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Heroine

Jennifer Kremmer

University of Wollongong

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Title sheet

'HEROINE'

*A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree

Doctorate of Creative Arts

from

University of Wollongong

by

Jennifer Kremmer, BA(CS), MA (Writing)
CERTIFICATION

I, Jennifer Kremmer, declare that this thesis, submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Creative Arts, in the Faculty of Creative Arts, School of Journalism and Creative Writing, 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.

Jennifer Kremmer
April 28, 2009
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I would like to thank everyone above for their generosity, faith and persistence in supporting Heroine.

This work is dedicated to the memories of my sister Carmel, and my friend Ed.
Heroine
ABSTRACT

Heroine

'Heroine' is a novel in the form of three linked novellas exploring 'the heroine' in literary as well as feminist senses.

The three parts are connected both thematically (gender/war) and internally via slender threads of character and situational linkage.

The first section, 'Heroine', explores military disenfranchisement and 'woman' in relation to the masculine bond, using a narrator whose traumatic experiences continually limit self-recognition, but who eventually resolves to produce her own brand of heroinism.

The second section, 'Pan Osculans', explores ideas of 'nature', human complexity and a desire to find Utopian social forms through the quest of a primatologist to find and identify with a new species of ape.

The third novella, 'Our Lady of the Sorrows', follows a young girl inside a military bunker as her father contemplates nuclear destruction, acting as a reminder of the dire need to continually reconsider the more oppressive of our norms.

Exegesis: Heroine and Back Again: Beyond Butler's Heteronormative Impasse

The exegesis works through the stymieing point provided to feminist activism by Judith Butler's critiques of identity, radicalism and the way oppositional politics always re-invokes the 'other' it attempts to deny. However I find that, where normative reiterations attach to interests that can be evaluated and critiqued, 'dichotomy' is an insufficient understanding, and a political art practice derived from it (such as ephemeral norm-destabilisation) may prove unnecessarily limiting. For instance, in traditional militarism's case, I argue that genders are produced specifically in the construction of the warrior bond.
(principled around motifs of penetrability), from where they achieve a hegemonic status.

This reframing of the discussion to include interests *within* heteronormativity allows for a reappraisal of radical feminisms as well as postfeminist logic, and to my mind permits political and artistic tactics from all fields to seem at least partially useful. For instance, I try to recoup Utopianism as a potentially powerful constructive tool, and in some parts of the novel I employ what have been called ‘feminist poetics’, including a range of linguistic tactics like elision, misnomer and stream-of-consciousness.

In conclusion, my goal is not to produce a singular antiheteronormative fiction (or literary ‘heroine’) but to use the fiction to explore and strengthen the bridge between feminist and postfeminist methodologies in the process of delegitimating (and exposing) heteronorms.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**Heroine: a novel in three novellas**

- Part One: Heroine ........................................................... 5
- Part Two: Pan Osculans ................................................... 84
- Part Three: Our Lady of the Sorrows .............................. 188

**Exegesis: Heroine and Back Again: Beyond Butler's Heteronormative Impasse**

- Introduction .................................................................... 230

**Context**

1. the feminist background ............................................. 236
2. the postfeminist impasse ............................................. 237
3. the heroine ................................................................. 243
4. hegemony ................................................................... 248
5. material fictions .......................................................... 260
6. penetrability ............................................................... 265
7. wider culture .............................................................. 281
8. escalations ................................................................. 291

**Methodology**

1. beyond ambivalence ................................................. 297
2. beyond militarism ....................................................... 300
3. a methodological overview ......................................... 303
4. bridging post/feminism .............................................. 306
5. a literary (post)heroine ............................................... 310
6. the ghost of radicalism ............................................... 312
7. beyond penetrability ................................................... 314
8. 'Heroine': beyond trauma .......................................... 315
9. 'Pan Osculans': feminism and Utopianism .................. 320
10. 'Our Lady of the Sorrows': Apocalypse ....................... 326

**Conclusion** .................................................................... 334

**Endnotes** ..................................................................... 336

**Works Cited** .................................................................. 354
HEROINE
They’re saying I learned stuff about torture from back on the poultry farm and I killed chickens and chucked them at walls, but no sir, that isn’t right, I never did those things.

I never shot my brother’s fox terrier with an airgun, because I never even had an airgun, let alone shot the dog. And if I did, my brother would have come for me with swords cause he’s the one who had all those samurai knives in a rack above his bed. And he killed the turkeys and the big old ram with the mangy head, and now he’s teaching computer science to kids and I’m down here scrubbing toilet floors while Major Samantha Ladymuck from Intel goes over my paperwork wondering which hidey-hole to file it in, E for Embarrassment or D for Dumb or F for Fuckup.

And this Major Wesson who I gather’s going to do my appeal, he doesn’t even look me in the eyes, so how can I trust him to tell my story?

First up, I want to say I never worked in killing sheds. I worked on a farm but it wasn’t a killing plant and I never killed a bird that wasn’t already half dead.

I grew up on a poultry farm which is where chickens get brought from day one and fed with grain waste and chicken excreta and whatnot until they’re fat enough to send away, and then the truckies that come and shove them in, well, maybe they’re cruel, but I couldn’t say. What looks cruel to one person is sensible farming to another and if you really want to know you’d have to ask a bird.

Down at the chicken processing plant, it’s a different thing. Those living panting flapping birds get unstuffed out of trucks and hung up by the legs on
this big overhead conveyor belt, and then they’re fed one by one into a pair of scissor-blades to cut off the head, only if the blades aren’t sharp or the chicken’s jerking round it’s nothing like a clean kill.

But if it happens in a processing plant nobody who matters sees, and if they did learn about it there’d be about five minutes’ hullabaloo and then it’d all fade away like forest fires after summer, cause if the world really cared about chickens then we wouldn’t have world wars.

I’m not saying nothing bad went on in our sheds. These sheds were about a hundred foot long, twenty-five wide, and they each had six hundred chickens stacked in tiers. Imagine this bank of cages from thigh to ear height, two rows, one above the other, with a galvanised tray in the middle so the crap from the top birds doesn’t fall on the bottom birds. And in every cage about the size of a milk crate we had two or three or sometimes four growers, just gobbling up their food and getting too big for their legs. You could see bright pink skin where the feathers had worn off, cause these birds were bred to have thin feathers, and lots of times you got sprayed with blood when a chicken that got pecked by another chicken shook its head. I’m saying this happened all the time, daily basis. And when they got big enough to put on the truck they were still just infants, I mean seven or eight weeks old, still cheeping. They had to sit everywhere cause no way were those legs going to hold up those big soft-meat bodies. Their breasts had lines from sitting in the cages and one day I found a bird whose sore chest had worn through to the soft white breastbone from sitting so hard. That flesh had healed all the way around the wire.

Every other week a big carrier that smelled of oaten hay and chemicals came round the bend over pot-holes and parked itself against the shed wall where a shiny bank of silver hoppers waited to take the load of kibble. You couldn’t get too close in case the dust got in your lungs, because it had some kind of poison for killing protozoa that kills chicks. So I guess you could say that place was just a charnel house. I mean whatever those houses are called where they take dead things.
Every morning and afternoon I had to go round with a scraper cleaning shit off the galvanised trays and making sure the birds were all getting their appropriate intake. If we let the shit pile up, it soon sat above the top cage floor and turned into a crap mountain, but even if we mucked it out twice a day the place just stank. Then every dozen cages or so we’d find a sick bird. If they were too sick to let live we’d haul them out and wring the neck.

But I never liked to do that part because I’m not strong enough at wringing necks, and the first time the chicken wouldn’t die, so I just kept pulling its head this way and that way for ages until the bits of tongue attached to the throat or maybe to the roof of the mouth kind of tore out of the beak and stayed attached to the neck and I realised I’d pulled the head off.

After that, if I had to kill a chook, I’d shut my eyes and stun it with a baseball bat. Then, slit its throat. Even this, I’m not too squeamish, but I couldn’t do one then another like the men we sometimes got in as workers. I don’t mean I couldn’t look the birds in the eyes, because I never bothered trying or not trying, because they were always just meat. But to see those pieces of chicken tongue poking out where they shouldn’t have been made me sick.

If I could invent a new way of death it would be just like falling asleep. Then people could use it on farms and in world wars. See, I don’t have it in me to cause unnecessary pain, and when I dropped a brick on my brother’s guinea pig it was only because he put it in the vat to frighten me and I thought it was a rat, and he was at the age when all boys hate their sisters. I didn’t know then that you kill rats by giving them anticoagulating poison so they run themselves around bleeding to death. So it was my brother who hated guinea pigs, not me. But a lot of people have taken that anecdote and turned it into this big thing, like I’m some kind of pervert who hates life-forms.

People have asked if I ever had a pet and I tell them I had lots of pets cause we grew chickens, and they think I’m joking. Like you actually have to treat an animal better than a human person for it to qualify as a pet. All those pointless crap-bred dogs going to vets taking up the space for starving children to get looked after, that’s how I see it.
Bulldogs have to get caesareans if they want to breed.  

This is the world in which Operation Dubious Freedom operated.  

I had no need of a pet cause we had so many other mouths to feed, and if I had a pet it’d be like owning a newspaper shop and reading the news. You just get sick of what you’ve got, no matter if it’s BMW cars or a thousand pairs of shoes. Maybe I’d have felt differently if those chickens hadn’t smelled the way they did and if watching them gobble up food, getting too heavy for their own bones so they couldn’t even stand up, didn’t make a person want to die.  

The stink in those chicken sheds got in your sinuses and it didn’t matter how many baths or clothes changes or perfume deodorants you had, it stayed in the skin. So everywhere I went I always had this sharp, boiling sort of reek. And no matter what I did it stayed in my nose.  

The other girls at school who didn’t like me anyway called me Chook Girl and reckoned I ought to just marry a chicken, or else get pregnant and go on welfare, because no man would ever have me for sane reasons. And they got Jason Addison Wilson to say he wanted to meet me at the ice rink and he never even showed. So the point of school was more like ritual humiliation.  

Even before I finished school I decided never to bother with a man. I mean in marriage, which is like being chained to a chair beaten raped hit over the head. I mean on a daily basis. My brother, now there’s a nice normal middle of the road fellow for you, and let me just say I pity the woman who comes close.  

And yet there he is, earning double what I ever earned and he doesn’t have to sit before some Judicial Board of Enquiry, telling guys who never look above tit-level why he’s a freak.
First time I had sex with two guys was after church camp.

Imagine all these proper middle class boys and girls and me.

So there was this one I really liked cause he looked cleaner than anyone and cause being clean and blonde, right, that was normality.

Plus, he almost looked at me. Somebody was saying what a freak I was to everyone else and the boys whose radar I usually passed underneath suddenly turned to me in this one swift fitting movement like a clock and there he was—he looked away first.

And I interpreted that pained look as kindness. Or sympathy.

I thought: ‘He’s exactly what the good-looking girls would say they want as a boyfriend!’ Which made me want him even as I didn’t want him.

And actually I just wanted to be noticed. This was year nine. I wasn’t getting noticed anywhere.

So I did all these stupid, clownish things, pretending to be a rebel. Like when Sister Barton said we had to follow behind the rivemaster’s canoe, I paddled up in front and got us stuck in reeds, and a wasp stung the girl who was already crying behind me in the canoe, and I looked at her snivelling and said, ‘Who cares?’

When they were passing Mars Bars around the campfire, I got left out. But I didn’t care because I was just holding my legs sort of close together imagining what it would be like if that boy looked at me and then away again—like lightning. I thought all it would take to cause heaven and hell is that spark.

So you could say I was sexual from a young age, even though I didn’t have a clue. You don’t get much sexual training around caged white chickens.
But here I was, age fourteen, and I was going to try the next thing, because all childhood is about hurrying to make adulthood come sooner. And I thought the next thing meant freedom.

The apple and the tree and the serpent.

These good churchgoer-hypocrites all started to look at me slant-ways. Not at me, but at parts of me, like my thighs which I showed because my dress came up to here or my skinny muscly little arms, because they didn’t approve of muscles on girls. Or maybe they thought I was using them too much for unimportant things.

Like, I beat two of the boys at axe-chopping races. I didn’t tell them I’d been torturing wood since six. They just frowned and went, ‘Oh yeah, that’d be Susie, cause she’s not even normal.’ Bzzt. Next thing.

I was always chasing next things but they were always turning out to be wrong things to run after, like being more grown up. You weren’t supposed to chase something that was going to come anyway, like a train. Just keep your legs together and get on. But all the other kids were getting Mars Bars.

So when that bright boy looked at me again I could tell he was thinking sexually. Everybody knows boys do that all the time—girls do too. But everybody knows about boys. So I huffed up my chest and kind of pushed it out, just a little. And I gave him a curve of lip and said, ‘Yeah, what?’

His cheeks turned rose, just for an instant. All kinds of electricity went through me before he jerked back into the things boys do. Running off to chase a ball, pretending balls don’t mean sexual things.

A girl who lived a few blocks away from me and was at the camp said, ‘Don’t get your hopes up Chook-shit,’ as she went past, just like that—psst! She wasn’t expecting that thump coming. She fell flat as a dead possum onto brown rocks and started howling, one hand up on her forehead where bright red question marks trickled down, like she didn’t have a clue why this person—me—had jobbed that person—her.
So of course after that I got taken ‘off camp’, which means put in the sisters’ bunkhouse where I had to recite Godly lines. He Maketh Me to Lie Down in Green Pastures. He Maketh Me to Lie Down in Green Pastures.

I mean, they really gave me that to recite.

And I was thinking naturally about that boy and me, lying down somewhere green. And the tree and the serpent, the whole thing. Who couldn’t?

My mother was supposed to come pick me up. But this is a woman who was seriously dead to the world—I mean she was interstate. So the camp commander, a wiry fag called Lieutenant Keet, said he’d drive me back as far as Richmond and I could get a bus. Meanwhile they’re saying *Girls don’t go out by yourself, Girls don’t talk to men, Girls don’t catch public transport*—see what they thought of Susie?

I said I’d walk. I grabbed my pack and stormed out the twin brick sentry gates, like it’s a military camp for fuck’s sake, and started up the road while Keet called, ‘Come back! Come back!’ through a loudspeaker.

I guess I knew somebody’d pick me up. But I wasn’t expecting a car right away. While Keet was blowing off at me this little mustard orange sedan comes crawling round the bend wavering from side to side and blowing blue smoke rings—a real pus box.

And before anyone from camp could catch me up I dived in there.

Two guys, backs of heads—I didn’t care.

‘Take me anywhere.’ I forgot you didn’t say these things to perfect strangers.

They just looked at one another, eyes in the rearview, those dull blank looks, and grinned in shocked surprise like boys at Christmas. Grinning not at me but at each other cause I didn’t exist. That was the first time I saw that empty-eyed feeling pass between grown men.

For about thirty seconds I kept up the attitude. No more Christian camp. No Tree of Knowledge—I laughed at that. No more dutiful songs while boys pinch me on the arse or wet their fingers in me. See, Christian camp is crude as
oil. That’s what I said, making jokes, cause I could feel in my bones or head what was going to happen.

On the floor of the car lay a couple of McDonalds toys and a leathery football beside a blue and white jersey that stank of sweat and mud. Some inside-out dirty socks. And a bit of coiled blue rope, but I wasn’t thinking about the rope. And a pack of cards. Somebody’s charm bracelet with the hook ruined. I picked it up, charmed. It was just like luck. I thought the guys in the car wouldn’t know if I put it in my pocket, so I did. Feeling it in there—a shoe, a horse, a love-heart, a key, a spider. All my life I never had a beautiful thing. So now I had my payment, down pat.

They took me down a dirt road, I don’t know where. Barely a word said. I remember my mouth moving saying anything, a bunch of crap all about how I grew up in a fancy house with a nanny, telling lies cause I was pretty certain about what was going to happen and I wanted them to think I wasn’t a slag. This prickly feeling moving up my legs, into my gut, seething out my arms as I sat on that vinyl seat. Like fear, only sharper. Smarter, maybe. See, all my life—I nearly said ‘all my lie’—I’ve known things in a way that isn’t knowing. I’ve known things that you couldn’t tell or explain.

These men wanted one thing first, the other secondary. They wanted to hurt a female or all females, but they also wanted sex. I figured they’d trade a bit of extra sport for willing compliance. All my life I’ve seen this in action. People go for second best if it’s easier.

In the military we call this a ‘skin saver’. It’s thinking up strategies to reduce the damage. Okay, so you’re going to get killed—you have to plan to leave some incriminating evidence. If you’re only getting half killed you have to work out which body parts to keep. All my life that was second or first nature. I knew I had to make them think I wasn’t dirt cheap so they might stop short of whatever the worst thing was that they were capable of.

Becoming capable of.

Whatever.
Those guys didn’t even need to talk with mouths. One eyebrow arched, another flattened. They communicated across the rearview. I could see they believed their smiles were reassuring. The driver turned us down a rutty track and I saw the wedding ring on his left hand.

Down the rutty road for rutting. Funny how all words are sexually cold.

For the first time when we hit dirt I got a thrill. I thought: I am going to learn things, here. I am going to remember that bit of wood, those hillocks, that sign.

‘Do not camp here—authorities.’

I am going to remember those bits of blackened twig at the outstretched ends of tree arms. Fire up the torso of that sheoak. Burn, like babies burn.

‘She’s done this before.’

‘She’s a fucken pro.’

They didn’t sing songs about sexless lying in green pastures, all secrets hidden, the wet fingers under the hem during scripture class.

At the same time as I imagined it didn’t hurt, I saw that inside every bit of truth or honesty—a gem, a grain—there’s agony. Somebody’s always dying somewhere in the world. Think about it—every second. Or part of second.

All those human chickens going chug chug down the conveyor.

It smarted like bee-stings. I remember cocks and fists and the saturating smell of ammonia. Gravel eating into my buttocks, grinding in. ‘Yeah, I like it—I want it!’

There’s always this part that remains outside sex, that watches from above or to one side, aware of being watched. Being watched but doing the watching. That’s what I learnt.

I was getting a fucken certificate.

They dropped me off at a road-house and drove off in a scream of tyres. When I dragged myself up to the guy at the counter— I had to ask to borrow the dunny key—that freckly freak gave me a look I perfectly understood, given what I’d just learned.

I know you.
His look sneered. But he handed me the key. In the cubicle I got my best graffiti pen out of my pack and drew a love heart with an arrow through it, ‘Susie Bickerts 4 Herself 4 Ever’ on the back of the door.

Then I flushed the key in the toilet, because that guy in the service station didn’t know shit.

And as soon as I could I joined the army.
Nobody ever had a better mother than I had. I mean, she was hardly ever there. One thing I hate about other people’s mothers is they’re always barging in.

She took one look at me, goes the story, and fled the maternity ward.

I was brought up by an aunt. She also raised my brother who turned out ‘so well’ while I turned out the way I am. When I say ‘raised’ I basically mean fed and watered and ignored. See, we didn’t come from stock who over-coddle children. Hardship makes good people, she used to say.

I must be turning into a pretty decent person.

Uncle Bruce was another thing entirely. He had those kind of bushy eyebrows you see in cartoons. Those eyebrows jumped off his face and crawled up and down like caterpillars. He was always shooting something, generally cats. Then he’d skin them and leave the furs hanging round the house with iron weights dangling from the corners till they dried.

Papers called it ‘ribbons of flesh’. But really he just hated to waste anything.

Aside from killing cats, my uncle never hurt a living creature. And when he saw a chicken with a broken leg or egg yolk peritonitis, which those big birds get if they reach adult age, he always went quiet. Like, he could wring a chicken’s neck if he had to, but he never talked about it after. He’d come out of the sheds fuming like a tortoise and crawl into the shadow under his eyebrows and stay that way.

It’s true that the day I got home from Christian camp with semen in my underpants he blew his stack. Not because of the semen—he didn’t know about that—but because I waltzed in and threw my pack onto my bed and I didn’t
wipe my feet, for one thing, or explain the boys in the car out front, for another.
I just said, ‘I dunno who they are, they gave me a lift.’ Which they had, but only
from the bus depot.

He belted me. I’d never been belted that way before—non methodical. He didn’t count the lashes. His arm went whomp whomp like pieces of tree
striking earth. Whomp whomp whomp. His face went brick red and dark, full
of obscene hatred, the head of a maggot or fire-breathing worm.

All that time I was thinking: I hope he doesn’t see my bracelet. I kept
trying to cover it with my other arm. On the way home from camp I’d fixed that
chain-link with my teeth. He just kept belting me. All the time I believed if he
saw that bracelet he’d know what I’d done and then he’d kill me, even though
this man was just about the most perfectly humane person I ever saw.

After that I saw it was his job to commit punishment. He had to do this,
see, or the world would get out of order. Even cats.

So I started waiting around corners with my eyes on stalks—looking for
cats. I started disliking those cats just the way my uncle did, not out of wanting
to be like him but just because.

Like I started to see how much of a problem those cats were.

The neighbours kept bringing home mixed kittens, letting them grow up
under the mulberries, then one day those kittens would get pregnant and have
their litters in our sheds, under the shelves beside the generator where it was
warm. That’s if we left a door open, which we sometimes had to if the cooling
fans got blocked or the generator was on the blink. Instant kittens.

Or they’d go in under the wood pile. Anywhere you could stick a fist
into they’d be clawing in to have kittens.

And those scrawny monsters would grow up and when they were big
enough they’d put their scratchy paws up through the cage floors and chew off
the feet of our chickens, or slice their skin revealing naked pink intestines and
food-stuffed crops. They’d get in through tiny chinks in the tin and cause a
ruckus in the middle of the night, so we were always getting alarm-belled out
of bed. They’d even drag heads off and out, somehow.
I suspect they used their claws as fishing hooks.

So to please my uncle or to earn my place I took to running around with lariats. I mean lassos. I made my own which were generally like a noose. You mustn’t believe this is hatred coming out. I strictly saw it as necessity. Somebody had to control the cats so my uncle wouldn’t be so angry. So I’d have a place.

Maybe I didn’t really see the cats as Aunty Joan. Maybe I wasn’t trying to ‘displace my anger’. It just seemed a fact that if I controlled the cats my life would improve. My uncle would maybe even look me in the eyes again. Ever since that episode in which I’d lost my cherry, he didn’t make eye contact.

There was one big tom, black with yellow sideways eyes, and I once saw him jump on a cat and spasm over her like he was sawing out her insides. I tell you, I wanted to kick that cat. Plus, the other thing, they have barbed barbaric dicks. I could just imagine that tom cutting into the she-cat. To see those cats fornicating in front of me like they owned the place was just shitful.

So I built the cat-trap they’re showing in the news with some hoity toity psycho expert saying it’s just the sort of thing he’d have expected of someone like me. What I didn’t expect was Aunt Joan giving them access to my childhood things, but that’s another story.

I built the cat trap out of an old hen’s cage. I rewired the floor so it could fall off after a jostle and then I propped it up with a hook attached by a long wire arm to a bit of meat. Then I set the cage up over the cleaning vat inside the chook shed, and filled the vat with water. And because the vat had stainless steel straight sides I figured the cats wouldn’t be able to claw out.

Every day I went into the shed to check but no cat was caught. Meanwhile two, maybe three chicks a night got clawed out through the bars. You could see leftover fluff and bits of half-grown chick thighbone dragged out under the metal walls. Skid marks made of red flesh on the cage floors. Cats like live chickens, see? So when we got our next delivery of day-olds I put one living chick in a sock and tied it struggling to the meat-hook in the cage. I didn’t try to injure the bird. I won’t say this isn’t cruel. I saw that live chick’s eyes
rolling round and round. I just, I really wanted to catch that rotten cat so maybe Uncle Bruce would look at me again.

And come to think about it I was saving that chick a fate worse than cat-bait, which is to be alive at all under the circumstances. Cause those chicks were getting more and more genetically fucked up by the truckload.

So that night I caught the big black tom. Only he didn’t drown in the water because the cage floor jammed. It jammed and I had this giant tomcat inside a cage, plus what it hadn’t eaten of the chick, all chewy inside the old sock.

I took the tomcat out with me onto the front lawn under Aunt Joan’s wilted hydrangeas and I waited until I heard the feed truck turn into our street. I was thinking of letting the cat out of the cage in front of the truck. Number one problem which I was sorting out appeared to be lining the cat up to specifically run onto the road. Number two problem was not getting my own eyes scratched out. Cats, I was beginning to learn, are unpredictable. They can always go two ways.

Plus maybe the truck would brake.

But that stupid truck was taking forever to come. And the longer I waited the more I started thinking about those yellow eyes. Like, what did that cat think just now? It wasn’t hissing or scratching, it was just crouching there looking at me with those pale eyes in a pure sleek face. All those slanted white scars forming stripes. It had a strength and a terribleness, which are kinds of beauty. And I could see a person in there, a cunning, invidious sort of person.

So I could see at once how much ahead of us cats are.

I opened the door. ‘Get out, you stupid cat!’ I yelled. He didn’t have another look at me, just bolted in that fine-streaked way of muscular things. Around the truck.

And from then on I believed the cats had as much right to live as we had, ourselves. Human cats.

At least the cats weren’t farming us to eat.
Now they’re saying I practiced noose-tying as a kid, that I hung around the chook sheds hoping for prey. That I even took a relative’s kid into the shed to tie her to the rafters. That the cat episode ended with cat meat, cat skins, cat gristle, tongue and blood and gizzard, cat, cat, cat.

Aunt Joan got quoted in the newspaper.

‘I never thought,’ she tells them, shame-faced, ‘that our girl’d do such terrible things to gentle animals.’

This woman who said, when I was packing for duty, ‘I hope you kill the whole bloody lot of ‘em.’
Cutter wasn’t what you’d call a girl’s man. He was more of a man’s man, or a
man’s man’s man.

Those drawings of male parts you see on toilet walls.

The other guys called him ‘Stud’ because he was always looking for
something to ram against.

In army training we had this thing, it was called ‘Row-bucket’. And what
you did, you put a guy’s head in the toilet and pressed the button, and the way
his arms move made you think of rowing. I got row-bucketed and it wasn’t so
bad, at least not as bad as scrubbing guys’ shit of your sheets when every man
to the last pissy recruit crapped on your bed.

One day Cutter the Stud goes, ‘I saw we row that kid’s bucket.’ Pointing
to Scott Johns who was ‘special’. As in—he didn’t fit in. So we goosed him out
of mess and hounded him across the yard and at his dorm we all got together
and locked limbs like a cattle crush, and he was so scared his eyeballs bleached
out.

Pinpricks for eyes.

He still didn’t ‘get’ it.

‘Hey, whatcha doing that for?’

‘Move—into the crapper.’

‘Why me—what for?’

‘Shut your lid, toilet face.’

For once, for maybe the first time, I saw how you could play a certain
game inside a way of being that wasn’t yours—I mean ‘fit in’. How you could
be just like other people if you didn’t care enough about who you were trying to be.

I guess I mean ‘faking it.’

I yanked Scott’s hair to pull his head back and the guys all said, ‘Go on!’ So I got to do the row-bucketing. That is, I shoved that kid’s head into the toilet bowl, the guys holding onto his shoulders to keep him down... In he goes, cough choke, and somebody’s turds are bouncing off his scalp.

When he came up bawling the others toddled out and Cutter hands the boy a wad of stiff toilet tissues. Then he goes to me, low as a dairy bell: ‘I could fuck you.’

I mean—imagine it, inside a crapper.

And Scott’s sneezing, crying, snot running, shit all over and Cutter’s got those burn-through-a-gauze-wad eyes. Drill eyes. Poke-you-dead eyes.

I just stared back.

We let Scott out to finish his crying since he was finished as a soldier, and he ran across the wasteland to his dorm and wrote home to his mother for a pardon—I mean reprieve.

Those drill-for-eyes came hard on mine and next thing we’re kissing and it feels like death inside a set of mashed mouths. Cutter put his knee up just hard enough. Grinding,

‘You like a bit of cunt rub, eh?’

The first time I could say ‘I like that,’ and it wouldn’t be like watching someone say it—I said, ‘Yeah.’

Then he hissed through slick teeth, ‘Just what I thought—a slut.’

I didn’t say anything, just kind of froze, looking up at him because Cutter’s two heads above mine.

Then he turned on his heel and went out. So I was just standing in the crapper trying not to cry and going—what?

That’s when I saw another way of truth. That having power over someone can be more important. Like, those guys after church camp, they wanted the other thing more. But Cutter was different.
Special.

He could have had me then and there. But he didn’t. Having it over me was better for him than what he could have.

Like those snakes that bite the hand instead of the baby rat. Yet certain people just keep on buying snakes.

No matter what we did, marching, up and down, sentry, shit-hole, whatever, I kept thinking about that time Cutter nearly drilled me. And what he said, which was like a promise or threat.

A week later I had to help stack stores. That’s when Cutter told me he had a cardboard box of kittens the mess Sergeant was keeping for some stupid idea of having pets, and he was going to fry them up to give the guy a heart attack, because his steak and chips were awful.

‘Wanna help?’

Burn or not burn—I said, ‘Sure.’

He snapped the back of my head like a cute rag-doll, steam-breath fogging at my face. ‘Stupid bitch,’ he said, ‘as if I’d let you go along with me.’

A poison cloud of viper-spit.

All of a sudden Cutter threw me off and went back to stacking like he hadn’t even noticed me in the first place. Which hurt more.

My arms and legs went jelly. But it wasn’t fear or anything, only pure naked hate. If I’d had a brick I would’ve smashed him.

Instead I went out and locked that cool-room door by putting the padlock on. I was just walking down the corridor toward the mess hut and part of me was thinking it’d be okay if the bastard died of suffocation or cold because then I’d go to gaol for murder and wouldn’t have to live in the real world or work with snakes. But then I thought about how the real world includes a version of gaol cause the real world is really a giant penitentiary. And plus, I wanted to scream my head off at Cutter. So two minutes later I came back and unlocked the door.

First I couldn’t see him anywhere.

Like, the room was full of crates of frozen peas.
'Where are you, shit-head?'

No answer. My breath a chain of fogs among the pea-crates.

I said, ‘You’re a fucken idiot, Cutter!’

A hand at my ankle—up-ended—I went down. But instead of punching my head Cutter whispers, ‘Miss me, huh?’ And there’s this slobbering mouth on top of mine.

‘You fuck—’

He shut me up. Half dragged me into a nook, kissed me on the lips so hard I could’ve fainted and shoved himself hard up against the region I’m always calling ‘me’ cause it’s so much part of me it is. We clawed each other’s clothes apart. His eye got gouged. I got a cut lip and bruises.

Down on the backs of frozen foodstuffs, my legs up round his ears, and I’m thinking—yes and more yes. Like a dream of being in a row boat, the oars going round and round, plashing, plashing, the swill of water against the sides, the thud of living things or maybe flotsam and jetsam against the hull.

That’s the thing between Cutter and me, the one thing they’re saying that’s right. Sexually, we were perfectly suited.

All my life I wondered how other people experience sex. I mean, occasionally I wondered if what I felt was ‘natural’. Me with Cutter, it wasn’t either natural or not natural. There was stuff in it they’re calling ‘sado-masochist’ or ‘sado-sadist’. In a way I can see myself playing parts, like with the guys in the mustard sedan, but they weren’t the memorable bits. I mean, it was the ‘freest’ I ever was during any sex.

The thing they don’t get right is it wasn’t just a play. The sado—the painful part—that meant nothing. He never ‘used’ me like a utility. We never dressed up in leather and chains and broke each others’ skin with whips like tailored madams, like artsy people who want all that charade. When we were angry and fucking it was like two screaming pigs. When we were quiet it felt like peace or love, like everything you can feel short of dying. Even Cutter sometimes said he found it ‘pleasant.’
So here I am and he’s growling ‘Snow Queen’, one hand gripping the back of my head, the other pushing my thighs apart, and the whole of his body moving in and out like oars. And I was just resonating like a plank. Snow Queen, Snow Queen, because of all the frost.

A long time later I learned Cutter had two girlfriends, one in Perth, the other in Sydney, which is as bad as any a case of symmetry. His folks were giving him a house in Darwin for his promotion present. The day they put us on the interrogation roster was the day he became a fully paid-up home-owner, while I looked in my bank account and it had all my most recent pay minus rent arrears. And I knew nobody would ever look after me or buy me a home.

I thought—I’m always going to be on my own entirely.

Maybe that’s what Cutter thought he liked, on the days he liked me.
May was the month for troop-carrying. People everywhere were braying for war. They wanted Australia to exist on maps like real countries.

I just wanted to get out of my surroundings. When we landed in Y the whole plane cheered. Wheels juddered on unsmooth concrete.

When the doors came open, the heat punched us in the face. I saw a sky bleached out and fused to bare brown hills of sand and ironstone. People wheeling tyres across the concourse. At the perimeter, shepherd dogs snouted pot-holes for mines. American marines with dead eyes herded us through strands of cyclone mesh toward the aircraft hangars.

At our own tents, pitched in long rows inside the hangars, we swapped food and chewing gum and played cards. Everything stank of sweat and temper. Thin steel walls recycled the heat. Soldiers kept collapsing and getting up again, like knockdown clowns.

A couple of Australian officers had the brainstorm of rotating fans. After long discussion they stuck them up the end of the hangar which was reserved for ‘servicewomen’. The men all started swearing: *slut* this; *bitch* that. The heat got infused with sexual hatred. I didn’t have a side to stand on. I kept away from the fans. I was watching the way Cutter’s eyes went flick-flick, this female, those tits—like razor blades.

For three days and nights we did exercises on the concourse and killed ourselves with boredom and heat exhaustion and sexual want. Officers called it ‘getting climatised’. Then came the rumbling of big engines. We got marshalled up at midday, in the worst of the heat, and made to stand for half an hour listening to speeches. The air tasted like coffee grounds cut with Aerogard.
From the grilles and stinking armpits of the Australian Light Armoured Vehicles we finally got to see the town. The place was upside-down. The walls and sky were made of dirt. The air left grit upon the teeth. Kids with dark eyes trailed the vehicles through checkpoints and barricades. Palm trees withered overhead. Elsewhere in the city, storms rising upward through the earth disembowelled citizens. In the corner of the vehicle a western news radio played. The trail of kids behind us got unnerving.

We drove like this, in fit and starts.

‘Hey, Cutter, what if I just ping one off?’

‘Go for it.’ A safety clicking. Eyes and teeth grinning. Nobody in this world stopped us from life or death or joking. A rumpless donkey scuttled across the roadway with a kid hanging to its tail. The gun turret swung to follow. Then what passed for a city passed back into desert.

Then we got to the valley behind the city to start ‘desert exercises’. These were meant to toughen our constitutions, or just keep us busy. Hammering tent pegs under a blinding heat into soil so stony the pegs barely went half-way—grit in the eyes and hair. Crunch of soldiers or officers walking past. At night it was sandy brown food out of foil sachets. Sand got in everything, crusting the eyelashes, lining the interior of the nostrils, coating the skin like talcum powder. The four weeks turned to ten.

Lots of talk of battles and first kills. ‘Hey, Cutter, what say we share the first one? You knock out one eye, I knock the other?’

Bang-bang on a trestle table over a foil sachet. ‘You saying rag-heads got two eyes?’

It was hard to think of ‘rag-head’ without thinking of ‘rags’. Where I grew up it was the word for sexual bleeding. At the same time, the subject of killing made men oddly respectful. ‘All I’m saying, on an open field, it’s him or me.’

All the men believed in Elysian Fields, or in somewhere. Heaven and Purgatory and his name on an obelisk. I didn’t have that belief. It wasn’t because I was a communist or atheist. Just didn’t believe I’d end up anywhere.
In the mornings, Sergeant Ruth Bayliss got us up and running on the sand-hills. We lived by her routines. She didn’t like me from the start.

‘What’s your name, soldier?’ Her mouth hung on crooked. Her eyes swivelled—this way; that. Sharp as small blue rocks. The men said she pissed on her ponytail every morning to keep it bright.

‘Bickerts, Ma’am. Susie Bickerts.’

‘Is that like biscuits?’ From then on she called me ‘Dog Biscuits.’ ‘Hey, Dog Biscuits, get over here with that crate!’

The men in my unit laughed. But they also said if she bent over her cunt would split open and turn her inside out, and then Cutter was going to clamp the lips together over her head so she’d suffocate. They called her ‘Sergeant Purse’ or ‘Pinchgut’. They didn’t like her any more than me.

One day Sergeant Pinchgut had me on shit-burning detail, and with the acrid stench of all our most putrid waste going up in smoke, Cutter came and muttered in my ear, ‘I could like a girl who burns.’ One hand down the front of my fatigues, belt unbuckled, his hand going up and down. I didn’t ask for this.

My guts went—whoomf! He wanted me even in the stink and refuse. It felt like we were ‘special’, like maybe after the army finished we could both get jobs patrolling wharves. We could use each shift as an excuse to push each other up against the wall behind the warehouses. I imagined his hot breath on my throat inside a metal shed, the swish of seawater licking at the piers underneath, the fear which is also hope of others walking in.

So I asked Cutter later, sort of casually, ‘What do’y’think you’ll do after deployment?’ They were playing cards with a Playboy deck. Legs and tits in the discard pile, like a death orgy.

Cutter muttered, ‘Anything, long as it isn’t tied down.’ I forgot his favourite hateful thing was suburban home life, kids whining, washing machines and fridges and everything the same from driveway to driveway.

‘I wasn’t talking about tying you down,’ I growled.

‘Fuck you weren’t. All women want to do that. Like getting up the duff. You’re a bunch of man-traps, like them stupid orchids.’
'Venus fly trap,' said Berriman helpfully. Berriman didn’t talk to persons he didn’t include. Since he never included me we never talked.

‘Play the game,’ said Steelo to both of them. We were sitting in the rec room, which was just a tent. Everything—sand, hate, heat—was just a tent. When you slept and dreamt it was all tents. So in this tent, stuffed with foldaway chairs and card tables, guys lounging round like zoo bears, Cutter was too busy being who he was to answer questions from a female whom he’d fucked.

These were new rules based on old rules that I’d learned.

‘What are you going to do?’ said Berriman—to Cutter, of course.

‘Become a gun runner.’ He didn’t hesitate.

‘You’re kidding? Running guns?’ This earned respect all round the room. Heads turned.

‘I got a brother over in Saudi Arabia,’ Cutter goes, first I heard there was any kind of family. ‘We’ll go into it together, cover each other’s backs, make a killing. Then it’s Hugh Heffner’s mansion and a bunch of nameless babes. Blow jobs twice a day.’ Slam of white tits joining the pile of used parts.

Like if I breathed out again my life would start beating. That’s how I felt in front of Cutter when he was with other men—inflated and deflated. A balloon popping. It wasn’t that I wanted the marriage deal. I didn’t want the dream or palace. I just wanted my life or death to matter to someone who mattered to me.

It didn’t occur to me this was fairytales.

When I started thinking about Cutter inside a mansion getting head-jobs by the hour, I began to hate him and imagine killing him with my standard issue Austeyr rifle or with a bazooka, or with bombs. Around this time, I began to suffer savage torture—I mean jealousy. To put this bluntly, I began to see him as a man alive while I was nobody, a non-person. At the same time I saw myself as this nobody person and I thought: ‘Well, fuck it.’ So from then on, I began to act out precocious behaviour. It was just like school. I saw that nobody wanted me so I became unwanted. That was the plan.
Like, if a man thought he could make a joke or story about being female in a way that’s negative I’d up the ante. I’d jump in ahead and tell the story about why women have legs, which is so they don’t leave trails like snails. Cutter was at the next table when I told that joke and he didn’t even look over his shoulder, just said, ‘Show us!’ So in the middle of dinner I stood up and pulled down my pants. Only that was a bad idea, because if you showed men your vagina they all got the notion that it was a free-for-all vagina with no rights. You couldn’t admit to having a hole for things to penetrate. As long as you kept the hole covered they pretended you weren’t too bad. And right after that, Sergeant Bayliss Pinchgut put me on report, and I got officially reprimanded.

But even though he never thought of me except when he wanted sex we still had sex. Because that’s the one thing I couldn’t stop, with Cutter.

Like one day he went past while I was handl ing a broom in the supply tent, another of Pinchgut’s details. Grey beady eyes went flit-flit across the space.

‘Come and meet me behind E-7,’ he went.

One thing about the way Cutter seduced people: he never came at it soft. In his world of seduction you either would or wouldn’t. Hard and sharp. We had no time for soft. It was do it now, or blam—get killed. That’s what we believed or told ourselves. Everything was either lust or hate.

This fact, and also my jealousy, made lust predominate. That is, we fucked at every chance. But at the same time, cause of hating him, I wanted to be immune. I wanted not to want him any more.

In the shade between two tents, Cutter got my belt undone and trousers down round my legs and pushed me onto an empty crate.

‘Get down.’

‘You want me to sit?’ I must have sounded confused. He meant bend over it. Then he put some spit where he wanted wet, between my legs. Only it didn’t work because there wasn’t enough.
‘Put some more on, maybe,’ I chimed in. I was humming by now, because here I was, dry and lucky, the first time my actual body wasn’t full of want. I realised it might be possible to be a person—alive.

‘Jesus,’ he swore, ‘you turned into a Sheila monster or what?’ Then he shoved me over and spat on me.

I tried to spit back but he was higher and my spit went down. So in the end I just pulled my trousers up and sat there laughing.

‘What’re you laughing at?’

I sniffed and wiped my nose on my forearm, resting on my knees. I didn’t have to be Cutter’s slave—I was realising this. My body didn’t have to have a master.

Like all along I’d forgotten my body was me, because of having no self.

My laughing slid behind a dune. ‘Why are you always so angry, anyway?’ I asked in a cool voice.

‘What?’ he growled emptily. ‘What’re you talking about?’

‘What you said about hating everyone.’ I took out a half-smoked rollie and lit it up.

‘I just do.’ Then he thought about it or something else for a while. ‘When I was a kid,’ he hissed, ‘my father tried to strangle me in the bath.’

That made no sense. ‘Why didn’t he drown you?’ See, it was seeming kind of funny, because of disliking Cutter so intensely now, that someone would strangle you when they could just push you under the water.

‘Oh, well, because he didn’t want to get his hands wet, I s’pose.’ He sniffed and looked around. Tent flaps shed drifts of powdery dust. It wasn’t windy, for a change. The sand fell out of the sky invisibly until it landed on skin and clothes and hair, then it went grey-brown. Wind would pick it up again, a dust tornado.

I smoked and said, ‘Every grown up father in the whole wide world has probably tried at least once to kill every son.’

‘You can be a real bitch, Susie, you know that?’
My mouth fell open, because it was the first time I could remember he used my name. Or properly. But I turned the fall into a shrug. ‘Just don’t think you’re special, okay?’

And then I got up first, and left him sitting there.

It was the start of a new thing between him and me. Cutter let everyone else know we’d fucked. Were fucking. Suddenly the rules shifted.

He put it about that we had this ‘open’ thing. That is, he told everyone that even though he and I were fucking, I was ‘open’ to anyone. At the same time, because I knew it wasn’t ever going to be a ‘relationship’ I was free to pursue other men, but because Cutter would kill me if he found out, I couldn’t or wouldn’t. These were the new rules I had to learn.

One night after watching a movie about marines in the rec-tent, we met under a tarp. He held the tarp aside so moonlight could show his cock disappearing into me. Like part of him couldn’t believe these things are possible.

‘Bitch,’ he mumbled or thought aloud.

I pulled out of his grip and scrambled crabways.

‘Watch what you say, arsehole!’

‘What? What?’ Like I’d spoiled his fun.

‘Don’t call me a bitch, okay?’ I spat.

‘I didn’t!’ He pulled me back toward him and started probing again.

‘Then who did you mean?’

‘Christ—the others—the guys!’ Ramming, gritted teeth. This was down by the assembly area where we came to watch grenade displays or listen to the latest news. It was barely dawn. We’d been up all night and were short of sleep. Being on duty together always made our pants ache. Sometimes our genitals were raw.

I used to daydream that we’d get seconded to a remote outpost where all we had to do all day was check the oil wells. Day after day, trudging through sand, checking oil well heads. Hours and hours to kill between shifts, nobody
else between us, him and me, the desert sun, all the time in the world. At other times I imagined blasting his face off with my Austeyr.

‘Shut up!’ he yelled in my ear, and got off me like I was diseased.

Then he kicked sand all over me, in my eyes and mouth and nose, sand after bootful of sand.

Before I could pull my pants up he threw the tarp back over me and thundered off. I heard him tripping over the rubbish bins and swearing. I lay there half-weeping and spitting dust out of my mouth and cursing him. Then I heard a noise toward my right. I couldn’t see properly because of the tarp but I heard the crunch of boots on travel. And then the tarp lifted.

‘Cutter?’ I asked.

A soft hissy chuckle. Then Wayne Pillock got down on all fours to look at me.

‘Cutter said pussy wants cream.’ He began to make licking sounds, his head inky against the moon.

Wayne Pillock who prays to God every night, I’m not kidding.

‘Go fuck yourself!’ I screamed, and started kicking.

Two other guys got sent out and I gave them the same treatment. And, I don’t know, they could’ve had a go at me, I wouldn’t have told anyone about it. But I wasn’t stupid enough to do it to get back at Cutter. Cause he’d never have come near me again after that.

As to why the guys didn’t push the point, I guess they were scared of Cutter. But after that, everybody had jokes about tarps.

When Cutter bothered to talk to me again, I gave up being furious. I was just empty now. ‘Why’d you do it, Cutter?’ I asked. ‘Why’d you tell the guys to come sniffing me?’ See, no matter how hard you try to stop from crying, being female’s always got tears. Which I hate, so I never let Cutter see them.

He pulled me round gruffly and knuckled my head. ‘You’re too much fun as a boy to be a girl,’ he told me.

He was good at messing up my head with cloudy words.
Then he said, ‘Tell you what, Dog Biscuits.’ See, they all called me Dog Biscuits after Sergeant Pinchgut. ‘If you ever lose your legs, I’ll finish it for you.’

‘You’ll what?’

He took my hand and made it mime a trigger.

I stared numbly as my fingers folded.

‘If you want to go, Susie Bickerts,’ he said seriously, ‘I’ll do it for you.’

I shook my head as though a brick had hit it. But at the same time I had to swallow, because of all the things Cutter could promise, this was one to trust. It was the most Cutter could ever be like a prince.

It made me remember the only two stories I ever read in my life. Fairy stories, or just true facts.

The first story was a girl who lived with ugly people. Those people were ugly enough to be brutalised just for being ugly, but instead they were brutalising her. Since this is a bad rearrangement of the way things should be, the girl was rewarded with a marriage and a palace. I hated that story at the same time as I loved it, since it wasn’t ever going to be a story about me.

The second story was about a fish-girl who fell in love with a prince who wasn’t a fish. She was a total fucken loser. After she chucked herself overboard, the facile princess who took her place linked her arm in the prince’s moronic arm and watched the waves. And they were happy, and she was dead and sad, because she could see them standing there even though she was dissolved. There was no end in eternity to her sadness. No end in eternity to her pain.

And I hated her, because she was so much like me.
We came into the prison-house in middle July. The earth was baking. High dust storms ate up all the water. People on the streets had started looking at us like enemies.

I wanted to say: ‘Your brother, he’s your fucking enemy!’

But I didn’t have one iota of local speech.

Cutter and I used to call the locals ‘Dead-heads’. They were like skulls on pogo-sticks, that’s what we thought. Imagine living in baking houses in that crap-heat. They were like skinny mangy dogs you get in pounds, barking their mad heads off causing you to be repelled so you walk away when all you did was go there to get a dog.

They hated us.

In the middle of this shit-heat we got put on guard and interrogation duties. The Australian sector prison was filling up. Mixing the sexes and backgrounds of interrogators might confuse the prisoners causing them to spill more knowledge which they didn’t have. Nobody cared that they didn’t have knowledge because it wasn’t the point.

Giving soldiers experience at hatred, that was the point.

I didn’t care. I would be near Cutter. I got soppy thinking of being near Cutter and I wanted it so badly I couldn’t think of anything else except how mad I got when he ignored me, which he did whenever he pleased.

With the new posting Cutter got a promotion so he became my superior. He got one stripe. So right from the start at the prison I had to be one of three females who all looked up to Cutter like he was God. All because the guys in Intelligence believed he had the appropriate degree of sociopathy.
Their word for it was ‘prisoner treatment skills’.

Cutter was being *groomed*.

I remember we were walking toward this prefab desk down a long corridor of plywood sheeting with doorways for interrogation rooms and this female person I’d never met before looked straight at him, because he’s so tall you can’t look anywhere else—*baboom!* Two raven-haired blue-eyed self-appointed royalty… Their eyes just locked. And Cutter muttered to me, or to any other person in the vicinity he didn’t care enough about, ‘I’m going to screw her.’ Just like that, staking his claim, getting in early. Just like I didn’t exist at all.

That made me laugh bitterly. At the same time I could see how that forgetting is part of being mates. It was like this little aperture inside the ranks and ranks of closed-up-tight men: I could put my head through and look both ways. Until something snapped it off. So Cutter forgetting I was female too made sense.

But part of me also went crazy with grief and hurt. I saw that no matter what human females like me did or said there’d be other females like fancy-Nancy. He never called us ‘boyfriend girlfriend’ or said we had a date. It was like—bend over this, straddle that. Which I did or didn’t do. I could imagine him doing different things with Nancy, maybe taking her out, paying for meals, and the idea came to me that they’d get married one day, and it seemed so certain I almost choked. A silver luxury Statesman, pink ribbons on the aerial. No—livery. A set of horse-drawn carriages. The king and queen visiting for tea.

When I lay on my pallet listening to missiles crash lives out in other sectors, I imagined sticking pins in her everywhere, all over her entire body. Neck and face. Vulva. Clitoris. I imagined holding her head down in a toilet with the other guys doing turds on her and laughing, but all of a sudden I knew nobody’d laugh. And I remembered there are two types of female and I wasn’t the other type. Distant flares coming and going on the wall. I had the sick falling feeling you get in funfairs that aren’t fun.
Later I found out why Cutter had his sights on that bitch. He was looking to the next rung up cause her dad was Chief of Operations on the Ground. But at the time I just thought she was his type.

So there’s this photo of me standing to one side, Cutter with an arm up on a shelf below which is leaning Private Nancy Gray who’s come to the prison in Y so she won’t be exposed anywhere to suicide bombs. Won’t get her precious lips blown off by actual insurgents. Black hair, blue eyes, white teeth, pointy chin. She looks like Snow White in a uniform. Beside her I look like a dull old black and white telly you can’t wait to hurl off the ute at the tip.

The third girl came from the Murray region, and cause of that I called her ‘Deadwood’. Plus she always asked me what she should do, when we had the same rank. She had short pale hair thin as straws and freckles on her forehead. I didn’t hate her or like her or expect anything of her except to keep out of my way.

That’s all I said to her when we first met.

And she said, ‘Fine.’ After that we barely even talked. Just, ‘Pass the charts,’ or, ‘I’m on night-shift, what are you?’ Meanwhile there’s all these Australian soldiers plus American marines going back and forth dragging prisoners who you can spot a mile away cause they’re always naked or semi-naked or wearing black cloth hoods over their faces so they’ll think they’re going off to execution.

But having a human female who looked like pornography in the ranks was making my life hell. Nobody ever looked at me any more. All the men had a thing for fancy-Nancy. At the same time, they couldn’t have her because Cutter was having her first. So they were all queued up and waiting for second turn.

Meanwhile the prison was built on an earlier prison which was built on a stone age prison or thereabouts... All those prisoners back to year dot. So there’d have to be about a million layers of dead prisoner sediments blocking up the drains, which is why the air always stunk of sewage and whatnot. Dead
persons, dead meat. With all this dead and death around the attrition rate was high.

Soldiers couldn’t wait to go home or vanish. I knew that from the faces on the guards that first day. Prisoners were the only ones who didn’t go anywhere. We got full to bursting with members of the public who’d come in under suspicion of being insurgents. But once in prison, they were no longer just under suspicion. Prison was confirmation. Once that happened they were all the same. Guilty, innocent, whatnot, we didn’t discriminate.

The first few days I got general guard duties, hanging around the front checking paperwork. I was eaten up with jealousy because of Cutter. I’d never imagined he’d get taken out of my league. The promotion meant he had better things to do than come near former members of his team. All the while, dusty MPs got out of crap jeeps going, ‘Where’s the senior person here, soldier?’ I had to point them down the hall. The steps had grooves in them from so many years of boots. Scuffs and drag marks along the walls. I felt like part of the prison walls, the iron bars.

I’m not using that to excuse myself.

Thinking of all the times we had sex even though it hurt… I never felt used, not ever. Just the willing participant. Up to Cutter, all my life I’d been in isolation. Twenty-three years in solitary.

So in many ways I saw him as my saviour.

Then a funny thing happened. Being cut off from Cutter, I started paying more attention to my job. To what might be expected of me—not asked.

They didn’t ask for things they wanted, in that prison. Intelligence personnel, I mean. They just sifted through the wreckage for soldiers who had what they wanted. Who could listen to the unspoken commands and play them out.

I decided to be the best at being the worst I could be. That’s how I’d get back at Cutter: by getting ahead.

We had prisoners of all kinds brought to that place: male; female; high value; low value; ninety-eight percent useless everyday locals, in fact. And you
could listen to the guys in the water room doing their thing and the screams and groans echoing up and down but nobody ever got anything useful from it, and I know that for a fact.

One day an MP asked if anybody else in the prison wanted to have a hand at extracting information. Somehow they worked out that having females perform interrogation on male prisoners was breaking down the males into babbling sycophants.

I shouted, ‘Yes, Sir!’

This doesn’t mean that I wanted to be the one causing pain or harm. I wanted to be on a level with Cutter so I could exist again.

So what they’re saying about my obsessive nature, I don’t deny. But when I signed the forms saying nothing that went on in the interrogation rooms or chambers of the prison would ever pass my lips outside the military, I wasn’t thinking about what I read or wrote. Just how much more notice Cutter would take of me if I got a promotion.

Already I heard he’d been out with the daughter of the Ops chief, and I heard him telling the Corporal she had a ‘Brazilian wax’, which means no hair on her pussy.

I didn’t grow my hair at all that month.

On the first interrogation I got asked to bring a bucket of water and just wait around. I hovered by the door, which they left open to allow more of the sound to percolate around the building. Screams and groans.

‘Please put the bucket on the handbasin there.’

The body under the black cloth hood sat with his knees apart slouching on a stiff wooden chair. His ankles wore chains attached through the chair rung so he couldn’t run. His hands were pinched behind the back with plastic ties. His head kept nodding.

‘Is he nodding cause he’s agreeing with us?’ somebody said—and smacked the hooded object in the forehead.

I didn’t walk in there to ‘memorise’. But these are the things that stuck in the mind.
Next thing they asked was for me to tell the prisoner what I thought of the approximate size and shape of his genitals.

‘In full detail, soldier.’

See, these guys—a military intelligence officer, a translator and a cheese-faced civilian with a clipboard—had authoritarian voices and I couldn’t help it, I thought of movies, like I was going to act a part. So straight away I knew there was a script. And if I got something wrong they just ignored that or looked away or fiddled with a pen. So pretty soon I understood the way up.

I looked into this nonperson’s crooked lap and saw two puny balls squished underneath a bit of blackened cock-stump, and said so.

‘That’s two rotten peaches under a dog’s turd.’

The civilian laughed. Over in the corner a translator who didn’t matter closed his legs and spouted out some local gobbledygook. The figure in the chair groaned a little.

‘Tell him what those bits of crap get used for.’

‘Oh,’ I said, ‘for bait and burley and what-not.’ I was thinking freely. ‘At home we generally staple those things to the door above the chook shed to keep out cats.’ It didn’t make sense. ‘Or throw them into a dog pit, watch them fight.’ I wondered how much a translator could get across, but the warble flew. The prisoner-spectator cringed. The translator wouldn’t look at me because of being female.

The soldiers didn’t look at me either, because of being men.

‘All right,’ they said, and the civilian with the clipboard got up and parked his chair beside the handbasin, ‘we’ll call you back when we need your help again, thanks, soldier.’

It was good to be called a soldier and do my job.

When Cutter heard I’d been given a role in interrogations he interrogated me about it.

‘So what went on?’

‘Oh, this and that.’
He put a hand on my shoulder and gripped hard. I yelped but shook my head. His face turned orange. ‘What went on? Did you suck that guy’s balls?’

‘Yeah,’ I said, ‘I sucked him off. Enjoyed it, too.’

Cutter thumped the desk with his fist, and manila files crammed with paperwork fell off and scattered. Plywood dust from rough sawn interrogation cubicles stung my eyes.

‘Do your filing,’ he said harshly.

‘They’re not my files, sir.’

He didn’t look me in the face. My arm yanked as he tugged it up behind my back so fast I couldn’t get away. Then he shoved me against the bit of board where they tack prisoner charts and daily key-words. I read, ‘Prisoner 8141 not eating’ as Cutter got my pants buckle undone. The hand groped, uncaring.

‘You’re wet,’ he hissed.

‘Not for you,’ I hummed.

Wham! I remember drawing pins raining down like golden drops. Cutter spun on his heel and stormed away, kicking over a chair.

As usual he left me trembling, this time with a kind of triumph as well as pain. People were coming towards me down the hall, boots clomping on the boards. I heard idle voices ringing out. Somewhere else a door banged as Cutter stormed off.

A Major somebody or other poked his head inside the bay and said, ‘Oi, is Sanders here?’

Sanders is that guy they’re calling ‘Civilian 9’.

I said, ‘I believe he’s in N-wing, sir.’

‘As you were, soldier.’

I didn’t collapse or break down crying or stab my pencil into the wall. In a way you could say I was elated. For the first time since we’d come to the prison, I got one up on Cutter. He noticed me.

When the shift ended I made my way out across the dusty yard to the fourth quarter of the prison that was a garrison wing. This was where all the
soldiers slept and fought and played card games and hated each other because of being so close together all the time. Long shadows bled from walls.

The marines on duty at the doorway looked at each other before they let me through. It didn’t seem too many had seen females before.

‘Hey sister, had any love today?’
‘Root your boot!’

I smoked five cigarettes in a row, one off the other, leaning on the ancient yellow mud wall in the dead flat courtyard. At the far end of the yard a near-naked hooded guy with a brick resting on his head squatted on top of a hillock of sandbags, and as I watched, spitting tobacco off my tongue, he suddenly tilted side-ways and fell off the mound. He didn’t get up again, and I wondered if the brick had smashed his head. Then the two marines, sighing heavily, got down from their posts and went over and kicked him in the ribs until he moved and groaned. Then they propped him up again and put the brick back on his head.

For a little while, I watched, and wondered what the prisoner had done. He might be a terrorist, or a supporter of terrorism. He might’ve crapped during interrogation. Then I realised there was no need for reasoning. It was the reason-for-being of prison to eschew reasoning.

Two ways I could go. I could be the person who was a non-person who Cutter never noticed. The person who was always at the receiving end.

Or I could eschew reasoning.
Become an interrogator.

The early evening hills came alight with distant gunfire and occasional shelling. Through the watery veil of smog, stars began to sprout in sockets, twinkling like they thought everything was fine.

Another day in paradise or hell.
Maybe all violent realms look about half-half.
Nothing made Cutter more furious than being forgotten about.

‘Hey, Susie-bird, how’ve you been?’

‘So-so—Sir.’

‘Argh, come on, none of that Sir crap!’ He leant forward, snickering. ‘You want me—come on, admit it.’

I shook my hair.

‘You want me right now—you’re creaming for it.’

We stood in the hallway to the shower cubicles. Sixteen soldiers thudding on the boards. Broken masonry littered the floor. Voices percolated through the rooms. Somehow the queue made privacy.

‘What happened to fancy-Nancy?’ I hissed. See, even though I was forgetting Cutter, I wasn’t capable of forgetting him without thinking of him first, so all my forgetting was really about remembering.

The man’s bright face went deadpan. ‘Dunno who you mean.’ His eyes looked sleepy suddenly. He gazed around and leaned closer.

‘Hey Cutter!’ Berriman flapped a towel.

‘Fuck off!’

A war started—a shower war. Towel flaps and naked stinging. Sometimes these things turned dangerous, or comical. It gave me the chance to pretend I didn’t want to speak to Cutter.

In the farm it was common for hens to collapse and die of heatstroke if the air conditioning broke. On hot days they piled up in corners one upon the next asphyxiating. They were stupid as dumb weights. Once I accidentally dropped a bin lid clanging and they shot to the backs of cages and piled up.
Twenty suffocated. Even when not panicking they were always pecking each other’s raw flesh to bones. Everything you hate about people, it was there, but worse. After a few days you stopped feeling sorry for them.

With prisoners, you soon got used to walking past filth. Like, if you dared to look at them, they spat or made fisting signs. This didn’t affect me in a serious way. That is, I always had my own spit ready. Getting it between the bars was another thing.

The cells looked like metal store-rooms with grilled square holes. Through these holes and bars you looked in and saw the prisoners, who always squatted or sat in corners. Some cells had an open front for close watching. These were the ones the prisoners spat through, when their faces and lips weren’t mashed in.

I couldn’t understand their gobbledygook. Sometimes I wondered if I could understand them even if I knew the language. They talked like chittering apes. They gazed out through dark rims, dark hollows, dark-set eyebrows. Beaky noses, stringy hair. They never wore decent clothes, which made you forget you’d taken their clothes away. They looked like rags.

First time I hit a prisoner, I nearly broke my hand. ‘Ow!’ I cried, dancing around, shaking my fist which felt dead cracked.

‘Don’t punch so hard,’ grinned Corporal Wedge, the senior interrogator. ‘You want to pace yourself. Like this.’ He demonstrated putting his hand into a half-fist with the fingers bent at the middle knuckles and karate chopping.

Just then the prisoner who I’ll call Prisoner A spat a string of bloody spit out the side of his mouth. It fell twanging off the handle of the door.

‘That’s disgusting!’ Corporal Wedge yelled. He threw his chair back, throttling Prisoner A backward. Throttled him until he nearly passed out, or did. I watched that half dead man heave on the floor, and since he wore no hood, we saw the face that mouthed hate at us. I saw that part of what he hated was my being female and having this position over him. But I was just trying to perform a duty. It made me remember how stupid chickens are, for not
knowing you’re just doing your job when you have a job to do. I hated those chickens.

Corporal Wedge got upright and picked up the chair. A rung broke. ‘Fucken useless piece of crap,’ he panted, hurling it away. Bits of smashed wood smashed into the open face of the prisoner. ‘Spit in front of a lady, will ya!’

That was the first time I ever got called a ‘lady’.

But later, going back to my quarters, I passed Corporal Wedge walking along with his head down, sucking at his teeth through a fingernail.

‘Hey Susie,’ he said without looking at my face. He wasn’t my ‘friend’. I didn’t understand this. ‘Wanna go out drinking?’ Not stopping as he passed so I had to turn.

‘Drinking where?’ I could’ve said ‘sir’ but it wasn’t called for.

‘In the sack, where else?’ He exploded, canons of laughter ricocheting.

‘No thank you, sir.’

‘I’m joking.’ He didn’t say what he was joking about. Then he stopped in his tracks and worried at the thing stuck in his teeth. ‘Hey, can you have a look for me?’

I came closer warily. Still not looking at me he bent his head down. He had a bit of toothpick sticking between top fangs.

‘I can’t get that,’ I said, ‘you need a pair of pliers.’

That seemed to poke him in the ribs. Shaking his head, worrying at the gum, he went away.

So all that ‘lady’ stuff was just joking. It was how you talk to prisoners, by not meaning anything. This not meaning causes power. So only if I didn’t love or want Cutter could I tell him I loved or wanted him. A fact I filed away for future use.

Next time I saw Cutter I was fully prepared.

‘Hey you,’ he said, ‘I hear you’ve been pretty busy.’

I shrugged and went on polishing my boots.
‘Some guys are saying you’re screwing the corporal. But I can’t see it, myself. He’s a tit man.’ He sat on my bunk and watched me casually. ‘Anyway, I happen to know for a fact, you’re a one-man girl.’

‘Oh, well,’ I said, ‘if you say so, I guess it’s true.’

He got off the bunk. ‘Guess what?’ Coming closer, hands in pockets, fingers fidgeting. And then I saw the sinister smile he wore. That clean cut chin, the half-curve, those murdering eyes. At the last second he lounged back against a damaged bedpost.

‘I’m getting a transfer into the SAS.’

Shock caused me to stop polishing. ‘You what?’

‘I’m out of here.’


He sniffed and eyed me from his height. ‘I always wanted to join the SAS since I was a little boy.’

I clapped the lid on the can and stood up. ‘Good for you, Cutter.’ Somehow my mouth worked out the sounds.

Cutter stared at me. A small flush moved up his throat and cheeks. His brown eyes glared. Then all at once his lip started to curl. I hadn’t moved or said anything. Maybe one tear had leaked out onto my cheek and started to roll. I tried to smudge it away, but he’d seen.

‘You really can’t let me go, can you? Listen, I never said this was going to go anywhere. You were just a fill-in.’ He yawned. ‘Don’t take it so seriously.’

I said, ‘Fuck off and join the SAS, dickhead.’

Cutter laughed nastily. ‘How about a quick head job?’

‘Ask your fancy slut, why don’tcha.’

Cutter smiled at me ironically. ‘I think I will.’

It wasn’t till later I found out she’d already been transferred. So everything he said was just to rile me.
When I lay down to sleep I found myself shuddering—not real crying like you do when you’re an idiot infant but a sort of shame. I felt like somebody had my head and was cracking it on the ground.

Crack.

Crack.

In the distance I could hear gunfire. It blatted across the rooftops and snicked the corners off memory, tat-tat.

Sex and death. I understood—on my pallet, listening to shots—that Cutter had some sort of genius like Isaac Newton. He knew the exact ratio between pain and power. When I felt pain, he knew he was winning. Everything he said or did was about strategy.

I’d barely fallen asleep when the bastard found me and crawled up inside my blankets, smelling of alcohol. I lay back very still and hopeless, not quite knowing who it was but knowing just the same. Before he even got to my upper body he started dry-humping on my leg, like a big Alsatian dog.

I could’ve balled my fists and mashed his knotty forehead and both eyes, but instead my hands stayed limp. Up and up he crawled, and then he twisted suddenly and knocked my chin with his forehead so hard my teeth rattled.

‘Get off!’ I shouted, but he didn’t move.

He lay still for a while, a pulse in the side of his throat going beat-beat-beat. Scratchy stubble of his face felt cool and prickling. The weight of him began to calm me down and then it became hard to breathe and the hardness of breathing became funny, like when you hit a certain bone inside your arm.

After a while I pushed him off gaspily and got up and lit a cigarette.

‘Where are you going?’ he asked, opening one sleepy eye.

‘I thought you were knocked out.’

‘I was just listening to you breathing.’

I paused, exhaling. ‘Why?’

‘Oh, because, I dunno, it’s reassuring.’

I crawled back into the bedding and tried to find my warm spot but his weight lay over it.
‘Listen,’ I said, ‘I’m not your girlfriend. Don’t come here expecting—’

Before I even finished the sentence his mouth came slurping. Next thing we were two mad cats fighting to get out of clothes. I couldn’t wait to get mine off. It didn’t matter if I hated him. All I could think was that he was leaving and we wouldn’t get to do this ever again.

A few days later I asked the Warrant Officer, O’Brien, why Cutter hadn’t left to join the SAS yet.

O’Brien told me Cutter was being punished.

‘Punished, Sir?’

‘Yes, soldier, punished.’

‘Can I ask what for?’

He looked above my head in a distinct line. ‘For poking his nose into other people’s business.’ Then he worked out I was suffering and laughed. ‘Put it bluntly: poking an officer’s daughter. He won’t be going anywhere for a while.’

So Cutter was the king of strategy, and I was the commoner. But at least he wasn’t getting off scot-free.
Somebody found a dog and christened it ‘Samuel’.

That dog hung round the garrison like a terrible stink. It had mangy fur with see-through tufts. The skin glowed red and dripped pus. It was the happiest dog I’ve ever seen when somebody rubbed its bright pink belly, causing agony.

Cutter took to calling the dog ‘Susie’. He fed the animal scraps and tin lids until Sergeant Smith ordered all dogs to leave the premises. ‘Here, Susie, come, Susie!’

Everybody except me was laughing hysterically. I didn’t like comparisons to animals. Then one day I laughed at Cutter calling the dog Susie, and he decided to stop it and forgot about it, so I could just be a person again.

One thing about Cutter, he only liked bothering to do something if it caused irritation.

The dog didn’t look so much like a dog as a pin cushion with legs. Everybody seemed to think having a pet around was more like being at home. Robson got some kitchen grease and slathered the animal. After about two weeks the mange started to go away.

‘Look, hey, a greasy dog!’ Cutter maintained he could see love forming between Robson and the dog.

I sometimes wondered what that mongrel felt about being alive. I don’t mean just being alive near the garrison. Did it have thoughts, plans, theories? If it did then it was the stupidest dog of all.

You can’t change what you’re in.
When I was growing up, the neighbour on the other side—not the cat place—had about six barking cattle dogs tied on chains. Every so often one cattle dog got off and came sneaking round our sheds. It wasn’t after cats. Like all vicious two-eyed beasts it was after chickens.

When the dog ran off with feathers in its mouth my uncle decided he had to go next door and ‘sort it out’. He came back smelling of beer. It was the only time I remember him getting tipsy.

Point was, we never had feelings over dogs.

And I remember also how that beer smell always reminded me of being an adult. Like you could find a magic place inside which everything you did had consequence. That was my dream of adulthood.

I began to see how many of us needed to have these minority objects to care for. Like we could shore up how we felt about ourselves. Maltreated. Homely. But the more we hung around dogs the more like dogs we became.

I could see this happening, and I wasn’t even a dog person.

The only other one who treated the dog like a dog was Cutter, cause of being a dog-hater. He treated Samuel the dog like he treated Eric Coogan, which is to say like a dog. That is, he constantly harassed, joked at, victimised and punished Coogan. If the dog would’ve gotten under Cutter’s feet more often he’d have killed it. As it was the dog stayed away.

The worst Cutter ever did to the dog was tie a made-up firecracker to its tail and slap it on the bony rump. The dog slunk a few feet away. Then it turned, cause of being treated in what it thought was a kind way by Cutter. You could see that dog thought anyone who didn’t immediately kick it in the guts was a friend. The dog started coming back to Cutter.

‘Jesus—is that mutt stupid or what?’

Robson rescued the dog by putting out the firecracker, and there was going to be a fight between Robson and Cutter, only a dog isn’t a woman.

They let it go.

‘Don’t touch the dog—okay?’
Because Cutter didn’t truly care about animals, he was able to agree to something he didn’t feel. So life went on.

Meanwhile Sergeant Smith treated the dog like a bad soldier who had to be ridiculed to make him fend for himself under duress. At the same time, he slipped the mongrel tit-bits after meals.

You could say that dog got off lightly overall. By now, his ribs sprung out around a huge pot belly. Somebody went on a few days’ leave and came back with a camel bone.

The flies and dog both loved that bit of bone.

For myself, I had no idea about dogs. I didn’t want to associate the thing with me. Because of Cutter and his way of looking at things I knew I’d be in for it. So whenever the dog came near me I booted it away. But it’s fair to say that I understood how it felt.

It was like I could plant my boot in that cringing yelping side even as I understood perfectly the snap of pain involved in being on the receiving end. So in some ways I was both the dog, and non-dog.

I just didn’t want to be branded doglike.

Maybe it was a man thing. Everybody used the dog as a way to talk about their wives.

‘Man, you look after that animal like it gives head jobs!’

‘Sheesh, that head reminds me of Cynthia’s mum.’

‘You can’t expect that kind of loyalty from females.’

In these conversations, or at the edges of them, I wasn’t an honorary male but I wasn’t female. I guess if any of the soldiers had looked at me while talking he’d have shut right up. That’s why I kept quiet so much, cause of not wanting to remind them of me.

Even Cutter sometimes had to be reminded by taking off my clothes so he could be sure which hole to fill with manhood.

The Americans turned up one day with a greyhound trailer. In the compartments were four attack dogs of various breeds. One had a bit of pit bull terrier, big blunt headed monster with a chest wider than it was tall. I saw it
latch onto the ear of a neighbouring German Shepherd and pull half the fur off. But most times the dogs were kept singly, going up and down the corridors inside the gaol. Baring their teeth at prisoners kept them from biting each other.

These were part of ‘Prisoner Cooperating Strategy’.

We began to be trained unofficially in the arts of keeping dogs near prisoners.

The first rule: dogs must be allowed to shit on anything. Sometimes this went against us as well. For instance, a dog on a leash crapped on Sally Baker’s purse. Sally Baker came to the prison in September and whined all the time. She was here because she was married and her husband wasn’t working out. Her purse was sitting under the administration bench, a trestle table behind plywood partitions at the end of the hall. Baker had stuck curtains across to make it homey. The dog backed up under the trestle and began straining.

‘Hey!’ she shouted to the American dog handler, who only smirked.

Sally Baker had to take her purse into the washrooms. But the rest of the turd they took away inside paper towels and later I learned they gave it to a hooded prisoner to use as soap.

‘Wash yourself!’ Cutter was telling it at dinner time like a joke. He showed us how he ordered the prisoner to use the shit. He mimed washing himself with soap made of dog turds. He mimed vomiting on his own feet.

We laughed, because at that point it was funny. It’s hard to feel anything when you’re laughing at something humorous.

The attack dogs were continually crazy because of being kept on a leash. Except when they got asked to pull a person down. They had this slavery look in their eyes, like their brains were far away and only their bodies worked. Like somebody had given them machines for minds.

When I got asked to ‘take Trusty for a walk up the corridor’ I knew instinctively what that meant. But they only called the pit bull ‘Trusty’ for a joke, because he’d already bitten three soldiers on the legs. So actually he was quite un-trusty.

‘Trick is to keep him steady.’
'Stay focussed.'

'Let him smell the prisoners.'

I was very nervous about this: I’m not a dog person. Plus being close to the dog, I began to get the fear about being doglike.

I felt that Cutter would see me and make a joke of it.

'What do I do if he bites someone?' That made them perilously close to dying of laughter. One of them nearly choked on an unlit cigarette, because nobody was allowed to smoke except during active interrogations. Then you were supposed to light up to show prisoners how much better off you were than them. Offer them one in the middle of proceedings but never light it.

I said, ‘If this dog bites my hand, I’m shooting it.’

The American handler eyed me steadily. No comment made.

I took my first turn down the hall. The dog came grudgingly. He had a neck exactly like a wild boar. The brindle colour looked like teeming maggots on rotting flesh. At every cell door the monster erupted. He chawed at the cage bars, saliva flipping across the floor.

Prisoners watched us tremulously and in indignant shock. I don’t know what they felt. All I can say is they fled from the bars.

‘Oi, you,’ I said jovially, ‘he’s not going to harm you!’

The animal wanted only one thing: to bite people to death. I saw those pale stricken faces in the backs of cells, and I wanted to laugh, because of course they would only get bitten if the dog was actually allowed off the leash and put into the cages with them. Since I was just walking up and down outside, it couldn’t matter. You can see I didn’t hate the men inside the cells. In a way, I was laughing out of nervousness. It was lucky they were in there getting snapped at by the dog, because as long as it was them in there it wasn’t me. As long as the dog had them to focus on it wouldn’t bite my hand.

When I got back I was panting and sick of the job. ‘Here, you take it.’ The dog kept pulling out my arms. ‘It’s too damn strong.’
They just blinked, sitting chewing on unlit tobacco smokes. The Sergeant in charge of interrogations, Sergeant Wheedle, pointed to a rule written above the doorframe. It said, ‘All soldiers are to follow orders!’

But what I had to do they weren’t telling me.

I got angry about that. ‘Listen,’ I said, ‘this dog is basically a maniac. He should be shot.’ The American handler showed me how to hold the leash so I could choke him.

‘Listen,’ he said, ‘it’s like a robotic toy. It’ll go in only one direction. Just make sure you’re behind the collar and you can’t get bit!’

‘Listen,’ said Sergeant Wheedle, ‘it’s a phobia thing. Prisoners just happen to be terrified of animals.’

‘Except goats,’ grinned the dog technician. ‘These guys just love goats.’

‘Dogs in particular.’ I didn’t listen to that or interpret words. ‘You just do your duty,’ the Sergeant ordered.

I was tired of being pushed over. My fingers hurt. ‘Listen dog,’ I said, ‘if you pull my knuckles out one more time…’

As I turned to drag the dog up the corridor again, Sergeant Wheedle jostled me. He poked a bit of paper in my face. ‘Door 23.’

I said, ‘You want me to take the dog to Door 23?’

No answer to that. He hiccupped and burped.

I said, ‘You want me to open Door 23, go in there, set the dog on a prisoner?’ For the first time I was sick of interpreting.

‘Oi me?’ I could see the Sergeant’s face radiating incredulity. At the same time he didn’t want to be responsible.

‘Just do your duty, kid,’ they mimicked amicably.

In the square dirty room behind Door 23 squatted a man with bricks tied to both his thumbs by cord that ran up through the bars of a fixed bunk-bed. I noticed separate bricks tied to the man’s genitals. The bricks on his thumbs pulled his arms sky-high as the ball-bricks weighed him down again. His face which was bare and blackened radiated agony.
I didn’t care or not care. I don’t say this is how I felt. I didn’t have the mental equipment for processing.

In, out, up, down.

I said, ‘Stand up, prisoner!’ But something tired also made me say, ‘Please.’

He moaned. Suddenly I had a headache. If only that stupid prisoner would stop crouching. Then that insane dog which had been growling began to snavel at the lower parts of his shins and ankles. Genitals plunged in the weighted cord as the brick hung between the man’s hairy knees. He couldn’t protect himself because of the weights on his hands.

I saw tears squeezing out his slitted eyes.

I wanted him to stop the problem happening. So I started shouting. I can’t even remember what I said. But he just kept ignoring sensible advice.

The dog jerked my arm nearly out of its socket. Steel jaws locked onto the brick-weighted forearm and dragged the man to the floor. I kept shouting at the dog. Any second I thought he’d tear the man’s face away.

I wasn’t in here to see faces ripped apart. This attitude was getting unholy. For the first time I couldn’t stand my orders.

‘Get up!’ I shouted at the man, because of his being floor level exciting the earnest dog. But nobody could hear a thing because of that damned dog roaring. I didn’t know if ‘interrogation’ meant leaving animals bite marks. The prisoner cowered as the brute beast tore at his arm and snatched onto the shoulder and started shaking its head from side to side.

If only that stupid prisoner would get up.

A dog handler came bounding into the room. Two men took the bleeding prisoner by the arms. I saw that he had wet himself—a great long stream of piss leaking down his naked leg. The prisoner was crying like a baby as they led him back to the bed and chained his elbows up at right angles to his body. His genitals were dark blue, almost black. The string weight had unravelled.
There was some discussion about how best to tie the brick on again. Then they left it, kicking the string across the room. ‘Fucken useless string,’ they cursed. They took the dog out, three men hauling to stop it snavelling.

In this particular moment I can say that I felt pity for the prisoner. But this wasn’t a nice kind of pity, because part of me was thinking that if the man just gave us what we wanted, it wouldn’t have gotten to that point. I wanted to say this to him. I wanted to brush the black hair out of his black eyes and say in words I didn’t know, ‘All I wanted was that you stand up, okay?’ Maybe if he understood this he would start cooperating. But nobody went near this prisoner for days. I know for a fact he wasn’t given food. Prisoners who were deemed ‘most dangerous’ got forgotten the instant the session was over. Sometimes they just weren’t there any more when we came back on duty. So I never actually saw this prisoner again.

A bit later the pit bull got tied to a post while waiting for the transport vehicle to come around. Somebody had got tired of holding the leash.

The skinny mongrel Samuel meandered too close. Maybe he was wanting to make friends. I don’t know. I don’t know the minds of dogs. That vicious bull terrier waited until the skinny mongrel came too close inside the reach of the chain, and then he opened one crafty eye. Samuel halted, sniffing. His tail stub wagged.

The trap snapped like an ancient freshwater fish.

Flying scraps of lip and neck-flesh. Yelps and growling.

The pit bull tore that skinny dog into tissue and fur. Everybody who saw this said it was seriously unstoppable. The dog handlers came back and were angry because somebody let a stray dog come close to their attack dog. They said it had a risk of germ transmission. Soldiers who didn’t care one way or the other said it was good that the American dog killed the raghead mutt.

In our team men were crying. Even Sergeant Smith said he was going to take the dog squad members by the scruff and drown them. Robson wouldn’t say anything at all. He just lifted up that dead and bony gut-strewn carcass and took it to the area behind the toilets to bury it in a grave just like a person.
And I was thinking—you’re all like those old ladies who keep fancy terriers in tiny apartments, and when they die, the dog eats their face. Maybe those old ladies would be happy to donate their faces. But to an outsider it just looks like we’re all animals.

About this time Corporal Wedge started taking photographs. I was no longer putting myself forward for interrogations. But when he came and got me, I shrugged and went along.

‘Where should I stand, Sir?’

Wedge frowned at the crumbly ceiling. ‘Wherever you can reach his genitals with a boot!’

A skinny private said, ‘Prisoner 9721, stand up, you useless sack of crap!’

A groan and then he eased upright. The translator sat in the corner mouthing on.

Wedge observed, ‘Why would a caring thoughtful God give a man such a measly bit of shit cock as you’ve got there, prisoner?’

A skinny private held the prisoner’s legs apart as the Corporal pulled out a rubber truncheon. He said, ‘My guess is this prisoner wants some pleasure time.’ Then he looked meaningfully at me.

‘Want me to do something with that, Sir?’

Wedge blinked twice. ‘I thought we had an understanding, Private?’

I said that I just wanted to do my job.

‘Then do it.’

I took hold of the fat rubbery rod. Smacked it on my hand.

Wedge grinned and brought over a chair. ‘I like to see things done properly,’ he explained to the translator. Then Wedge changed his mind, or seemed to. ‘See if you can get him to do himself.’ This was said to me. The eyes going up over my head to a spot on the wall behind.

‘Put the truncheon up his arse himself, you mean?’

‘Private,’ he said, ‘there’s no reason to be uncouth.’ Two MPs who’d come to look in the door barked with laughter. From that I understood what had to occur.
So I told the man on the floor to do what we said, and in about ten minutes he had no more than an inch sticking out, and even then he was nearly doubled over.

They got Cutter and some of the guys off duty to come look at it.
‘Looks like a bit of liquorice in a baby’s mouth!’
‘No—a snowman’s face upside-down!’
‘A bald teddy bear!’

Cutter tipped the last inch in with his boot, nearly causing the prisoner to fall forward. I heard the prisoner give a gutteral groan. But it wasn’t as bad as the dog episode. We were in control.

‘You know,’ said Wedge thoughtfully, ‘with Christmas round the corner, what say we take snaps for folks at home?’ He flicked two clasps on metal carry case. ‘Cutter? Bickerts?’

I shrugged and posed.
‘A little in... That’s it... Aha. Now, smile!”

The prisoner didn’t seem to care one way or the other. Maybe he never saw cameras before.

I believe you know the picture. Cutter has his hand draped on my shoulder. We’re forming a bridge across the naked buttocks of the prisoner, whose anus has been blurred out so that sodomites and kids don’t get ideas.

Cutter looks like a kid at a birthday party. Me, I look almost happy. Of us as a couple, it’s the only shot I have.
Everyone wanted to get out of Y.

It was a place without the possibility of living. All those microwaves, bioweapons, particles, shit, desert. It was a place of men in trucks looking narrow-eyed at other men in trucks. Giant sick Americans snapping gum behind powerful microwave weapons. Blaring sicko music. You could just see all those common locals crawling about like headless ants. They didn’t understand liberation at gunpoint.

It was true that people were dying. I mean thousands, literally. Checkpoints popped humans by the day. No sense taking chances. Or just for fun. Americans had aggressive trigger-fingers. Australians weren’t so close to action, or maybe we’d have been taking out civilians too.

People were just lying down and dying in hordes.

Americans shot Americans. Or Italians. Other nationalities took up defensive postures among the debris. People shot people. I was all for shooting people, specially if they fired first. But being female, it wasn’t up to me to shoot at men.

I understood that. It wasn’t part of training. In training I was given human male cut-outs to shoot at. I shot them in the head, heart, lungs and liver. My average was high.

Cutter told me bullet holes remind him of sex. I believe this is a male-wide phenomenon. I didn’t have an opinion on bullet holes. I wasn’t interested in object displacement. Maybe this is why I wasn’t into shooting as much as them.
The guys all wanted to have an experience of killing someone. If they heard of a guy who shot a person they grilled him about it. The ones who had, they didn’t look good or evil or kind, just normal. They didn’t sweat about it. They shrugged, looking over everyone else’s head.

‘I popped him—so what?’

‘Did his brains go everywhere?’

‘Yeah.’

‘That’s fucking awesome!’

‘Just like in the movies!’

‘They deserve it, cause of 9-11.’

I began to notice things like this without recording them. I mean, without thinking about them. I just noticed, even though they weren’t anything to me. But they were noticeable.

Like, if I went into a men’s area, say I was shining my boots, say it was in my dorm or barracks… I listened without being aware of listening, because I never had it in me to do only one thing at once.

The men always noticed me come in but it wasn’t like noticing. Like—tits and any possible holes. They were always talking in that way males have.

I didn’t either care or not care about 9-11. About the people on top of the American towers—I could imagine them feeling a certain way. Scared as they’re falling. Angry or confused as they’re waiting for a helicopter that isn’t going to pick them off. I imagined realising how movies don’t work. It would have felt genuinely shocking. Armageddon, War of the Worlds, Saving Private Ryan. Imagine finding your own real life is over—pow!

Nobody ever let me think I’d get rescued, suppose I’d been on the towers. I never had that belief. All life is expendable—that’s why I never saluted when they put us on parade on September in the baking desert sun waiting for Americans to go past so we could show them how in solidarity we were.

Nobody’s ever going to rescue me, I was thinking—uh-uh.
So now they’re saying ‘She’s un-Australian,’ because of not saluting. You have to salute quite a lot of dead people when you’re in the military. It’s like the dead are more appealing than the living.

Like they have more to say that way.

Meanwhile drones carried on over our heads, plummeting to ‘rogue’ states. They had missions. They had no men in them. Global American security forces were playing safe. They had wireless communication via satellites back to reinforced bunkers where men and women sat at simulation screens operating the controls. Threads of invisible wires connecting A to B. Carloads of undesirables being blown sky-high.

Meanwhile microwave weapons drilled into locked local buses causing massive body overheating and human death. People exploded in seismic waves, leaving seats and windows intact, blood caked and cooking. Depleted uranium radiated constantly from soil and surroundings. Our ally was using war as a dumping ground, as an experiment. They were practiced at using junk to make weaponry. This isn’t anti-American. It’s simply facts.

Children, men, women, rats, we were all so sick of being here we felt like vomiting. It wasn’t fear or phobia. I didn’t have bellyache. We just felt like we had this giant animal in a cage, and every day we had to feed the thing... Had to water the thing... Had to stroke its belly. Take out its cock...

Once I felt this way everybody else did too. It was like a disease.

We wished to be among green fields we’d never seen. I don’t know if these green fields were Heaven. Only death could bring us out of there.

Cutter started refusing to look at anybody. I could see him pulling imaginary triggers at Sergeants’ heads. Other people did this too. It was like they had to imagine doing it over and over again so one day they could do it for real. We ate and drank what we had to eat and drink.

Crap food, rubbish food, all washed down with plastic electrolytes. Running round was dangerous so we stayed cooped in. We did hand-springs or stationary jumps for exercise. Or if we went out running on the roads we had to have an armoured escort vehicle.
At some point the place stopped operating in any other mode.
Then somebody brought a suicide bomb to the front gate of the prison. I wasn’t on duty at the time.

The men asleep in quarters nearly shot each other. Then they realised—it’s just a suicide bomber. Sirens wailed through the city. Dawn heat stank up the blood like pieces of fish. Ragged strips of flesh draped over sand bags. It wasn’t American or Australian flesh. It didn’t matter. None of our mob got hurt.

We hated the idea of suicide bombers so much nobody ever cleaned up the dead flesh and rotting pieces of bone. Men played football in the compound with the top of a skull. They painted another dead-head red, white and blue and stuck it up at the entrance to the prison. A visiting Major made them take it down.

I remember leaning on a brick wall looking at a fleck of dried tomato sauce and then I realised that tomato sauce doesn’t have hair.

That’s when I decide to get out of Y by any means.

At night the shooting grew louder and closer, among the streets. A boy riding off on a bicycle got popped and went side-ways. People rushed toward him—civilians always do. They rush to give assistance to their fallen. I looked at them doing this and I thought—is that real?

It was like they had the beliefs of genuine people.

Meanwhile Cutter took on mannerisms of Americans. I could see he wanted to become one of his heroes.

Then they gave us a break from prison duty. Two nights away. We left in a troop carrier, knees knocking in the dark, groans and grunts and cigarettes and farts. Yells outside the carrier as something crashed; then a couple of shots. Men in the dark mimed firing a handgun and blowing triumphantly at the muzzle.

The jog-jog of being carried is like infancy. I felt like curling into a ball and being nowhere, forever locked in sleep. Is that death? My mind rattled. I could imagine waking up and still being nowhere.
At the military hospital where we went on leave they said I had a cyst. That was why I always felt like passing out and vomiting.

‘You’re kidding, right? A cyst? What’s that?’ I was upset because of wasting all my precious leave time on my body.

The female doctor’s bored hand made a fist. ‘A cyst is a round growth usually caused by an unruptured follicle.’

‘So—it’s not pregnancy?’ Disappointment slicked my voice.

‘What?’ She eyed me sharply. ‘Are you trying to get pregnant, private?’

‘No, sir,’ I said.

‘I’ll have to report anything untoward,’ she told me, scribbling on pad. She passed me a script. ‘We can inhibit the cyst from growing until your cycle of duty is done.’

This is as much kindness as the army medics allow.

I went to the pharmacy. Cutter was waiting in the outpatient area, staring around. He was worried about my state of health—pregnancy, I mean.

‘Nah,’ I told him, paper flapping. ‘Just a cyst!’

‘Thank Jesus Christ.’ He spun on his heel, jauntily marching out. ‘I tell you Susie,’ he said outside, ‘you’re lucky you’re not up the duff to me. If I had a sucker of a kid I’d have to bash his brains out on a rock, cause I’m not safe to be around. Listen,’ he said, since we had a plan to go out afterward, ‘looks like the guys might’ve organised a poker game. See, I’m trying to win a spot on Ace of Spades.’

Ace of Spades was that show that turns one ego-head out of seven into millionaires.

‘Christ,’ I said. ‘You’re dumping me.’

‘I’m not!’ he grinned indifferently. He was already reaching in his trouser pockets for taxi fare. ‘You’re a big girl,’ he said, ‘you know how to get from A to B. Anyway,’ he went on, ‘it’s not like I’m father material.’

So he trooped off, and I was left in the middle of this alien intersection surrounded by bleeping cars.
I didn’t feel great. My ovaries were playing up. The other women who’d been put on recreation leave had all found places to go. Besides, they didn’t like me. So even though here was safe from warfare I felt like murder.

Our sleeping quarters were a small Australian corner in the American compound. Base had set up a bar and everything, for off duty soldiers like me. Budweiser and San Miguel. No guns popping: this wasn’t the war zone.

I was just sitting at table downing a solo beer when I felt another twinge, this time dead centre. Like a little mongrel just kicked me in the guts. ‘All right, cyst,’ I promised, ‘I’m drowning you.’

Two marines in fatigues came in and sat at the next table. Their eyes slid over, down, up, away. When they looked a second time I moved to their table with my third beer and coaster.

‘You guys seen any action?’ It was a standard opener.

One had a fat moon face with a classic jar cut. Pale sandy hair. Watery eyes. The other one had shiny dark skin the colour of tepid tea. They looked at me and ignored me and continued their conversation.

The fat one was saying, ‘If it happens again I’m moving out.’

‘We’re all behind you.’

‘Fuck you are.’

I said, ‘Well, we got a SB at the prison gate, but all he blew up was himself.’

They looked at me. After a while the fat one said, ‘You got a suicide bomber?’

The other one yawned.

‘Yeah,’ I said, ‘real piece of meat. You should’ve seen.’

They looked bored and stared round the room. Military men have this habit of scanning constantly. They have to look alert so nobody suspects them of having any sort of hole waiting to be penetrated.

‘So who are you with?’ the skinny dark one said.
I told them my name and the name of my unit, and they picked labels off their beers. I began to get the feeling they didn’t want me here. ‘Well, be seeing you,’ I said, clicking my fingers as I got up.

Outside the baking heat made my eyeballs water. I wanted to shoot or fuck someone.

I wanted to be wanted by Cutter so I could not want him, for a change. But for the first time this didn’t seem like much of a thing to want.

‘Hey, you!’ The fat American skidded up behind me. ‘Wanna take a drive?’

‘Where to?’

He shrugged. ‘You tell me.’

He had a jeep parked round the back. His unit had commandeered a whole hotel. We went there and he made jokes all the way up the stairs with men coming down. It was broad daylight. The marines didn’t bother looking at me past my tits. I was used to this.

We went into a big open dorm and across to a balcony. ‘It’s the only privacy.’ He stuck a warm Coke in my hand and pulled the curtain across and shut the doors, leaving us out on the balcony. Dust wafted up from taxis and military buses below. Men walked by shouting and slapping pockets. Drunks.

Another balcony to our left had a guy lazing back with a cigarette, naked feet up on the parapet.

‘Won’t that guy see?’

‘Nah!’

I laughed. ‘It’s strange to come outside for privacy.’

The American yawned, showing clean molars. ‘Nobody cares.’ He started undoing my shirt. I still smelt of the hospital. ‘We call this “the love seat”,’ he told me, unbuttoning.

‘Hey,’ I said, handing him the Coke bottle back, ‘don’tcha want some warm fizz?’
He put it aside, sitting it on the concrete parapet. American soldiers used Coke for sexual currency. They believed in it so much, they thought everybody would.

He pulled me down into the concrete niche and I could see pure blue sky through a drainage hole on one side and the boots of men inside the dorm coming by under the door curtains. When I looked up the American was on his knees with a naked pink erection in front of me. I realised he intended me to suck it.

‘Not that!’ I spat.

‘What?’ His eyes squinted. Above the cock and naked balls his belly ballooned.

I said, ‘I don’t do that type of thing unless I’m involved with someone.’

The marine’s eyes narrowed blandly and then he sat back on his haunches and went slack-mouthed. He shook his head and clicked his tongue like a man these moments always occur to. For a brief instant I was maybe attracted to him. Like, he had a chubby physique, a fat neck, a soft face. He wasn’t feminine. I wasn’t masculine. Or both.

‘Listen,’ I said, ‘it’s not like there’s anything wrong with you, it’s just me. I have an abrasive nature. I’ve been hurt by men.’

The marine’s growl sounded more like irritation. He hefted himself against those glass doors with his knees bent up. I could see his empty wide face growing more petulant. With Cutter I never thought about getting in the mood or not being ready. Somehow it always just happened.

I said, ‘Do you have a girlfriend?’

He eyed me. ‘Yeah, maybe.’

‘I don’t mind if you do.’

He slapped his sides. A fly whirred away.

‘I have a sort of boyfriend, some days,’ I said flatly.

He had to keep listening a second time to work out what I said. He wasn’t used to Australian accents. He didn’t ask questions. I couldn’t tell if he liked me or hated me or didn’t care.
It was occurring to me that I ought to have asked his name.

‘Listen,’ I said, ‘I’m not a slut.’ His mouth tightened. ‘I’m just careful, cause of being hurt.’ I opened my shirt all the way up. His left eye slid to my right tit. Cutter always said my tits were nice and round and small and hard and he liked them. They were the one part of my body I didn’t have to think about. Two parts, I mean.

‘Nice tits,’ the marine murmured.

I opened his trousers. His cock felt warm and sticky. It bobbed up again like a floater. I put my hand around the middle and got on top and slid down over it. My shoes squeaked on the cantilever. Up and down on a strange man—and nobody cared, least of all him or me. Boots moved inquisitively below the door curtain and I thought how whenever Cutter jammed into me he had to cause pain. This didn’t hurt. We weren’t hurting anybody. If anything it was mild and sweet. The man on the next balcony cleared his throat. A bird flew into a window, smack. A horn blared from below and people shouted. The marine murmured, ‘Oh, oh, sweet Jesus.’ My insides shook and he grabbed fistfuls of skinny hips and pushed up hard, but nowhere near as hard as Cutter did. Bare balls slapped the concrete. I felt the dizzying surge of energy as he came.

Light and furious motion. Like a dance.

He panted while I climbed down side-ways and we rested. The insides of my thighs ached. My knees had concrete burn. I felt a peculiar joy—almost a cleansing. Sperm washing sperm.

I don’t know what the marine understood or experienced. His mind was another universe. His mouth hung open, enervated. Then one sleepy eye opened. He grasped for his clothes. He kept looking to check if I was stealing his wallet. I sniggered.

‘What are you laughing about?’ Laughing, I could see, made the marine worry.
'Nothing.' I stood up, buckling. My skinned knees stung. This must be what the cat felt like when I let it out of the cage. Light and dizzy. The swift fierce rush of air.

‘Nice view,’ I murmured.

The marine burped and opened the door, staggering slightly. A round of applause met us in the doorway. Another marine stood by with a woman he wanted to screw. You could tell there was commonly a queue to use the balcony. The woman I didn’t look at.

The marine tried to usher me down the staircase but I waved him away. At the bottom, hurrying, he plucked my sleeve. ‘Hey, wait,’ he said crossly.

‘What?’

‘I just—this is kinda weird—how will I contact you?’

I said, ‘How will you what?’

He shuffled, hands in pockets. I could see his brain thinking—she said two days. ‘Tonight,’ he said at last. Then the pale gaze slid to my chest and rose up again. He had flighty eyes, exactly like small birds. They darted off and swooped down to the ground.

I said, ‘I’ll see.’ I remembered Cutter always saying he was going to be somewhere he wasn’t. I didn’t want to do this to the marine. ‘Look,’ I said, ‘that was really great, even if it was quick.’ His eyelids blinked. He might’ve thought I didn’t mean I liked it. ‘But I have to be getting back to base. Listen, anyway, if you’re ever in Australia—’ I gave him a pretend phone number.

He put it away like it didn’t matter and drifted off. And all at once I felt bad for lying.

Which, I’ll agree, all things considered, is weird.

When I got the next transport back to the prison Cutter wasn’t there. I felt gleeful, insolent. In the recreation room everybody clustered round the radio listening to a newsreader talk about ‘prison photographs’. ‘Hey Bickerts,’ somebody said, ‘you’re on the news.’ Since I didn’t care about news I just kept walking.
I lay on my bed and made plans without Cutter. I could get a new flat in a place I liked. Maybe people with my skills weren’t disallowed from normal jobs. I tried to picture myself in an office position. I knew something about computers, though the system was military. I knew how to clean a rifle and put it together. I could be a game keeper on a reserve. Or teach teenage brats how to arm themselves in case of revolution.

The uprising of all the underfed and underpaid.

Well, it could happen.

Cutter still wasn’t back by nightfall. The dormitories were buzzing because somebody leaked pictures of ‘prisoner abuse’ to journalists. Big deal. My vagina smelled of sex. I wanted not to wash. The smell was like a rabbit’s foot. For luck.

He came back on the next early morning transport and looked like shit. He’d lost all his money in a single game of cards and had spent the night trying to borrow to get back. I saw him at breakfast. He hadn’t slept.

Five minutes before we went on duty he came into the room. ‘Hey, Susie,’ he said, ‘got any cash?’

‘No,’ I said casually. ‘I’m saving up for a trip.’

‘Oh yeah?’ He went all stiff.

‘Yeah,’ I nodded. ‘I met this guy. He wants me to see the Empire State building.’

His mouth froze open. Then his voice croaked out, ‘No way.’

‘I’m going to the United States when I finish here.’ See, I even called it ‘The United States’, and not ‘America’, which is what ignorant people say. Which just goes to show I was apparently serious.

‘Christ—when?’ He fidgeted with his sleeves. ‘You’re not going there.’ Then he smiled. ‘You’re too much of a rebel. They wouldn’t let you in. You’re a fucking lunatic.’ His eyes went quiet and nonchalant. ‘Anyway, who is this guy?’

‘Nathan Richards, a marine.’
‘Marines are jar-heads.’ He lay back on my bed and put his hands behind his head. He had an undeniably handsome body. I could see why the daughter of the Chief of Ops fell for him so hard she tried to slit her wrists. This common knowledge had made me laugh when I found out.

Cutter said, ‘You know, if you go there and you like it, maybe you could send across for me.’

‘What?’

‘You know—vouch for me on a visa.’

‘A green card?’ I remembered from a movie.

‘Yeah. That thing.’ He chewed a toothpick, staring at the murky whitewashed ceiling. ‘Hey—we haven’t screwed in ages!’ He swung his long legs off the bed and came to me and ran his fingers up both my arms.

‘Oh, well, it’s just fucking.’ I shoved him off and straightened the bed-sheet. ‘It doesn’t mean anything.’

‘Listen,’ he spat, ‘you know it’s not just fucking, you know that. Every time I’ve done it to you you’ve cried out so much. If you didn’t love fucking me you wouldn’t come begging.’ Ego swarmed. ‘Like you can’t live without my dick shoved up you.’ His warm breath stained my earlobe. Then he pulled away and looked at me. ‘Did you have sex with that jarhead?’

I shrugged. ‘Maybe, maybe not.’

We heard footsteps. He hissed, ‘Those marines are fucken disgusting. You’ll get pox and scabies.’

‘Oh, no I won’t.’ I couldn’t care less about condoms. It didn’t matter. Certain things were more important than my life. The army teaches you that first of everything. ‘This one, he’s a real nice guy. He’s clean.’ I began to get this picture in my mind of Nathan Richards, a ‘nice person’. I saw us making marital love tenderly—on a rose printed bed in suburbia. I’d meet his parents, who’d like me straight up.

Cutter snarled, ‘You’re shitting me, cause I haven’t looked at you in months.’ He put a hand into my waistband. ‘You can’t wait to get into it again.’
His fingers hurt me. I could tell he didn’t even have an erection. ‘You’re dying for it.’

‘I’m off to work.’ I wasn’t shouting. I wasn’t wet.

So that was the start of the things said in the news, about my sex life. Only they reported it all wrong, as usual. They said, ‘Rumour has it that Private Sue Bickerts was indiscriminate in her choice of sexual partners, and frequently kept several lovers on the go.’ Another report said, ‘She seems to have had no sexual boundaries to speak of.’

That night I was walking past the exercise yard when two guys I hardly knew came up to get a smoke off me. They lit up and talked across my head. ‘Scuse me, guys,’ I said, ‘I have to get some washing done.’

‘That’s not what we heard.’

‘Huh?’

One said, ‘Now suck this.’ He lowered his trousers and waggled his groin.

I laughed out loud and said, ‘No, thanks.’ Cause the guys often clowned around like that. A prick’s a prick.

But the second soldier grabbed my pants. Smoky breath hissed at me. ‘Give her a helping hand,’ the first guy said, and they pushed me backward. One dragged my arms, the other made sure nobody watched. They took me into a pool of shadow. ‘We’ve heard you always say “no” when you mean “please”.’

It wasn’t worth kicking but I kicked. Then I stopped. ‘Listen, guys,’ I panted, ‘I’m not a slut. Who’s saying all these things about me? Cause I’m not like that!’ I scrambled on the ground and bit my lip. They pulled my ankle and I kicked the one who had me in the face, and while he processed that, I got away.

Next morning I heard my name on the radio.
When the military cop read out the charge sheet I was standing by a big wooden slab table like they have in butcher shops. The tribunal went on and on, voice after voice spouting away without me. I just stood by without a care in the world, because no amount of care was going to make a featherweight of difference.

I was thinking how when we got those chickens removed from the grower sheds there’d be this wind blowing back from the crates and if you dared to stand watching there’d be smacks of shit and dander and chicken feathers in your face, like those animals were already starting to blow apart in a breeze. You’d go into the sheds and they’d be empty but for bits of feather and stray shit piles. And it would seem weird and frightening, like one day you could blink and you wouldn’t be there.

It was like this back in training. Every other unit, the guys hung out together. But I was in a unit that didn’t care. They’d make a plan to go to Nightclub B and I’d tag along. Then halfway through the night just when things were loosening I’d look up and they’d be gone. Drinks unfinished. And I’d follow on to the next nightclub using cabs or whatnot and they’d be gone. Deadwood who worked beside me at the prison used to say it happened to her as well.

I’d go to every place I knew they visited. Going back to barracks all alone was worse than being on a city street. The ones who got stuck in barracks while they were supposed to be on leave were ultra-nobodies. See, at least in an actual war-zone you have enemies to hate.
On this one night, I got so frantic I couldn’t think. It wasn’t that I wanted to be around Cutter. He wasn’t even in my training team. I’m talking about not wanting to be alone.

So I got into my civvies and caught a bus, and when I found one of the guys who knew us I started shouting into his face. When he couldn’t be bothered fending me off any more he said, ‘They went to Club Australis.’

A mindless bar-room up the top of town. I caught a cab. I was spending all my money on transport. When I got past the doorman, I found I was a minute or two late. Somebody must’ve tipped them off. The drinks were still half-there. They’d slipped out the other entrance. I could even tell by the kinds of drinks left over. Two tequilas, two blacks and four pale ale.

I went out into a lane that ran behind the shops and nightclubs. Rain drizzled into a gutter strewn with glass. At the far end of the lane, a taxi was just turning onto the main road. I saw heads craning, distant mouths open, laughing.

This was the end of my life, it felt like. It wasn’t just that I wasn’t loved. I wasn’t alive to anybody. Like dog meat. Nothing ever felt worse than that. See, when you’re a kid, you presume you’re wanted even if you’re not. You don’t know enough to expect being wanted, or how it looks, being wanted or not. But when you get to nineteen, if you’re not wanted, it feels like death.

I trawled along kicking bottles onto walls. Between bouts of crying I balled my fists and punched my arms. If I fell into a drain-hole and disappeared… If I just lay down in the road… If I cut both my wrists on bottle glass and bled to death… None of these things would make a difference or help.

Then I saw someone, name of Buckler. He was groaning in a doorway with a girl. When he saw me he tried to hide his head but she was too short for him.

‘Where are they?’ I must’ve sounded mean. The girl looked hardly teenage. She wore a strapless blue scrunched dress and one high-heel. The other leg kept curling up behind her calf.
'Eh? Gone off somewhere.' He spat the girl’s frothy hair out of his mouth. ‘Back to barracks, I think.’

I didn’t believe this for an instant. ‘If you don’t tell me where they are I’ll fucken report you for smashing the Sergeant’s tail light.’

His eyes went wide. ‘Look,’ he said, moving the girl around so she could glare at me too, ‘they just said they were getting laid, okay? So why don’tcha look in Number 44?’

‘The fuck’s that?’

But he was back to kissing.

I found the place. The taxi driver who picked me up didn’t say a word. I jumped out and threw notes back at him.

The club had a brick wall out front with silver ‘44’ the size of beachballs. Steel grilled windows. Pale pink light plumping out through curtains like overripe fruit.

I knocked — no answer. A doorbell came to mind. I pressed the chime.

Bzzzt—‘Can I help you?’

I banged on the door and shouted, ‘I want to see the guys!’

Some twittering, but no answer. Then a soft, throaty voice came on. ‘We are open for business—if it’s business. For other reasons, please go away.’

They never answered again. I kept crossing back and forth, peering over at the shuttered, brick-walled building from out near the road. Cars trawled by in swishes of dirty water and scraping headlights. Finally I got two housebricks from an alley, and ran at the door. Threw the bricks forward with all my strength.

One bounced off the grille. The other took out the security camera with a shower of sparks. Glass rain. Next instant blue light caught me on the chin like a boxing clip. Police car swinging into the kerb. Shouting inanities.

I ran.

Got to barracks at four AM, last of my money spent on a final cab. Sentries stopped talking to read my pass. I was still panting. Nobody over my shoulder; nobody following. ‘Hey there,’ I said.
‘Hey there yourself. Have a nice time?’ Sentries behaving pleasantly.

‘Yeah, great,’ I shrugged. Took myself up the stairs three by three. And walked into the unit dorm to find everyone back in bed, asleep.

My whole unit.

And I just stood there looking at all the heaving breathing sleeping males thinking: ‘This is why people commit murder.’ And I could see how a person could do that, could come in the barracks with a loaded rifle and start taking shots—crack, crack, crack, crack. I could see blood running out of Banjo’s scalp. Coming off Levi’s elbow. Pulpy pillows. All that rain. And at least if I’d done that I could stand up and say, ‘Yeah, I meant to kill them, cause they didn’t care about me.’ The only people I ever wanted to kill or maim.

But you weren’t allowed to mutilate people without orders.

See, I never personally hated those prisoners.

But as Major Samantha Kosh, who ran the first tribunal, said, ‘We’re not here to comment on either personal or political issues, gentlemen.’ So you could tell by her tone and that self-satisfied serious face that the whole thing was going to be a sham.

The tribunal lasted seven days. It was strictly military. Officers going ‘That’s my understanding, Sirs and Ma’am,’ with apologetic innocence. Nodding. Lots of furious stares and backings-down. Scrawls on clip-pads.

People in the back of the courtroom studying me. At the same time, I never took it seriously as a court. My military lawyer said, ‘It’s just a preliminary.’ And when they walked Cutter up to the podium, I just picked a piece of hangnail off my thumb and waited for him to back up what I’d said.

Just—that we were all doing exactly what we understood the orders to be, whether they were spoken outright or not.

A fat Lieutenant-Colonel said, ‘And is it true that you had no idea of the extent of the abuse problem?’

The pattern of their questions went ping-pong. I was waiting for them to indict Corporal Wedge, but of course they didn’t. They just kept asking these sideline things of Cutter.
‘When did you become aware that there was a breakdown in Geneva standards?’

Cutter never looked at me. He kept his hands down and mumbled. His forehead shone. A couple of times he murmured something and had to repeat himself. By the time he’d finished he’d said nothing anyone could use, whether in persecution or acquittal. But he’d agreed that nobody had ordered torture sessions. He agreed it had all just happened spontaneously, him and me.

The only saving moment was when the Major running my case cleared his throat and said, ‘I want to add that conditions around the prison were exceedingly hostile. The psychic damage done to these men and women by the suicide bombings and whatnot can only be imagined. I beg that decision-makers bear in mind the enormous good that the soldiers have done in performing all their other duties to the best of their abilities.’

Whereupon Major Samantha Ladymuck, I mean Kosh, said, ‘Thank you, Major Wesson—that will be taken into consideration.’

Next minute we were being taken out of the room so a row of old men and one woman could put their heads together to nut out how best to handle the media. Which, everyone was saying, was the most pressing problem.

Next morning in the cells, they told me to piss in a cup. The doctor put a slim white stick in the urine.

‘What’s that for?’

The bony white-haired git didn’t look at me. Five minutes passed. Then he wrote something on a form. Only once did he look right at me, through watery glasses that made his eyes look like fish eyes.

‘You’re going to be a mother,’ he put it, formally.

I said, ‘No way—it’s just a cyst.’

The masked white moron misunderstood me. ‘The cyst won’t hurt your pregnancy. It’s a follicular cyst. Your baby won’t be harmed.’

It took me a minute to believe him. And then I just sat down on the bench and started laughing, because if there’s one thing they let you out of the
army for, it’s having a brat. But here I was on the verge of dishonourable discharge.

After the tribunal delivered its verdict, the Lieutenant-Colonel came up and shook my hand. ‘I just want to let you know we understand the situation,’ he murmured like a drone buzzing. ‘And if there’s anything we can do to make your next few months a little easier…’ His gaze slid to my belly and back up. Like everyone else in the room, he knew my insides out. My medical records were all up on the wall. Like a pregnant person can’t possibly follow orders without fucking up the basis of society.

‘Well, thanks,’ I snarled. I couldn’t think of anything. And when I looked around the room a second time, the old geezers were already filing out.

Cutter sat across from me on a plastic chair with his shoulders slumped inside his uniform. His own lawyer, a woman, rubbed his back.

‘Hey Cutter,’ I called out. ‘Demotion to private, three months return to basic training—you’ll do okay.’ I made a mound out of my belly. ‘Guess what I’ll be doing?’

He looked about to vomit. Then he tried to hide behind his puny little lawyer. He muttered something into her ear.

She smiled coolly, one eyebrow rising above her head. ‘It’s a long way to America, Miss Bickerts. But if I were you, I’d start hunting for your marine, before he realises what you want him for. Men can get pretty scarce when they hear the word “paternity”.’

‘Yeah?’ I said. ‘Tell you what. If it’s Cutter’s I promise to send the baby to his mum.’

Then we all went out, banging our briefcases together.

My lawyer found me a hole-in-the-wall motel room near the barracks. He told me I should wait up here till things were finalised, then get over to my Aunt’s. Avoid all public railway stations and bus stops. Like, if I wanted to dye my hair or something, now’s the time.

Then he stood in the shabby doorway taking a phone call on his mobile. I heard, ‘What?’ and, ‘Who said?’ and, ‘Oh, no.’
When he got off he flipped the phone away and looked at me.

‘Listen, Susie,’ he said, ‘I know you’re not the newest kid on the block. So let’s not get any pretence going here. Thing is, they want a larger tribunal—a civil one.’

‘What’s a civil one?’ I asked.

‘I mean, a full court hearing.’

‘Why’s that?’ I was under the impression things were done with.

‘Because there’s a sense that the military justice system doesn’t investigate itself as thoroughly as it should.’ This from a military lawyer, for Christ’s sake.

I said, ‘So?’

‘So we’ll apply for leave to wait until things die down. Just say they grant it. I can’t see why they wouldn’t. Three months on we can apply for various other delays. You’re pregnant, right? So that should be good for a stay of proceedings. Assuming you… intend to carry the… baby to term?’ He blinked at the doorframe.

‘Yeah, whatever.’

He left me to it. I lay back on the smelly mattress in that tiny room, and listened to a tap drip about eight inches from my head. A three foot en suite sat behind the partition. A whirring air conditioner rumbled on, sucking gases from some absent planet and spouting them here in this windowless cupboard for nobodies.

Imagining that crawling living thing inside of me. Like worms or nematodes, eating what I ate. No more power or say than a jelly blob. Would it care?

Now they’re saying I had choices all along. Knew what I was doing. A normal female would-be mother wouldn’t sacrifice her moral standing. But I was never a normal female would-be-mother. I didn’t choose.

There is no moral standing. I know that much.
The MPs came to my aunt’s house which is where I went after the initial furore of the tribunal. It’s true that I was deferring any decisions. You could say I had a phobia about thinking.

‘Private Susanne Bickerts? I’m afraid we’re going to have to ask you to come with us for questioning. It won’t be wholly military.’

I said, ‘But I already gave statements.’

They escorted me to an interview room in the local police station which had been commandeered. Two civilian interrogators carried bright red clipboards and while they threw in a few ‘softeners’—‘What’s it like over there, hey?’ ‘You see any direct action?’—they asked some incriminating ones.

In the corner near the venetians sat Major Kosh from the military tribunal, as an observer. Her steely eyes went dart-dart between the questioners and me. Her chocolate hair stretched in a bun and her eyes formed lance-points. I could see she didn’t care a shit for anyone. But when the interrogators asked me if there were any orders ‘direct from government,’ she clapped her notebook shut and stood up.

‘If you want to question the private along political lines, this interrogation is finished.’ She wasn’t my lawyer. She didn’t care. She had a job protecting government.

My lawyer wheezed out through his nose.

The interrogators agreed.

‘When you participated in the tying of bricks to this man’s genitals, what, if anything, was said to you beforehand?’ A small man in a blue suit asked this.
‘And at what point in these proceedings did someone ask you to attack a prisoner with a dog?’

‘And was this before or after sexual relations with Cutter?’

‘And how many times did you hit this person on that day?’

I just kept saying, ‘I did my job.’ I could see having a job was meaningless to these people. The civilians hadn’t been over there. The Major representing me had done all his legal training in East Timor. Major Kosh was here to make sure government stayed clean. They all looked across the top of my head and kept passing documents including statements from other witnesses. In all of them was a character called ‘Private X.’ ‘Is that you?’

I had no clue about me. I only knew what I was required to do, spoken or unspoken.

I wanted to say, ‘No, Sir, I didn’t do anything but follow orders.’ But after a while I got sick of seeing all the pictures and hearing all the stories like pornography. ‘Listen,’ I said, ‘it’s all bullshit. Just do what you have to do.’

Smiles rendered them only partly human. They passed me a form letter which I didn’t read. It didn’t look like an admission. It just said stuff about where I worked and for how long and who with, approximate dates and times. Didn’t mean I was guilty of inventing torture. So I signed.

‘You just signed your life away,’ said my lawyer, when the civilian interrogators had taken their paperwork and gone out to confer.

‘I understand hot water, Sir.’ I looked at him and then at Major Snot-nose Kosh. She didn’t look at me.

‘Her life away, Major Wesson? Surely that’s an exaggeration.’

‘She won’t have a career.’ He couldn’t understand any army person wanting to not be in the army.

‘You’re probably right,’ Kosh said, smiling. ‘But I don’t think ex-Private Bickerts cares about that.’

‘That’s right, I don’t.’ I felt fine. I didn’t need sympathy.

A hapless police sergeant stuck his head in the door.
‘Are we finished here, people? Cause we got suspects of our own to interview.’ I could see he didn’t like having his office commandeered. Filthy look in my direction.

Later, on the news, the pictures looked worse than real. They looked sharper, harder, uglier. I didn’t even realised they’d taken so many. Shots of me and Cutter with the truncheon. Clowning round with naked prisoners. I didn’t want to look at television or photographs. I didn’t need any help.

Sending us there, that’s what sucked. I knew all that.

‘It’s probably not a good time to tell you this,’ the ultrasound guy said, ‘but some others in the waiting room have asked not to sit anywhere near you.’ He showed me into a booth where I could wait alone, cause of being the instigator of a social disease.

Pariah, see? The blob on the monitor looked like a deformed snail. I didn’t even care if it had arms or legs or eyes. What would it know? It would see me from the inside and all that stink. I wondered if it would ever want to be near me?

‘I don’t even want to have a baby!’ I kept this to myself. It felt like an invasion of a Body Snatcher. I imagined a tiny Cutter or a jar-head. Some days I felt worse than others. I won’t say I never felt maternal. Rationally, though, nothing mattered.

The ultrasound guy didn’t like me either.

Suicide bombers kept crawling into the sides of vision. Starts and specks. Guys getting out of unmarked cars. I looked up and there’s a bank teller going, ‘Excuse me—can I help?’ I didn’t even remember how I got from A to B.

‘I want to take out a loan.’

‘What kind of loan do you want?’

‘The kind that lets you live in a house you own.’ I thought about that. ‘Doors with locks, and stuff.’

‘Fill in the forms,’ she goes, looking bored. But the army had stopped paying my account because of the trial. Because of that I couldn’t get a loan.
I began to get a panicky feeling. Life inside me and death all out. No chance to reabsorb that infant. Cutter didn’t want it and I didn’t want the jarhead. My home life was barred. And in the throes of this difficulty which was real, I understood the impossibility of any kind of living.

So on the morning before my next legal appointment I went to an abortion clinic. You could say I was going ahead.

Religious fanatics clustered on the street-front. Insane mouths rippled. ‘Stop the murder!’ ‘Save the child!’ They showered me with pictures of dead foetuses in jars. They didn’t read or care about news. They didn’t know about dead soldiers. They just wanted more babies to be born to help fight wars.

I’d had enough of interrogation. ‘Get out of my way,’ I snapped.

Inside, the quiet of the building wrapped round like a mausoleum. At a cool white desk a receptionist handed me forms. I waited on a chair while my strange marks on the paperwork got processed. Clocks ticked and keyboards rattled. Behind the ticks, rattles and cold I felt the press of death. It seethed out of wall chinks and between tiles. I felt I was in a halfway place, half church and half hospital.

The counsellor said, ‘Come this way.’ I followed her down a hall like the tunnels people go down when they die. It didn’t look unkind. A sensitive New Age god might lurk in the end room. Goddess. Might see me as somebody worth helping. I began to feel calm again.

Then she took me into a cool beige room with Tuscany prints. I’d never seen Tuscany. Tuscany was just a wholly other realm. But the prints looked quiet and peaceful. It was possible to believe that, in the whole world, Tuscany lay outside war zones.

‘When did you last use contraception?’
My head felt dizzy. ‘Not sure.’
‘Are you currently on the pill?’
‘Is your current partner using condoms or has he had a vasectomy?’
‘Do you understand that having sex without contraception is likely to result in pregnancy?’
‘Are you aware of the possible dangers of termination?’
‘Is what you have signed to do compatible with your religious morals?’
‘Have you read all the pamphlets about the joys of single parenting?’
On and on. Sometimes I said yes, sometimes no. I wasn’t thinking.
‘Let’s go,’ she said.
‘Huh—what?’
‘The next part of the procedure will be medical.’
‘Excuse me,’ I said, blinking, ‘but that place—those pictures.’
‘Yes, what?’
‘I mean—is that a real place, inside those pictures?’
She eyed me carefully. Big fluffy blonde hair over a gross white suit. I could see her intellect had border guards.
‘It’s called Tuscany.’
‘Is that a real place?’
‘It’s not somewhere I know personally,’ she said.
‘Yes, but, I mean—all those white walls and olive trees.’
‘Goodness, yes, I suppose so!’ she said ignorantly. ‘Now if you’d come this way…’

The clicky heels clicked down the hallway but I turned abruptly and walked back through the reception area where the girl was busy at her computer.

‘Hey, Ms—!’

Couldn’t remember my name, had to look at the paperwork.

I’d already opened the door. The religious claptrap had dissipated. Off to tea breaks or to chat up condemned kids. I turned left and kept walking.

I kept thinking about Tuscany. How I could use the money saved up after my trial for a plane ticket. I imagined a place, I don’t know, outside of violence. Just olive groves and light like sun dancing. Kids playing in dappled shade with baby goats. Maybe they hadn’t heard of war crimes in Tuscany.

I could have a baby. Imagine that. Me, chook girl. It would be allowed. Nobody could stop me. They hadn’t outlawed children yet.
Even a bad person could have a brat.

My new lawyer was a fucken God’s gift to criminals. She was twenty-seven and pretty in a bitchy way. Polished skirt. ‘The pregnancy thing could go either way,’ she cautioned. ‘One, the panel sees it as proof you’re redeemable. You could re-enter society as a functioning fulfilling person, a mother. Two, they see it as a sign you’re messy. Unprincipled. Not married.’

‘I don’t believe in abortions,’ I said.

‘Well, that’s your right to choose.’ She crossed her legs the other way. ‘Personally, I’m of the view that unwanted uncared for children are the cause of a major amount of social illnesses.’ Blah blah. I watched her red mouth move carelessly. She totally saw me as crap but had a job to do. ‘Point of the discussion is, we want to be sure we’re covering all bases. But first, we have to get the trial delayed. That should be easy enough,’ she said, ‘just play up the pregnancy. Morning sickness and all that. Meanwhile, here’s where it’s at with your old pal Cutter.’

She passed me a document in a yellow envelope. It was my copy of a letter we’d forwarded to his lawyer. It said that if he supported the truth about being given orders from higher up then we might not press ahead with a paternity charge. He had eighteen percent of his income to lose.

‘So what?’ I shrugged.

‘So we’ve got him where we want him, basically.’ As she spoke she moved her elbow and a folder fell. Snapshots spilled onto the floor.

And I saw all those newspaper photos, right? Only this time, all blown up.

I saw this giant picture of the prisoner with the blurred-out arsehole, only in this picture it wasn’t blurred. This photo lay upside-down to me in the moment before the lawyer snapped it up again.

Between the prisoner’s open dark-haired thighs I saw a face. A mouth. A moustache. So all along he’d stuck his head down between his legs to look at the camera. He knew the way this picture would get used. It was like he was
saying, ‘See? Look at me. I’m here, and this is being done to me, and whatever you think, it’s already too late, cause this has been done.’

When you’re in the room you’re doing your job, but when you’re in another room you’re not. My breath started coming out fast. I could smell old chicken stink because of my own skin. Sweat and funk and old feather death and shit. Everything over again.

When the lawyer put the photos away I croaked, ‘What about Corporal Wedge?’

‘Corporal who?’

‘The one who ran the interrogations.’

She glanced at her paperwork. ‘I don’t see the name Wedge anywhere. I can only go by who they’re indicting, which is you and Cutter.’

My breath kept coming too fast. Maybe it was the blob of jelly I mean baby inside. I guess I’d started thinking of it as a child. But mainly I didn’t want this comprehension. Like the prisoner was a person I might’ve known. While everyone else—sentries, soldiers, sergeants—was another species.

‘I guess we can start by pleading blood pressure,’ she told me, standing up. Her royal blue suit went straight again, no wrinkles. ‘The more time there is between these news articles and your trial, the better.’

‘Who is he?’ I croaked.

‘Who’s who?’

My numb finger poked the folder. ‘The prisoner. His name.’

She opened the file again, turned the photo over and read the back. ‘Prisoner number 9721. There’s no name.’ She flipped the picture back and shut the folder. ‘Anyway, finding who he is won’t help you in any way. He’s hostile. Which is understandable.’ Chicken stink filled my nose as the lawyer yawned. This time I couldn’t tell if the smell came from me or her. ‘Take my advice. Go somewhere quiet and lay low for a while. Have a holiday. I’ll keep you informed. Meantime we’ll play for all the time we can. When they finally do get us to trial, no-one’ll care. Believe me, this old prison scandal will be ancient
history.’ Then she gathered all my papers and put them into a file in the cabinet.
The baby got pushed out of my vagina in a manner approximating torture. I
didn’t scream because I don’t scream but I fumed and threw things. The
midwife stayed because of me having no appropriate husband, mother or off-
chance carer, but I was glad she wasn’t somebody I had to care about. She
didn’t seem to hate me as much as other people.

I saw that hot-bodied baby lying wiggling on my thigh as the obstetric
personnel clamped the cord. Still attached in that full minute. I hadn’t had
drugs. I could see her clearly. The nurses took her off to be weighed. She didn’t
cry. She looked exactly like any other baby, but she was mine.

Two weeks after labour, the case went to trial. At first I stayed in the one-
room flat watching a DOCS worker look after my baby. DOCS workers didn’t
believe I knew the appropriate methods, which was true. Then I had to be in
court, because of sentencing.

Guilty as charged.

But I knew that already. The weird thing was, I didn’t go to gaol. It
turned out they saw other factors as mitigating.

‘It is the opinion of this court that the defendant erred in judgement due
to the violent uncertainties occurring in that particular war, a war in which we
are still engaged, a war that must be addressed with greater resources if we are
to keep our nation safe from future terrorism—’

So all I got was dishonourable discharge. Since I didn’t believe in
‘honour’ I didn’t care. My infant was six weeks old and still didn’t have a name.
The Registry robots were getting anxious. But up to the trial, I couldn’t think of
one.
How do you name a kid, really? Put that label on and zip it up. Plus, I had no time to think of names. Any minute I expected DOCS to keep her.

Now I came out of the courthouse in a daze. Nobody waited for me—no photographers; no hecklers. A bus stop opposite belched with bus fumes. Kindly or mean old ladies got on and off. A worker had taken the baby in for the night, in case I went to prison. But here I was free as anyone. It didn’t make sense. I was the nth degree of evil. A fucking hateful female monster. But nobody really cared.

It felt unreal, like waking inside a dream. I could see all these fatuous serene faces. They didn’t live in rat-holes or garrisons. They hadn’t split open prisoners’ lips with fists or batons. Not because they lacked the ability or cruelty. They inflicted these sorts of punishments on each other regularly.

Just because it hadn’t occurred to them.

I kept on walking. Down the hill near the beaches a madman stopped me. Stooping, grey suit, old man hands, handkerchief crowding out of an upper pocket.

‘You’re that female person I saw torturing prisoners.’

I shrugged, ‘So what?’

‘Then tell me this: why is our country standing by while every little bit of Asian filth is pouring in?’

I said, ‘Beats me.’

‘I’ll tell you why, it’s them Asian-lovers and Muslims!’ Saliva jetted out of an insane mouth. He reached for his handkerchief and wiped it all around and kept on talking. ‘I know who’s in charge of running this country, it’s not the government, it’s not the greenies, it’s the Indonesians!’

I said I’d take it up with higher bodies and he seemed about to let me go.

Then he patted onto my arm like a paedophile. My skin flinched. ‘Bless you, darl,’ he said or spat.

I could see the madman had been shaken to the bone. His idea of country was getting wobbly. He wanted me to shore it up for him.
But I didn’t care about country now, if ever. Place was just a giant billboard somewhere. ‘Drop dead,’ I laughed, and shoved the man away.

Across the road lay pubs and then the beach. A bunch of neo-Skinheads sat opposite a skater park from six Aussie surfer guys with zinc-creamed noses. No smell or hint of war, but it was already here. I could feel the hatred inside sunburned skin. The whole world wanted people to fight without seeming to. Battlefield men dressed in civilian clothes sat on swivel chairs in buried ship containers playing video games that steered aerial drones to target, kaboom, kabam! Over here, men dressed in fatigues threw balls and carried baseball bats. The beach seethed with litter and volleyball games. Sky ruffled like curtains. Men and women pushed giant rugby streamered prams attached by leashes to Dobermans. This was the beach where Aussie surfer guys and Aussie Muslim Lebanese had violent clashes. It didn’t matter what over. The beach was just plain white sand that wouldn’t grow anything. The sky looked lifeless. Teenage females with belt buckles paraded girl-power. Boys thundered missiles from one end of the foreshore to the other. Sky high reaching arcs. Cracks and tat-tats and fists and slaps. A man wore billboards pinned to every shoulder announcing death from Godly sources. High trees the shape of spearheads formed sentry gates.

I wasn’t thinking life was war because I’d been in a warzone. I was thinking it because of being here.

Strangers came and went in ancient petroleum fuelled vehicles. Horns bleated. Massive cars burned rubber up the hillside toward the pubs, using up fuel. As petrol ran out, people bought more aggressive cars. Plumes of grey exhaust. Screeches and traffic light bumps. Men and women I didn’t know could be watching my behaviour from satellite. I could be inside their video game.

Hello—are you watching?

Every day, people got taken off streets for questioning. All this had become law while I was away. These laws fulfilled the purpose of pulling
ordinary humans into extreme situations in which interrogations might occur to the benefit of the continuation of war.

To continue war, you need *enemies*.

So this was the real reason why I hadn’t been sent to gaol. All our international acts were seen as ‘liberation’ from bad guys. The prisoners should have been grateful but weren’t, so me and Cutter were accidentally abusing them. The authorities were sufficiently sad for everyone.

Nobody here believed there would be any consequences of fighting in another country. All our official wars were fought on foreign soil. The girls with midriff tops expected men to want them sexually without acting on that want unless instructed. It was pretend power. Because of the war and wanting to hate Muslims, young Aussie males acted like they supported the wearing of midriff tops and its meaning of female power. But they didn’t care about female power at all. It was like a giant joke to them.

I could see why the whole world except for spitting jaundiced old men from relic wars hated me. What I expressed in all my doings and in my obedience was the utter absence of morality anywhere.

So what country did I have? What place? Australia wasn’t my home, although I lived here. Maybe the prisoner I tortured was my true ‘countryman’. We were both refugees from war. He got put in prison by a countryman who spread the word to soldiers. I got put in prison as a perpetrator by fellow Australians. We both existed outside the places we’d been born in. Neither of us could call our places home.

Inside, but outside—him and me.

Maybe I could bring the prisoner here. He might want a place to start again. I knew Australia took immigrants cheaply. I’d sponsor him, I really would. Right then, I had a feeling he’d understand. ‘Listen,’ I’d say as we sat by the breakwall, ‘all that pain and torture was only because of being in a job called guard duty. Once you learn the unimportance of human life you can’t unlearn it easily. That’s the why I did the things I did. And I’m sorry about that, I really am.’
Maybe he’d forgive me, when I explained.

I’d tell him why I decided to name my daughter Tuscany. It came in a flash, as I sat on a bench looking at the sea. ‘It’s like the place, see? The place in the picture.’

‘What picture?’

‘The one on the clinic wall.’ I could see I’d have to start again. ‘A peaceful, empty place, only it’s got people living next to one another. A place without torture.’

‘But all places have torture. Because of being human.’ His moustache would shiver. Or maybe he’d have shaved off his moustache to fit in with Australians.

‘Uh-uh,’ I’d say, ‘not the place in the picture. It’s not real, see?’ And I could show him my copy of the Tuscany print. ‘A country only has to be an idea. My Tuscany is peaceful. That’s why I named my girl.’

But maybe none of this would work out. He’d still hate me, or else the authorities would find a way to shut me up. If they can blow apart suspects with tiny robot missiles, they can do anything. Maybe they wouldn’t let me keep my baby long enough to explain the name.

I could see I’d have to move slowly.

Sitting on that bench across from the ocean, I stared at the waves. Fat adults lazed under cancerous rays while oceans away human beings fought and died and committed further acts of torture behind closed walls. A moving electric ad-board revolved on its axis. A woman in striped briefs ate a banana. Buses went by taking people from one position in the allegedly safe world to another. Sunlight streamed. In the life of seagulls came the smorgasbord of fish and chips. Glass tinkled on pavements. The smoothness of daily life had a glossy sheen, a deadening oiliness.

I could have picked up a pen from somewhere and found a wall, but graffiti is for kids and true believers.
All the same, I said it over and over in my head until it became a mantra. Like I could use it in front of journalists, suppose I rang them up to sell my story.

I imagined myself saying the mantra out loud to cameras, to flashbulbs, to nineteen-fifties style reporters who lived for grabs but had ideas about truth.

Standing on a podium with those open mouths and poised pencils I’d say: ‘The war, my fellow citizens, is not about oil.

‘The war is oil.’

Then I’d step down, put my hands up and become what they want.
PAN OSCULANS
There are some things you miss, Bea, before you even notice they’re gone.

Like fresh air. Hot summers. The painful intimacy of family.

It’s like a jump, a high-dive. I’m experiencing the range of terrors: cold sweats; palpitations; recurring nightmares. In one, Dad’s trying to reach me through some kind of gelatinous wall, his mouth opening and closing, and I can’t tell whether he’s screaming for me to follow him or crying in grief because he never meant to leave. In the other, the sky is red with bombs and the ground is full of fire chasms. You would say it’s only guilt, perhaps, but they seem very real.

When I wake I’m surprised by how peaceful the world seems. I keep expecting to find my London flat with its radio clock alarm blaring out a babble of war zone reports and a foghorn of traffic queuing up for petrol rationing on the street below. There should be drifts of early snow piled against the windows and taps banging in the wall. Meanwhile I should be getting ready for work, hurrying to get dressed, to look proper, to spoon rice nibbles and cold milk into my mouth while snatching at student papers and question sheets off the sofa. Nobody in the bedroom, of course—the brown corduroy professor had a wife to go to. And maybe on the coffee table there’d be a postcard: Mad times in Aussieland, but we’re surviving, Bea.

Instead there’s the only the whisper of termites in the doorframe and the faint whom-whom of blood in my head. The heat presses from all sides, leaking through the pores, but it’s a softly enervating heat that comes with the early part of day. On the corner of the dusty road are children hugging the bright orange skirts of mothers, and a pear tree, or at least I think it’s a pear tree, not
being a horticulturalist, not being any other sort of specialist to what I am; and for breakfast every day, delivered to the dining room—a thatched rotunda in the back yard—I have orange shrimps with rice on a bit of board. It is, they tell me, what everybody eats, except the children who beg at my hostel window, who probably eat nothing at all.

You’ll say I should have told you first, but I didn’t tell anyone, not even the primatology school. I posted my resignation letter the day I booked the flights. The faculty sent flurries of emails to my old address asking whether I might have made a hasty decision: ‘Dear June, please consider the consequences for your future career!’ It’s funny how bureaucracies produce ideas of permanence, as though social decay can be kept out by a few granite walls and a touch of lawn. I forwarded a copy of a lovely chain letter a French man had sent to me, offering a hundred years of luck if they just pass it on to the head of their organisation and nine other friends.

So here I am in X, city of fate, chance, kings, and desperate men. See me sitting on the doorstep in cheesecloth shirt and long fatigues, a water bottle at my belt, scarf on my neck like any Foreign Legionnaire. In a few days the man who runs the ape sanctuary will return from Botswana to be my guide, and I’ll head north to look for the mystery primates that have been on the news. You’ll say I should have taken a satellite phone and GPS, but these are the days of communication breakdowns and system failures; and besides, I’ve come here to avoid the old reliances. People say traditional ways have returned.

Meanwhile the wars have left their own detritus. Landscape changes by the hour, by the day. Boys run up and down the bare earth road thudding leather balls; girls in bright scarves convey cantaloupe. Streets and people are colourful as clotheslines, while shopfronts have been boarded up. Every so often a truckful of troops comes through, bored, gazing out across the dust to some indescribable nirvana. When we disembarked from the plane, men in fatigues escorted us to a steel frisking room, and the plane got hastily covered in green netting. Yet their actions seemed rote rather than aggressive. Like all places opening up after conflict, they seem sanguine about the future.
The hostel manager, a preternaturally friendly elderly man called Zo, hugged me on the dusty doorstep, his wizened skin sagging off his elbows. The bright yellow stucco walls and blue door looked as ramshackle as a doll’s house. By the time I got my bags into the room I felt like Alice in Wonderland after she’d found her way into the rose garden.

Wonder of wonders, this morning my laptop even turned up, having spent seven days in luggage limbo. I’ve brought a solar laptop charger; a sleeping net; and a hi-tech pair of jungle boots resistant to heat and moisture as well as leeches. If I find our mystery apes, you’ll be the next to know.

Meantime I’ve left my flat keys in the hands of a real estate boy whose facial stubble looked softer than chick down, and I’m using up the last of my ‘what if baby’ funds—the glory box and trousseau I was never going to use; the bank account; the years of hoarding tax returns in case. These things matter so much less once one hits menopause! Now I can really focus on my career, and Environment Channel, of all institutions, has been in contact. They say if I find the supposed primates or tangible signs (faeces, DNA, hair, bones or other tissue or body parts verifiably distinct from known apes), then I am to let them know at once and they will send contracts. While I can’t imagine my face on television, I do feel that some kind of permanent record of the apes would be justified.

Thank heavens for local papers, which—alongside the airport closure—have given me the jump on other primatologists. Apparently the aid worker who saw the mystery ape in a bush food market only saw parts of the torso and the arms. He says that in old days local hunters were obliged to give the head and a limb to their village chief as an offering. As so little bush meat has been caught in the past three years, the remains got passed along the chain of obligation and trade until they reached the capital, where they finally got stuck in a stew. As for the remains I saw in the photographs, the aid worker is right: they are neither chimpanzee nor bonobo, and certainly not gorilla hands. If anything, they look a little human.

‘New-found discovery! Ice age chimp!’
‘The kissing primate!’

‘Stone age ape said to be closer to man!’

Closer than what, I wonder? As for me, I’ve always felt further than anyone.
All went well until I woke up this morning and learned that the airport had closed down due to fuel issues. You’ll say this is fate telling me to quit, perhaps, but as I meandered toward the only building in this quarter of town with a telephone, I felt the strange stillness of heart that comes with having all one’s decisions cut off at the branch. In the foyer of the United Nations business centre here—a straw-clad hut concealing more modern concrete architecture, a kind of *trompe l’oeil*—two burnish-eyed security guards watched me as I phoned.

The young woman who has been handling things at the Environment Channel end wasn’t there, so I spoke to a secretary.

You have to imagine the long pauses between the exchange.

‘Yes, hello, yes? Are you still there?’

‘I said Miss Phillips can’t be spoken to at the moment.’

‘Well,’ I said, ‘can you please let her know June Lesky called—I’m having difficulties with transportation.’

A nasal mumble intervened and a moment later I realised I’d been put on hold. Piped music doesn’t make the distance, fortunately; I could hear a faint pipping sound, but nothing more. Then one of the executives I’d spoken to some time ago came on.

‘Adam Sanchez,’ he breezed.

‘Yes, Adam Sanchez, please don’t put me on hold—’ I didn’t tell him my coins would shortly run out. A primatologist without university tenure is one thing; a primatologist using a coin operated phone is slightly more alarming.
'Mizz Lesky,' he said, ‘how lovely to hear from you. Uh—has nobody spoken to you today?’

‘Today here is not quite today there,’ I said lightly.

‘Unfortunately there’s been a review process, Mizz Lesky. We—ah—don’t know if we can be in a position to fund your present research at this stage—’

I won’t bother transcribing the rest of that exchange; my patience with the language of bureaucracies has never been high. But by the time I’d gotten my passport back from the security guard at the entry gates I’d begun to experience a strange and new kind of exhilaration. Have you ever missed your footing down a step and caught yourself at the last moment? Isn’t it always a surprise when you manage to avoid the crash? I remember once I’d had to run from a departmental meeting toward a class on the lower floors, and to save waiting at the lifts I’d taken the stairs. Galloping two by two, a bunch of unmarked essays under my arm, I’d seen in slow-motion the arc I would take even before my feet actually stumbled. Somehow I wound up upside-down, my shiny court shoes facing the horde of students clattering downstairs after me, the essays scattered down the stairs—a happenstance reference to the old joke about how to mark papers—and not a hair on my head out of place. How incredible it is to find oneself safe and intact on an ordinary thoroughfare, palms and knees unbloodied, and only the less robust elements of ego in any way put out.

So just like that I’ve found myself alone in X, with only my own wit and personal finances to see the research through. It’s not as frightening as you’d think. There are no evil-doers hustling me and only people struggling in the ways people do, taking goats to barter and bringing home pulses and greens; if I look both ways when crossing a street I’d be lucky to see a vehicle of any kind. By the time I reached the hostel I felt—how can I put this? — newborn.

At ten o’clock I went to Centreville by push-cart, chiefly at the urging of the manager, Zo, who seems to believe in tourism at a fundamental level. He told me that push-carts—a kind of bicycle with a heavily decorated box at the
back for the rider to sit in—are, far from being colonial or exploitative, a necessary means toward keeping young men in work. ‘Don’t worry, don’t worry!’ he kept saying as I clambered aboard, feeling a bit like one of those adult colonists in the thirties being carried across Papua New Guinean streams.

But as the young pedal pusher’s head moved up and down in marvellous syncopation with the street, the township crawled by: children in dusty clusters playing with stones; women carrying head-baskets, all of them wearing bright orange and red clothes; now and then a tethered brown-headed goat; ancient drawling trees with long black pods cascading beautiful shiny nuts the size of matchboxes; mud-walled rectangles with rusty corrugated iron roofs; and then, two blocks on, the business district with its concrete construction abutting dilapidated shops and awnings. Telegraph poles wobbled in the heat-shimmer. I saw no soldiers, no guns, just the faint whiff of hunger and depletion as mangy dogs snuffed at bins; but still, it’s no worse than your average New York tenement. Behind the line of shops sprawled a backdrop of partially scalped mountains that seemed about to pounce, like the tidal waves of Armageddon movies. It’s funny how looking at verdant hillocks can soothe one’s temperature sense; staring at those bald heaps, I felt the searing heat rise at me like a wall.

In the shade of a massive tree I found a girl whittling animals out of bone-white wood, her huge expressive eyes and tiny plaits shimmering in the dappled light. She said her name was Chanya. I’m afraid I’ve bought you and Gerald the see-no-evil trio of monkeys; they were so finely carved, and she so beautiful, that I forgot how long it’s been since you admired kitsch. Fortunately the parcel will take years to arrive, and your husband’s minders will no doubt split it open to check for explosive devices. I hope they show mercy; anatomically speaking the monkeys are very well carved.

A little after twelve, I slipped into a restaurant just off the main boulevarde and nearly fainted at the sudden temperature change. A cup of water would have sufficed; something cooler than boiling, if not cold. Astonishing to find tarragon seafood and crisp waiters in black and white
bending from the tie-strands of their aprons! While the rest of the city stifles
without running water and girls earn small money whittling, the restaurants
keep shrimp in huge cooled tanks and charge an arm and a leg for a glass of ice
with a splash of sugar cane wine. With the sort of insane power-wasting that
seemed normal in the west until a decade ago, an air conditioner kept the
temperature between tables down to under twenty celcius. The décor sported
green velvet drapes and polished silver lightshades; the potted palms had been
stuffed with orange kapok. A few scattered women wore brightly coloured
headscarves and muumuus; the men had the aura of dignitaries from high
business or the military or, for all I know, offshore CIA, who apparently like to
linger in these outposts looking to start new wars rather than face the
consequences of old ones at home. The big men sat in replete slouches as
waiters came and took plates away.

I didn’t have enough money for an entrée, but sat down on an enclosed
verandah and bought a soda water. Down the hillside wound a curve of surly
water with its Joseph Conrad aspect in the form of loose-clad men loading boats
for trips up-river, although the hillsides near the waterline had been clear
felled. Despite the barren appearance, everything moved slowly and peaceably.
A soft-voiced waiter brought my drink and seemed unconcerned by my lack of
interest in the food. The restaurant clacked with wooden dishes and
implements below the hum of voices. Every now and then, when I looked out,
the distant flat-bottomed boats had drifted a few inches further away and the
birds had alighted higher up the current like passengers being slowly shifted by
a train. Next thing I knew it was four-fifteen and the waiter was shaking me out
of a trance. They had to close up the restaurant to prepare for dinnertime.

How spinsterly and gauche is that, falling asleep on the verandah of the
city’s most expensive restaurant? But if I hadn’t fallen asleep in the restaurant
or come back late perhaps I might not have met Chantelle and obtained my
guide.

Back at the hostel, in a sort of fugue, I crossed by the desk (an old timber
school desk with a bell on a string) and suddenly saw another western woman
unsling a backpack against the doorframe and reach for her money-belt. She looked tallish and pale, about thirty, very slender, wearing a drab green singlet and three-quarter beige cotton pants. Her fine, pale cheeks looked tinged with sunburn, and her eyes shone green as banana fronds. She was paying for her room and exchanging banter with the young man who minds the hostel in the day. Traces of reddish dust climbed up her calves and along the seams of her tennis shoes. As soon as she saw me she spun, excited; apparently she’d heard there was another French woman staying here. She didn’t seem to mind when I proved to be Australian-English. The young man looked from her to me, then went back to his graphic novel with a shrug.

‘But of course,’ Chantelle said, when I indicated that I couldn’t speak French well enough to converse properly. ‘Are you with the mission?’

‘Good heavens, no,’ I said with a smile, and told her that I had come to track down a new species of ape. I didn’t mention the Environment Channel or the faculty—after all, I’m now officially on my own.

The young woman eyed me speculatively, both fine dark eyebrows raised. ‘But you will shoot this ape?’ Zis ape. When I looked aghast she smiled and mimed a camera operating.

I said that I hoped to take proper footage.

She hefted up her backpack without further explanation, straps dangling. ‘Come with me,’ she said. Wës me.

We went down the short hallway to her room. I felt a brazenness to her, an air of world-weary competence beneath the pulled-back auburn hair. She reminded me of your daughter, all precision and seriousness, too old for her age. We sat on upturned crates and she grilled me on my trip so far, while outside her window children threw pebbles at one another and squealed, ordinary sounds a person might hear anywhere.

‘I’ve not done much yet,’ I confessed; ‘just a visit into town, and a few long walks. I wanted to speak to the manager of the ape sanctuary, but he’s stuck in the north-west, and apparently the planes won’t land until they know
they can refuel.’ I shook my head. ‘If it wasn’t for the terrain, I’d cross the mountains myself.’

‘Oh,’ she said, ‘but they are too dangerous.’

‘Aren’t the militia gone?’

‘They are gone, perhaps, but who knows if they will return?’ She lit a cigarette with long, fine fingers slightly yellow at the tips. ‘But I know this person. Perhaps he will find a plane to take you.’ She made the universal gesture of black market money between two fingers. ‘Like me, he is a UN outreach officer, but he has many children he must provide for.’ When I asked how many she laughed. ‘More than one village, perhaps.’

‘What is your job?’ I asked.

‘Oh, I go to provinces, assist with sanitation, file reports.’

‘It sounds arduous,’ I remarked.

She seemed to presume I meant the paperwork. ‘Pages upon pages,’ she told me. ‘It is too much, these reports.’ She said she had been in ‘situations’. She made it sound mundane, not dangerous at all. A spider’s exoskeleton twirled on an empty curtain rod above her head; outside the heat had begun to grow most intense, as it always does here around five. ‘Young boys are the worst,’ she said. ‘There has been fighting for so many years; they don’t know how to be normal again yet. But I think they will.’

I asked whether she felt aid had achieved real progress.

She shrugged for the umpteenth time and looked out the window, where a ragged palm frond wavered in a humid breeze. ‘Some days, I think so. But sometimes, no, it is worse.’ She told me of what had happened when one village had been encouraged to grow plantain to wean itself off bush foods. Their use of water from streams and their development of a clearing that had channelled water had changed the patterns of the creek and affected fish-farmers downstream. ‘When people live close so together,’ she murmured, ‘problems happen. But it is not so different to the big city now, no? So many problems.’
We talked a little further, mostly about unremarkable things: how hard it is to buy luxuries; washing in a basin; the lack of showers and deodorants. She seemed surprised, despite her earlier comment, when I told her that power for central heating had begun to be rationed in London. Then she shrugged again. ‘It is all the same everywhere.’

When I was about to leave to let her unpack, she said, ‘But you have a guide? For this expedition?’

‘Oh,’ I said, ‘the ape sanctuary man was going to find one for me. But I can’t contact him until he returns to open the centre.’

Green eyes opened wide briefly. ‘It is futile,’ she said, ‘he will not come back. The ape sanctuary will not reopen.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because funding for it has ceased. There are new priorities.’ She told me that a new directive had been issued in light of the fuel situation; no aid would go to non-human services.

‘But what will happen to the gorillas?’

‘They will be shot, perhaps.’ Then she reflected a moment. ‘But of course they will not be shot; that would cause too much of an international outcry. They will be “returned to the wilderness”, or the government will find a zoo somewhere that will buy them.’

‘Oh, dear,’ I said, and she half-smiled in my direction, her expression somewhat quizzical. ‘Would your—friend know a guide, Chantelle?’

She pondered this for some time, leaning on her doorframe. ‘My—friend is familiar with the area,’ she said, looking slightly doubtful. ‘Only—you might find that you do not like him to guide you.’ A delicate pause. ‘He might be a hunter of the chimpanzees, you know.’

I said that I had no opinion about jungle hunting. Actually this isn’t quite true. When we were little, you and I, we coloured in animal picture books and read stories about little pigs who spoke English; but nothing prepared me for seeing the complexity of chimp interaction and intelligence. To see the kinked arm of a chimpanzee on a plate is much like seeing a human body part hewn
off and stewed. Yet, as I told Chantelle, ‘I’m not here to tutor villagers in diet. All I want is find these apes; then we can deal with how to best protect them.’ I kept thinking of my own experience with the executives at Environment Channel. When I’d first heard from them they’d been full of serious passion, buttering me up with promises that any programme to come out of my journey would ‘help save the last few great apes’. They’d sent me a copy of a documentary filmed only two years ago about the bush meat trade in X. Ironically, I hadn’t until that moment seen the cultural relativity at work. The documentary had been trying to win opinion on the side against ape-killing. Instead I had heard a village woman complain that if they couldn’t continue to eat bush meat, they’d have no protein, and her children would starve. I told Chantelle about that.

‘It is true,’ she nodded.

‘Then I couldn’t tell people not to hunt.’

She eyed me carefully for a moment, then checked her watch. ‘I will recommend you to my good friend Mulumba, and we will see what he can do.’ Then, in the absence, presumably, of some ritualised gesture such as shaking hands—an activity I have always found unusual between women—she clapped my arm. ‘Let us make a plan for dinner, no?’

How strange the world becomes when we travel. If I’d met Chantelle by the clock-tower near the bridge, would we have bothered to say ‘hi’? I would almost certainly have found her handsomeness intimidating. She would have been waiting for a boy she calls ‘My Parisian Prince’; and I would have been fuming that the brown corduroy professor hadn’t showed up for the tenth or twentieth time. Two islands would have separated and spun apart on their tectonic plates.
It’s perplexing why so many accountants and engineers are into extreme sports. Every Easter break on campus I used to see them loading up their Landcruisers, taking all the university white water equipment. These were the same people who ended up giving me big cross-marks over requisition forms: ‘Improper calculation,’ ‘insufficient funds’; the ones who terrorised pool-goers with their underwater hockey games and drank so much the union—back in the days of university unions—had to run a bar.

Now I find myself saying the word ‘expedition’ over and over in my mind, and loving it. I’ve never trekked in Nepal or abseiled cliffs; but here I am going jungle. For the first time in my life I feel I understand the allure of adventure.

I’m flying a bare wing’s-breadth above the treetops on the north-eastern sides of the mountains; and what treetops they are: massy; green-black; ancient. You can imagine the wilderness creeping back, overtaking the slashings and burnings of modern progress. Perhaps the earth’s green heart has hope!

But every now and then the carpet of jungle bares itself to reveal scars of excess and exploitation: singed villages; flattened scarps; felled valleys and swathes carved into iron-red clay streaking up entire ridge-lines. The logging roads now go all the way north to south, dissecting the country.

The airfield we are to land in looks to be, from my scant view of the map, no more than several clearings joined end to end. Having come this far, it seems entirely possible that we will simply nose-dive at the end. What I do have, however, is a mild sort of buzzing in my stomach, a lilting kind of ‘What now?’
The pilot sits about two hand spans in front of me, a brutish sort with a prickly head and long nasal creases. We met on the tarmac shortly before climbing aboard; I’d stupidly presumed he was another passenger. ‘G’day,’ he said—not Australian but South African—‘I hope you’ve got some sturdy walking shoes.’ This over his shoulder, already sauntering off to check all the poky little compartments pilots like to fuss about. He’s actually wearing, believe this, a safari suit, khaki with tremendous pockets and sweat-marks. As Chantelle said when it had all been arranged, ‘If you have money, you can buy anything.’ This trip of four hours cost nine thousand dollars US. The thought of what this could have bought for local residents appals me even as I can’t just drop the quest.

But sitting directly behind the pilot, I don’t feel like an expert employing hired help; I feel like luggage. This isn’t a corporate jet but something just slightly grander than a bumblebee. It’s certainly nothing like your husband’s jet. Two staterooms, is it, or three? For all that, I think even he might envy me a little. When I first climbed aboard I felt too horrified by the sight of rusty rivets and the torn seats (of which there are precisely three, one being the pilot’s) to think I might enjoy the ride. ‘Belt up,’ he grunted when I climbed in, and he made some finicky gesture that it took me a while to realise meant plugging my ears; a set of foam plugs sat helpfully on the seat. Appallingly, they appeared grey with use, and I thought of using my fingers or cotton balls, only these couldn’t hold back the engine noise. Now I feel partly drugged, adrift inside a padded cell, but it’s better than going deaf.

Just before we took off, while the pilot fiddled with his console, I turned and gasped to find, looming behind the seat, another set of eyes. They peered out of the belly of the tiny plane like the watery eyes of a hostage, pallid grey in all the gloom. He hunched, tall and angular, so that his knees nearly came up to his chin in the cramped space, a human C. Amazingly, he turned out to be Helmut Scholl, another ape-expert. A German ape expert, which is almost as astonishing as an Australian-English one. He had booked a flight through other
means but with the fuel problem it fell through, and when he heard that there might be another trip arranged at short-notice he bought in.

Even more amazingly, he’s heard of me, though I’ve concentrated on teaching above publishing, and have done all my behavioural research inside zoos. ‘June Lesky, yes.’ While the pilot flipped switches Scholl clasped my hand with his, the flesh on him strangely soft and limp. ‘You are enjoying the country, ja?’

I said that I had seen very little of it, having been waiting for the gorilla sanctuary people to return, futilely, as it turned out. I mentioned Chantelle, thinking that he must know her, but he doesn’t. His contact remains the pilot; apparently Scholl came here six months ago on a study tour of the river basin and met our pilot. Unlike me, Herr Scholl has university backing for his expedition, and seems to have little trouble having repeated funds approved. I wished him well.

Soon enough the engine noise began to turn all our eardrums to mush, and I never found out how Scholl heard the location of the apes. I must assume—he’s snoring now, proving himself the superlative air traveller—that he intends to be the first to make the official discovery, in which case I must believe myself locked in an academic kind of mortal combat. I can’t help feeling cheered, though, by the fact of his presence. There’s nothing like a belief in German precision to make one feel safe.

Last night I had a strangely sensible dream, though I thought I’d done with ordinary things. You were visiting on my doorstep, and the dominatrix from the adjacent flat was leaning across the hallway watching us with an expression of amusement. You wore a silver dress and high heeled shoes, and your face had been marvellously touched up, or perhaps success always heightens the cheekbones and brightens the hair. I was reminded of a line from a review I read of one of your earliest exhibitions: ‘She is like the dapple of light on a busy stream, always going somewhere beyond itself.’ When I woke I realised with a jolt how hard you’d had to try, as the second born in a marriage already failing. I only had to do a few sums, learn a few tricks to do with
intellect. You, Beatrice, you had to fill our father with sunshine, because he couldn’t forgive you for taking after her.

Isn’t it funny how far we’ve come? You’ve given up painting for love, and I’ve gone ape. Out my window I can see the unfolding of a living mass. Rivers, winding crevices, troughs and peaks, deliberate as a carpet off a loom.

But this is a god’s perspective, and I’m human. At any moment the pilot is going to tap the windowpane to his left to indicate that we’re going to descend. How very little time there is; how very little chance to see the patterns of our lives before we have to buckle for the jolt.

On the other hand, there’s a pattern to everything when viewed at sufficient distance, isn’t there? I might as well take the long view. As our grandmother used to say—feisty old buzzard that she was—belief in grandeur is always in some way grand.
People I like fall into three categories: ones I like because I feel a little sorry for them (which you would say isn’t really liking); ones who seem to like me (therefore obligatory); and ones in whom sheer remoteness combined with admirable qualities produces something rather more like adulation.

I’m going to have to put the German primatologist into a whole new category. He doesn’t seem to like me; in fact, if I had to say it, I think he actively dislikes me. He is too staunch and dry-mouthed to feel in any way sorry for; besides, he remains seamlessly knowledgeable. And as for admirable remoteness, I was close enough to him a little while ago to hear his early morning flatulence.

We landed two days ago on an airfield lined with Coke cans. Why Coke? Apparently an advertisement using a jungle background in 2008 left hefty crates of the aluminium cans; locals have resourcefully filled them with dirt and peeled out the edges reflectively or perhaps ironically, like silver and red flowers at a wake. The people who met us at the airfield looked to be of all ages and builds, dressed in the usual fashion of bright colours and hide thongs with beads, but when we failed to bring out film cameras or some new product most of them understandably drifted away. The westerners they see, I presume, are either fly-by-nighters like our pilot, in and out with money or smuggled goods, or UN workers who want to oversee ‘development’ and perhaps confiscate their bush meat or tell them what to plant.

The huts sit in a forest clearing the size of two tennis courts. Around us, an impenetrable dark splash of jungle foliage crawls up the slopes and away, dense as night in a closet, but the village itself remains bright by day. The
ground is a baked red clay of volcanic origin. Believe it or not, I found a car in the village, an old sedan that apparently only the headman drives; in any case the road in and out appears virtually unpassable due to giant mud-red craters and pot-holes. Once the bumble-bee we arrived in had lifted off, leaving us behind, I could see how difficult it would have been to approach the village on foot, but I haven’t felt for a moment that I shouldn’t have come.

Helmut Scholl continues to fascinate me at every turn. I find him gruffly tenacious, full of exacting wisdom. When I began alighting from the plane he barked at me to watch my step; for a moment I thought I’d annoyed him by getting out first. Nothing like it; in front of me proved to be a curious kind of russet-flecked lizard with serrated scales, and Scholl wanted to squat immediately and take a sketch. In a horror movie he would be the one who gets bumped off first. His pure vowel-loaded intransigence inspires me to read his books, which I must admit I’ve been avoiding recommending to students because of their turgidity. But it’s only here, amid such wilderness, that I see how well this diffidence suits his work. His sketches are pure science, as meticulous and labelled as those of the botanist Banks.

You’d like Helmut Scholl, Bea. You’d like his stooping manner and pale bony hands and the way his grey hair curls and ripples like Breughel’s waves. He’s a fascinating study in what you once called, in an exhibition, ‘the magic of self-belief.’ I confess I’m spying on him, but in case that sounds amorous, I couldn’t picture Scholl with no clothes on except as a study in form, a figure on a morgue trolley rather than a chaise lounge. His angularity—elbows, knees, peaky brows—seems half gibbon, half Leonardo’s David, or maybe Peat Bog Man with scrunched eyelids and a noose about his throat. Like all good art subjects he’s utterly unaware. Yet he could write a book on anything you care to name; he knows subjects; indices; wheres and whens. I have trouble memorising a bus timetable; Helmut Scholl knows the coordinates of all the major cities on earth. When a man like that condescends to brush a gnat off your cheekbone you feel genuinely moved.
Our new guide, Mulumba, arrived the day before we came, not by plane but army jeep; he has contacts in government and can travel anywhere. When we first came to the village he lay stretched out before a mud-walled cottage, sunning his boots and eating a black-skinned fruit something like a sapote, peeling it with a huge knife. About thirty-five, he has a pocked face with full, animated lips and short cropped hair; he wears light cotton trousers that look expensively made and loose colourful shirts. A three-year-old girl in a loincloth straddled his knee, poking a twig into the earth. Apparently the women here know him well.

As for the locals, they seem as bemused by our presence as we were by the Coke cans on the runway. Mulumba translates roughly, but doesn’t seem particularly bothered by details; I suspect he finds the chore of being a go-between unpleasant, because he rolls his eyes and sighs heavily when asked. Meantime the villagers and I keep nodding to each another across the gulch of understanding, waiting for Mulumba to say what we’ve just said in whatever lax form he deems worthwhile.

Mulumba, like many men I’ve met in my own culture as well as others, speaks predominantly to the male of the group, in this case Helmut Scholl. Because of Scholl’s aptitude for the local dialect he is able to converse partly in it, along with a lot of hand-waving and signage; and of course Mulumba is proficient in French. One can’t be a feminist in another country, but with the language barrier (which is my fault, of course) I do occasionally feel slightly piqued. Then again I don’t look much: a skinny academic with age spots and lank pale hair. But then this description would apply equally well to Herr Scholl, if not more so. I must shrug off resentment and apply it all to the common good, in this case finding our way to the summit of the volcano.

The villagers have been tolerant enough to let us stay in a disused hut. A willowy, languid girl showed us the sleeping place, set behind a kind of hearth made of stones. Apparently somebody died here, right where I have laid out my sleeping mat, a fact I only learned this morning when I overhead Mulumba telling the story to Helmut Scholl. This disturbs me a good deal, but apparently
it was two years ago, and he had no immediate family in the village to find our presence in his hut appalling. For light we have my Environment Channel torch, but this morning when I got up I found that the bag containing my solar charger had been misplaced, perhaps left at the airport in X or perhaps confiscated. In a few days I’ll have no laptop, but even this means little to me now, as I’m relearning the art of taking notes on a pad. I’m reminded of the enormous expense NASA technicians were put to in designing a pen that could write in space while their Russian counterparts used pencils.

Isn’t it nice to feel oneself jettisoning things? Meanwhile the fellow occupants of the hut—mostly hairy spiders and scuttling giant beetles—seem fairly sanguine about our presence. I wonder what the fellow who lived here died of? Should I even ask? There are no phrasebooks that could let me approach a villager directly; their dialect contains not even the generally-found percentage of French that I’ve grown used to. Scholl, however, seems to have been here before.

I did try this morning to make myself useful with the local women, but they didn’t seem to want me there; Scholl (whom I grilled last night about it) seems to think that this had something to do with Mulumba. Today I went to the rivulet that winds down from the jungle hills to fetch a panful of water. Two women, very dark, about twenty or twenty-five, sat flushing a kind of earthenware pot in the stream and laughing together. The word ‘Mulumba’ stood out from their discourse, and when I felt uncomfortable about intruding and made an apologetic noise, they exchanged a single glance of such potent understanding that I blushed, which isn’t usual of me. Chantelle had said in passing that a white woman of any age—particularly those over forty, who are considered rich—are seen as predatory when it comes to local males. This suspicion must surely be grounded in other issues besides sex, but I can’t help feeling mortified by it anyway. I suppose if I’d been staying in the village for some time I could have reassured them and perhaps learned a little of their lifestyle and language. In any case, if they believe I have designs on Mulumba
then that belief surely can’t survive his indifference, for he’s looked at me the sum total of twice since my arrival.

But we’re not to stay here long, and I was grateful for the neat arrival this afternoon (against expectation) of a crateload of supplies that Environment Channel had sent on before they changed their minds about funding the search. The crate had been dumped on the airfield by a freight plane as it passed, miraculously achieving the landing-mark without smashing more than a few panels of the outer box. The inner box held paring knives and bags of rice; and (the executives must have had rocks in their head) small childish gifts like yo-yos. I didn’t want to make any kind of fuss over such items, but Mulumba announced a ceremony, and only halfway through the serious handing-over of goods I realised he wasn’t being only ironic but brazenly satirical. This all took place half an hour ago, in what appears to be a chieftain’s hut.

Paring knives, yo-yos, bags of rice. Oh, and some UN filtration equipment that Chantelle asked me to stow, because they don’t have this village on their list of places to deliver aid (hence the fact of our being allowed to piggyback on their freight plane). But the equipment—three large urns with a six-month supply of filtration inserts—raised no more than a shrug from Mulumba, who seems by turns amused and completely indifferent. Two very young mothers began examining the urns. A girl about the size of your daughter scrambled forward and poked her finger among the packing foam, and soon a whooping morass of children had sent flurries of pink and orange foam curls dancing about the room. Scholl’s face twisted in irritation.

Suddenly Mulumba turned his deep-set gaze onto me. ‘Why is this necessary? To come to my country to chase monkeys?’

‘They’re much closer to us than monkeys,’ I smiled. ‘Perhaps even closer than chimpanzees. The story I heard is that they’re clean-faced, like most apes, which suggests that, like us, they probably communicate face-to-face. Strong proboscis—I mean nose. Bodily, they’re finer and lighter than chimps, but also longer-legged and more upright. I don’t think they’re a remnant population of bonobos, because the basic descriptions don’t fit. But even if they’re just a
subspecies of chimp, I still think we can learn a lot about ourselves by studying them.’

Mulumba spread his arms wide, taking in the entire group. A rumble of laughter vibrated through the hut. ‘It is enough to live with other people to learn about ourselves.’

My new guide cut quite close to the bone with this remark, though I only smiled. How could I explain the shortage of community in our western cities? How we’ve been taken from our human rituals and deposited in the world of commerce as market resources, the nth degree of specialisation: two-point-one children; two adults; two cars? You, Bea, have barely more family connection than I have—a husband and child. Me, June Lesky, I’m solo; I’m the basest consumption unit in a system of exploitation and market individuation that is coming to a close. Fortunately Scholl chose that moment to embark on a discussion about route. He very kindly refrained from long perorations in French, and I soon found myself involved in mapping out a line from the village to the first plateau. Mulumba seemed disinterested in our maps, waving them away with the back of his hand like gnats, but Scholl, like myself, prefers to augment memory with paperwork. We agreed that the most likely refuge for the apes, if they exist, would be at or near the volcano rim, supposing that they might come down the slopes occasionally to feed. There are many unmapped sections toward the peak, and we have no idea what to expect.

Our next port of call is a local Induction Centre—a kind of chimpanzee and gorilla hospital set up only a year earlier with Save the Chimp funds. It was built in the foothills to avoid last year’s fighting, but has itself been subject to at least one raid. We’ll be met, according to Mulumba, by two hospital workers who staff the place in the dry season.

With this part of the proceedings over, I headed for the hut to sleep. I’d just strung a makeshift curtain across my corner when Helmut Scholl returned. (He has a sleep-mat just beside the door.) He glanced about the hut, saw me preparing to stretch out and, after a moment’s hesitation, came forward, at least as far as the stone hearth. Upward of that, the roof opened a chink about the
smoke-hole to reveal a darkening sky and nascent stars. Scholl looked up, frowned, fiddled with something tinnily and soon had a dangling kerosene lantern swaying from the roof. ‘Do you mind the light?’ he asked gruffly, as an afterthought.

I shook my head and smiled, expecting (God knows why) that he might be meaning to converse. I’d wanted to ask him, now that I thought about it, what had motivated him to enter primatology and what he hoped to achieve if he found the new apes. But no sooner had he set the lantern alight then he trundled off to the doorway to wrestle a miniature desk out of a packful of knick-knacks, and next minute he had set it up and sat down at it.

Scholl is one of these people with noisy jaws. He was eating something in one hand, or rather somethings (when I looked his way I saw a crinkly packet that might have been nuts). Sitting in profile to allow a little light over his page, he continued masticating while writing in a pad. At school in Melbourne we used to sing ‘Click go the shears’—I know you came a few grades behind me but you probably remember it too—and in my head, obtusely, this song resurrected with the words altered to ‘Click go the jaws.’ Finally I realised I wouldn’t be able to sleep, and took out my pen and pad to write this chapter.

So now I’m lying on my side, listening to pages turn (he’s finished eating, finally) and hearing his intermittent, throat-clearing ‘Hrum’. It’s like the sound of a faraway motor starting on a work day when the alarm has been turned off and you don’t have anywhere to be, because you’ve already quit your job.

I don’t suppose you’d think of it like that, because you’ve had your work cut out since having a child. But then again, you’ve had nannies for some of that.
Mulumba woke us up with a booming ‘Halloo!’ By the time sunlight had forced its way through the canopy, we’d already packed and assembled before the huts. All the villagers waved him bye-bye; as for Scholl and myself, they seemed bemused or perhaps even annoyed by our presence. I can see why: our clothes and equipment speak of money and time; we’re white, endorsed by corporations (albeit mine having withdrawn at the last moment) and full of compartmentalised learning. We’ve come down from the icy sheep-hills of our Viking and Lionheart heritage to tell equatorialists what to do. As Jared Diamond says, the only thing that has stopped colonialists from completely destroying the tropics is malaria; and these days, we have insect repellent.

The morning proved bright and mistless, though not yet as hot as in the capital. Mulumba led us out of the village into a network of tracks, moving in a sort of crab-crawl round the base of the hills. By ten o’clock we’d suffused ourselves in a fog of sweat, wilting like lilies in the sun; yet we’d walked chiefly in shade. Gradually the tracks all converged and became one that wound upward unsteadily, now curving into gullies and folds, now resuming its climb. Mosses clambered along the shanks of old logs and clung to the undersides of vines. Red soil, yellow in places, seeped with liquids rich in tannins, mosquito larvae, ants and beetle husks. I saw no signs of primates—no night-nests in trees; no clipped leaves; no droppings—but this close to human villages made the absence expectable. Yet of course I saw plenty of vegetation chimps like to eat. Remember those old Tarzan—Johnny Weissmuller—movies we used to watch on Saturday afternoons, before Dad came home from his morning consultations or our mother dropped in from one of her hairdressing
appointments? We looked after ourselves a lot, in the early days. The jungles always resounded with ape chatter and elephants trumpeting—Indian elephants, of course, because African ones had been too hard to train.

What is it about wilderness that so moves us, do you suppose? Is it the idea of plenitude? I’m thinking, of course, of those Watchtower pamphlets with lions lying down near lambs, a story not of benevolent co-existence but the simpler fact that the lion has eaten its fill. When a new pocket of the Papua New Guinean highlands was discovered a few decades ago, researchers found marsupials and birds completely unafraid of humans. The visitors could walk up to them and pick them right up because the local highlanders had never bothered climbing that particular forest peak. How I would love to visit there! But in these old haunts, where hominids hunted a million years ago and we still hunt now, and where wilderness itself has been so chopped up, we’re lucky to hear birds or apes at all.

My fear is that the mystery apes might have vanished into extinction at the same moment as the amputated hand made it into the western media. Fleeing militia took many routes through the forest to escape the local soldiers. They might have come upon the last remaining individual of this new species and cut him down to feed themselves or to pay for a border crossing. The less exciting but perhaps safer prospect remains that the dead animal might have been a mutant or a hybrid of some kind. In either case, you can see how precarious my expedition must be.

When we left the basin, Mulumba took the lead, and Helmut Scholl walked a few feet to his rear, always looking for signs of animal life, so that more frequently than one would expect they bumped. The track had been well-smoothed by villagers, but occasionally it branched again, at which point Scholl and I usually stopped the trek to consult our maps. Mulumba found our painstaking approach funny. ‘Aha, we look at pictures again!’ In the end, despite our desire to keep abreast of the pictures on our papers, the lines on the rough chart and the track surroundings proved hard to reconcile. We gave up; we gave ourselves completely to Mulumba, who seemed no more but no less
delighted by our sudden deference to him than he had been by our slavish attention to maps.

The man, it turns out, is full of cheeky wisdom; he’s almost always joking at our expense. Now that I’ve worked this out I find him less frightening, almost bearish. A little earlier we stopped for a break and Scholl took his boots off to apply sticking plaster around his heels. While Scholl laboriously pulled on his socks, I saw Mulumba drop something in one of the nearby boots. I reached over before Scholl could aim his foot at it, and shook it upside-down. A centipede as long as my finger fell out and immediately trundled off into the leaf litter. I kept the matter to myself, but when I glanced at Mulumba later he grinned facetiously back. I wagged a finger by way of admonition, and since then, I believe jovially, he’s been calling me ‘School Mistress June’.

We’ve been joined by one of the villagers, a shy youth called Fili or perhaps Fillip (the others seem to use these names interchangeably). Mulumba bears some relation to this child, perhaps in the way of a godparent or mentor. Fili at first seemed positively bored, whipping at undergrowth with a spiny stick and generally showing an air of truculence. I realised he must have been made to come by his relatives in order to secure more money for the village, which of course is very shrewd of them. If they’d plied us with an extra helper back at the village we would have said ‘no’, but one can’t turn back a child once he’s come this far.

Mulumba felt we should pay a good deal for the extra help. Humming around with an expression of annoyance, he suggested that I simply bill Environment Channel; he obviously didn’t believe what I’d said earlier about the organisation having withdrawn support (Scholl hardly seems to believe this either). In the end I told him I’d pay for Fili’s help out of my own resources, which perhaps makes me sound like some wealthy entrepreneurial adventurer, but looking at the smiling boy with his sharp shoulderblades and pensive little face, I felt a pang of responsibility.

At that moment, to my surprise, Scholl intervened. Having only just returned from browsing among the leaf litter for specimens, he brought out an
unseemly bankroll from a sealed plastic tube and handed a sheaf across to Mulumba, saying, ‘I trust this will cover any new costs.’ It would have seemed charitable except that he immediately expected the appropriate paperwork be filled in, including a receipt. We stood on the side of this seeping rainforest mountain waiting for Helmut Scholl’s pen to work, while all around us birds chirruped and beetles clicked and leeches made a beeline for my calves. I felt faintly irritated by the man’s gesture, not so much because it makes the expedition seem rooted around Scholl—the figurehead I first encountered in his books—as that he didn’t make the slightest show of friendliness toward Fili.

The boy has begun to amaze me, now that his taciturnity has entirely worn off. How could we be so differently brought up but still share powerful traits? For instance, there’s the wry grin I saw on Fili’s face when Scholl stubbed a toe and I felt my own mouth tighten—a laugh would have been unforgivable. Fili glanced at me and his grin broadened. Later, as we clambered over a gully, the boy turned to me and shyly pointed out a giant, broken-off stump. According to Mulumba this is where his maternal grandfather is buried.

How can I explain how touched I felt at this amazing confidence? Do you and I even know where our grandfathers are buried? One lies in Bristol, apparently, the other in Armidale. I’ve never even been to see their graves. It seems as though, in our family, the entire fact of human finitude could never be broached. Our father had to appear as he liked to see himself: massive; noteworthy; perpetual. No wonder he didn’t want us to be brought up by her after they divorced. She lacked his brand of sturdiness; too flaky by half. Looking back, I can still see the flat in Bellevue Hill she escaped to, with its half-finished sketches and mad macramé, its overflowing ashtrays, its rings of sticky sherry on every surface. You got her looks and talent, Bea, but she never managed to do much with hers. As for me, I’m a child of Zeus, straight out of the old man’s head.

Fili belongs to a place—belongs to a community that belongs to a place, saturated with belonging. He can point to a tree and know it as part of his history. It’s such a rich arrangement that I can’t help feeling awed. At forty-
nine, nobody in the world would miss me if I disappeared. Even Scholl, for all
that I imagine his wife to be a placid, undemanding sort—who else would settle
for a husband absent most of the time?—would probably be missed more for
the legacy of written work than the man himself.

How have we both ended up here, leading such basically disconnected
lives? (Can Scholl feel me peering at him from behind? I confess, I’ve been
watching him almost as often as the trail.) Is it a hangover from our northern
forebears, with their icebound remoteness from larger centres of population? Is
it to do with the contraceptive pill? Economics? Marriage is the only
institutional union we’ve got in the west, and if that fails, what else is there?
You tell me, Bea: you always were better at those sorts of things.

After a short rest and a lunch stop we set off up a gentler slope. The track
had widened out; according to Mulumba these trails sometimes carry troops of
villagers from further around the mountain. Now that we’d shared our dried
fruits and biscuits, Mulumba seemed in a fine mood. His rumbling voice
bellowed a stream of information about the land we clambered through. He
pointed out edible plants (a climber vine that resembled grapes; a type of husky
nut; the frequent cluster-figs) that supply survival nutrition when other foods
become scarce. I saw termite mounds aplenty, though none bore the score-
marks of primate activity, but their presence seemed hopeful anyhow. A little
way ahead of us Mulumba stopped by a curve of track, fell on his knees and
began carving at the ground; he soon unearthed a flat-bodied, rattish mammal
reminiscent of a spiny anteater. I presumed he intended to kill it, but
fortunately (for the creature as well as our stomachs) he only wanted to show
us how such sustenance is caught; he flipped it away like refuse and resumed
walking.

It turns out Fili knows several words in English. Mulumba has been a
sort of village uncle, I take it; a procurer of things and information. Fili told me,
in halting sign language and with the occasional help from Mulumba, that
English is the language they think will best help them achieve modernisation.
When I quizzed him about that (actually his expression was ‘being modern life’), it turns out he meant having ‘Playstation.’

Mulumba gruffly informed me that he meant new roads, income, planting renewable crops, but that when he took Fili to the capital the boy learned the name ‘Sony’ from the white son of an aid worker.

In return for helping Fili practice his English, I garnered a few rudimentary terms of the local dialect, which I’ll not repeat here for fear of getting them wrong: words for foot, arm, snake and that sort of thing. (Later I amused Fili by calling a leech a foot-snake; we had stopped for a bite to eat and I’d found my ankle drizzling blood and a fat black thing slithering around in the sock. My skinny ankle has been itching hellishly since.) We also learned from Mulumba that a military encampment a few mountains to the south-east in the last few years had decimated not only the villages nearby but all the bush meats (that is, living chimpanzees, colobus monkeys and small antelopes) for kilometres around it.

‘Do you believe in the mystery apes, Mulumba?’ I asked.

‘Oi, yes, maybe,’ he said, shrugging. ‘But not on this mountain. They must be up high.’

‘How high?’ I asked.

‘It seems, very.’ Mulumba has a way of looking slightly to the side of the person he’s talking to; it’s hard not to turn to check what’s there. ‘Up on the top,’ he said, meaning the volcano. Scholl merely grunted. Then Mulumba, mumbling with his back to us, volunteered, ‘They eat you, this ape.’

Scholl looked askance at this, but I suspected a joke. ‘Do they prefer white meat?’ I asked facetiously. I have a gift for keeping a straight face, and for a little while Mulumba peered at me the way one would look at a possibly poisonous snake. Then he threw his head back, revealing white teeth and a throat entirely devoid of facial hair. (Scholl’s is florid with shaving rash.) ‘Oh, yes, they prefer white meat,’ he guffawed, and for the next hour or so he could be occasionally caught leaning forward, letting another volley of humour burst out into the corners of the rainforest. A short time later, when we had left the
main track to climb a narrow ridge that would take us into the next incline, he courteously held aside a thicket for me to pass.

By the middle of the afternoon we’d reached the top of the foothills and sat resting on a dark, moist sort of saddle among the ridgelines. Above us sloped the perennial closed canopy, steepening into a wall of tree-boles and ferns; behind us lay a vertiginous downward slide.

Is it possible to be really happy, Bea? I remember you saying once that the sight of your infant sleeping filled you with a profound feeling of peace. I’ve no experience to match your child-raising joy, but sitting on a leech-infested log snacking on dried mangoes and Brazil nuts while rich green forest slopes away to the valley floor might perhaps comes close.

Mulumba and Scholl sat several paces away discussing our progress; Fili had taken to pulling stiff hairy bark off some type of medicine tree and making gestures to mean that I should lend him my knife (which I did). The cool moss of the log, moisture dripping from undrenched leaves, puddles in the dark earth that would never dry, and overhead this rich dank green filled with the quiet rustlings of animals, now that we have gotten off the hunting tracks—if I’ve ever been close to Eden, it’s this.

I wonder who first decided to hew trees and stick a few scabby carrots in the ground to stake a claim? I can imagine that this is how the world began, a dense green canopy that somebody decided to open out to sunlight. The same old pressures are happening in this country even as we’ve reached the end of tenure in ours. What catastrophe will annihilate us first, we who’ve annihilated our closest relatives?

Or almost. Here, in jungle so dense you could shout at yourself and not hear it, it’s possible to believe in nature again.
Ideas of hearty meals at actual dining tables and leisurely day-walks to get our bearings have gone astray. We have been camping rough outside the Induction Centre now for two and a half days, waiting for the workers to return from what Mulumba suggested was probably a ‘wildlife survey’, just as likely to be a holiday or drinking trip. Meanwhile Helmut Scholl has taken himself on nature walks every half-hour and I’ve been examining colobus monkey bones and writing this, at least until mid-morning, which is when we finally heard the Jeep come crashing through. At that point the sight of two wild-eyed men in jungle green, sporting automatic rifles as they bounced over a rut, felt almost enough to make me wish I hadn’t come. They looked like militia on an ambush, but in fact they turned out to be the workers.

The plan I had back when I was making plans had been to make contact with the Induction Centre staff, utilise their resources (for payment, of course) and ask for anything they could tell me about the mystery apes, as well as for guidance to the location (which remains vague). I could use the Centre as a base, perhaps, and travel out from there. The Induction Centre is little-known because it hasn’t been here long, but basically it’s a product of major global bank public relations and conservationist agitation in the form of a leaf-coloured metal-clad building set in a tiny clearing between giant trees. Mulumba laughingly told us it had been helicoptered in before the trail had been built, which seems both ridiculous and possible. American money—excuse my phrase—seems prone to grand gestures. However two days parked in the bush, without access to the water tank (which sits in a locked compound, heaven knows why) had made us all eager to enter.
When the great padlock finally clicked open, we found an officelike dwelling with a desk, solar-powered ceiling fans, a solar fridge, and two spacious rear rooms, one used for sleeping (with four double bunks, that is eight beds, drilled into the walls), the other containing three small cages and an examination table, a cupboard, and a safe for medicines. The safe hung open, empty of course: all the money had been spent on setting up. As for chimpanzees rescued and brought here for eventual release, the place has yet to see more than the one infant chimp that, having lost a hand, is kept as a pet by one of the American-funded Centre overseers stationed way down south. The staff aren’t interested in adding cleaning to their list of duties, apparently: at the back of the surgery room I saw a little dried black turd.

Guided tour over, we sprawled in the office on a cluster of fold-out chairs, Helmut Scholl bringing his own tiny camp seat in. The two workers bantered with Mulumba and offered us water from their miraculous fridge, unfiltered though it was (and you could imagine the germs from animal dung on the roof here, which feeds the water tank; for myself I felt happier to boil). The pair proved almost hysterically kindly, except toward Fili, whom they rippled with hostility over for being a member of a local clan their own has some longstanding feud with. Fili sat in the corner and said nothing to anyone, but stared at his own bare feet. I suppose it seems as pure a picture of tribalism as any, except that, at one point, the taller, thinner worker here, whose name is Kefin, mentioned something about ‘The Japanese’.

I said, ‘What does he mean, “the Japanese”?‘

‘Argh, he means tourists!’ Helmut Scholl spat.

So we are to expect two new visitors, who have apparently been staying down at a natural reservoir sampling peat and watching for gorillas. I’m unsure about the expansion of the group; the tourists apparently have designs on trekking up to the volcanic rim. Helmut Scholl seemed actively frantic.

‘These Japanese? They wish to come along?’ he exclaimed furiously.
‘It is husband and wife,’ the placid-faced Kefin offered in choppy English, as though the matter of marital status solved the problem. Scholl and I exchanged a glance; a storm fomented in his brow.

An intense dialogue occurred between Mulumba and the two workers, culminating in much head-shaking. The more dour of the latter, Joseph brought a receipt book out to show us all.

‘It has been paid,’ Mulumba translated. ‘The Japanese must come.’

Kefin spoke in halting French even I could make some sense of, though every now and then his phrases had to be shadow-translated by Mulumba. Scholl, who speaks fluent French, made his share of interruptions. The gist was that the Induction Centre had been contacted by a Japanese couple some time ago asking to be notified of the next expedition to climb the mountain. Not wishing to go alone, and being inexperienced, they hoped to latch onto a group; when they heard that a field trip had been organised, they muscled in. Their money is as good as anyone’s.

Scholl glowered at the room, thick pale eyebrows abseiling down his nose. ‘Honeymooners—argh!’

I had to laugh. ‘Really,’ I said to Mulumba, ‘we did expect to be on our own; but I can see no reason why others might not come along. They’re not competing with us for honours, after all; they’re not researchers.’

Scholl barked nonsensically; Fili cowered.

‘Anyway,’ I said to Scholl, whose ill humour seemed likely to cause health problems for him at some time or other, ‘it’s only an exploration; we have no idea if we’ll see anything or not. From my understanding the climb up the mountain is relatively safe.’

The two workers nodded, for Mulumba had been translating for me; their reply came back via the same channel, a cautious ‘Yes.’

Scholl remained thoroughly indignant. It wasn’t that they were Japanese; it seemed an insult to his primatologist’s pride. They weren’t university; they weren’t specialists. They were eco-tourists. ‘Argh,’ he muttered, and turned away, giving such a gesture of disdain to the rest of the room that only
Mulumba continued smiling (if anything, more widely than ever). The two Centre workers rolled their eyes.

Forty minutes later the Japanese couple crawled sheepishly out of the bushes. Perhaps they are lithe and limber and won’t mind the climb, but I must say I found them disconcertingly unblemished. The young man, Hiro, entered the building first, wearing baggy grey trousers of light synthetics and walking with an affected saunter. An elfin bob-style haircut swung as he walked. He put his hands together as introductions passed, then beamed at Mulumba and made a small bow; Helmut Scholl, unfortunately, hadn’t returned from his sulk. When I made a greeting for Scholl as well as myself, the boy’s brown eyes flicked to me, the brow furrowing, and then he continued speaking with Mulumba in what sounded perfect French. As for the girl—it’s hard to say ‘woman’ when she appears so fragile and childlike—she only sneaked a trace of a glance my way and then resumed hiding behind her husband. She wore cream pants and a filmy white shirt and looked delicate as a mouse-deer. A little later she brought out a jar in which she’d caught a pink and gold velvet butterfly, and when I expressed amazement at its beauty she finally allowed a small smile to trickle into the corners of her mouth. Her reticence made me want to hug her even as such a gesture would probably scare her to death. Indeed, taken together, the newcomers seem so very reserved that I doubt, for all our expedition’s leisure—three weeks to climb the mountain, take observations and return—that we’ll know anything about each other at all before the end. To an outsider we would look like separate species, each with our own colourings, our own vocal styles and gestures.

I’ll send you my own modest drawings of the Induction Centre, Bea, and in between noticing the differences between the human figures depicted, you can tell me how terrible they are as art.
When animals are domesticated they develop neoteny—the persistence of juvenile traits into adulthood. Compared to the people of these wilds, I feel like a child.

I’ve been talking to Fili—haltingly, obviously—about his life in the village. He tells me he has two sisters and three brothers, though two brothers went east in the war and didn’t return. They’re apparently not dead, but don’t want to leave their unit to come back to the village. His father went away to work in one of the larger southern towns and found another wife. Fili says his mother wants to go to the city and become a nurse. When I asked him if his mother would take all her children to the city with her he shook his head glumly and kicked at a root. The old saying that it takes a village to raise a child is perfectly apt.

I feel very naïve, very backward. Fili has seen more of life than I can possibly imagine. An average eighteen-year-old here has already borne two babies without medical support. Vaccinations have been scheduled, but those wanting their children immunised must take them all the way to the southern town, a trek of several weeks. Yet in general the people seem perfectly healthy and fit, and if Fili is representative, the children are dazzlingly smart. You can see his quickness at language and society as well as concepts.

It makes me wonder if we’ve poisoned ourself too much in the west; if our high levels of specialisation derive partially from brain effects too subtle and multigenerational to be examined seriously? I remember reading a recent bone protein study that said Neanderthals ate a lot of meat, but no fish or molluscs, whereas their competitors—our ancestors—ate a lot of seafood.
Neanderthals continued with unhafted axes but modern humans drew pictures and designed ornaments, all evidence of brains turned in upon themselves (excuse me for seeming to dismiss art). As health departments like to warn us now, fish is high in mercury, one of the most potent neurotoxins around. Perhaps as westerners we’ve so saturated ourselves with heavy metals—you know, of course, that those long-life light globes all our governments have mandated contain mercury—that we’ve gone past the point at which our brains can cope.

Enough of that; I’m a primatologist, not a biochemist! It’s not only Fili’s mind that shows evidence of an astonishing complexity. Social arrangements here are never simple. Earlier Mulumba tried to explain the local clanship system, but I’m afraid I couldn’t follow very well. I gather that indebtedness and obligation exist transgenerationally; one’s great grandfather’s marriage to a distant village girl may be reciprocated by the reverse arrangement so many years later that it’s a wonder it can be thought of at all. Trees and vines exist like a library, each plant serving as a pharmacopeia and/or historical document telling the story of a particular hunting expedition or recounting seasons and time. Fili began telling me the names of all his cousins, but I would need to be an anthropologist and linguist to make sense of the names and associations. It seems that marriage exists for many purposes aside from child raising—intergenerational clanship debt being a linchpin of customary trade—and Fili’s father’s decision to abscond has caused a great stir among his clan. But at least Fili can rely on the network to continue to raise him.

How strange I must seem to Fili, with my lack of connectedness (no, no children I told him, and no husband). Where did I live before this?—London, a place where you could shake hands with two hundred and fifty people a day for your whole life and still not meet the total population. Why didn’t I have children of my own?—ah, well.

I remember coming to this continent several years ago to help a senior primatologist observe subordinate-dominant chimp relations. Though much further south, the various enclosures had been artfully decorated to resemble
the wetter forests, with massive fibreglass tree trunks competing for beauty against lush greenery. The new zoo enclosures had been a last attempt to save the bonobo, a species of relatively arboreal chimp with matriarchal and sexually licentious habits. At any rate, a beautiful, very dark woman standing in the doorway of the zoo cafeteria pressed her hand to my stomach and rolled her gaze toward the ceiling fans, murmuring a few words in her own language. When I asked what she’d said, the zoo manager, a Dutch man who’d been showing us around the facility, immediately turned a brickish colour and stammered, ‘She says you must give birth soon!’

‘Oh,’ I said mildly, ‘but I’m not pregnant.’ I pressed down the pleats in my trousers to show that the bulge had only been air. Everyone in the cafeteria looked at me pityingly until I realised I’d been the one to make a mistake, not the woman. Of course she hadn’t thought me pregnant—nobody could believe my skinny frame capable of hiding something like that. She’d been urging me to have children before I grew too old.

I’d scarcely thought back to that moment until Fili asked why I didn’t have any children of my own. Immediately I realised I’d fulfilled the woman’s prophesy. My boyfriend at the time of the excursion, a sturdy mathematician called Rusty, had urged me to stay home from Africa, live with him in a sweaty flat not far from campus, and become the sorts of couple our parents had been—or at least, his parents (ours obviously wouldn’t fit the mould). I’d shrugged him off, thinking that I didn’t need to make such decisions at twenty-whatever-it-was. Yet each of my three boyfriends after that proved successively less interested in taking a permanent path, and for myself, while I’d always felt slightly deprived of maternal instinct (whatever that might be), I became somewhat interested in the idea. Donald, the one with whom I bought my first real estate (that tiny bed-sit above the main road), put me off the topic of children with the pronouncement that he ‘wasn’t ready to settle down’, a particularly Sydney moment given that we’d just signed a mortgage. (Five years, it turned out, is the limit, even for real estate.) Somehow I stopped bothering to think of myself as a potential parent after that; it just seemed I had
better things to do. Looking back, I can see that I’ve sunk more effort into writing each essay than learning how to avoid being forty-nine and solitary.

You, of course, had no intention of ending up that way. Remember the exhibition opening when you’d won the Premier’s prize? Your long gold hair restrained for the occasion, you wore absolutely the last thing anybody would have expected an artist to wear—electric blue sequinnes with a neckline scalloped down the back—and the photographers kept tripping over themselves to get a shot. I felt so full of pride at my sister’s accomplishments that I almost forgot to take in the art-work. Then I saw what had won the prize, and I admit, it was a shock.

Had you intended to paint me in such gharish colours or had you just felt like fauvism for a change? I remember a purple and yellow swirl with a bloody tinge at the edge. Even so, the colours meant little against the stark depiction of narrative: two odd-looking, asymmetrical girls glaring at one another in the shadow of a giant bearded man in a doorway. The man carried a weighty book and wore a brown corduroy coat such as our father used to wear. Our mother existed in the painting, if she existed at all, as a shadowy figure in one of the side panels, with three glasses of straw-coloured liquid resting on the dresser-top, complete with lipstick smudges. It was as much as picture of the decay of family as a ‘play on reflections’, as the prize-giver wanted to believe.

I remember loitering outside the gallery waiting for a cab to take us all back to our respective hotels. I’d felt awkward and prickly, knowing that our father hadn’t been invited and our mother hadn’t wanted to come—the legacy of a bad divorce, both parents not wanting to be there if the other might attend.

Suddenly I looked up and saw that Gerald had drifted away from us in his casual, sauntering way. You hadn’t noticed; you’d begun talking to the gallery owner, who had come out to say what a success the night had been. A lustrous, dark-skinned and very pretty woman in a black cocktail dress had stepped out of a sleek silver car. She didn’t chat to Gerald in the way that anyone I knew talked to a man; she draped herself over him, only peeling away when our cab arrived. Later, in the hotel bar, you shrugged and said, ‘She’s his
girlfriend.’ You can imagine how much that shocked me—prudish June the spinster. Back then, I’d rather idolised your relationship.

Now, of course, I know that monogamy isn’t even vaguely integral to our species—most of our closest relatives prefer polygamy or something even more licentious. Gibbons are monogamous, but they tend to live quite separately from others of their own species, so there’s little sexual competition. Even female gorillas consort with strangers out of sight of their silverback. As for the mystery ape, its behaviours are unknown. Will it engage in serial polyandry like chimps, connected fundamentally to its oestrus, or will it mate seasonally? Least likely is the prospect that it forms bonded pairs, that smallest and least efficient social unit. Yet we westerners do have these stories of coupledom, don’t we? Cinderella; Snow White; Sleeping Beauty—we love to believe the couple can take care of us, even when it’s patently wrong. Maybe the only truth is that we humans are good at learning behaviour even when it just doesn’t suit.

Now you’re a successful politician’s wife, and I’m Jane swinging through the academic forests without Tarzan—a wizened, placid sort of Jane with reading glasses and pale brown shoulder-length hair. Neither of us is particularly coupled-up, but given the state of the world, I’d say we’ve both been relatively successful.

As for bush meat, we’re only a famine away from cannibals.
I woke this morning with a rhinoceros beetle trundling up my bed and a sound of growling. At first, groggy with sleep, I presumed the beetle to be making the noise, but a moment later I located the source.

Scholl stood fuming in the middle of the room, cursing in German, only his lower half visible to me from my position in one of the bottom bunks. Fili must have already woken and gone out, leaving a rolled-up blanket neatly by the door. The others had slept in tents or out in the office.

‘What’s wrong?’ I asked.

Scholl fumed again and flashed an open palm at me. In his hand sat a small square box—a Global Positioning System. It turns out our position according to the GPS is about thirty-eight kilometres south of the position marked as the Induction Centre on our maps. Not only that, but if the GPS is right and the maps are wrong, a series of very steep gradients lie between ourselves and where we want to begin our final climb.

My colleague had calmed now to a rumbling seethe, and we moved out into the common room to see if either of the Centre workers could provide more information as to our precise whereabouts. I could see the pair exchanging cheeky grins over our befuddlement. Mulumba had gone for a wander up the mountain. The Japanese couple hadn’t emerged from their tent out under the trees. Sitting in a corner fiddling with his rifle—cleaning it, I imagine—Kefin laconically voiced the opinion that nobody has managed to map any of these peaks accurately yet, and so of course our maps must be wrong. At least, that was the approximate translation Fili whispered to me.
when I looked quizzically in his direction. He seems to prefer staying out of Kefin’s line of sight.

When Mulumba returned, the full story came out. ‘Yes of course,’ he said flatly when asked to judge. ‘All wrong, those maps. But you have plenty of help. Plenty of guides through this forest. We can make it to the top in two weeks, no problem.’

‘Two weeks?’ I gasped. ‘Mulumba, that will leave us no time to look for the apes, much less record the find!’

Our problem, of course, isn’t so much money or time as the onslaught of the wet season, which apparently always starts here early next month. The peak we need to climb will be treacherous enough without mud; unclimbable either up or down with it.

Scholl said ‘Argh’ again, threw up his hands and went out, slamming the heavy door. Meanwhile Fili got hold of the satellite gadget and walked from place to place inside the room and outside, checking to see what his motion did to the numerals. These things work by triangulation, using orbiting satellites to fix a person’s position to within a few metres. Whenever a figure ticked over he squealed in delight.

The primatologist came back, his forehead crinkled with irritation. He wouldn’t look Mulumba in the eyes, but dared to size up to the man, saying, ‘Why didn’t you point this out earlier?’

‘Helmut,’ I said quickly, ‘Mulumba barely looked at our maps, and we didn’t make a point of asking him to. Besides, I’m sure he knows the area well enough.’

Mulumba leaned against one of the built-in wall poles and eyed Scholl calmly. The air felt brittle and overstretched. I suspect now that what Scholl found most unbearable was being wrong. ‘Ja, well,’ he said, and, sniffing, wandered away.

After that, both Scholl and Mulumba avoided each other. Finally I took my own maps up to Mulumba and asked him politely if he would mind sketching our likely route; it seems better to appease Scholl by having
something map-like to go by, since he patently distrusts Mulumba now. Meanwhile, our affable host, Kefin, returned from speaking to Scholl to say that the primatologist (who had ensconced himself in the room with the door shut) had found moisture inside one of his camera lenses, and we would have to hold off beginning our trek until tomorrow. None of us, I think, felt surprised.

As often happens in the lead up to the wet season, the afternoon soon turned into a slough of heat. The canopy that had been cut back to allow building of the Induction Centre had regrown almost to the eaves, and yet that tiny inlet of light made the earth seem to melt as the day wore on.

When the maps had been redrawn, I put my work away and went to sit near Yumi, the Japanese girl. I soon found that the two words of Japanese I know (one being, I’m embarrassed to say, sayonara), brought a shy greeting in return, and we have been conversing in a kind of sign language. But a little while ago I felt her attention drifting in its perpetual search for Hiro. She seems very fixated on him—very in love, perhaps. Unpacked around the room, where she has brought them for cleaning, lies an enviable array of gadgets including tiny spy-glasses, insect capturing and holding devices (a little like the toy I remember as a child, called something like Ah-Gotcha, which had a sieved lid and a clear plastic viewing chamber), small mammal weighing machines, field traps, mosquito-proof head gear and so forth. The loving way she handled them reminded me of a mother with baby clothes, but I was surprised that two nature-walkers had brought so much equipment.

Early in the afternoon our mood lifted, albeit with a good deal of help from the two workers. Cheerful Kefin and slightly dour Joseph said they would drive us around the first foothill and partway up the mountain, knocking off the hardest slope in under a few hours. Apparently the remains of a little-known track have been giving them a good bit of illicit four-wheel driving fun. There would be, of course, insufficient seating in the jeep for all of us, but when this idea was put to the group, Hiro, the Japanese bridegroom, decided that he would walk while the rest of us went with the equipment by car. By the time
this had been sorted we all agreed (Scholl included) that we should leave at first light tomorrow.

With the expedition finally on its serious phase and with nothing to do for the rest of the afternoon, I took to studying the group and making small drawings in the margin of my notebook. Yumi showed me her sketches of giant snail shells—marvellous mahogany things the size of a fist—and a diagram of fungus the shape of a sea anemone, with a fleshy centre. She said she and Hiro had found a host of little-known insects as well as the snail shells and fungus. Her drawings reminded me of medical diagrams, finely sketched without evidence of stray lines or smudges, and with very delicate cross-hatching to give a sense of three dimensionality. I wish you could have seen them, Bea, though of course you’ve a preference for abstraction in art. She makes my crude sketchwork look like piles of sticks waiting to start a hearthfire; beside her, indeed, I felt quite Neanderthal.

The staff at the chimpanzee centre are two of the liveliest fellows I’ve ever met. They don’t sit still, even to converse. They whittle objects (Joseph carves intricate face-masks out of wood); they tie ropes; they work on the car by turns, bickering over parts; they receive calls by radio about orphan chimps, which for the most part they defer. Apparently many people call asking for a reward to incriminate a neighbour for keeping a captive ape, but when they hear that the Induction Centre refuses to pay for the chimps to be released, they ring off. It’s not their fault; neighbourly relations matter only slightly less than survival in the forest.

Herr Scholl, in his grimly upright way, has become more charming to me now that I can understand a little of his behaviour. Why is it so exquisite to see one’s own foibles writ larger in someone else? He remains short-tempered, indifferent, saturnine, almost autistically inclined to silent absorption in his own calculations, and besides all that he has been openly rude to the Japanese girl, snatching his equipment out of the way when her proximity appears to threaten some delicate piece of work; all this I put down to frustration at our delay. But his gruffness vanishes the moment he returns to absorption. To see
him stooped over his microscope examining monkey faeces is to see purest contentment; he is a person utterly formulated for the task at hand. Could a man like that ever be particularly attentive to another human? Oddly, the sight of his grey-white fluffy head bent over the eyepiece fills me with reassurance. Is it merely that I’m no longer the least sociable person in the room? Or is it that, in his own way, Scholl comes closest to an amenable childishness when he is absorbed in something?

Perhaps, in his own way, he’s been warming to me too. ‘Here,’ he said just after lunch, and handed me a fax he must have been keeping under wraps. So I’ve now earned a place beside him, more intrepid and academic than our ‘naturist’ friends. I feel almost chuffed.

The fax remains the fullest account of the supposed apes I’ve read so far. His sources are a journalist who interviewed the aid worker; and two missionaries who talked in detail of a freshly killed ape they saw attached to a pole, saying that it had grey fur, a pale, smooth face with a prominent nose, and low-set ears. The description had been transcribed by way of a drawing, which I’m afraid I’m a little inclined to distrust for resembling Piltdown Man. However the details sound quite reliable. Here’s my own summary, for posterity:

No tail tuft, and relatively inconspicuous genitals.

Long, slender fingers more resembling human hands (I know that one).

Lock-out knees: that is, a wide-footed posture with the legs firmly straight (though I wonder how they know this).

Kidnapper of babies (perhaps only myth—one elderly man’s grandmother had passed the knowledge on to him).

Reputed to live high on the volcano wall, which is fortunately where I always intended to search.

Most surprisingly, reputed to catch fish, which is unusual among primates (though it has been observed, for instance among lowland gorillas), and to use simple tools in secondary and tertiary fashion—that is, they build tools that are used for the making of other tools.
Now for the absolutely stunning detail: where they live. According to the account by one of the missionaries, these strange apes actually go ‘inside’ (or ‘underground’: the translation seems unclear). You may not know this, Bea, but Chimpanzees were called troglodytes because of the mistaken impression that they lived in caves. While some savannah chimps have been known to use caves as shelters, the journalist in this report extends the idea to include the notion of a kind of architecture, as though the chimps not only dwell underground but actually do the digging and fashioning.

True or make-believe, it seems a juicy sort of detail. Ordinary chimpanzees and now-extinct bonobos used to make night-nests out of leaves and branches, but these nests were only used a few times and then fell apart. Could a form of cave or underground dwelling explain why our mystery apes have stayed out of sight of humans for so many years?

At about two o’clock we all suddenly stopped our various pursuits to listen. Unmistakably we heard the screams of chimpanzees from somewhere nearby. Talk ensued of all of us kitting up and heading into the jungle to try to catch a glimpse (unlike Scholl, I’ve only once seen wild chimpanzees), but it was thwarted by a sudden downpour that lasted until half an hour ago, whereupon all noises seemed to have ceased.

It’s now too late to venture outside, and at present (while I write this), the young woman Yumi is perched on a crate against the furthest windows of the centre making something like a daisy chain out of native orchids; remembering our father’s wrath whenever his muse was interrupted, I’m half dreading the moment when she, having reached the interlocking point, tiptoes across to Hiro to lay it over his neck. For his part, her husband looks absorbed in technical manuals, his black bob hanging over his face, and it seems possible from his remote behaviour that they’ve had a small dispute.

What would a chimpanzee of the wild think of us, sitting in this tidy mud-floored tourist centre, communicating via books or not at all, unable in our human backwardness to reach across the gaps? I really know nothing of
Mulumba, or Joseph, or Kefin, or Yumi or Hiro; I know nothing at all, either, about Herr Scholl. I feel like an eyeball out of its socket, blind as a tumour.

I wish we’d both grown up among happy people. Don’t you, Bea? I can’t help thinking we might have both succeeded in our relationships—though perhaps you have. Then again, maybe unhappiness has a way of getting into the blood where contentment doesn’t.

Remember the story of the zoo chimpanzee in Chicago? In the tameness of her pen she became a matriarch; she organised a coalition of females who, between them, kept the boys behaving unaggressively. In the wild, of course—well, any primatologist will tell you how unpretty it is. Male chimpanzees rule; the alpha is always some moody, bellicose brat who seems, in my view, little better than an adolescent human in terms of his reliability and peacefulness. The boy chimps align pretty early with the other males; they go on raiding parties into other chimp territories; they murder and maim. Female chimpanzees, ever alert to status and hierarchy, sometimes kill the newborns of other females, or for no apparent reason turn on one another and their infants. There is always some slummish drama going on in chimpanzee life. But in that zoo, for that short time, peace ruled. In a way, it could be said that something in zoo life—probably the protection from aggressors from outside—favoured female bonding; and that particular chimpanzee, a mother, took her position seriously.

But do you know what those zookeepers did? They saw a female chimpanzee being alpha chimp as ‘unnatural’; this from people who keep tigers behind concrete walls. They brought in two new males who were aggressive enough to reassert control. They engineered the ‘natural’ domination of bonded males.

That poor old girl, that ex-matriarch, spent her remaining years apparently depressed—well, who wouldn’t?

And oh—it’s done. The dreaded garland of tiny blue blooms has been placed about Hiro’s neck; the sullied man is fending his wife off with jerky waves of irritated hands. You can just feel the masculine amusement echoing
forth from these drab walls; the sense that, there but for the grace of longstanding execution, goes the entire pact.

But it’s all right. Yumi, blushing bright red and suffering, has removed her flowers and has repaired to the far room; Hiro is frowning into his technical manual; Kefin, Joseph and Mulumba, who have been playing cards, are backslapping one another loudly at who owes the most. Fili has gone to hide in the bunkroom, assumedly from all of us.

How many tribes are represented here? The wonder of it is, I suppose, that we’re not all at war. But maybe we will be before the month is out.
I’ve been studying Scholl’s copies of the ape hand photographs. The thumb is likely to be almost fully opposable; the carpals seem only slightly longer than their human counterparts, in relation to the thumb. Chimpanzees have extremely long knuckles, but these are somewhat shorter. The wrist (the hands are severed about a third of the way, in human terms, up the forearm) looks slender and gracile, more like a duchess than a troglodyte, though it’s certainly hairier than the most hirsute man. The fingernails are squarer than chimp fingernails, which can be slightly claw-like.

Once again we failed to begin our trek, though we meant to set out at first light. The jeep packed it in at about six in the morning, when Joseph was backing it up to turn around. There’s no proper road anywhere here, just roughly-razed earth that the jeep tyres have been chewing into a reddish mire, and when he backed slightly too far into the undergrowth he hit a ball of tree-root and knocked out a key component. Scholl is no mechanic, and neither am I, but Joseph and Kefin found appropriate spare parts in the store room, and at least they look convincingly competent whenever they get under the car.

Meanwhile, our language and culture difficulties have all sunk out of sight behind differences in temperament. Earlier, while I sketched a curious sort of dragonfly I’d found—already dead—near the toilet pit, Yumi brought out her own sketchbook and tried to engage Hiro in a conversation, pointing to parts of her pictures and achieving the delight of seeing him, in his beautiful curtain of solid black hair, smile tolerantly. But a moment later he got up and left her still sitting there with her drawings, leaving her mouth agape, while he amused himself helping the workers dismantle the car. I can only wonder what
she’s done to offend him! To soften the moment I showed her my worst
drawing (which was of a colobus skull) and, with a rueful sort of glance at
Yumi, let it be known that I would appreciate any help correcting the detail.
However she only blinked a little and moved away.

When the air had grown too stifling inside, I took my pencil and
notebook and went for a nature walk with Fili, cautious not to go too far. While
a slope generally makes it easier not to get lost (two directions, at least, are
obvious), the ground here tends to fold into confusing ridgelines, some running
perpendicular to the main hills. In his beautiful pantomime with the odd word
thrown in, Fili let me know that we’d never get lost here because Mulumba
would track us down. I explained to Fili that I’d been known to get lost between
a railway station turnstile and the platforms—true. He understood ‘railway’
and even ‘platform’ (once I’d made a platform with one hand and a noisy train
siding into it with the other), but ‘turnstile’ left us both stymied until I mimed a
security guard with a cap inspecting a ticket, at which he fell about with
laughter, probably at my facial expression rather than the concept. After that he
scampered about the undergrowth, panting with eagerness to find some new
and dazzling specimen for what I had called ‘our nature table’ back at the
building, but no longer urging me to ‘go far’.

All the rain-soaked hillsides crawled with vine thickets and mossy fallen
trunks as well as the usual buttressed trees. Keeping the clearing to our right,
we moved downhill, following a very fragile-looking trail. I had to give up
scanning the canopy for primates in order to keep looking at my feet; instead I
found myself struggling to avoid damp places where leeches clustered, and
continually stepping across logs and fallen branches.

Surprisingly, the ridgelines south of the Induction Centre proved to
contain fewer large trees than elsewhere, and a lot denser undergrowth.
Rainforest canopies generally shroud the ground, allowing few plants to
erminate. Above us, vast slabs of sky peered down, brooding with afternoon
clouds. Only when I’d passed my seventh massive fallen tree did I realise that,
perhaps due to undersoil slippage on the steep hillsides, or maybe because of
increasingly violent storms, the rainforest itself has begun to alter its composition. The ridgelines, being more exposed, are collapsing first. Every now and then Fili whooped and leaped up onto the back of a fallen log that lay moss-covered and dinosaurian among the weeds. At times we found entire stands of trees that had all fallen together, one upon the other like dominoes. In this area the herbs and young tree saplings had formed stands as dense as bamboo.

We’d almost returned to the Induction Centre when we heard a chittering from above. Fili seemed inclined to ignore it, but I glanced up and caught the familiar darting figures of colobus—familiar, at least, from my time in zoos—jumping between slender branches. Their speedy movement looked forced, though I saw no sign of predators.

‘Shh, Fili,’ I whispered, ‘there might be chimps.’

He shrugged and followed me into the clearing where Joseph stood wiping his hands. Kefin’s lower body, his feet bare, stuck out from beneath the chassis of the jeep. Joseph gave us an odd glance, but they soon followed us into the Induction Centre, moving quietly and keeping near the eaves.

The prospect of seeing some form of primate, if not necessarily chimpanzees, seemed to infect everyone. Even Mulumba took up a position near the doorway to scan the clearing outside. Joseph and Kefin, who must see primates every day, made a good show of not looking bored. The rest of us clustered at the windows, all being masterfully silent, hardly even daring to breathe.

Our silence and caution soon brought results. A minute or two later, a troop of colobus came into view in the branches above the clearing, swinging between fragile branchlets and making tiny squeals of dismay. A female with a tiny infant swung down low enough for Hiro to take a long-lens photograph. Yumi clapped softly, her eyes dappled with joy.

The reason for their chatter and alarm soon became apparent when motion stirred a fringe of leaflets at ground level, and a large male chimpanzee appeared, his shoulders bunched, his eyes transfixed on the canopy. He paused
to consider the building barely twenty paces ahead, then silently and swiftly retreated.

We waited, breaths held. A moment later, a solid form came into view in a cluster of branches high above Kefin’s jeep. It moved with extreme caution, then settled into a crouch between the Y arms of the tree’s main trunk, where I realised it sat waiting to ambush.

The colobus continued to chitter and, perhaps recognising that they’d been surrounded, made feinting dances up and down their tree to try to escape via a less obvious route. We could see little among the darkness of forest at ground level, but it appeared that chimpanzees had spread themselves both below the colobus and up in the canopy around them. Finally two more large, dark blobs appeared in the colobus’ tree, and at once the exodus became a panicked rush.

Tiny monkey forms sprang out of their branchlets and scrabbled for limbs further out or lower down. A few reached the outer upper edges of the clearing overhang and, realising that no escape lay there, nevertheless scrambled to the very ends of hand-holds and clung there, screaming. Chimpanzees shook entire branches, stirring the monkeys into heights of panic. Discarded branches fell heavily on the ground and on the Induction Centre roof, the brief clang only halting proceedings momentarily.

We’d all been too intent on the clearing to look at one another, but when I glanced about me I saw that Hiro had moved to the doorway, where he stood fiddling with a video camera and gradually inching further out. Despite my desperate hand signals, he pointed the camera upward and began to walk slowly out of the doorframe, moving almost dreamily, not watching his feet. He’d almost reached the far side of the clearing—the apes too engrossed in the zenith of their escapade to notice him—before his next step cracked a twig.

All at once the chimps and monkeys in the trees above stilled. The air seemed to solidify. A twig or perhaps a piece of fruit dropped from a tree near Hiro’s tent as a chimp rustled the branches. Then, in two separate but interwoven masses like combs through hair, both groups of primates sped
away through the trees. The jungle resounded with distant crashing and screeching for some time afterward.

Hiro looked about him with the slightly sleepy unawareness of a newborn just waking up. Then he turned and saw us all gaping, Scholl’s cheeks puce with irritation, and his own face coloured deeply. Even Yumi seemed unwilling to rescue her man. He made a small show of fidgeting with his camera, scowled, dropped his lens cap and all at once stormed across the clearing toward his tent.

A huffing sound made us spin, and we found Mulumba sitting on a fold-out chair with his feet up on a crate, eating nuts and rumbling with laughter. For a moment I thought Scholl might explode. But then Mulumba pointed out through the doorway.

Our heads swivelled, and for the first time Scholl gave a snigger and then, leaning forward, a hoot of triumph. Yumi squealed in wifely dismay and put her hands to her slender cheeks.

Hiro crouched in the flap of his tent, furiously dusting something from his hair and off his camera. Clods of dark matter tumbled down.

Scholl wiped his eyes, clapping his knees and shaking with laughter.

‘What is it?’ Yumi faltered.

‘It’s chimpanzee faeces,’ I explained. ‘Poo.’

‘Oh!’ I must have exhausted her English, because she murmured a few words in Japanese and put her face in her hands, but the corners of her own mouth seemed half inclined to crinkle. A little later we heard Hiro sluicing himself around the back of the Centre, where a small rainwater tank collects roof runoff, his cursing obvious despite the language barrier.

This moment altered what had seemed about to become a fairly uncomfortable set of interactions. Whereas we’d tended to eat separately (me eating rehydrated noodles; the Japanese couple miso and rice; Scholl cured meat and freeze-dried cabbage rolls; the three locals a ration from supplies), Kefin suggested we share food, and in the end we had something of a feast. Hiro red-facedly turned up halfway through and sat next to Yumi, his eyes
downcast. The tables seemed to have turned, because when she dared to pop a few morsels of Joseph’s unleavened bread between his lips, he accepted them. When he finally dared to look up, he realised we all watched him. I thought for a moment he would speak sharply and scurry away, but he only stood stiffly, bowed deeply and said, ‘Very sorry,’ then sat down cross-legged again.

Smiling, I passed Yumi some of Scholl’s cabbage rolls, and she delicately took them to share with Hiro. After she’d bitten a few millimetres off one, chewed and nodded, she looked at me and smiled.

‘Good heavens—I can’t cook for peanuts!’ I gestured to my colleague, who sat hunched to himself, his own wiry legs crossed and his socks pulled up to his knees. ‘Scholl made these, I think.’

Hiro raised a cabbage roll and smiled beneath his lank hair. ‘Thank you, Mister Scholl,’ he said.

The German primatologist might have intended being hostile forever, but next instant he got up and shook hands with the surprised Hiro, and the matter seemed closed.

After the meal Yumi brought Mulumba a tiny blue garland like the one she’d made for Hiro, and he couldn’t stop chortling in his rumbling, heavy-chested way. The two Induction Centre staffers whooped in delight at seeing their heavy-set compatriot in a garland. They soon fetched some kind of local wine they kept in a stash in the laboratory; and when the men had drunk a little of it, a good deal of merriment ensued, particularly when Helmut Scholl (who had first declined) swigged some and almost immediately turned bright red until he’d managed to cough it down.

I sat back; I’m no drinker as you know. Soon Hiro, making a gestural announcement of it, brought out a bottle of saké he’d kept at the bottom of his toyshop backpack (Yumi’s even had cartoon cats all over it); Scholl went rummaging in his tent and brought in a harmonica; I brought out... well, I brought out an intense desire to learn everything about Fili’s home life, his mother, his sisters—to which questions his answers had somehow become shy and reticent. As usual I’d begun mistaking the situation—in fact he just wanted
to be one of the boys. The men soon grew rambunctious and loud, and this quelled my conversational preferences quickly, since the noise in those close quarters felt like being shut up with drums. So much for our chances at seeing more chimpanzees on the hunt—but still, it was better than frowns and feuds.

Before they’d finished carousing I went to bed in the rear room, closing the door as delicately as I could. Yumi remained, so far as I saw her, poised like a living statue at the edge of the circle while the boys (including by way, I suppose, of initiation, Fili) drank their spirits and generally grew louder and louder. Fili had been hanging back until Joseph, the less cheerful of the two Centre workers, had suddenly patted him on the back and gravely said a few words in their common language that I presume meant welcome. Their tribal suspicions put aside, the boy had now become almost relaxed.

As the night wore on, the noise and heat—the afternoon’s shallow rainstorm had been held at bay for a change—made me wish I’d stayed out in the main room, which at least had large windows. The bottom of my sleeping sack (a precaution against mosquitoes) felt clammy and uncomfortable, and in the end I shrugged myself out of the thing altogether and lay on the naked bunk, stifling and irritable, dressed in no more than cotton underpants and a t-shirt.

Then the door swung open and a figure shuffled in, clearing his throat and swaying as all drunks do. I half stifled a giggle as he eased one boot off, then the other. A moment later, groaning, he sat down on my bunk, and I barely had time to move out of the way before he suddenly lay down almost on top of me.

For a few seconds I wondered what to do. Ridiculously, it seemed too late to actually open my mouth and say something, as well as embarrassing for both of us. But I could barely breathe—the bunks aren’t very wide—and besides, it must be far more ridiculous to stay quiet.

At last sensibility took hold, and I tapped his shoulder.

Then Scholl (for it was he) hiccuped violently and shook himself, either mocking me or perhaps (more likely) shaking off a little of the alcohol. I heard
the faint sound of his throat clearing; and then, out of the side of his silhouette, so gutteral as to make the atoms split, ‘Tut mir leit,’ as he got up and slithered away.

I racked my brains to remember my schoolgirl German; but it wasn’t until he had clambered across to his own bunk and fallen upon it to begin snoring that I remembered; and then—I’m sorry!—I could barely stifle my giggles.

Good heavens. For a moment there, after he’d doffed his boots and laid down, I’d thought he wanted me.
A breakthrough—an oasis of sunshine between the leaves.

We’re climbing the back of a verdant ridge, miles from earth.

I feel like an alien on Pluto.

I’m sitting in the back of the jeep (a vehicle without a back seat, so I’m sitting on boxes), slightly behind Yumi and Scholl. Hiro and Mulumba set off much earlier on some sort of post-hangover feat to meet us at the top of the tracked rise. Apparently the trail goes almost vertical, but they can manage it quickly without equipment. Fili sits to my left, half-propped on one of the tyre rims.

Joseph stayed at the Centre, and Kefin will apparently turn back as soon as we’re high enough, having done his part for our expedition. Scholl is sitting, perfectly indifferently, next to me, no sign by gesture or word of what happened last night. Nevertheless I’m sure he must remember, and except that it might mortify him to bring it up, I’d prefer to say something to restore our general ease. Unfortunately he’s clammed up like a fridge.

The air is slightly cooler up this high, though we’re barely a hundred metres above the Induction Centre. A good deal of lateral driving has taken us around the mountain several kilometres. But for the last eight or ten kilometres the road, if a strip of squashed vegetation, oily and ribbonish under tyres, can be called a road, has wound on near-vertical hairpins more or less straight up. I’m constantly terrified that the top-heavy car could flip over backwards and pancake us; but there’s a roll bar, albeit rusty, which at least might make death slightly quicker by squeezing our heads clean off. Otherwise, I suppose I’m fairly relaxed, given that I’m sitting on top of boxes.
Scholl, sitting to my right viciously biting his lower lip, has been avoiding my gaze all morning; and I had half an impulse a moment ago to just gently lay my hand on his knee and give it a little squeeze. It’s almost impossible to believe that a man who sits upright as a churchman and has such bushy brows could have lain beside lanky old June Lesky, even by mistake! But our Dad (according to our mother, who told me) once came home with somebody else’s car, having performed the unconscious miracle of starting it with the family Mazda’s keys.

The jungle is turning quiet as we rumble through it. Scholl has an eye for butterflies, like Yumi. The serene creatures are like unfolding scarves, tie-dyed and rainbowed, flitting through the tree boles. As for me, I’m on the lookout for yesterday’s chimps, but they’re clearly laying low as we grind noisily through, which is slightly disappointing.

We keep changing gear jerkily, grinding, gnashing—we’re a dragon on the move, clunky and inept. Every now and then we lurch as the hairpin bends the other way and the rear right wheel spins out gobbets of ochre mud. All the tree trunks beside our mired route have turned russet-brown. Sometimes our wheels go round and round on the spot, gouging deeper; then we all jump out (myself more nimbly than I could ever have imagined) and push.

Every word I write comes with a judder. Even now—we’re stopping to take in a view, perhaps; or else Herr Scholl wants to get something out of his pack, and, naturally enough, it’s at the very bottom—the way forward seems impassable; the way back just a matter of putting the clutch in and falling away. Is it possible to truly fall ‘off’ a mountain?

Just now I looked backward and had the fright of my life. The swath of cut forest, still sappy-smelling, drops away to clear nothing; to either side rise thick and high green margins, but when you look down through the cleared patches you see what looks more like a cliff’s edge than a navigable climb. Somehow Hiro and Mulumba are coming up through that! Right at the bottom, before the land evens out to closed forest, undulating and creased, I can see the rooftop of the Induction Centre, partly screened by the enveloping canopy. It
looks the size of a very small woodshed. A puff of blue smoke and a choppy sort of hum tells us the generator is going again.

Up here the air isn’t quite thin, but there’s certainly a greater freshness. I can smell, as well as see, further than I’ve ever seen before. The others are jumping off the jeep, seemingly without regard for their footing; but, having shifted sufficiently for Scholl to be able to budge his pack (he was after his water bottle), I’m less inclined to try the ground. We’re perched precariously on an earthen outcrop; and when I craned behind the vehicle to see what the churned road soil looked like, Kefin had just started wedging in a chock.

Aha. We’ve come as far as we’re able. Yumi, smiling because Hiro has just emerged into view at the bottom of a short descent between the trees, is preparing to fling her arms about him; Fili is carving designs into the clay with a stick; Scholl, coughing up something, has gone to screen himself from us by a fringe of bushes. We’re barely six kilometres in a straight line from the hut, but perhaps forty counting bends in the road; and it’s already half-past twelve.

From here on, we’ll be relying not on mechanical transport or even Scholl’s GPS (which has begun to falter as we hug the mountain) but our guide, Mulumba, and our feet.

As for the apes, they could be anywhere from here on. It makes me feel prickly with expectation even as, in all likelihood, our very appearance will push them into hiding.
I remember waking as a child and seeing stars in the pallor of pre-dawn against my windowpane, and feeling a marvellous sense of promise in everything. I might have been the only person alive or sentient; and yet all around the globe, other people were walking or reading or gathering hay or putting lights out to go to bed. The world felt profoundly mysterious, but it was a mystery merely awaiting the brilliance required to understand it, every last fact.

Yet the process of growing old seems to be about forgetting ego, forgetting the idea of a knowing mind, and accepting that the only knowledge one can really learn is one’s own limits. I’ve now discovered, for instance, the importance of good knees. (Strong knees don’t run in our family, alas—remember Uncle Adrian with his bandages?) Fortunately we’ve been climbing more gradually again, since the mountain just keeps sending us round and around rather than straight up, and the sides are scalloped with enormous hillocks and furrows. To make things slightly harder, for much of the time we’ve been cutting our own paths because whatever tracks once existed here have become thoroughly overgrown. Some of the herbaceous plants contain nasty stinging hairs that burn for hours.

From our promising start when we left the Induction Centre, I’m afraid we’ve stumbled back into recrimination. When we crossed the first ridgeline, we found that a landslip had taken out a large section of climbable hillside, turning it into an orange clay quagmire and forcing us to detour and lose a lot of height. As we floundered downhill on a carpet of slippery moss, Scholl kept calling skidding halts to quibble with Mulumba over the chosen path, and in the end they shouted at one another. All the previous night’s amity had been
forgotten. When I suggested we go between the two ridges instead of around both, Mulumba clapped me on the shoulder so hard I felt my bones jar. For a long time after that, the two maintained a firm distance, with Scholl staying just a few paces ahead of me and Mulumba heaving his way through vine thickets at the front, sometimes alternating this chore with Hiro.

When we’d finally passed below the land slip and climbed back to our starting height at the top of the main foothill, Hiro looked completely blown, though he refused to rest or indicate that he wished to. Yumi tried to give him some of her water, which had kept cooler, but he shook his head. Day had already begun to bleed out into the crevices of forest night; howler monkeys sounded off across the gorge. We camped just over the first peak, where the ground continued level for some metres before rising again.

Morning came with the sounds of warblers and doves trilling and cooing through the treetops, and we packed up quickly, ate our separate breakfasts and got moving. The forest had thickened as the slope levelled slightly, and we found ourselves moving upward along a thin stream that trickled out through rocky crevices in the hillside. Each of us stooped in passing to peer into the water, whether to see what had become of ourselves in all this wilderness, or to catch reflections between the leaves of an otherworldly sky—or maybe, as Hiro preferred, to check for life-forms inside the drink. Already he’s amassed several dozen tiny phials in which some or other minuscule creature curls up in preserving liquid, dead to all but science. He passed them to Yumi, and she very obediently put them away in her pack (his own being already stuffed full). Scholl kept clicking his tongue at these tiny delays, and quickened his pace until it seemed all poor Yumi could do to pocket her specimen, zip up the various compartments in her toy backpack, fiddle with her shoes and rejoin the trek behind me. At those times, Hiro looked particularly vexed, shrugging her off to take the lead with Mulumba.

I seemed to be the only one noticing the interaction between the newlyweds. In the beginning it appeared that Hiro must want to be first to see the supposed apes (I’d have to talk to Scholl about that); then I realised he and
Yumi had definitely had a falling out. Mulumba and Kefin remained a long way ahead, only the chucka-chuck of their machetes sounding through the forest as they struck away the vines and branchlets of trees, and Scholl usually strode quite a distance in front of me. Every time the Japanese man paused to gather specimens, he muttered under his breath if Yumi didn’t seem ready at once to take the phial. In all honesty she did have trouble keeping up, but perhaps if Scholl or Mulumba had only eased our pace she might have found it bearable. At one point I stopped to pick off a leech, and deliberately delayed setting off again to wait for her. Yumi immediately put on a brightly serene face, but as she drew closer I could see she’d been crying.

Admittedly, we had to negotiate a particularly hard stretch of forest. The vines weren’t innocent creepers and twiners but vast woody lianes, some peppered with furious spikes. When touched they pierced like hot needles and wouldn’t come out without tweezers (consequently we were all busily picking at ourselves at the end of each day, for they got through all layers of clothing). The low-lying broad-leafed herbs were not to be brushed against for similar reasons, namely stinging hairs that tingled for up to eight hours after a casual brush. All of us had masses of leech bites up and down our limbs.

Then Yumi tried to cross a rocky gulch containing a rivulet. She slipped, fell back, and cried out, perhaps twisting her ankle in the process, and landing awkwardly between two rocks. Hiro, eyeing her in a cold and lizardy sort of way, forged his way downhill and instead of helping her up began to lecture her in a nasty, low voice. I felt a little the way I feel whenever I’ve been in a shopping centre and come upon a parent acting viciously toward a kid. In the end, Mulumba, making a joke of it, soldiered past Hiro, picked Yumi up and set her down safely on a flat portion of the track, where she remained for a few minutes rubbing her foot. Hiro merely turned back to his specimens, his lank hair swishing across his face like a curtain closing. When she’d gotten up again, the first steps Yumi took resembled a hobble, though each time I turned to check on her over the next few hours she appeared to be walking naturally. I think she knew I watched her and wanted to appear well.
After a series of peat flats between ridge folds and the mountain proper, we hit another obstacle in the form of a rock fall that had left an unstable area of steep ground. Mulumba had stopped to wipe sweat off his face, and sat heaving on a fallen grey log, his machete hanging. Hiro crouched beside him, hands on his knees, panting.

‘What now?’ said Scholl abruptly.

Mulumba gave the man a cool, slightly quizzical glance with his deep, jet eyes. Then he wiped his upper lip and said, ‘We camp.’

Scholl’s face darkened. In German and then in French he barked the time—four thirty, I understood—but Mulumba only shook his head. At that moment Yumi laboured into view, her face grey with pain. Fili led her by the hand and seemed all solicitude and good natured urging, but the girl could barely walk.

‘We camp,’ said Mulumba in satisfaction.

From there we descended a short way, avoiding the rocks, to where a peat swamp had partially filled a natural basin. Here the ground spread out horizontally for a few dozen metres, softly springy underfoot, like foam rubber. A few fallen logs stretched across the basin but the area remained naturally open to sky and had been heavily vegetated by broad-leafed herbs and reeds. Late afternoon sun slanted through the surrounding canopy, burnishing the rushes.

By the time we’d set up our straggle of tents the mosquitoes arrived, though in fewer numbers than we’d experienced earlier. Frogs clicked and croaked among the reeds, perhaps their tadpoles keeping mosquito numbers down. How lovely to find a place that still has frogs in it; they’ve been decimated in most continents. Only when we’d set up our camp did attention turn to Yumi.

She sat by herself on a rug, her head pressed forward onto her knees.

‘Are you all right, Yumi?’ I asked quietly. Hiro had taken himself to the far side of the swamp to gather specimens. The girl only gazed at me expressionlessly. I showed her my roll of bandage and little zip-pack of various
ointments. She carefully undid her shoe and prised it off her foot, then touched my arm.

The back of her heel had been rubbed raw and bleeding by the shoe, but by the look of it the blister had formed and burst some days ago. Around the edges the skin looked hot and inflamed, with bright red streaks of infection flaring outward. The fall earlier hadn’t caused this; I’d say she lost her footing because of the pain.

But when I stood up to call Hiro over, she gripped my arm more firmly and shook her head.

‘You don’t want to tell him?’

A pink flush spread across her cheeks.

‘Oh, Yumi,’ I said, ‘this is very dangerous. You must tell him to take you home—the heat here would suppurate anything.’

She shook her head again, this time furiously. In the end I made do with an application of ointment, but I knew it wouldn’t be particularly effective. The infection had already spread past the margins of the blister. In a short time it might well become systemic.

Just on sunset, I found Scholl jotting in one of his journals, sitting beside his tent. As I walked up he clipped it shut and put it away.

‘Ja?’ he said, then waved at me to sit down on his miniature cool-box.

I perched on the lid, grateful to be a few inches higher than the ground-leeches. ‘It’s about Yumi,’ I said. ‘She’s got a blister that’s begun to fester. I think it looks serious.’

He glared at me, his eyebrows taut across his nose. ‘So?’ he said.

‘The only antibiotics I have are for stomach ailments.’

His voice became even gruffer than usual. ‘It is her fault,’ he muttered, jerking his chin. ‘She is not prepared.’ Absently he fidgeted with a small steel billycan sitting on his single-burner. He lifted the lid with a fork, stirred the liquid and put the lid back on. Then he got up and slipped into his tent, so that for a moment I had the confusing notion that he intended to leave me here to mind his cooking. Should I stir it again, or just keep a watch? A few awkward
minutes later, Scholl came out, bringing a small plastic box. Inside, when he opened it, sat an array of syringes.

‘Antibiotic,’ he said indifferently. Then he clapped the case shut and handed it to me. ‘The Japanese must stay here. They cannot come.’

I sighed. ‘You’re right, Helmut. She can’t walk, and we can’t delay our expedition.’

Scholl gave me a bristly, uncertain look. For a moment he seemed unable to trust that I’d actually agreed. Then the gruffness departed and he said, very quietly, ‘You’ll forgive me, of course—it won’t happen again.’

‘Excuse me?’

‘An unfortunate mistake. The night in the quarters.’ His hand made a revolving motion. ‘Unfamiliar alcohol. Impairs the judgement.’

‘Oh, yes,’ I said, ‘yes, it will do that.’ Then I hurried away toward where I’d left Yumi, struggling to repress a smile.

Yumi sat looking balefully across the dimming pocket of swamp, huddled into herself like a forgotten child. But as I approached with the antibiotics Hiro poked his head out of the tent. He saw me, waved uncertainly and tucked himself back in.

‘Here, Yumi,’ I whispered, handing her the case.

She nodded shyly and poked it under the corner of her blanket, before looking pleadingly at me. ‘Say nothing, please,’ she said.

‘But Yumi—’

‘Say nothing.’

What could I do? I left her just as Hiro came out carrying their meal elements and tiny stove, looking at me suspiciously under his swinging locks.

I went back to my tent and organised a small meal—crackers and dried meat with tomato chips. Next time I glanced outside, Yumi and Hiro sat with their heads together in an attitude of either contented intimacy or sorrow, but they looked peaceful enough. I can only hope that by morning both will have decided it’s time to retreat, and call in their own helpers (they must surely have some kind of holiday insurance).
Now for the funniest moment of all, since it concerns Scholl again. At about six forty-five I’d crawled into my tent and prepared to lie down. Over the top of distant night bird calls I could hear Fili chattering over in the corner of the camp, and Mulumba’s deep rumble as he laughed. Somewhere, a fire crackled.

As I turned over, something cool and squishy made me check under my arm, where I found a leech the size of a fat Brazil nut. With an involuntary horror—I’m quite used to leeches in the field, but not actually in my sleeping bag!—I seized the horrid squishy thing, pulled it off my skin, opened the flap and threw it out. All at once came an unmistakeable, gutteral ‘Och!’

How could I have known Scholl would choose that moment to walk past? Since then I’ve been rocking on my sleeping bag, my hands crammed into my mouth to keep from laughing. But there’s something so comical about the sight of an up-tight primatologist wiping leech-blood off his cheek that I don’t think I’ll stifle the laughter for very long.
Another stultifying day. Morning found us patching our various aches and wringing out socks, all except Yumi. She sat by herself, folded in a gauzelike sheet, and in the early heat of daylight her teeth had begun chattering. Seeing no sign of Hiro, I went and sat next to her and asked if she’d tried any of the penicillin.

She hadn’t. After administering a shot, I left her and went to find Scholl.

The peat smelled tangy. A light mist filtered down the shoulder of the mountain and curled among the reeds. Scholl sat finishing a bowl of muesli, his tent already packed away. He looked slightly to the left of me, perhaps appalled by my insistence on embarrassing him.

‘Helmut,’ I said, ‘have you seen Hiro anywhere? I want to make sure he knows—’

At that moment, Hiro came into the clearing with his machete at his side and looked brazenly at everyone. He said, in English, ‘It is all decided. Yumi wishes that I continue with the expedition. She will stay here.’

For somebody on a tourist jaunt, I thought his word use odd. It seemed to indicate a seriousness he oughtn’t be in a position to feel—almost an ownership. Quite suddenly, in a way I haven’t with Scholl, I found myself understanding the word ‘territory’.

‘She can’t be left alone,’ I started to explain.

‘I must stay,’ Yumi said, shaking her head. ‘Hiro must go.’ Her voice sounded pleading through the chattering of her jaw. The others looked at one another and then away.

‘She has sufficient antibiotics,’ Scholl said, when I glared at him.
'But what if they’re not effective?' Being flustered always makes my chin quiver. Several sets of male feet shuffled. ‘Yumi,’ I said, ‘you must let somebody stay here to make sure you’re all right. Somebody has to help you off the mountain if your foot gets worse.’

She didn’t answer. Hiro leaned on his machete and said, ‘See? I go; she stays.’

I tried to keep my tone mild. ‘Your wife might need to go to hospital, Hiro.’

My tone seemed to unsettle the men. Mulumba began whumping the ground with a bamboo staff, and Kefin looked away. But suddenly Yumi, shielding her face, said something that made Scholl look at her sharply.

‘What, Yumi?’ I asked.

Face burning, Hiro translated. ‘She is not my wife. And—and she is not supposed to be here.’

A long, confused pause ensued. ‘What’s going on?’ I said.

‘I am here to look for apes.’ Then he fished in his pocket and brought out a plastic-encased identification card, tethered to his pocket with a tiny chain. The writing was in Japanese but the logo remained obvious, a symbol of a sun-bear holding a lotus flower.

‘Oh, Hiro,’ I said. ‘You’re not a tourist at all.’

A small smile in that embarrassed face.

Scholl rose, bristling. His walk toward us seemed stilted, unnatural. ‘He is a researcher?’ In disbelief he read the young man’s identity card. ‘But what is G Corp?’

The young man looked incredulous, then slowly explained. G Corp is the world’s fourth-biggest construction chain. They want to increase consumer confidence in their ecological goodwill. So they’ve set up their own pilot programmes in conservation and research. Hiro is their senior field operative and only primate researcher.

The difficulty now, however, is that he’s used up most of his research budget bringing Yumi, who’s never been to the jungle before. Apparently she’s
a corporate secretary assigned to book all his flights; she found the idea of a jaunt in the wilderness with Hiro exciting. Now she’s worried about her position with the company; they both are.

Meanwhile, if he doesn’t go back with some evidence that he’s been to the summit of the volcano (and hopefully found the apes) he’ll lose his job, a matter that’s taken with far more severity in Japan that elsewhere. Yumi shakenly said it would be like death. I’ve no doubt they’re both terrified.

Scholl fumed, his pent-up pallor tinged with green.

‘I’m sorry,’ Hiro bowed over and over. ‘We never meant to cause a problem.’

Appalled, Scholl and I went to consider this together. Scholl muttered angrily about ‘unethical behaviour.’

I said, ‘I agree.’

Surprised, Scholl looked askance at me, as though he’d expected otherwise. ‘Then it’s settled,’ he said. ‘We carry on without either of them.’

Unfortunately the plan proved difficult to put into action. Told he must remain with Yumi, Hiro stood up from the mossy log and bowed deeply for about the eighth time, saying nothing. Then Yumi said, through clenched teeth, ‘Hiro will continue. I will wait here.’ With his eyes downcast, Hiro added, ‘I will go alone, if necessary. I will follow the trail you have left until I find what you find.’ I have to admit, the young man’s tenacity made me sorry for him even as I wished he’d help Yumi.

The stalemate persisted until the sun had risen high above, poking down accusingly through a veil of lingering clouds. Sneakily, kettles and burners came out of packs and we sipped teas and waters in the shade; then one by one, we brought out lunch. The entire day appeared to be slipping away for nothing. Scholl and I checked our watches and privately hoped that the young man would realise he had more at stake than saving face.

But at twelve thirty something of a miracle occurred. Joseph appeared, sheeny with sweat from having toiled up the last incline. He’d driven the jeep further up the hillside than anyone had believed a car could go. Apparently
he’d learned by radio of an attack at the village where we’d stayed. Two ex-
militia men had burst into the village with guns, injuring a villager and taking
food and the filtration units. Luckily, on their way around the base of the
mountain they’d been captured by the headman, who’d been returning from X.
The two men are now being held in the same hut that we slept in while a trial is
arranged.

However Joseph had come to tell us that Fili’s mother wants the boy to
come back. His mother wasn’t injured in the furore, but one of his cousins was.
Fili now needs to take up the older boy’s role in working around the
community.

I expected Fili to take the news with some disappointment—he has been
carting a little of our equipment, but in general seems to have taken the trek as
a bit of a holiday—but at once he whooped and ran to get his meagre bed-roll.
When I asked him whether he’d begun to miss being home, he shrugged and
said, ‘No-no!’

‘You seem so happy to go back.’

‘To see militia men,’ he said, shrugging. ‘They’ve got guns.’ Then he
mimed a rifleman taking a shot at something. In the meantime, Kefin also put
his hand up and said he wished to turn around and go back to the Induction
Centre. He and Joseph, between them, would help Yumi downhill. Hiro,
hearing this, seemed to turn purple with emotion, but he gave no sign of having
changed his mind; nor did Yumi ask him to go with her.

Helmut Scholl went across the clearing to shake hands with Kefin and
Joseph before, a little more gruffly, he clasped Yumi’s hand. He seemed to have
relegated Hiro that part of the vision that causes car accidents. For his part, the
young man mooched around picking at the insides of his palms and belatedly
acting the part of solicitous lover when it came to helping Yumi pack her
things. He clearly wanted a way back into the expedition at an official level, but
Scholl had no intention of picking up the discussion. Finally I took Scholl aside
and said, ‘Hiro’s feeling very bad right now. What if we use this to make him
agree to something.’
'To what?' he hissed.

'To leaving the expedition at the first sighting, after he takes a photograph or sample—that is, to leave all the observation and consolidated research to us.'

'And why should we agree to his coming along at all?' he asked through gritted teeth.

'Because he can be a useful observer, and also because he’ll follow us anyway. I’m simply suggesting we choose the lesser of two evils.'

'A woman’s idea,' he muttered angrily.

'A pragmatic idea, Helmut. And it’s better than a young man getting lost in the jungle because two primatologists were too proud to share the path.'

Scholl threw his arm in the air and scowled, but his scowl seemed uncharacteristically light. For a moment I sensed a flicker of approval in his glance at me. Then the brows came down hard. 'If the man continues past that point—'

'Goodness, Helmut,' I said, 'he only wants to satisfy his employers that he reached the peak and fulfilled his duties, not have a whole species named after him.'

In he end, not only did Hiro agree to the proposal, he went so far as to promise to turn back after the first irrefutable sign that they exist (I’m sure he’d settle for a souvenir), and to insist that any right to naming and claiming would be ours (by which point I suppose Scholl and I had come to some kind of wordless mutual agreement, for neither of us bothered to divide that prospective spoil).

A little later the two workers set off downhill, Yumi conveyed on a sort of sling between them that kept her more or less upright and allowed her feet to dangle. Occasionally she hopped up and helped herself, not wanting to burden them, while Fili (ever-proud to be part of things) bore her gear. As they passed the first crest and began to disappear down the ravine, Hiro ran to whisper something in her ear, and she threw him a look that would melt glaciers. Her stoicism seems irreproachable, but I did wonder to what degree women who
accept backseat duty make it harder for those who don’t. Aren’t we all judged by what others are prepared to do? Fili, meanwhile, permitted me one brief kiss on his cheek before he fled.

As soon as they’d gone, Scholl, Mulumba, Hiro and I, walking briskly, left the peat swamp to plunge among the trees. Mulumba continued hacking away in front whenever stinging vines or woody lianes blocked our path. Helmut Scholl climbed close to me, hacking at the undergrowth from time to time with his own small knife. Hiro sheepishly took to the rear. Not a comment passed between us all the while.

After three or four hours—by now, semi-dusk—we reached a flattish grove among tree roots and turned to gain a view of where we’d been. Looking back and down to the lushness of the basin, we saw birds descending toward the peat swamp we’d vacated: storks; ibis; some kind of harrier or kite. They flitted into view between our narrow line of shredded foliage. While peering over the edge of that vast hillside, Mulumba suddenly murmured, ‘Just weeks ago a little village girl died because of antibiotics.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘We could not get any for her,’ he said, then turned and began walking up the hill.

How cruel it must seem to him (as it did to me then) that westerners can still arrive bearing satchels of medicines while locals die. I felt a vast sense of shame for my own part in that; for carrying the mantle of economic relativity so unthinkingly into his jungle, into his world. And yet he may not realise the extent to which my country—our countries—have achieved the appearance of health at the expense of vigour. Were antibiotics to be removed, it would be our decline, not his.

The climb soon put these and other thoughts out of my head. My knees had been creaking ominously for days, but now I found that my left routinely ached. Yet at the same time I felt fitter than I had in years, Bea; fitter because every moment involved physical labour.
Mulumba toiled along in front, now giving way to Scholl, now striding ahead where it seemed the slighter-built older man had trouble cutting through. I offered—actually, asked—to help with this labour, but my request met a look of amused bafflement on Mulumba’s broad face and surprised incomprehension on Scholl’s. Finally, after a long moment, the latter handed his machete across to me with a wipe of its shaft, and I spent the next hour doing a fair imitation of jungle Jane, hacking and slashing at vines. Nobody said a word, but when I looked up, Mulumba had stopped at the top of the next rise to wait for me, a thing he must have been doing every few minutes during the climb. But I felt better for taking part, and from this moment onward Hiro, myself and Scholl took turns to relieve each other, occasionally even giving the elephantine Mulumba a break from his labours.

Scholl began to remind me of some sort of lanky uncle, shy and unapproachable, whom you only learn was interesting when you’ve read his obituary. When he paused from hacking, sweat dripped neatly off his elbows and fell away into the shrubbery. I felt I should have asked him more questions earlier; discovered more about the man. As it was, we’d crossed the border into a bizarre kind of intimacy—a moment in a mistaken bunk; occasional brushings against one another on the climb—without knowing the slightest thing about each other’s lives.

I’m reminded of the day our mother died, when the nursing home phoned, and I couldn’t remember who ‘Mrs Wembly’ was. I’d forgotten she’d taken her maiden name back some years ago. And yet now I’m seeing her in myself, in things I do, in my own quiet urges to disappear out of daily life without troubling anybody. You’d know this feeling, surely? It’s like the urge to become well-known—to become so famous at something valuable that the self ceases to be. (I honestly can’t imagine why a person would want to be famous otherwise.) There’s something in Scholl that appeals to that part of me.

By five-thirty or six we’d climbed out of the densely vegetated folds of hillside and found ourselves on a small plateau, after which lay a short downhill section and then another climb. Instead of the overbearing canopy
and massy buttress roots intruding across our path, we moved in late light through a region of green broad-leaved plants that resembled bananas. They rose high above our heads and seemed stapled together so thickly that nothing else might grow below. Again we had to cut through them, damaging many in our wake, but we saw no other way to cross the plateau. The last of the sunlight turned the upper spears of these plants brilliant yellow.

In the middle of this strange crop on the hillside—perhaps growing over a landslip or mud slide—Mulumba paused, dashing sweat from around his eyes with a cupped hand. He glanced at the downhill section we’d just traversed and eyed the uphill area, where trees nudged one another, more dubiously.

‘Is it far to the top now?’ I asked; and he said, ‘Mebbe.’

Scholl came alongside, gesturing among the plants and every now and then bending a stalk to examine the tips. ‘Marantaceae,’ he informed us. ‘And Zingiberaceae. Wild ginger.’

Hiro immediately fished for a notebook and jotted the names down. ‘How to spell?’ he asked eagerly.

Scholl watched him briefly; then the German stooped forward to indicate a spelling error. The younger man scrawled patiently as Scholl dictated. From this moment on there seemed an undercurrent of respect, almost of pupilhood, in Hiro, and a condescending mentorship on Scholl’s part. By the time we passed the last stand of ginger plants they’d begun speaking civilly.

As the light waned, trickling away between the trees like a sudden storm, we reached a mini-valley behind the ridge, and the canopy closed completely over us. All the undergrowth seemed to disappear, shrivelling into itself like so many dead wet leaves. Around us lurked a dim expanse in which knobbled tree roots and vine stems twirling like old telephone cords remained the only ground cover. Tree trunks loomed.

‘Look,’ said Scholl, walking two paces ahead of me.

Below a mossy fig tree sat a mound of chimpanzee faeces, very fresh, and a cluster of half-eaten fruit. Beside the piles lay a single print in the soft
earth, no more than the impression of one set of knuckles. The creature had obviously been on all fours when it reached the ground. It wasn’t our ape.

At that moment I turned and saw Hiro creeping toward us with his camera out. He took great pains not to frighten away whatever we’d found, but even when he saw the mound he maintained an attitude of reverence. ‘Okay if I take a picture now?’ he said.

Our mouths dropped open slightly, then we clapped them shut.

‘Of course,’ I murmured.

‘Ja, ja!’ Scholl beamed, waving his pallid hands.

The young man set up a tripod, adjusted settings and took a very grave, very beautiful photo of the pile of faeces and the half-eaten figs beside the knuckle-print. He jotted the precise whereabouts of the droppings. He applied tape measures, worked out angles and measured the distance to the tree, finally asking Scholl to name the tree species.

When he’d finished jotting the information, he gave us a deeply apologetic smile. ‘Once again,’ he said, ‘I apologise for causing trouble earlier. Now I have proof I can take home.’

We both looked at each other, hardly daring to breathe. For a moment I’m sure Scholl hoped I wouldn’t break the bubble. But I couldn’t bring myself to let the misconception stand.

‘Actually,’ I said to Hiro, ‘it’s more than likely from a common chimp, as you would know if you were a proper primatologist. But it’s a lovely photograph.’
Have you ever seen your own eye up close? As an undergraduate I remember bending to study a pond-water slide under a scope and seeing for an instant, rushing up at me with frightening speed, something hideously oysterish and fringed with tentacles. It looked like a pond-monster opening its gullet up the tube, until it blinked.

In the morning Helmut Scholl gave me his lens to look through, courteously letting me have first glimpse. We’d camped under the fig tree overnight and, at first light, taken the microscope to a clearing downhill a little way to find a patch of sunlight. Now, poking gently with a probe, I saw fig seeds; some fragments of what may have been bone; a few intact kernels; digested plant fibres.

‘Just as we thought—it’s troglodytes,’ I said, exhaling. ‘From the descriptions and the hand, I would have expected our apes to have a diet higher in plant fibres and tubers than nuts and seeds; they’re not supposed to be arboreal.’

Hiro had begun picking at a seam on his trousers. Now he looked up, squinting slightly. ‘Perhaps there is no mystery ape?’

‘It could be a hoax,’ I admitted. Actually, I’d thought this when I’d first read about the ape hand in the news. But later, viewing the pictures, I’d changed my mind. ‘It could also be a hybrid.’

The young man glanced from me to Scholl. ‘Do you mean—part gorilla?’

I sighed. ‘You really ought to have done some more research, Hiro. There’s a lot of interesting material on the question of ape genetics. What is your background, anyway?’
His face blanched. ‘Basic zoology—with a little specialisation.’

‘What in?’

‘Molluscs.’

Scholl snorted, though he didn’t look particularly upset. Hiro’s inadequacy had put him in a better mood.

‘Then let’s start from scratch,’ I said. ‘Have you heard of Henry?’

Hiro shook his head.

‘Henry was famous in the seventies. An entrepreneur used to show him around on collared leash. He walked upright; he had lock-out knees and wide-spaced hips.’ To my surprise Hiro began writing this down, perching a pad on his knee. I spoke more slowly, ridiculously self-conscious the way I never got lecturing a class. But then no student I’d ever lectured had been this diligent. When Hiro’s pen poised in the air again, I said, ‘Henry had a different head-shape to common chimpanzees and bonobos as well: higher-domed; with lesser brow-ridges; not much of a snout; smaller, low-set ears. Some claimed it to be a human-chimpanzee hybrid,’ I continued, packing the equipment. ‘In fact, that almost seemed a possibility, judging by appearance, and I could see why so many laypeople were fooled. But eventually DNA testing showed him to be free of human genes and mostly troglodyte—that is, common chimp.’

‘Ah,’ Hiro said disappointedly, and clicked his pen.

‘But that’s not the finish,’ I added. We slowly turned to make our way back toward the tent site. ‘Henry was a little strange, after all; his genes differed from troglodytes at two distinct points. The creature was either a mutant or a hybrid between a common chimpanzee and an unknown ape.’

‘Unknown ape?’ Hiro looked around the rainforest hillside, his mouth slightly open. ‘Then it could be from this mountain?’

‘Why not?’ I said, shrugging.

Once at the camp site, we reshouldered our packs. Mulumba, who had been dozing, stood up and brushed himself down before pulling his machete out of its sheath. He gazed at the blade, sighed and put it away. ‘No need for machete now,’ he said. He looked up through the dim, damp forest and
checked his watch before donning his own small pack. ‘Easy going but very steep.’

We’d hardly set out when Hiro found a broad leaf on the ground with bite-marks taken out of it. Chimps use leaf-clipping for various purposes: a sexual come-on; a faddish practice; to line their nests. He held it up to show me, and I frowned. Scholl came to examine the leaf, and we took bite measurements.

‘Is it chimpanzee?’ Hiro asked.

‘Yes,’ we said.

‘Ah—but is this a problem?’

Scholl and I exchanged a glance of disappointment. ‘Chimpanzees are aggressive,’ I explained. ‘They most likely wouldn’t let other apes into their territory.’

Hiro frowned.

‘Unless the apes occupy a different ecological niche,’ Scholl amended. ‘In that case, ja, maybe chimpanzees care a bit less.’

As we passed under the canopy, the rainforest gradually shrank in scale, and small patches of pure sunlight appeared. We could focus on the highest branches quite clearly, though the ground remained relatively free of undergrowth. However in patches, a dense mist cloaked the climb and made our hands and clothing damp. Even Mulumba, like the rest of us, had to pause every so often to catch his breath and wring the water from his shirt.

We saw fewer animals the higher we climbed, and then mostly of the invertebrate type. Webby circular flaps of spider-holes lined the mossy soil. In one cluster of vine stems we found a grove of cartoonish pale blue snails, their shells high and flattened as though they’d been half squashed. Far off through the forest we occasionally heard a chittery noise, like a bird or monkey warning of our passage, but even these sounds began to dissipate. The soil became rank and stony, with the graininess of granite.

Mulumba sat to rest as we tried to see from our maps how much further we had to climb before we hit the volcano rim. At one time in its long life the
mountain had been an active volcano, but a Mesozoic blast blew out the majority of its core, leaving a collapsed crater hemmed by a series of scalloped ridges.

‘How much further to the rim?’ I asked.

He kicked a pebble and sent it rolling mindlessly down the hill. ‘Mebbe two, three hours.’

‘It’s the last section, then,’ said Scholl. To my surprise he now brought out his camp burner and lit it for tea. All his hurry appeared to have gone. Whistling, he boiled the billycan and we ate a meagre lunch of shared soy cakes and a few orange quarters. Hiro sat slightly apart from us, his head resting intermittently on his knees.

With the meal over, nobody seemed in a hurry to get moving. I could see why: three more hours would take us to the end of our expedition. If we saw no strange apes in that time, or, more importantly, no signs of their presence, then we’d be going home empty handed. I, too, didn’t really feel like taking the next steps yet.

Scholl appeared to have gone to sleep. Hiro crouched by the billycan stirring a new brew, while Mulumba sat further up the hill drawing lines on the ground with a stick. I’d sat down with my back against a log and now found myself drowsy and reluctant to get up. Had we come this far only to find a few chimp droppings and nothing else? I’m not prone to full scale regret but I did wonder whether I’d be able to resume a normal life if I had to go back to putative ‘civilisation’ empty handed.

But what had I expected anyway, Bea? You’ll say I’ve always been an optimist, but that’s not strictly true. As a child, yes—but I’ve sunk a little in recent years. Twelve years in academia without proper tenure will do that to you.

A brighter person would have said that six months after a creature has been butchered is a long time to wait before going in search of its friends.

As I sat against the log, all at once I felt a creeping, crawling feeling. It moved from neck to collarbone, then to chest—I leapt up, tea flung across the
grove, and began slapping at my clothes, which coursed all over with brilliant red ants. I’d inadvertently sat under a branch that held their clustered colony; now I felt a multitude of tiny stings, like nettles. A moment later Hiro came to the rescue, dashing at my arms and legs with a branchlet.

Mulumba had started hooting with laughter, pointing at my face.

‘What is it?’ I gasped, when I could speak.

‘Oh, not dangerous,’ he laughed, ‘but extremely bad to look at.’

He meant my face. I put my hands up—ugh! A mass of raised bumps, like horrendous acne, covered my cheeks and throat. My arms felt on fire.

‘Oh, dear,’ I said dourly. ‘That was silly, wasn’t it?’ (It’s best to play the aunt with oneself after injury.)

‘You’d better shake your clothes out,’ Scholl muttered, looking embarrassed.

At that moment another ant stung me from the inside of my waistband, and I hurried to a private patch between two huge tree trunks and hastily tore off my pants, nearly tripping in the process. Fortunately few ants had gotten into the clothes themselves, except about my collar. The men very politely stayed across the slope, tucked away in the hollow where we’d stopped.

I turned my khakis inside out and shook them thoroughly. In underpants and a singlet, the way all powerful discoveries occur, I suppose, I happened to look further down the hill to where a mossy log crawled with dead vines. All at once a face materialised out of the cluster of rotting vegetation.

It was watching me. Not only watching me as a wild animal watches, but, I would almost say, studying me. And then it put something to its mouth—a leaf?—and blew softly through it, making a tiny, almost inaudible whistle. Have you ever been whistled at by a man on a scaffold, Bea? Of course you have. Well, this faint sound had the same risqué timbre—the same sexiness—as those human sounds. All I can say is the creature wanted me to notice it there.

But at that moment, in the distance, one of the men made a movement. Next instant the animal peeled into the backdrop of dank leaves. A last
impression came of its back, not hunched like the spine of a chimp in flight on all fours, but upright and straight. It was grey, and it was moving, so far as I could tell, *uphill*.

Students always want to know whether humans are closer to extinct bonobos or live chimpanzees. (You get these questions a lot from girls; never from boys.) Bonobos had darker, more human-like lips and top-parted head hair. Their proportions resembled human proportions, and they didn’t only mate during oestrus. For bonobos, sex was a kind of aggression-subduer, a way of being communal, even between groups of strangers. With sex harnessed to subdue aggression, they didn’t need masculine bonding or complicated hierarchies. By contrast, chimps and humans both seem to utilise status and organised aggression in the form of raids to maintain communal harmony. (We’re never closer to shoring up internal politics, as your husband would understand, than when we fight outsiders.) The bottom line seems to be that all ape societies need some way of channelling or defusing competition between members of the group.

To be honest, I can’t immediately explain what I did next. That is, my initial feelings were for the ape itself; for its survival as a species. But how can I fail to see that what I actually did was to remove competition?

I said nothing, not even to Scholl. I just went back to the group, smiled at everyone and shouldered my pack. But I couldn’t feel the insect bites, and I had to grip the pack straps at each side of my chest so my hands wouldn’t keep shaking. Every time Hiro exclaimed at something after that, I turned, gasping, but none of the clipped leaves or primate droppings he found appeared to be anything other than chimp.

We made our afternoon trek without incident, reaching the summit of the volcano—its last faces pale grey and barren in the sunshine—and spreading out listlessly to rest. Nobody could credit the top of the volcano with supporting life. Above us rose a tower of dead rock, its grey turrets empty all the way to the sky. Below us stretched a carpet of dark green falling away to
shrouded valleys. For a while we picked at stones or sat in contemplation, inhaling sharply because of the thin air.

I kept thinking about the face I’d seen—and the strange quiet whistle as it had blown through the leaf. Every time I thought about it my heart beat faster. Why had the creature gone uphill?

All the supposed sightings—two or three up until the hand had come to light—had been on this side of the volcano, the southern side. My heart began to flurry. What if the apes lived inside the collapsed interior? In my earlier researches, the dark, pocked crater had shown up on satellite images as an inaccessible blur surrounded by dead rock walls. The sheer height of the rock tower made climbing it impossible, even for the most arboreal of apes. But what if these apes could come and go through a gap? Didn’t that make sense of the claim that they lived ‘underground’?

Curving around in a huge arc, the rim appeared empty and lifeless, virtually a cliff. My gaze meandered over its surface and toward the join between fallen chunks of granite, the vegetated slope of rainforest and the granite shield, looking for any possible sign of entry. When I felt Scholl watching me I shrugged and turned back to the rainforested slopes, meeting his scowl with a sad kind of smile.

‘We were defeated,’ he said.

‘It doesn’t mean they’re not here somewhere.’ I pointed to a vegetated crevasse running the length of the hillside and eventually forming one of its main lower valleys. ‘We haven’t checked all the valleys, all the niches.’

‘We have no more time.’ He put his hands in his pockets and moved a few paces downhill, sending miniature avalanches of scree down the slope to fetch up against grass tussocks. Hiro sat on a boulder further along, apparently deep in thought, having exhausted his willingness to take photographs proving he’d come high enough. Eventually Mulumba, who’d waited on another outcrop of boulders toward the vegetation line, came up to tell us we had to leave, or it would get too dark.
I didn’t mention the striations I’d seen in the rim wall, where deep crevices had formed in the exposed rock. At one cleft along the base of this cliff, vegetation had formed a deep green clump, like a tiny patch of rainforest. That can only mean a source of water, which up this high must be from within the crater itself.

There is at least one hole in the volcano rim wall. And as soon as I can come back alone, I’m going to find a way in.

What can I say? The ape looked at me. And you don’t come this far without losing the odd friend, here and there.
We spent a few days at our tent site going on short day-walks with the only signs of ape habitat being a few chimp droppings, all old. We rarely spoke to one another except to pass the salt or offer a cracker. Hiro alone seemed relatively pleased, but I suppose he can at least tell G Corp that he’d done his best.

On the third afternoon, resources getting low, the expedition officially came to an end. We prepared to pack up and leave at first light down the trail we’d already blazed, Hiro deciding that he’d hurry to be the first to reach the valley. I could see he wanted to be with Yumi. No doubt they have a lot of story-doctoring to do.

At nightfall Scholl came and squatted next to me at my tent-front, where I’d settled on a corner of my camp-mat to nibble a few biscuits.

I passed one to him and he studied it before experimentally breaking off a corner. ‘Not bad.’ He crossed his legs and sat on a corner of my ground-mat. ‘It has been an interesting expedition, ja?’

‘Interesting,’ I agreed warily.

‘A pity nothing was found.’

‘Oh, yes—a pity. But we can only study so much of the landscape; we don’t have the ability to comb it all.’

I felt his cool blue gaze flick over me and away, into the darkness. ‘And you, June Lesky? What do you intend to do next?’ He wiped his hand down his sides.

‘What do you mean? The expedition’s finished.’

He gave me an irritated glance. ‘I mean will you resume teaching?’
‘Not likely,’ I murmured, putting the rest of the biscuits away. An idea flashed into mind. ‘I’ll probably write a book.’

‘Ah, yes—“Life with Chimpanzees”.’

‘Actually, Helmut,’ I said, ‘that’s a very nice title for a book about a few people I’ve known.’

His eyelids crinkled slightly. ‘Perhaps.’ On that enigmatic note, he headed for his tent.

The others had been in bed for perhaps half an hour when I came out again, whispering when I drew close to Mulumba so he wouldn’t be startled. I pushed a hand under his sleeping-tarp and prodded him on the knee.

‘Mulumba—I have to talk to you.’

After much coaxing, he sighed and came with me into a corner of dripping forest. If he found something odd in my wishing to take him clear of the others, he didn’t show it.

‘So what is it?’ he hissed.

Taking a deep breath, I explained my intention. I told him that, for a childless woman, her life’s work comes first. ‘Imagine one of your village women unable to have babies. She’d find her life incomplete. She’d worry about growing old without leaving something she cares about behind—something to remember her. Your children remember you, Mulumba—all I have is my apes.’

‘Plenty of children in the city,’ he said, but he didn’t seem hopeful that the idea of adoption would sway me, and it didn’t.

‘I’m too old for that now, Mulumba,’ I said ruefully. ‘But maybe you can use my money to help a few children who need it, if you want to.’

At last, not looking at me, he accepted the roll of traveller’s cheques and bank notes, nodding huffily. I hope he keeps his part of the bargain, because I paid him almost everything I had.

This morning, our final morning as a group on the mountain, a shadow moved across my tent flap, jolting me out of sleep. At first I couldn’t remember where we were. I’d been dreaming of myself in your Spanish holiday villa,
overlooking the vines. In the dream, I’d had dozens of children running about
me, some mine and some yours, all squealing and tossing horseshoes and
petting piglets. I’m not sure that our mother hadn’t been there, fondly looking
on. Is it a death-dream, do you suppose? How appropriate to have one like that
right now.

A gnarled tree bough poked inside my tent and wobbled at me. For a
moment, dumb, I gazed at it. Then slowly the human proportions of the limb
evolved to view, and I realised Scholl was handing me a tube of ointment.

The gnarly arm shook at me. ‘For your ant bites.’

‘Thank you.’ I looked up and down my arms, relieved to find no signs of
skin infection. Having suffered my share of insect bites, I’ve long since learned
not to scratch, and overnight the painful welts had settled into red specks, each
capped by a tiny pair of pincer-holes.

The others waited with their tents already stowed and their backpacks
ready to be put on. But when Scholl went to help me unpeg the tent, I stopped
him. ‘I’m not going back with you.’

Hiro and Helmut Scholl both stared, Hiro’s lip curling. Scholl’s mouth
opened and closed. His brow twitched.

‘Environment Channel have decided they want me to stay to gather data
on the local chimpanzees. As you know, Helmut, they’re endangered, and the
Channel believes it would make good television, even without the mystery
apes. They’ll pick me up by helicopter when I’m done.’

‘And how did you get this communication?’ he hissed.

‘Joseph passed it on when he came uphill. You were too busy seething
about Yumi’s situation to notice, I’m afraid.’

Mulumba leaned against a termite mound, watching the proceedings in
amusement. Hiro put his backpack on and tightened his straps.

‘I don’t believe they’re sending a helicopter,’ Scholl muttered.

‘But that’s silly, Helmut. How else would I get back down the
mountain?’

‘You’d brave it yourself, you foolish woman!’
‘Good heavens—do you really think me that mad?’ I turned to Mulumba.

The big man stood scratching himself with the spine of his machete. ‘Yes, she has a helicopter coming,’ he said tonelessly. ‘She is an English. She has money everywhere but no good sense.’

Scholl’s eyes narrowed, but his face had turned white and now he wouldn’t look at me. Then suddenly he lifted a hand in the air by way of dismissal, and went to get his pack. He and Hiro stood about for a few moments, Scholl clearing his throat and studying the ground, his wiry beetle brows pushed close together. Then Hiro made the first move to go downhill, looking relieved to be away. Mulumba, chopping into the termite mound a few times to vent a little irritation, shortly followed.

When they’d passed through a grove of trees, Scholl said, ‘Why?’

‘Why what, Helmut?’

‘Why did you let me believe you’d lost your backing?’

For a moment I blinked at him, unable to think of a swift reply. Then suddenly I wondered if he felt annoyed because of the money. He’d paid Mulumba for Fili’s help, all out of his own grant.

‘Please, Helmut,’ I said, ‘this isn’t about money, is it? Because I can pay for any extra expenses you’ve incurred—’

‘Foolish woman!’ he cursed, stepping back from me. ‘It is not about money! It is ethics!’ He stopped himself short of shouting, though his face turned white with fury. For a moment, staring at me, I thought he might say something absolutely crushing—something about my sexlessness, or my lacklustre hair. How strange to fear these most childish attacks, but I did! But a moment later the man gathered himself, checked all his straps and said, ‘I suppose you have reasons to research these particular chimpanzees.’ His voice sounded diffident; almost flat. ‘What you do now is no interest of mine.’

Then, with a tiny, gruff wave, he began making his angular, knees-out way downhill, not looking back at me through the trees. Soon the tufty top of his grey hair passed out of sight over a hillock. Mist continued to drip from tree
boughs all around. Gradually the footsteps and voices merged with the sounds of water.

I waited for a long time to be certain that they wouldn’t return. Then I gathered up what I thought I’d need, refreshed myself in a tiny spring that fed through a maze of tree roots, and headed uphill.

Perhaps I should have worried over such an easy victory. But as you know, Bea, I’m not the best judge of human behaviour.

Besides, every discovery starts with a rush of blood to the brain. You, Bea, will understand this passion. I felt the way you’ve perhaps felt, standing before a clean white canvas with the most breathtaking of pictures taking shape in your mind.

Isn’t pure science also an art?

While the sun gradually began to filter through the thinning treetops, I made my way out of the forest and onto the lesser-treed slope. For nearly three hours I followed the passage we’d taken previously, even pausing at the same locations to sip water and rest. No apes came to leaf-whistle at me, but occasionally I felt the nape-prickling sensation of being watched. Once I paused by a slab of rock to study the way I’d come, and thought I saw a dark movement between two thorny bushes. But nothing appeared on the slope, and eventually I turned again and kept climbing.

But I’d barely reached the granite area, breathing the new-minted air with all the wheezy delight of a newborn, when a scrabbling sound from behind halted me. I didn’t think my mystery ape would be so noisy, and I was right.

A white-haired ape—Scholl, of course—had begun the rock ascent after me, scrabbling forward on hands and knees. I don’t think I’ve ever been quite as angry at a fellow human as then. Remember the apes smashing bones in that old Kubrick movie? I swear I had the same urge right then.

‘What on earth are you doing?’ I screamed, gibbering at him.

He answered with a glance in my direction—upward—and a serene, almost fatuous smile. I watched his grey head lower once more as he hoisted
himself up the rocks. Picking his way, he reached the lesser slope and straightened, his light hair ruffling in the breeze. He didn't look angry or impatient; he just looked pleased with himself, and perhaps even with me. A few minutes later he perched beside me, shrugging out of his backpack and leaning on it.

'I understand that you want to be the first to make the name for yourself,' he said. Bowing his head, he added, 'I accept your terms, June Lesky. You shall name your apes, and I'll have second billing.'

I stared at him, not bothering to ask how he knew I'd seen one of the apes. He must have noticed the look on my face just after it had happened. Lines crisscrossed his cheeks and mouth, but if anything he seemed better humoured than he ever had. 'That's not why I did it,' I said sharply.

'No?'

'Not even close.'

He inhaled deeply but also exasperatedly. The thin air kept making us gasp. 'Then why did you make up the lies?'

'Because I don't think these apes should be discovered. At least—not until we know how to protect them from that discovery.'

Scholl snorted, 'Not discovered! That is idiotic!'

Inhaling again—we're continually inhaling up here, pointlessly because it's hardly enough to meet the oxygen demand—I let my hand drop. 'I think the apes are still here because they haven't been catalogued. What if they're completely non-aggressive? What if they're like bonobos, Helmut? Poachers, desperate people, violence—it wouldn't take much.'

'This is preposterous!' But I thought I saw his brow soften, and a moment later he closed his mouth and gazed out over the expansive valley toward the furthest reaches of view. 'I take it you know where these apes are?'

'I might.'

'And you don't intend to tell me unless I agree?'

'That would be my stick, yes. The carrot being—'
'—the carrot being my share in the unannounced, secret, pointless, clandestine discovery I’m not allowed to mention to my peers.' Suddenly he began to rumble with laughter that shortly turned into a cough. Hacking, eyes watering, he rubbed his face. He shook his head despairingly. ‘Okay; all right. I agree to keep the find a secret, if you show me where.’

‘You do?’ Open-mouthed, I stared at Scholl. ‘For all-time?’

He shrugged, squinting off into the distance, where tamer peaks rose against the flatness of the plain. ‘No, I did not say “all-time”. I agree to embargo the find for six months. That is six months for us to work out a way to keep them safe. You have my word on that.’

‘That’s hardly long enough, Helmut.’ I frowned, considering. ‘Make it twelve months.’

‘Twelve?’ Now he glared back at me. ‘That is a long time.’ But all at once he picked up my hand and shook it. ‘We have agreement—ja?’

My anger fled, exhaled like so much pointless vapour. I didn’t feel trumped or usurped; I just felt relieved not to be completely alone on a mountain any more. ‘You do realise there’s no helicopter coming,’ I said.

‘Then we walk all the way home, like little piggies,’ he shrugged. Squinting, he gazed off into the patches of green that clung to pockets in the barren rock. Then he stood up and reshouldered his pack. ‘Where are we going now, hmm?’

‘I’m not sure,’ I said. ‘But if I were an ape that enjoyed caves and crevices, I’d find something like that.’ Standing, I pointed to the narrow, dark crevice I’d seen three days ago. It sat above a ledge formed by fallen granite boulders, and the path to it stretched between patches of loose scree and fallen slabs of stone that jutted every which way like broken crockery. Tufts of pale green vegetation sprouted from the cleft. When he didn’t answer I said riskily, ‘You don’t think I’m lying just to lure you up here, Helmut?’

‘June Lesky,’ he said, waggling a finger, ‘you are very bad at lies. Next time you pretend to have a helicopter on the way, give it somewhere to land.’
We stepped from boulder to boulder and then from slab to slab, spiralling our way upward. Every now and then loose scree threatened to send us tumbling, but either I would put a hand out to steady Scholl (who seldom took it), or he (more often) would steady me, using the weight of his backpack as ballast. Occasionally he had to take it off, wait until I’d reached a safer position, then pass it to me. By turns, moving with utmost caution, we reached the base of the rim wall, and found the cleft.

The water leaving the gap between shrubbery proved to be no mere seepage, but a steady trickle. About a hand span wide, the flow felt cold and fresh as it poured from the bottom of the cleft. It wended its way between boulders before disappearing among a downhill patch of vegetation.

Scholl put his pack down and allowed a cupful to accumulate in his palms before sniffing it.

‘Very fresh,’ he said. ‘But how could water flow this high?’

‘Maybe it’s overflow from a reservoir.’ I pushed at the tassellated vegetation overhanging the gap in the smooth granite wall. My arm disappeared into empty darkness. I could feel cold air inside, but nothing more. ‘Look!’ I cried, pulling snags and branches aside. We could see a few interior slabs of stone, but between them lurked more darkness. ‘It’s a keyhole, Helmut.’

‘A keyhole?’

‘Granite is formed from magma, isn’t it? Somehow the magma here trapped a flow of softer material, perhaps pumice from ash. Then over time, the
pressure of water trapped in the volcano’s crater widened the hole, and it became a tunnel of sorts.’

‘So we go inside?’

‘We go inside.’

A crinkled grin tilted his mouth. ‘I hope you brought a flashlight with you, June Lesky. Mine is at the bottom of my pack.’

Indeed I had. I brought my flashlight out and shone it into the cleft between the stone. A wet floor glistened, carved into a shallow groove by the running water. Above it lurked a series of high, narrow, fluted caverns. And by one corner, low against the wall, sat a pile of faeces.

We didn’t linger to examine it beyond a swift prod with a boot. ‘Fresh,’ Scholl muttered, wiping his toe against the rock.

The tunnel seemed remarkably smooth, for all the fluting. I pressed a hand in passing to a wall and found vertical ridges, but no trace of water. All the moisture seemed to run along the floor, and occasionally, where a boulder or slab of fallen granite covered it up, to disappear completely. Once we both heard a whispery sound and then a flutter near the entrance—a bat, probably.

After perhaps no more than six or seven minutes of squeezing ourselves along, the tunnel suddenly opened. Instead of a narrow cleft we found a deep, long cavern with multiple dark gashes in its walls where other clefts ran through the rim material. I had the impression, though my torchbeam remained too weak to explore higher, that the holes had formed from further volcanic action some time after the major blast. But I’m no geologist, as you can probably tell, and perhaps my guesses were incorrect.

Scholl gathered a few pieces of stone, but otherwise appeared disinterested in the vault. ‘We must find the way out,’ he said quickly, his breath wheezing in his throat.

‘Of course.’ Straining into the darkness, I swung my beam around. The floor, very uneven, rose several feet over the length of the cavern. We could hear water flowing somewhere, but it now flowed underground.

All at once Scholl exclaimed, ‘Turn it off!’
'What for?'
'The light.'

Following his gesture and switching the beam off, I swivelled to stare into the furthest corner of the cavern. A triangle of faint light appeared between two huge slabs.

Have you ever been to the desert, Bea? Ever travelled over the crumbly dunes in the middle of nowhere and suddenly come upon that most mythical of places, an oasis? You’ve been to the Middle East—I’ve only read about it.

We climbed the last slab of rock and crouched to fit through the triangular overhang. As we rounded the last slab and came into a natural stone foyer, a blaze of green burst into vision, full of light and life.

The volcano rim formed a vast circular wall around the jumbled expanse of crater. In places the rim rock had crumbled and left jagged piles of boulders like stepping stones. Between them, a lush disc of vegetation flourished around a large, dark-watered rock pool. The forest looked oddly misshapen until I realised that most of the trees must be dwarf versions of native forest ones; I saw a single fig tree the height of a backyard lemon bush, but its branches had spread almost all the way across the crater. Here and there, red-fringed aerial roots hung down and tethered portions of its branches to the ground. Closer trees looked like bonsai, the leaves apparently normal-sized but the trunks and limbs gnarled and stunted.

Below us lay a series of haphazard natural steps formed when a huge granite boulder had smashed; slightly further below lay the cool darkness of the reed-lined pond. This, then, must be the source of the cascading water: a natural reservoir caused by a depression in the crater floor. Seepage from the soil around the crater possibly helped keep it full during dry months, or perhaps pressure from a long way underground pushed artesian water all the way to the surface; indeed, a light mist rising from the water made the latter seem more likely. Surrounding the pool lay a rich band of smooth, dark earth in which numerous reed-like plants flourished. And in the middle of this dark oasis, clustered upon itself as though a giant termite colony had set up in the
volcano—or no, not a termite colony, more like the Leaning Tower of Pisa—sat an enormous structure built, it appeared, of dried mud.

I say ‘built’ because, while its might well have been a natural formation—soft pumice left from the settlement of ash, or a porous slurry—the structure had been honeycombed by numerous holes with rounded edges, like portholes. Ledges ran along the front of each series of holes and presumably formed the means of entry, for even as we gaped across the crater, we saw a dark shape barrel out of one of the holes, scamper along the ledge and disappear into another. Scholl’s body stiffened and his breath came out in a huff.

‘Did you see it?’ he hissed.

‘Yes, I did.’

‘A primate.’ His trembling fingers locked onto my sleeve. ‘You were right!’ Immediately he slung off his pack and began rummaging in the side pockets. Smiling, he brought out two sets of field glasses and handed me a set. I recognised the silver pair as Hiro’s. ‘A gift,’ he said, ‘and an apology—he asked me to give these to you.’

‘Oh.’ I stared at the field glasses in wonderment. ‘But then Hiro knows why I’m here—’

‘Not at all.’ Scholl cleared his throat with a grunt. ‘Please credit me with some ability to make up stories.’ He put his own glasses up to his face. ‘As far as he knows we are here to study ordinary chimpanzees.’

For the next two hours we stayed very still on the ledge, peering down into the basin and across to the mud structure. Neither or us moved or spoke, except to shift position on our elbows slightly when the stone grew too uncomfortable. In that time we saw only glimpses: flashes of animals darting between mud dwellings; or a sudden face watching from among leaves. Then the sky darkened over the rim wall, and a moment later, with tropical swiftness, a rainstorm hit.

We sat back, our faces drenched, and huddled in the darkness. ‘Is it the start of the wet season, do you think?’ I asked Scholl.
‘Ja, possible.’

‘We have very little time left, I suppose.’

‘Unless we are here for the duration of the wet season!’ He sounded serious, but I presumed he meant that as a grim joke.

Rain thundered down; we could hardly hear each other now. A little later we both retreated from the noisome entry-way, and Scholl began rummaging in his pack again, this time bringing out his camp-chair and esky. He arrayed these carefully inside the cave and set up his pocket-cooker. ‘Miss Lesky,’ he said, ‘I would be very grateful if you’d join me for early supper.’

‘Supper?’ I hadn’t eaten since first thing this morning; I hadn’t even thought to. But he’d already gone to fetch water from the trickle at the far side of the cave, his flashlight bobbing in the darkness.

When he returned and set the billycan to boil, he smiled, peering at me out of the darkness. Grinning doesn’t suit his gruff old face, but for some reason that makes it touching. ‘It is like that expression,’ he said as he pulled out his meal sachets and dropped them into boiling water, ‘the big game hunter; only we do not do it for the pelts or the tusks or horns. Pure learning, eh?’

‘Pure learning.’

He poked the foil packs for a while, turning them over, before fishing them out one by one onto a plate. When he snipped at the corner with his pocket knife scissors, they released a heady aroma and the particulate matter of, if you can believe this, bacon and eggs. No, not crispy bacon—boiled, after all—but a kind of smoky ham; certainly the scrambled eggs looked real. Imagine that: bacon and eggs, and he even took two pieces of bread out of tinsel packs and toasted them over the tiny flame, handing one to me.

We ate close together, hunched and munching. I don’t think a meal has ever tasted quite as good to me before, and yet it wasn’t the meal as much as its circumstances. His jaw clicking didn’t even bother me today.

‘June Lesky,’ he said, ‘would you pass me the ketchup?’

‘Ja!’
We maintained this light bantering tone with each other even after the greys outside had merged into a sleety umber. The rainstorm continued, bedraggling the landscape and making ape-watching impossible. Somehow even that failed to depress us.

‘An early start, ja?’ said Scholl. ‘We want to be up watching.’

‘Early as possible,’ I agreed. Then we both rolled out our sleeping bags, and lay there in the darkness, listening to water gush.

‘My dear Miss Lesky,’ he said after a while, ‘will you be so kind as to let me say one more thing?’

‘Oh, yes, one more thing, why not?’ I crossed my arms, flushing. Dear me, Bea, what embarrassing conclusions I jump to sometimes—I won’t even tell you what I thought. But the sudden intimacy—Scholl on the other side of the cave, lying on his back as though contemplating the ceiling, the only light from a small gas lamp—affected my nerves.

He leant up on one elbow. ‘Since I met you I have been well and truly, at every turn, put into my place. I have found myself irritated, vexed, intrigued, repelled—’ (he must have seen me quail then: what was he saying?) ‘—but none of that matters. I want to say, Miss Lesky—I want to say,’ he said, ‘that you are a woman of singular integrity!’

*Singular integrity!* Has a man ever complimented a woman so obscurely? I turned on my side so he wouldn’t see me convulse with relieved laughter—relief because, after all, the man is married; laughter because, after all, I’m not. But thankfully the rain gathered impetus and the sheeting noise stopped all further conversation, at least until night had thoroughly set in, and I could convincingly feign sleep.

In the morning he seemed his old gruff self again, and I busied myself getting ready to shift to a better vantage point in the crater. We both halted at the edge. Looking into the miniature valley revealed a trio of grey-furred shapes squatting on the ground beside the pool. They appeared to be chewing on reed-stems, oblivious to our presence, all approximately the size of chimpanzees. Indeed their postures looked disappointingly chimplike until one
stood up and revealed its upright frame. Its back to us, we made out a figure somewhat slighter and wirier than pan troglodytes, but its legs significantly longer than a chimp’s.

Once more I felt we were being watched by creatures hiding inside the dwelling-mound.

‘We’re disturbing them, Helmut.’

‘I know.’

‘And yet they don’t seem to be acting aggressively.’

‘Not at all.’ He studied the trio on the bank, his head cocked slightly.

‘But certainly they’re aware we’re here. Odd, I’d say…’

‘I think it’s time we made a move to a better position.’

‘You want to go down?’ He inhaled sharply.

‘No—not down.’ I pointed to a series of enormous boulders overlooking the dwelling-mound. They formed the remains of a section of wall that had split and tumbled, perhaps millennia ago. In a crevice between boulders, various spiny plants had taken root and flourished, like a Mohawk haircut. A series of smaller boulders formed a kind of staircase around the pool. It would be easy for us to get there, but equally easy for the apes.

‘We would have no way out if they decided to dislike us,’ Scholl said ominously. ‘And yet—it would be good to be so close.’ Peering through a set of fine field glasses, he said, ‘Yes… Yes… We could set up recording equipment and one of the tents. It would give us a view of the entire area.’

‘Then what are we waiting for?’

We set off, easing our way between boulders and gradually climbing around the pool. Every now and then I glanced toward the creatures down at the pond’s edge, but they seemed almost completely oblivious to us. One had begun grooming the back of another, the way chimps do. Next time I looked down—carefully because the boulder I perched on jutted out over the water—I realised two young, black-bodied apes had joined the poolside ones.

In this way we found ourselves some twenty feet above the reservoir surface, and in a fine position to note details of the closest apes. Behind us
towered the volcano’s jagged rim rocks, looking like the ruins of castle battlements. I’m hardly a vulcanologist, but even I could see the reason why this spot remained ideal for undiscovered primate life. Not only had it been protected by the rim walls, but bird life and bats had brought fig seeds up to germinate, and over time these had eroded the granite into highly fertile soil. Wisps of mist rose from the pond surface like steam from bathwater.

To our right, now that we’d risen slightly above the canopy, lay a forest consisting of perhaps no more than two dozen trees, each one looking extremely old and wizened, with the same broad spread as the stunted fig. A single treetop brushing against the border with our boulder proved to be yet more chimp-forage, this time a native Garcinia. In fact, every tree in sight appeared to be an ape-forage tree.

Could this be mere accident, or had generations of the apes brought home seeds among their faeces until fruit trees outgrew everything else? Yet surely that wouldn’t have produced this singular cluster?

Suddenly Scholl hissed in my ear and pinched my arm at the same time. I followed his gesture with my new silver field glasses to zoom in on the ground at the feet of the squatting apes. From this vantage their faces looked oddly familiar—but I’ll come to that.

‘See what they’d doing?’ he whispered.

Carefully I nudged the focus dial until I saw what he indicated. All around the apes’ squatting forms lay scattered tiny black shells. Zeroing in, I recognised miniature mussels.

‘From the pond?’ I gasped. ‘But—they couldn’t be! Mussels could never have evolved up here—not in a volcano!’

‘No,’ he smiled, ‘of course not.’ Then he took the glasses back and swung them to gaze at the individuals on the bank. ‘Miss Lesky,’ he said, a trace of a wobble in his voice, ‘I think our friends down there are farmers.’
I haven’t always been prone to nightmares, but I’ve always been what one might call a dreamer. However something odd has happened to me up here. Sleep seems to come with the speed of a light turned off, and I never dream. Perhaps what happens in daily life is rich enough already.

Furthermore, I’ve found the source—or, rather, sources—of the large pond. Some of the water definitely comes from run-off seeping around the edges of the rim. The crater is probably six hundred feet across, and such a wide expanse will naturally collect a good deal of rainwater. But even in the dry season, when the soil could be expected to dry out, the steep rim walls perform a secondary feat (aside from maintaining privacy from the rest of the world). They condense the water vapour right out of the air. When I put my hand to the wall this morning, it came away soaked. I’m reminded of those mist-collection screens set up on the hills above Los Angeles.

For the first hour or so after we woke, having set one tent up on the ledge (and, yes, sharing it platonically in our exhaustion), none of the apes would emerge to scrutiny, and it seemed we’d upset them after all. To ease my anxiety and perhaps his boredom, Scholl and I made notes of all the plants we could see, most unknown, including a type of water-rush or lily. It seems to grow upright at the water margins, reaching a height of perhaps three feet above the liquid, being of some central, waxy stalk with opposite, serrated, slightly wavy pale green leaflets. These appear to shiver on the air, perhaps with the movement of water creatures below. I think the stalks must be round in cross section, and probably hollow, a little like bamboo or bulrushes. Above the leaf arrangements each plant has a single, tapering flower spike of pallid
rose. Tiny soft blooms hang out on either side like Christmas bells, waving waxily. Scholl remarked that he’d never seen anything like it before either.

These lilies or rushes grow in ten-foot long staples to either side of the pool, perhaps where water flow and depth suit its form. In the midst of the pond itself we saw no vegetation at first, but after zeroing in to maximum magnification I caught the subtle waving of the long, thin and extremely pallid fronds of some kind of underwater plant. Right below us, around the pond’s edges, so dark that they, too, are easily overlooked, sit miniature lily-pads.

From here we can easily see that the flat area surrounding the lake has been worn into discrete paths. Copious herbaceous plants grow here, some similar to the wilder gingers we’d seen on the slopes; others, as already noted, like bulrushes. Some are tall, reddish and multi-stemmed, like waist-high grasses, only the blades are thicker and succulent. Others adhere to rock or sprawl indifferently over mounds and scattered stones, such as a patch of tendril climbers with tiny grey leaves.

Both Scholl and I lay on our stomachs to reduce our profiles to any creature that might look up. Whenever we had to shift position we tried to move slowly and with little sound. Even so, it took a very long time before anything happened; and when it did, it surprised us unutterably.

We both heard the plop of a stone dropping into the pond.

‘Did you dislodge something?’ Scholl muttered.

‘No. Did you?’

We gazed down for ages, listening.

‘There,’ I said, pointing at what appeared to be the origin of a series of ripples, though I could see nothing below the water’s surface. ‘And there!’ I whispered. Another plop, this time at the edge of the pool just below the doorway into the crater.

‘I don’t think it’s an animal in the water,’ Scholl murmured. He slithered forward perhaps six inches, so close to the edge now that I could envisage him slipping away. I felt half inclined to grasp his feet, just in case; but to do so
might have startled him into falling. Looking down through his spyglasses, he waited a very long time, motionless as an owl.

The plop came again. I’d been scanning the surroundings of the pool, where a few reedy plants had begun waving unnaturally.

‘Got it,’ Scholl grunted, and turned to me. ‘They are tossing them in,’ he said, and began to laugh.

‘Throwing stones?’ At that moment I happened to glance toward the rushes nearest the dwelling-mound. And that’s when I saw a black sticklike arm rise out of the wavy undergrowth, bend in the middle, and hurl something.

‘But why are they doing it?’

‘Who knows?’ Breath hissed through his teeth. ‘Perhaps, to scare us away.’

The throwing soon stopped, either because we failed to react, or because it hadn’t been about us at all. Then the fernery began to move in several places at once. A kind of warbling vocalisation erupted, first in the section nearest the keyhole, then either moving or being answered in a chain about the pond. It didn’t sound chimp-like, for it contained more of a melodious quality, whereas the daily progress of a chimpanzee community through the forest is usually punctuated by noisesome screams. These apes wouldn’t have been heard by us if we’d been twenty feet more distant.

We listened for as long as it lasted, Helmut Scholl’s face split into something that might have been a grin of pleasure or a grimace of fear. His hair, which, in the half-sunlight and half-dappled shade held a greenish tint, poked upward in slept-on spikes. After a moment he reached for his voice recorder, but barely had he turned it on before the calls ceased.

Then Scholl did something that at first appalled me because it might scare them, and then irritated me because I hadn’t thought of it.

He lobbed something over the edge of the rock. We heard a chinking sound and then a low-down splash.

Once again the fernery below us erupted. Dark figures scampered out, made feinting motions at the water and fled back into the undergrowth again,
their postures crouching like those of chimps, but with no apparent hand to
ground contact. But opposite our ledge, a quizzical creature emerged, raised its
face (I won’t say ‘snout’) and sniffed the air.

It stood a little under five feet tall (hard to estimate from our height) and
from its posture appeared knee-locked, just like the old hybrid Henry. It even
had his balding head (though other figures I’d glimpsed had fringes about their
faces, like parka fur). Chimpanzees possess prominent eyebrow-ridges and a
chinless underjaw, while the extinct bonobo had a slightly more upright face,
but none came close to the short-snouted appearance of this creature.

His eyebrow ridges barely covered his eyes. Instead, as in humans, his
cranium appeared to rise steeply from the brow and, though lower than a
human forehead, the shape seemed similar. His eyes, when studied closely,
looked rather human also, with clear white margins telling of a social need to
convey expression and intent. His nose, when the creature briefly turned his
face to glance across the pond, looked more strongly profiled than a classic
chimpanzee nose, but not yet as protuberant as that of the proboscis monkey.
His facial skin was neither grey nor black, but a sheeny sort of beige, and at the
point below his mouth—I suppose his ‘chin’—lurked a tuft of hair like a tiny
Colonel Sanders beard. His ears, set low on the skull, certainly appeared
smaller than chimp ears.

Did I say ‘his’? Of course I couldn’t tell; by his height and baldness he
certainly appeared male, but he stood with his body half-turned toward us, the
lower half facing away. At the same time, one of his arms lay cupped about
something we couldn’t see because his shoulder shielded it—was it an infant?
When this creature turned at a movement we saw another animal move out of
the shrubbery and stand beside him. They appeared to use a stooped motion to
scamper to a hiding place, but their favoured posture remains upright. This
creature looked slightly smaller and had less hair on its breasts than the first.

‘Female,’ opined Scholl, coughing dryly.

‘Or juvenile.’ We couldn’t tell; the lower half of the second ape lay in
shadow, its genitalia obscured. Female bonobos did have definite breast-
swellings once sexually mature, but chimpanzees, unless lactating, don’t. However we had no idea what the case might be with these specimens. As for sexual dimorphism—degree of difference in size or shape between the sexes—this, too, seemed inconclusive.

We waited. Then all of a sudden the first ape yawned. In chimpanzees, yawns often indicate aggression. But this yawn, head turned sideways, seemed to be something else, for with the yawn came a soft, almost inaudible vocalisation, something like an exhalation of relief.

Slowly, cautious and then curious heads and arms appeared. One small ape creature scuttled to the pond and dipped a hand in, then flicked a spray of water that might have been aimed at us. It seemed very like an ordinary chimpanzee’s behaviour—a little daring, naughty, even. This infant had a darker pelt as well, like chimpanzee hair, but a more rounded skull shape and those lower ears. Unlike the bonobos I’d seen on autopsy tables, however, these apes couldn’t be confused with chimps, even by laypeople.

‘I don’t think they’re a subspecies,’ I whispered to Scholl, who agreed.

All at once the first creature turned, and my suspicion that it held an infant was confirmed. A tiny, grey-headed creature turned its head against the adult’s chest and appeared to suckle. Scholl did a double-take, hard to do when lying on one’s belly. ‘Female?’ he sputtered. ‘I don’t believe it!’

‘No, Scholl—look!’ I pointed excitedly. A set of male genitalia appeared between the animal’s thighs, small but bobbing as he moved.

We couldn’t tell if the ape actually lactated for the infant—perhaps the young one had been merely questing for a nipple rather than suckling—but the longer the male ape nursed the infant, the more singular and startling it seemed. Baboons, of course, frequently use infants as a way of getting attention, sometimes even manufacturing status out of the theft of a young one, but such activities are more in the way of disruptions than norms. Here I saw classic maternal bonding between an infant and an adult male.

From the moment of the ape’s yawn-sound, the flat area about the pond began to bustle with activity. Shyly, other apes soon ambled out of the fernery
and moved about the edges of the pond. Some squatted; some picked at waterside weeds; some began to filter their hands through the water as though hunting small fish.

We watched for the next four hours, growing increasingly uncomfortable but also increasingly determined to capture as many facts as possible. At one point it got so hot on top of our ledge that we had to draw back into the shade of a small overhang to wait for late afternoon. It’s that time now, and Scholl and I are both so wilted we’re in danger of falling off our perch. In all this time, the tiny infant—which looks to be no more than a few days old—never left the crook of the male one’s arm.

A short time ago I said to Scholl—our lips virtually glued by now from thirst, as we’ve been too absorbed to eat or drink—‘Do you think he’s stolen that infant, and it’s perhaps going to starve?’ This is the fate of many infant apes—chimps as well as baboons—abducted for sport or status, though occasionally a lead male baboon will intervene to take the baby back to its mother in time to nurse. But in all ape communities, infants are involved in power plays; for instance, mid-ranking female chimps will often monitor the births of those lower down to see that none are social-climbing by having more than their share of babies.

However I’ve never seen an abduction happen without the mother expending a great deal of energy trying to get her infant back. Even where the mother finally seems to forget about the baby (rare enough) there’s usually a sense of guilt in the thief’s demeanour; he or she tends to scuttle between other monkeys, hiding the prize; and often all the monkeys are made uneasy in the process. When the thief sits down to nurse the stolen baby he or she usually doesn’t know what to do.

This male had seemed completely comfortable with his borrowed appendage. He held it to his breast the way a mother chimpanzee does, arm curled protectively under the baby’s back and his fingers curled around its bottom. He used his other hand to move foliage aside as he thrust through the rushes.
We’ve also learned that these apes do generally walk upright, especially when relaxed. (When startled into hiding they tend to run forward, not so much on all fours as occasionally touching the ground with one hand in passing.) But all the apes we’ve seen move around the perimeter of the lagoon did so in a fully upright state. The big male, for instance, uses his knuckles approximately a tenth of the time that he’s up and about, if that. I think it’s safe to say that the upright walk has developed out of a form of squaring up or posturing, because they never use any other method of ambulation when approaching one another. The males in particular, so far as we’ve seen, will always come together front-on (unless, as happened earlier, they’re aware of something unusual like our intrusion, and are looking away from each other, or unless one is male and one female, in which case the front-on approach will sometimes vary). The knees don’t lock into position when they’re walking, but as soon as each ape stops, the leg straightens fully. When two males stand together, even if they’ve swung away from each other to take in something else, their knees stay locked.

Yet another interesting moment came just a moment ago, while I was writing the last few paragraphs. As I finished, there came a sudden noise like scratching from directly below us. I had to clamber almost to the edge to peer down.

‘What do you see?’ asked Scholl, still sketching.

‘I think you should look.’ I heard him sigh, put his pencil down and slither to my side. His shoulder pressed lightly against mine.

A fairly small male had come to the water’s edge below us, where it almost met the base of the dwelling-mound. As we watched, he rubbed a piece of rock the size of his fist against the boulder. His motions appeared highly organised, and every so often he lifted the rock, examined it closely and began rubbing again.

‘My God,’ I said, ‘he’s sharpening it!’

All at once the young ape sprang into the pond, not in a dive, but in a swinging, graceless flop, his body disappearing but his head emerging and
shaking water from his parka-like fringe. None of the other apes looked his way. He inched forward in the water, apparently concentrating. A few moments later, having no doubt felt along the bottom of the pond with his toes, the animal suddenly duck-dived. We both watched, flabbergasted. When he reappeared—again, ducklike—he’d reached the far side of the pond, holding something in his fist.

He clambered out and fiddled with his booty—not one, but two things. One turned out to be a mussel. The other, his sharpened rock, he used like a knife, inserting it between the lips of the mussel and twisting it open like a tin of boot polish. Then he slurped up the mussel flesh, scraped the lid clean, and threw the empty shell among the bushes before jumping into the water to find another one.
Remember those Japanese macaques who spend hours each day languishing in hot springs surrounded by snow? The warmth alone keeps them submerged to the neck. I’ve never seen it happen anywhere else.

But a little earlier, something scared the apes. (It’s tomorrow now; I’m not quite sure of the day.) The animals, as one, all listened out; and then at the faintest of shrill whistles—more like a bird again—they all flopped into the belly of the pond. For half an hour they stood up to their breasts in water, or in some cases up to the chin.

But whatever alarmed them—not Scholl or myself—moved away, giving a fleeting impression of a shadow flashing across the rim walls. Suddenly the apes in the water grew voluble again, this time in a series of pitched whines, and as though soothing themselves they began to form clusters of three or four, chattering incessantly among themselves. We counted twelve apes in these groups before a sudden motion to our right, among the dwelling-mound, caught our attention.

Of course a small community of apes couldn’t keep from extinction—at least that’s conventional wisdom. Incest supposedly destroys the gene line eventually. But neither Scholl nor myself had expected the dwelling-mound to be full of apes.

I mean that very literally. Every doorway, it turns out, had been occupied. For the last few days they must have settled for nocturnal feeding and spent the daylight hours watching us, because we could hear activity on the ledges after nightfall (we didn’t like to subject them to round-the-clock scrutiny; besides, our flashlights are hardly capable of it).
Now, out of every crevice in that rock, we saw motion. Infants tumbled down; larger adult females scampered on all fours until they reached the flat area by the pool, at which point they all stood upright and adopted those posturing, strutting walks. We counted fifty-nine, possibly sixty individuals. Then every last ape—man, woman and child—moved (a little like the beach scene in *Jaws*, only in reverse) into the pond. With a great flailing and splashing, they soon formed a cluster filling at least half the pool, infants held high over heads, pressing together like sardines in a tin. At first I expected a predator of some sort, but now I believe they were performing some sort of ritual.

Chimpanzees usually groom one another after an upset; it’s a practice they use to cement internal bonds and reassure one another that the hierarchy is untroubled. They’re not precisely reciprocal, but rather the submissive chimpanzee will usually spend more time grooming its senior than the reverse; and females spend more time grooming males. (Bonobos used to form clusters like this for grooming sessions, but the sessions usually self-terminated, since their preferential way of resolving communal disharmony was to copulate.) But these greyish apes began moving into shallower parts of the pool, some even joining little clusters standing up on a submerged rock, to begin mutual grooming. Where an ape found itself alone, it quickly sought a couple and formed a trio. No ape—male or female—lent itself to being groomed without grooming another one at the same time. They nibbled and fiddled with one another’s shoulder and scalp hair, picking and tweezing. And then every so often, with a kind of surreptitious (or, rather, deft) speed, one of the grooming apes would suddenly reach into another’s line of sight, pucker up the lips and plant an extraordinarily delicate kiss on the other’s cheek or lips. Even the infants performed this oddly human ceremony.

This went on for at least forty minutes and began to seem almost parodic, as though somehow we had stumbled onto a little band of saucy entertainers whose chief goal must be to embarrass primatologists. Scholl positively writhed in discomfort once it appeared the ritual would continue for most of the day. However eventually a pattern emerged. Some of the smaller
apes (both male and female, though we only noticed this once they had left the water or climbed up on rock perches; quite a few older females are actually taller than the first male ape we saw) appeared to be rejected out of it. The kisses soon favoured a few of each cluster—Scholl believes this might indicate status; I had a feeling it might be to do with oestrus—and then the clusters broke into couples, only one doing the kissing. Now the kissing took place at an almost frenzied frequency, and the non-kissers stopped doing any grooming at all. Those who had been dismissed (or who had opted to quit the game early) left the pool. The ones who had been receiving the favoured kisses stayed somewhat hunched in the pond the longest. But eventually even these small kissing partnerships broke up, and, glancing about, the last kissers slowly waded to the edge and clambered out.

As they climbed from the water, several apes in the mass of animals came forward clutching something. Once again our eyeglasses showed these to be infants. Those carrying the infants proved to be mostly (but not all) female, while most of the apes that had remained in the water longest turned out to be male (but again, not all). As we watched, incredulous, the five landed apes snuggled up to the waterlogged ones and, rubbing against them, gradually handed over their infants.

Now the drier apes, freed from nursing, began to graze among the reed stems and other plants. The animals fresh out of the water began strutting, as though proud of each one’s breast-held infant. All the other apes occupied themselves in either getting out of these strutters’ way, or, as we saw a little later, gathering food for them.

It appears as though either sex can equally nurse the infants—though we have yet to see evidence of males lactating. But when we look very closely, it is certain that the babies are really suckling.

Eventually the apes scattered themselves, some returning to the water to splash and play, others lingering at the edge to nibble on weeds, and still more ambling up the rocks to disappear into the fig grove behind the dwelling-mound. A few younger apes played stone-throwing games at one another; they
seemed to have no clear relations to a ‘mother’ ape, but rather, when hit by a stone, went running to the nearest adult and cowered in his or her shadow. As for sexual breakdown, though it’s sometimes difficult to ascertain, we think there are roughly half of each.

When the day had finished and the apes—by now, it seems, used to us—had clambered up their ledges to sleep inside their caves, Scholl turned to me. He’d barely opened his mouth—and I’ve no idea what he meant to say—when a thunderous shower hit, having sneaked over the rim of the volcano in time with the encroaching darkness. Half laughing and half drowned, we flung ourselves into the tent, realising as we did so—one after the other—that he’d left his journal, and I’d left my new field glasses, outside. There followed an insane scrabble before, collapsing once again into the sanctuary, we lay on our bed rolls listening to the storm.

‘June Lesky,’ he shouted. The hammering of the rainstorm made it very difficult to hear precisely.

‘Yes?’ I yelled over the roaring noise.

‘It is time, no?’

‘Time for what?’

Water ran in rivulets down his face, slicking his silvery hair to his pale pink scalp. ‘We must head down the mountain before the season sets in fully.’

‘We could make a boat,’ I joked. ‘We could float it down the stream. There’s no hurry to go now.’

‘You are intractable, woman!’

The rain let up slowly, turning to a steady pour. Cold moisture chilled the tent floor and slid slickly off the walls. After a moment I heard Scholl give a deep sigh.

‘So have you been thinking about a name for the apes, Helmut? He said, ‘Something about the nose, I suggest.’

The nose? I said, ‘You mean like the proboscis monkey? Nasalis larvatis? But our apes don’t have that big a nose!’

‘Nevertheless, it is larger than the other Pans.’
We toyed with Pan Nasalis; it just seemed wrong. Scholl was convinced this would sound terrible but be perfectly apt—as typical a scientific name as any, I suppose.

I said, ‘But the nose doesn’t seem integral to this creature’s existence. It doesn’t capture the essence of it, don’t you see?’

He eyed me with a hint of irritation. ‘Then you have a suggestion?’

It came to me in an instant, then, a flash of something like genius (or a desire to get under the man’s skin)—‘Pan osculatus.’ I thought about it; corrected myself. ‘No: osculans.’ Latin wasn’t exactly a strong point.

‘Pan osculans?’ A diffident pause; a snort. ‘But what means this “Osculans?” Is it something to be used in science? Is it a proper term? Is it bedpan, a dishwashing detergent, a type of scrubbing brush?’

‘It’s Latin,’ I reassured the German primatologist. ‘It means “kissing”. Pan osculans: the kissing ape.’

I think it might have been proper here for Scholl to faint; or have a fit. His face drained of colour; his features turned brick red, like Santa Claus in Christmas cartoons: red nose; red cheeks; white hair; blue eyes. Then abruptly he slithered out of the tent into the rain, where I could hear him for a long time afterward, kicking at utensils and storming about.

But no matter how often he’s broached the subject since—and I can hear him outside the tent now, making ‘ahem’ noises, probably hoping I’ll come out to discuss it further—I’ve resolutely failed to budge. I just kept nodding, listening to his arguments—Pan hortulanus, for God’s sake: the garden ape; Pan volcanus; he even quibbled with ‘Pan’—I remain adamant.

Do you think I should invite him inside to end the argument? We could always toss a coin or draw straws. Or maybe, as has been coming on for days, we could admit that actually we’re a bit taken with each other. Then the married primatologist and the spinster could at least spend their last few hours on the rock holding hands. That wouldn’t break any laws, I think.
I’ve finally managed to sort out the arrangements. Of course we’ve had two whole days of argument and stony silence, but the rainstorms have brought Helmut Scholl to reason at last. His books are full of notes and drawings; his camera disks bulge with images; and even he, I gather, has reached the point of recognising what must occur.

You’ll think me mad, Bea, but I’m happier than I’ve ever been.

He’ll set out at first light for the Induction Centre, where he’ll find our friends Kefin and Joseph. Mulumba will be jeeping around his various village centres; Hiro and Yumi will be home in Tokyo sitting silent and uncomfortable in boardrooms. Scholl will explain to the world that poor June Lesky, who had delusions about helicopters in her middle years, fell into a ravine on the way down. With our maps so faulty, it won’t surprise anyone when my body isn’t found. The expedition will be deemed a failure. The funding bodies will prefer to forget they invested in it.

But twelve months later, back in German comfort, Scholl will make his announcement. The world will see the first glimpses of a new species of ape, one that lives in perfect harmony within a limited environment and uses infant care as the basis for social rituals. The first of the helicopters will start buzzing the skies above the crater. Presumably I’ll be down here waving to them to keep back.

I know you’ll have suffered as a result of my ruse, Bea. But think of the gain to science! A year’s freedom for me to study and learn. A year to figure out ways of keeping the new species safe from us. By then I’ll have filled page after page of spare journals with observations. Think of how our society could
benefit from this information! We might find ways around aggression, Bea. Ways to survive being human—I’d like to think it isn’t too late to try.

Amazingly, my old acquaintance the leaf-blower has been back, clambering within half a dozen stone steps of my sitting-place to whistle softly at me. For some reason the ape always waits till Scholl is asleep—isn’t that sweet (yes, I know I’m anthropomorphising)? Just after moonrise—very bright and full earlier tonight—he rattled about in the undergrowth and brought some cluster figs, leaving them a couple of steps above where he’d been sitting and then scampering into the shrubbery, presumably to watch. Scholl would probably say they’re full of dangerous germs, but I ate them an hour ago with no ill-effects. The worst that could be said was they were a little gritty.

So there you have it, Bea—my life as an ape. I’m about to go in to shake Scholl’s shoulder and see if he wants a cup of tea. Dawn is gearing up to flood the crater rim; the stars are dimming.

I’ll leave you with a quandary, because it’s just unfolding as I sit here. All my life, as you know, I’ve been studying the nature of chimpanzees.

But what if apes are no more natural than we are? What if they’ve arrived at their social forms largely by accident, some combination of resource pressure, accident, preference, self-perpetuating necessity—fad? But once chimpanzees began male-bonding, using war to manage aggression in their own community, they forced all other communities to do it too. You can’t fight against war without being warriors.

So here’s the quandary—how do we stop the cycle if we’re inside? Your husband, Bea, does he have the power to do it? Or do you yourself, in your white-walled mansion with your blank canvases and endless public relations tasks to perform so he can get to the next platform in his career?

Maybe it’s like asking the waters to part. An act of god or earthquake; a miracle.

Yet I keep thinking back to that old zoo matriarch. Somehow she had it in her to be a leader. What would have happened if she hadn’t been forcibly returned to a ‘natural’ state? Would she have taught her young to behave in the
same way? And if her offspring had learned to quell aggression by forming strong female bonds, then would they have become a whole new species of ape? And if those apes had gone out in the world and thrived and on the way bumped into aggressive male-bonded apes… Well, who would be the ones ruling the world? What’s nature, anyway, if it isn’t cultural?

Or as Scholl would have it, ‘Death is the only certainty.’

But I think he’s just trying to talk me out of it.

*June Lesky,*

*April 2012, Africa.*
Our Lady of the Sorrows
At school Alice had a sore throat. She lay on a hammock bed with grey blankets, like a toy forgotten in a spare room. Voices kept drifting in through the doorway from the main office. She heard, ‘Can’t get hold of the mother,’ and, ‘I wonder if it’s anything to do with what’s on the news?’

The sick bay had no windows and contained the office photocopier and two smudged grey cupboards. A white sink sat below a row of hanging coffee cups, their rims stained an ugly brown. She could see fuzz on the pipe curving underneath the sink, which made her think of germs.

Beyond the sick bay lay a short hall leading to the main office. An elderly teacher came in from the playground to use the photocopier, only noticing Alice when she went to set her papers down on the bed.

‘Oops! My goodness!’ The woman recoiled, her red-lipsticked mouth drawn back across gold-capped teeth. ‘What’s your name, dear?’

‘Alice.’

The woman poked a set of pages into the copier and pressed the button. Light whooshed across her chest in a thin stripe. ‘And what’s wrong with you today?’

‘I’ve got tonsillitis,’ Alice said.

‘Tonsillitis! That’s a big word for a young girl.’

Momentary pride swelled Alice’s throat. ‘I can even spell it, too: T-O-N-S-I-double-L-I-T-I-S.’

‘Gosh—my goodness!’ The woman teased her copies out of the slot. Then she left the room quickly, giving Alice a sharp glance.
Lying back on the cushions, Alice could see starlings on a branch just outside the window in the hall. She could have told the teacher they were starlings if the woman had seemed interested. She could have named the tree, too: *banksia*. But she remembered that people didn’t like an eight-year-old telling them everything.

Her mother had explained this one day when Alice had started crying about having no friends. She’d wanted so badly to make friends in the new school that she’d tried too hard, and failed. It didn’t make sense to Alice, who’d been brought up to believe in fairness.

‘But why don’t they care I’m trying?’

‘Honey,’ her mother had said, ‘you shouldn’t keep trying to show people how smart you are all the time. Just listen and follow what they do, and you’ll soon make friends.’

But that hadn’t happened. Alice had tried for a little while, gulping down her pride to stand in the girl-huddle comparing bracelets and electronic pets, but the other girls always moved away. One of them had said as a parting shot, ‘Your dad’s a fascist.’

The worst part was that Alice even knew what a fascist was, and her dad wasn’t it. Sitting her on his knee, he’d explained fascism, democracy and communism. Fascism was the belief that people were by nature either rich or poor; democracy was rule-by-ignorance, but at least people felt they had a say; and communism was having everything meaningful given away for free so that eventually nobody worked at all.

‘What one are you, Daddy?’

‘Right in the middle of all three, Poppet.’

‘So which one’s right?’

‘Well,’ he’d said, frowning, ‘nobody’s found that out for sure yet. But you can bet when they do there’ll be opposition.’

Now a curly-haired, freckled woman came into the sick bay and frowned at Alice. ‘I’m sorry, poppet, but your mother isn’t answering her mobile phone. Do you have anyone else we could call?’
'There’s Dad.’

‘I don’t think we can interrupt your father at work, honey.’

‘What about Samantha?’ Alice blurted the name before she had time to think, and suddenly that was the person she most wanted to see. But it made her feel guilty at the same time. Her mother didn’t like Samantha much.

‘How do we contact her?’

‘You can call Dad’s office.’ When the woman looked confused Alice added, ‘She works with him.’

The curl-headed woman sighingly went out. A short time later she came back, carrying Alice’s schoolbag and parking it in the doorway. ‘We’ve found the woman—Samantha—and she’s on her way. You didn’t tell me she’s a Major!’ She eyed Alice coolly. ‘I expect you’ll be relieved to see somebody you know, especially if you’re feeling sick.’

Samantha came at a quarter to eleven. She walked into the hallway quickly, darting glances all around the cluttered little room. When she saw Alice propped up on pillows she bent onto one knee through a slit in her neat olive skirt and gazed into Alice’s eyes. ‘Poor girl,’ she said, ‘you must be feeling pretty bad, to have to call me.’ She turned to one of the office women and said, ‘Have we got everything?’

The curl-headed woman said, ‘Just her school bag.’ The office women seemed abashed by the newcomer, probably because she was so beautiful. Samantha’s face looked perfectly smooth even up close, the skin a warm toffee, her dark hair pulled tight into a bun. She wore army insignia on her tight, neat jacket and no earrings, just tiny dark dots in her earlobes.

Alice wanted to parade her friend through the playground just to show everyone that she wasn’t a loner; that she did have friends. But all too soon they’d reached the car.

It sat at the kerb out the front of the school, a long back vehicle with enormous doors and windows you couldn’t see inside. A man in a chauffeur’s cap held the back door open and took Alice’s bag as they got in.
Alice loved riding in government cars. She loved the leather smell and the long, sleek dark body enveloping them. She could have ridden in a government car all day and not yawned once.

Her mother hated it. She would glare out the windows, stubbing her cigarettes out in the shiny ashtrays and complaining about the waste of petrol just to go shopping. She didn’t like government men following them, either, shepherding them into clothes shops and cosmetics boutiques. Once she’d taken Alice’s arm and pulled her in to a dressing room, giggling. ‘We’ll wait in here—watch them panic!’

By contrast, Samantha never seemed unhappy; never rude to drivers or security guards. She always spoke softly and clearly, without frown lines. ‘Do you want to go home first to get changed?’ she asked now.

Alice shook her head vehemently. She’d forgotten about having a sore throat; everything felt well now. They turned a corner, the car moving steadily and slowly like a parade float. Cars and buildings slid gracefully by. A man on a bicycle made a salute, perhaps joking. Not very many people drove cars any more. Her mother said it had to do with the price of petrol.

‘It’s a shame about your nanny,’ Samantha said, biting her lip. ‘But we can’t always see ahead to accidents, can we?’ Then she turned and looked into Alice’s face, peering very closely. ‘Are you very sad?’

Alice wondered why she was supposed to be sad when she didn’t even like Geraldine. ‘No,’ she said truthfully.

‘Oh?’ Surprise pulled Samantha back. ‘Well, then, never mind. Some day you’ll feel sad about these things, but it’s all right not to.’

‘Is she dead?’ said Alice.

‘No, she’s not dead, Ducky, but she won’t be helping your mother for a while.’

When Samantha said ‘mother’ she made it a very small word, like ‘oat’ or ‘crumb’.
Alice thought about the matter. If Geraldine couldn’t be her nanny now, maybe she’d get to pick one. They had to have a helper because her mother always had to go to political functions for Alice’s dad.

Alice could imagine having Samantha around, the way it would calm everything. There wouldn’t be those long arguments before her parents went to one of her father’s functions. Her mother called it ‘doing the night shift’, getting dressed up into shiny clothes so she wouldn’t look ‘too awful beside your Dad’, waiting impatiently for Geraldine to arrive so she could hurry to the big black car, forgetting her purse and having to come back for it. Maybe Alice’s mother would even have more time for her art.

They could live in the big white building where her father worked, and Alice could come and go between offices, drawing with clicky silver pens and playing hide and seek in all the rooms. She could draw pictures on people’s blotters, a thing she’d done once before when a carer couldn’t turn up to mind her after school and her mother had been in hospital with pneumonia.

They rounded the corner before her father’s workplace, threading serenely between buses and taxis until they reached the entry gate. Ahead of them, in the building’s wide green courtyard, an army truck sat unloading a cascade of stern-looking men. Alice saw real guns, not just toys, as the men came out and stood to attention on the lawn.

‘Things aren’t normal right now,’ Samantha said, just as the sentry gates began to swing open.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Oh, just busy for a change, that’s all.’

They drove up to a boom gate and stopped. Alice knew it was a boom gate because she’d asked the sentry, and ever since then she’d liked imagining the sound it would make when it came down on a naughty car. It pleased her when words fulfilled their duty of expressing what a thing was. But today the boom gate didn’t open right away, and in a minute, two German Shepherds on leashes stuck their noses under the car, thumping against the metal under Alice’s feet. When Alice giggled and lifted her heels, Samantha said, ‘Sit still.’
The driver just kept staring out to the side and Samantha yawned, the back of her right hand with its braided silver ring parked neatly over her mouth.

Then the boom gate lifted, and they drove around the back of the building. The road dipped into a large, brightly lit car park. The driver eased the car into a spot against a big square pylon and looked expectantly at Samantha.

‘Do you want me to wait here, Major?’ he asked over his shoulder. He had black eyes and a hooky nose like a statue of an eagle.

Samantha looked at Alice then, her eyes figuring. ‘No, thank you.’ She didn’t smile, but after a moment she suddenly patted Alice’s hand. ‘Come on.’

They went through a set of glass doors that opened when Samantha pressed her thumb into a little green pad, finding themselves inside a lift-well. When they got in the lift Samantha finally slumped, her body leaning against the sheeny metal wall. ‘I’m tired,’ she said, as though to herself.

They came out of the lift and passed through a giant office called ‘open plan’. Alice remembered this part of the office because it had been the fun part, hiding under all those desks, giggling up at everyone. Gosh, how old had she been? She must have been very little, almost a baby. It seemed weird to remember it so well, but she never played on the floor now; floors were full of germs.

She kept expecting the fun to start immediately. When she’d been here before, everyone had smiled. Two young staffers had shown her how to make paper planes that could fly all the way across the office partitions using aerodynamics. They’d also made a basketball out of scrunched up paper and a hoop out of a coat-hanger, and spent all afternoon showing her how to do a ‘dunk-slam’. But today all the men and women sat hunched at computers. A man with a shiny white scalp said, ‘What’s a kid doing here?’ Then he caught sight of Samantha, ducked his head and went back to work.

When they reached Samantha’s office, the woman who sat nearest the doorway and usually ran errands for Samantha stood to attention and saluted. Her face looked as though someone had pinched it, blotchy and unpleasant.
She had fine blonde hair pulled back hard into a ponytail, and her uniform consisted of boyish long pants covered with patches like the shadows of fallen leaves. Her chin, short and round, carried dimples that made her look about to cry. Her nameplate said ‘Marron’; Samantha called her ‘Sarge’.

‘You’re wanted in the Blue Room,’ said Marron harshly. Her glance slid off Alice with a flicker of distaste.

Checking her watch, Samantha steered Alice into her wide, venetianed office and parked her on a cool black leather chair near a window so she could look out. Like all Samantha’s things the desk looked tidy, in-and-out-trays neatly stacked, bookshelves uncluttered. A lemony smell clung to everything. A stationery tray held four sharpened HB pencils, two biros, a chained stapler and box of staples, and a pile of plastic multicoloured paperclips. On the filing cabinet sat a photograph in a frame; with a jolt Alice realised the young woman in the picture with a square black hat on her head was Samantha at a younger age. She couldn’t know who the older man and woman were, though; they just looked the way all old people do, sort of nice and finicky.

Alice had thought she’d spend all afternoon with Samantha, here in the room. But now the woman stooped, touched Alice’s cheek and murmured, ‘I have to go now. I’ve got lots of very important work to do downstairs.’

‘But why not do it here, at your desk?’ asked Alice, suddenly almost in tears. She didn’t want to be left here; didn’t want anyone she didn’t know to come near her. All of a sudden the sore-throat feeling came back.

‘I’m sorry, Alice. I’m needed downstairs. Sometimes events move too quickly and we have to act.’ Samantha crouched and flattened Alice’s cardigan seam. ‘It was all I could do to be the one to pick you up.’

‘But what events?’ said Alice. She wasn’t trying to hang onto Samantha precisely, but she sort of was. She knew when the conversation had finished Samantha would go.

‘Well,’ said Samantha, ‘it’s about the possibility that our country is going to fight to support another country.’ She pointed to the insignia on her shoulder. ‘This means it’s my job to help sort all that out, do you see?’
‘Yes,’ said Alice doubtfully.

Samantha straightened up again. ‘I’ll try to come back as soon as I can,’ she said. ‘Meanwhile, Sergeant Marron is going to be extra kind, and make sure you’re okay until I come back. Sergeant Marron is a very nice person, Alice. She has two daughters of her own, and is very good at looking after sick children, aren’t you, Sergeant?’

The other woman stood in the doorway, a bunch of papers in her hand. ‘Absolutely,’ she said, yawning. When she yawned, the blotches on her face seemed to expand.

Alice knew she shouldn’t say anything, but she couldn’t help it; she didn’t like Sergeant Marron. ‘But I could stay with Daddy,’ she said. ‘He won’t mind. He always says he likes having me around.’

Samantha frowned, the lines of her slender eyebrows suddenly moving together. Then she bent very close once more to Alice and looked in her eyes. ‘There are times,’ she said, ‘when you have to be a very big girl, Alice. Do you understand?’

‘All right.’ Alice bowed her head, sorry she’d kept asking. By the time she looked up again Samantha was already moving through the open plan section, checking her watch. Sergeant Marron stepped into the office. Alice leaned out past the woman to watch Samantha’s stockinged legs scissor away down the distant corridor.

‘Think you can just stay put?’ said Marron.

Alice nodded. Marron sighed in apparent relief. ‘I’ve got a ton of files to take down, everyone wants a piece of me today.’ When Alice had no answer to that, she frowned. ‘Look,’ she said, ‘if anybody comes, just say I’m back soon. Can you do that?’

‘Yes,’ said Alice darkly, spitting the word out. And then the woman ducked to her desk, grabbed a bunch of coloured folders from the shelves behind her chair, and, with one last glance at Alice, hurried away down the hall.
Alice sat on her hands swinging her legs below the chair. Sometimes she imagined the sore throat, and even felt herself growing hot in the legs and body, as though feverish. But then the feeling would pass, and she’d feel she’d tricked people; that what her mother sometimes said was true. Alice did make up stories to get out of school. Yet she had felt sick this morning! Her body was full of little betrayals like that, like being asked if you needed to go to the toilet: when somebody made it into words the feeling hid.

She sat painfully upright, clenching her hands between her knees. Nobody came in to see to her; nobody came to check. Marron didn’t return. At one time a kind of anxiety broke over the open plan office, and everyone crowded to a giant screen at the far end. Voices rose, and then grew hushed. As they drifted back to their desks, Alice saw that everyone looked angry. One man threw a paperweight at a bin, and the bin tipped over. The paperweight shattered. All eyes turned to the glass fragments; then a mild, young man in pale leaf-shadow trousers quietly started sweeping. A woman at the far partition blew her nose.

Alice stayed on the vinyl seat until the backs of her knees felt sore and her stomach felt about to burst. Darting glances into the office, she watched figures moving back and forth. But the movements gradually grew further away. The outside offices quietened; she heard somebody ask where someone else was going for lunch. Nobody remembered to come and check on her.

Suddenly the quiet frightened her. It felt she’d been alone for ages. The room looked different, the light on a slant.

Had everyone vanished? Maybe what Samantha had said about countries fighting had already happened. Enemy people—she imagined soldiers in red suits, with stars on their foreheads—might be on the way up to take Alice into a room so they could hurt her. They might stick pins into the ends of all her fingers and tell her it was good for her, like in a dream she’d once had about doctors.

But in a weird way, that might be better than being alone.
The cold grey lift doors remained tightly shut. Above the lift bulged a line of dots like spider eyes. The second dot in the line shone red, which meant the lift had stopped on the second floor. But no matter how often she pushed the call button, the light refused to change.

Breathing raggedly, she wormed her way around the offices. She couldn’t remember the way to the toilets. Every partition revealed a desk, papers, waste bin, apple cores, filing cabinets, and computer screens crawling with goldfish, but no sign of toilets. For the first time in years she had to struggle against wetting herself.

Suddenly, though, the light on the second floor indicator winked out. The floor began to tremble. Realising Sergeant Marron would be angry with her for having left Samantha’s office, Alice backed all the way to the central partition and waited. She watched, pinching at the webbing in the crease of each thumb, as the glow began to move from one dot to the next along. She pinched so hard that her fingernail left a red crescent-moon; but since she’d done it so hard on that side, she then had to pinch the other side that hard as well, to even up the sensations.

Then there came a muffled clunk, and the lift doors swooshed open.

Alice couldn’t recognise the man standing there. He looked too old to work here, and wore a police-type uniform. He put one black shoe out into the hallway to keep the doors from closing, and stuck his head further, glancing around.

‘Anybody up here?’ he yelled. The doors tried to close but he pushed them back. ‘Is there a little girl hiding anywhere here?’ He put his mouth to a
walkie talkie, saying something in a quiet voice, then looked around. ‘Somebody called “Alice”?’

She stepped out from behind the partition.

He gaped at her, scratching his head with the base of his walkie-talkie. His silver hair stood up all over the top of his head, like the hair of a mad professor. But he had a pleasant face like a giant teddy bear. ‘All righty then,’ he wheezed softly, ‘found at last.’

‘I wasn’t lost,’ Alice’s words said, almost of their own volition. She pressed her legs together so he wouldn’t see how badly she needed to find a toilet.

‘Well, found you are anyway,’ he said. He put a key inside a hole at the doors to the lift and locked them open. Then he came over near Alice and put a foot up on a spinny chair, which made it wheel and him nearly topple over. She could tell he hadn’t meant that to happen but he laughed anyway. ‘Haven’t you ever found something nobody lost?’

The feeling of being about to wet herself passed. ‘Like what?’

He crouched before her, big legs creaking at the joints. ‘Like, oh, um.’ Tufts of woolly hair waggled round his ears. ‘Like this.’ He pulled a coin out of somewhere near her collar, and showed it to her.

She giggled. ‘You put that there.’ But she wasn’t sure; maybe he really had just found it.

‘Did I?’ With a chuffed smile he stood up and put a plump, pink hand with white hairs sprouting from pale freckles out for her to grab. With the other hand he clipped his walkie talkie onto his belt. She’d been trying to read a word from sidelong on his shirt tag, and with a burst of joy realised it spelled Clifford, the name of a big floppy dog in a book that had been her favourite at three years old. She’d outgrown the book, but the name still made her smile.

‘Those people don’t know whether they’re Arthur or Martha sometimes. Lost child, they said. Level six, they said. But who’s this? Looks more like a princess, to me.’
Alice blushed. Not many people knew that she sometimes pretended to be a princess so that she wouldn’t have to feel lonely. Princesses often lived in high towers, and didn’t have to play stupid games with other girls.

‘Now, we have to go down a bit, of course, and round lots of corridors that go on for about a hundred miles,’ he said.

‘It’s not a hundred miles,’ she corrected, because she knew that much.

He pretended to wobble and nearly fall apart. ‘What? You’ve been here before? Not a fine young girlie like you! Though now I think about it you do look familiar.’ He turned her head by tipping her cheek. ‘Nope. I don’t know any princesses.’

‘My Dad works here,’ she said proudly.

‘Really?’ He led her into the lift, collecting his key. The lift started humming faintly. ‘Where’s your mother?’ He pressed a button low down on the wall and the doors shifted closed.

‘She’s down in Melbourne,’ she said.

‘Melbourne?’ The lift dislodged itself and began to descend. ‘My goodness. A mother in Melbourne. Doesn’t she like looking after you?’

Alice gave him a pale look. The urge to go to the toilet had come back, and she had to stop talking to pay attention to that. The idea of asking a strange man where a toilet was made her cringe.

‘What’s your name?’

‘Alice.’

‘Alice? As in... Alice and the Beanstalk? Alice and the Three Bears? Hang on, what’s that famous Alice story?’

‘It’s just my name.’ Again the sensation of urgency eased, and she uncrossed her legs and tried to stand up straight.

The lift clunked and when the doors opened she recognised the foyer. Clifford pushed her through to the front desk and stopped. A young, tidy man with black neatly parted hair looked at them warily, then with a sort of double-take smiled at Alice. ‘Remember me?’ he asked, but she didn’t. Immediately he switched to Clifford. ‘Did you get onto Personnel?’
'What in blazes for?'
'They want an internal head-count.'
'For goodness sake,' said Clifford, 'isn't that why we bundy on?'
'This is serious.' The man glanced at Alice and then leaned closer to Clifford. He mimed something like a plane landing with his hand and, under his breath, said, 'M-I-S-S-I-L-E.'

They both looked at Alice swiftly, but she pretended to be watching the soldiers. Clifford said, 'So where's the father, Farley? He work in the building?'

The desk man jumped a little. 'You've been in the cupboard or what, Clifty? He happens to be our boss.'

'You're joking!' Clifford stood back from the desk, appraising Alice up and down. 'I was right, I guess—you are a princess.' Suddenly he saw her jiggling. He spoke in a whisper, leaning down. 'Is there, hmmm, something you need just now, Missy?'

Alice blurted, 'Toilet.'

'Oh!' The desk man politely averted his face and Clifford swung around and ushered her along the foyer to a white door near a hallway. He sat himself on a flat low bench and she went inside by herself.

The room looked too bright and smelled of disinfectant, which always made her nose itch, but at least it was empty. She hated using a bathroom or toilet with anybody else in the room. People in books didn't use toilets. If she could have designed a perfect world it would have been one in which nobody had to use a bathroom except to have a bath.

When she'd finished and come out again, Clifford slapped his knees and stood up, his eyebrows pinched together above his nose. 'Ready, princess?' He put his freckly, rough-scored hand out and she took it shyly, walking with him toward a plain grey door in the middle of the foyer wall.

'Excuse me for not knowing who you were,' Clifford apologised. 'I usually monitor the car park, see? It's my job, like your daddy's job is to run the country. I'm sort of the Prime Minister of cars.' He paused to press his thumb into a special button on the wall, but it didn't open. He kept trying it, going red
in the face until finally a security guard came over and checked his pass and opened the door for him.

Beyond the door lay a glass-walled corridor overlooking a narrow garden courtyard. As they trotted along she glimpsed a wide pond full of multicoloured fish and, overlooking it, a statue of a woman in long robes. Alice wished she could go out into the garden, because it looked so organised and peaceful, but Clifford kept moving. ‘Back when I started,’ Clifford told her, ‘this building used to be just a barracks. I guess they decided to make it nicer for princesses, so they put in a fairy-garden. But when I came here it was just big square blocks, and if you wanted a coffee, you had to go up the street.’ The other side of the courtyard was made up of another building just the same as this one, with the same tall glass panels, so that Alice thought she might see a little girl just like herself being marched along that corridor, but of course she didn’t.

‘Are you taking me to Dad?’ Alice asked.

‘Oi?’ He seemed to have to unknot his thoughts. ‘On our way to the diner, little friend. I was told to get you a bit of lunch, or something to drink. Are you thirsty?’

She swallowed experimentally. ‘A bit,’ she admitted. ‘I was sick before, but I guess I’m better now.’

‘What?’ This disturbed him. ‘They left a sick girl up there—Jesus.’ Then he got all flummoxed. ‘Don’t mind me—I shouldn’t swear like that. People say hurting another person is bad, but words can do the worst damage of all. You should always be careful what you say.’

Alice said, ‘Like “missile”?’

Suddenly he stopped in the passage and turned to her, hands on his hips. His voice stayed low and quiet. ‘You are a smart girl,’ he said. ‘I forgot you’re clever. See, when I was a kid like you, I didn’t know nothing at all. Now I’m a grown up and I still know nothing! See this?’ Stooping in the middle of the hallway, he put his thumb between two other fingers and, reaching into a pocket, pulled out a pen to draw two dots on the knuckles. ‘Know what this is?
It’s a bulldog.’ She stared in amazement. His knotted hand did resemble a bulldog. He opened and shut his thumb and made barking sounds. ‘What I really want to be when I grow up is a circus clown,’ he told her. ‘Do you think I can be a circus clown if I grow up some day?’

The idea that he might have some growing to do made her laugh.

They reached the end of the corridor and passed through a door. Clifford led her between two rows of filing cabinets and a cubicle where a man in a black and white uniform sat with his feet on a desk.

The man jumped up and pressed a button, and Alice and Clifford had to stand between two tall metal objects while a buzzing sound moved over them. ‘See, if the machine finds out you’re thinking bad thoughts, it’ll zap you,’ the man said, laughing through his nose.

‘It’s not true, is it?’ Alice whispered to Clifford.

The old man stopped and tapped the young man’s tabletop. ‘This girl’s sharp as a whip,’ he said. ‘Watch what you say.’

‘Yeah, right.’ The other man thumped a big green button with the heel of his hand. ‘Chip off the old block, huh?’ His voice sounded nasty, like he didn’t like kids, or like he didn’t like anyone who had kids.

Then they found themselves in a long red room with giant, sleepy green armchairs pressed up against the walls. Instead of windows the walls had been hung with huge paintings of famous men, including the person Alice’s father had replaced, who looked down his nose at her. When she walked across the burgundy carpet the portraits’ eyes followed her like hungry dogs. The chink of dining trays could be heard through a far door, and a sharp smell like burnt toast and coffee wafted out.

‘You wait here, okay?’ Clifford said, propelling her into one of the chairs.

She counted squares on the carpet so she wouldn’t have to meet the accusing eyes of the paintings, or worry that Clifford had left her here the way Sergeant Marron had left her upstairs. She’d only gotten to forty-seven when he returned carrying a cup of tea and a glass, fizz popping above his hand.
‘Lemonade for the madam,’ he bowed. He had such thick white eyebrows they looked like caterpillars.

They sat side by side, Clifford sipping his tea, Alice slurping lemonade. Bubbles kept filling the straw.

Suddenly she heard a strange scratchy noise. Clifford leaned onto one arm of the chair and fished in his belt. He brought up the walkie talkie and talked quietly into it. She heard the word ‘Roger,’ and knew that meant he’d finished. ‘Looks like they’re finally taking a break,’ he said, when he put the walkie talkie away. ‘That means somebody should be coming soon to get you, and I’ll have to go off and work.’

‘Oh,’ said Alice, disappointed.

But he hadn’t finished giving her the news. ‘I’ve got another surprise for you, angel. Your mother’s on the way back. She cut her trip short, apparently.’

Alice put her glass down carefully on the arm of the chair. Her mother would be angry that she’d left school without being genuinely sick. Sometimes thinking of that could make Alice feel sick, like now.

Clifford smiled distractedly. ‘You know,’ he said conversationally, ‘when I was a kid, mothers never went away on trips. They were always at home. Then again, I hear your mother’s a busy sort of person.’

Alice nodded proudly. ‘She won a prize for a painting, and everything.’

He cocked an eyebrow at her. ‘No kidding? Well, that’s great. I can see you’re a strong young girl. Don’t mind being alone for a little bit?’

Alice shrugged.

‘Fact is,’ said Clifford, ‘being strong, maybe that’s better than being worried all the time. I can tell you one thing, worrying about stuff never makes it better.’ He eased his leg out in front and shook the trouser cuff down to cover his sock. ‘You know,’ he whispered, ‘I voted for your Dad. Do you know what voting means?’

She nodded. Voting meant putting a tick in a box to say you wanted that person to lead the country. The funny part was imagining Australia being led
around, like a dog on a leash. She was thinking how peculiar that would look when Clifford suddenly slapped his knee.

‘Gee whiz, you’re a clam,’ he said loudly. ‘If I didn’t know you were a princess, I’d suspect you were a spy. The really smart spies, they listen, they don’t talk. Are you a top notch spy or something?’

Alice wiped lemonade off her upper lip. ‘No,’ she said faintly.

He laughed and tapped her knee. ‘I was just joking,’ he said. ‘You know, you’re a lot more serious than I was at your age.’

A woman had come into the room to fetch coffee. It was Sergeant Marron. On her way out she saw Alice and came over, making a throat-clearing sound. ‘So that’s where you’ve got to,’ she said to Alice accusingly. Her blotches looked larger and brighter than ever. ‘I went back to the office and she’d run off,’ she complained to Clifford. ‘I just got an earbashing from you-know-who for it. Stuffed if it’s my fault.’

Clifford didn’t look impressed. ‘All I know is,’ he said, ‘I got up and the place was shut and there was a sick girl left on her own.’

‘That’s because we got an immediate four-oh-two,’ said Sergeant Marron.

‘I don’t see why you couldn’t get an aide or someone. Poor kid up there all alone.’

‘Jesus,’ she said, ‘I’ve already got two kids at home.’

He checked his watch. ‘Are you going to take her now?’

Sergeant Marron’s face grew more sour than ever. ‘Not me,’ she said. Then she stormed away.

‘You see that woman,’ said Clifford to her departing back. ‘That woman’s a witch. You know what witches are? Well, what I want to know is, who’s minding her kids?’

‘Their dad?’ she ventured.

Clifford made a snorting noise. ‘Probably.’ He peered into her lemonade glass and sighed. ‘Better finish your drink soon, kiddo. We ought to get moving.’
‘Where am I going?’ she asked.

‘The Blue Room. Heard of it?’

She had, but not in a way she remembered.

Just then another man came in. Clifford pointed to the top of Alice’s head and said to the man, ‘She doesn’t know the Blue Room, Dean.’

Dean peered at them both. He had a long, angular body and huge hands like a Gumby doll. Grunting, he went into the other room and came back in a moment with a Styrofoam cup of smelly coffee. ‘They’re all over you when they want something,’ he muttered, sitting down next to Alice. He stirred his cup with a wooden stick like in ice-blocks. ‘What’ve you got, anyway?’ he asked Alice in a squeaky voice. He peered into the dregs of her lemonade and grunted, slurping his drink unhappily. ‘Guess you’ve heard,’ he said to Clifford cagily.

‘Heard what?’

‘We’re about to go into lock-down.’

Clifford kept shaking his head and clicking his tongue. ‘I knew today was a bad day to come to work.’

‘Worse day not to, if you ask me,’ said the gumby-man. He scrunched his cup and tossed it into a bin as he left.

Clifford held a hand out for Alice. They went through a different door, a double one with flower pots to either side and red carpet. A woman sat in a kind of foyer at the end of the short hall, wearing a soft forest of pale brown hair and a bright floral shirt. She looked about fifty and had such long fingernails she had to type with her hands carefully held away from the keys. A pale tan coating frosted her face.

‘Hello,’ she beamed, winking. ‘This must be the little charge. How are you liking your day here, dearie?’

‘Very well, thank you,’ said Alice. She clutched Clifford’s hand a little tighter and looked around, hoping he wouldn’t leave her here. But all at once Clifford bent down, and she knew he was about to say goodbye.
‘I have to be going back to the car park. Be seeing you, huh?’ He tipped Alice’s chin with a forefinger, then with a last bristle of his eyebrows set off down the corridor, walking with one shoulder higher than the other.

She hoped she got to see him again. But somehow she knew she probably wouldn’t. Things never stood still, around here.
Her father sat at a giant oval table in his shirtsleeves, tapping a gold pen on the polished timber. Before him lay a folder flagged with red and yellow tabs, but as Alice walked in—past Samantha, who sat on a chair just inside the doorway—he suddenly shut it and put it aside.

‘Hello, petal. Still feeling sick?’

‘No,’ she said.

‘Well, that’s good.’ He gestured her closer, onto a chair next to him. ‘Did you hear from your mother at all?’

‘No.’

He didn’t seem surprised, and didn’t look at her for a moment. ‘Well, not to worry. Been a funny day, huh? Do you want a drink?’

‘No thank you, Daddy.’

He pinched his forehead and squeezed two lines down the middle, between his brows. His hair looked ash grey instead of blonde, and when he leaned toward her she could smell sweat beneath the starchy fragrance of his shirt. ‘Well I want one,’ he murmured. He nodded to Samantha and she reached for a decanter on a long low sideboard near the door, poured out a glass of water and brought it over. Then she sat down a few seats away from Alice, while his father drank half the glass and sat it on the table with a clink.

‘Okay,’ he sighed. ‘Where do I start?’ He leaned forward, his pale hair toward her so that she could see the pink of his crown. Then he lifted his chin and rested it on his steepled hands. ‘I was going to bring you here after school, to avoid some of this,’ he said softly. ‘But now that you’re here, you’ve probably already noticed this isn’t a normal day. A bit later we’re going to go
into this thing called “lock-down”, and you’ll find that you can’t wander about any more. In fact, we’ll all be pretty much locked in for a while, maybe even a couple of days. It’s all just until the current crisis resolves, which should be soon.’

‘We’re not going home even to sleep?’

‘Not even to sleep.’ He frowned slightly. ‘Now, you may find people start acting a little weird once they realise they can’t go home, maybe even saying they feel worried. I want you to ignore anything other people say, and just listen to Samantha and me, okay?’

Samantha said, ‘It’s all just for a short time.’

Alice looked from one to the other in dismay. ‘But what about Mummy?’

Her father studied his hands. ‘She’s fine, Alice. I’ve explained the situation to her. She knows you’re here, and she’s very happy that I’m keeping you safe and well.’ Again he flicked a glance to Samantha. ‘In fact, down here is about the safest place anyone could be.’

Alice said, ‘Is that because of the missile?’

She hadn’t meant to say anything startling, but the two adults looked at one another, open mouthed. Her father slapped the table. ‘Who’s been talking missiles?’

Alice shut her mouth abruptly, feeling her cheeks go pink. Samantha coughed. ‘Security pool, possibly. She spent a little time with one of them earlier.’

‘Well, that’s just great.’ He moved his hand through his hair and leaned back, sighing. ‘So much for low key.’ He coughed and looked around the room before turning again to Alice. ‘Listen, Alice, we’re in the safest part of the building. Nothing can get through, not even ten missiles. But anyway, even if a missile did fire at us, there’s no telling where it might land. It could fall into the sea and disappear. It could be what they call “a shot across the bows” — that’s the most likely scenario, a scare tactic. Countries do that sometimes.’ Samantha cocked her eyebrow but her father continued, sweeping his hand through his
hair again. ‘Of course, we have to take the threat seriously. Which means nobody comes in or out from four o’clock today, at least till the crisis resolves.’

‘But why are they shooting missiles over us, Daddy?’

Her father smiled tolerantly. ‘Because they don’t like our friends.’ He saw more questions coming, and held up his hand. ‘All right, I’ll explain better. This enemy, let’s call them for sake of argument the Baddies. Now, they’ve been fighting for ages and ages to stop our good friends from getting access to certain important resources. However our friends—the Goodies—are very reliant on those resources, and can’t afford to have access to them denied. Do you know what “denied” means, Petal?’

‘Of course.’

‘Well, the problem now is what’s called a Mexican stand-off. See, the Baddies and the Goodies both have exactly the same number and kind of bombs. These bombs, of course, could really do a lot of damage if a war was to start. And in a way, it’s against everyone’s interests for that to happen. Do you follow me?’

‘Ye—es,’ she drawled.

‘All right.’ He tapped his fingers on the table, a knickety-knock sound. ‘So the thing is, the Baddies know we’re friends with the Goodies, and they know that we have a couple of special bombs of our own, but what they don’t know is whether we intend to use them.’

‘What kind of bombs?’

‘Oh, just some bombs.’ Her father fidgeted with his collar. ‘It’s a delicate situation. Nobody knows where the first missile might come from, and everyone’s got a lot to lose.’

‘Who are our friends, Daddy?’

‘Oh, well, you won’t call them this now, but in my day they were called Americans.’

‘Why don’t we just tell the Goodies and the Baddies to be friends together?’ She frowned, thinking of the advice she’d heard at school. ‘Like, maybe they could just share.’
‘Well,’ he grinned, looking over her head to Samantha, ‘that’d be all very well, but sometimes countries lie, especially when they both need the same thing, and it’s getting scarce. You know, sometimes they promise not to do something but they do it, and by the time it’s done it’s too late to go against them.’

‘Like—they might fire a missile?’

‘Like that, exactly.’

‘Oh.’ Suddenly a terrible thought struck. Alice gazed at her father, open-mouthed. ‘But what if they fire at us, and Mummy doesn’t come in time? Won’t she be locked out?’

Her father blinked. Samantha sank to one knee, pulling Alice toward her. For a long time they rocked, though Alice didn’t want to rock. Samantha said, ‘I understand how it feels, I really do. I don’t have a mother in the way you have, but I can see how worrying it would be.’

Her father said, ‘You have to understand, Alice, this might all turn out to be part of a game. It’s like—‘ he floundered, casting his eyes up to a television screen above a cabinet, ‘—it’s like the Roadrunner cartoon. Remember the old Coyote? He likes to pretend to catch Roadrunner, but he never will, because that’d be the end of the cartoon. So while it looks bad, everything he does is just to keep the game going. It’s exactly the same with countries sometimes.’ Across his forehead glistened a thin moist sheen. ‘Of course, there’s always the remote chance something will go wrong. That’s why it’s so important to stay in charge.’

Samantha said, ‘Do you know what a panic is, Alice? It’s when people give up on their authorities and start fighting with each other. Even the best people can turn mean when they’re worried that the system isn’t working. We want to be able to keep calm in here, and we want to make sure nobody can start a panic by spreading news about the missile outside. That’s why we lock the doors. Your mother’s safe at the moment, wherever she is.’

Alice stared palely at Samantha. Then she nodded.

Her father stood up abruptly, sighing. ‘I have to be at a briefing about now, Sammy. Do you think you could take her to the mess for something to
‘Eat?’ He gave Alice a peck on top of her head. ‘I’m sorry, pet, but I just can’t sit
with you, much as I’d like to. Stay with Samantha, and do what she says—and
everything will turn out all right.’ Then he shrugged into his jacket, picked up
his folder and went out. Alice stared at the doorway after he’d gone.

‘Come on,’ said Samantha, ‘I’ll show you why they call it the “mess”.’

They walked down two corridors, got into a lift and went down another
floor. Alice thought they might be under the car park, and she imagined
Clifford walking above her head, checking on cars. Would he be able to come
into the downstairs part too? What if lock-down happened before either he or
her mother had time to come inside? She imagined them both wandering about
the lawns, not knowing which doorway to come through or even if there was
anybody in here. But then she remembered that Clifford would know the way
in, even if her mother didn’t.

She followed Samantha into an enormous room that smelled of coffee
and bacon and something else like curry or tomato paste. About a dozen men
and women in leaf-patterned shirts and trousers sat at plastic trestle tables,
sipping hot drinks. They didn’t look up.

‘There’s not much choice, I’m afraid,’ Samantha poked around a pile of
wrapped shiny packages on top of a long table. She said to the woman behind
the trestle, ‘What happened to set mealtimes?’

The woman had sharp blue eyes in a liney, pointed face, and her blonde
hair formed a blob shape inside a fine brown net like the string bags fruit comes
in. ‘We’ve got boys coming on duty who want late lunch and ones going off
who want early dinner. You tell me what happened to mealtimes.’

Samantha smiled archly, turning to Alice. ‘I think we’ll try shepherd’s
pie.’ She took two sachets, one in each hand. ‘Let’s find a chair.’

Alice thought Samantha must be joking about finding a chair, because
the room didn’t even look half full, but at that moment a chattering detachment
of young soldiers came in and took up two of the three remaining banks of
seats. It seemed a funny way to eat, with all the food being pulled out of timber
crates with ‘MRE’ stamped on them in green. The food wasn’t like proper food,
either. It came in metal packets inside other metal packets, which heated automatically when opened. You had to sit there, with the hot foil in front of you, waiting for it to self-heat to the right temperature. At first Alice presumed the packet was actually cooking what lay inside. But actually, Samantha told her, it already was cooked, it just had to be made fresh again by chemicals.

Weirder still was how ghastly people seemed to find the food, yet they still ate it. They all seemed to find it a bit awful, or at best just faintly terrible, depending on how hungry they must have been. When she sat at a trestle table with her sachet, Samantha, sitting opposite, simply smiled and said, ‘If you’re hungry, eat, but if not, it’s okay.’

Alice said, ‘What time is my mother getting here?’ She kept asking this over and over until Samantha, sighing, said, ‘She knows you’re here, Alice. She won’t miss out. Tell you what, I’ll set my watch to remind us when lock-down’s about to start.’

To distract herself, Alice took to staring at the soldiers. Samantha said everyone had been up all night the night before; they hadn’t been to bed at all. It seemed incredible; whenever Alice stayed up past nine-thirty she couldn’t even keep her eyelids open.

‘Do they have to stay up again tonight?’ she asked, and Samantha shrugged.

‘Sometimes that’s just part of the job.’

‘But what were they doing while they were awake?’

‘I would say, organising supplies, like the ones we’re eating now.’ Samantha had wide eyes with heavy lids and long lashes, so that you could convince yourself she was asleep when she wasn’t, she was watching all around. ‘They have to take the food out of the store-rooms and bring it to places like this. Imagine how much food it would take to keep an army alive for a month underground, Alice.’ Suddenly she stopped herself. Her finger pointed to Alice’s tray, and Alice understood she was to be quiet and finish her meal. But even though it smelled just like real food, she found that she didn’t really want to eat it. Even Samantha didn’t seem to want hers.
The men in the room came and went; just when you were used to the face at the table opposite it got turned into another one. There seemed hardly any talking, just the sounds of utensils. When people finished eating they threw their cutlery into metal wash-basins and stacked their meal trays in a huge lined bin, which got so full it had to be taken out.

Two men came in, walking in front of a woman. The woman turned out to be Sergeant Marron, but when she saw Samantha and Alice sitting together she veered sharply and went to the furthest part of the room. Samantha didn’t turn to watch her, she just serenely went on with her meal, smiling at Alice so that Alice thought she hadn’t seen the Sergeant come in. But a little while later Samantha said, ‘Sergeant Marron’s angry with me,’ and Alice asked why.

‘Oh, I don’t know.’ Samantha’s face was sort of smiling and sort of not. ‘Actually, I think I do, but it’s complex.’

Alice said, ‘I know what “complex” means.’

With a sigh, Samantha began to explain her situation with Sergeant Marron after all. ‘It’s like this,’ she said, ‘we went to a camp together, you have to go on lots of camps when you’re in the army, and there was this officer she liked. Well, I didn’t know she liked him, so I made a mistake. Anyway, she hasn’t forgiven me.’

‘But what sort of mistake did you do?’

‘Oh, I guess I sort of decided to like him, too.’

Alice said, ‘I know what an officer is, it’s somebody who always tells other people what to do.’ Then she clapped a hand over her mouth, realising that Samantha might be offended by that, because Samantha was one.

But Samantha only laughed. ‘Maybe, sometimes,’ she said. ‘But you haven’t finished your food.’

‘No,’ Alice admitted.

‘Why not?’ Then Samantha laughed again. ‘It’s hard to get used to eating in a big mess hall, isn’t it?’

Alice nodded guiltily.

‘I find that, too,’ said Samantha, ‘but this is how it has to be.’
They got up together and on the count of three threw their half-eaten meals in the plastic-lined bin. The woman in charge of pulling the meals out of boxes and leaving one of each kind in a particular place on the table glared at them. When she saw Alice staring back at her, she flushed. ‘You girls won’t be wasting food soon enough,’ she said warningly.

Samantha laughed. ‘I dare say,’ she agreed. Then she checked her watch. ‘We’ve got over an hour to kill,’ she said to Alice, leading her away from the woman’s frown. ‘What would you like to do?’

‘Oh!’ Alice stared at her hands. She felt that horrible fear again, that her mother might not come. The serving woman’s tone of voice had done it. ‘I want to go outside to wait for Mummy.’

‘What?’ Samantha sat up abruptly. ‘I mean, what do you want to do inside?’

Alice had never made Samantha angry before. It shocked her that it might be possible. ‘I just want to make sure she can hide from the missile,’ she said.

Samantha sighed. ‘We already explained all that. But listen.’ She looked around her, then moved Alice out into the hall so they weren’t blocking the doorway. ‘It’s not only that we’re hiding from a missile, Alice; we also have to consider launching our own. It’s called a “pre-emptive strike”. Our friends want us to take the initiative, to show the Baddies that our side has the most weapons. If they see that, they’ll give up and we can resolve this peacefully. It’s a tactic, see?’

‘I see,’ said Alice.

A man in a uniform came past and murmured something, and Samantha stood up and saluted before plucking Alice’s sleeve.

‘Come on, Alice, I’ll tell you what we’ll do, we’ll go have a look at the fish pond. Have you seen the big orange fish yet?’

Alice shook her head, sniffing.

‘Come on, before the area gets closed off.’
They didn’t come to the courtyard through the glass-walled corridor she had walked along with Clifford, but via a lift just outside the mess area. This lift didn’t have the polished look of the other lifts, but trolley skid marks and patterned metal flooring. At the top they emerged into a big empty room with a few overturned cardboard boxes in the corners, and a bright steel door to the left. When Samantha swiped her identity card through a slot, the door slid into the wall cavity to reveal a corridor with a glazed section just like the earlier one. Somehow Alice knew it wasn’t the same corridor as the one she’d travelled with Clifford. The light had a golden colour. Yet the statue outside looked the same, if a bit more detailed in the face. Then she realised they’d come all the way around the building to stand on the other side of the garden, in the opposite corridor, and that she was looking across to where she’d been.

Samantha pressed a thumb-pad, and after a moment’s indecision one of the glass doors buzzed, allowing her to push through. With Alice trailing, they emerged on a gravel path that wound among the ferns and strap plants. Afternoon sunlight flared off the pond surface in the far corner, the rest shadowed by the building. In the middle of a grove of heavy shrubs sat a tiny wooden arched bridge, like a cut-out from a picture book.

Samantha sat, sighing, on a bench and adjusted her skirt while Alice meandered up to the bridge and leaned over the rail. A few feet below, long, lazy white and orange fish with pearly scales moved slowly through the liquid. Despite her disquiet, Alice found herself giving a squeal when one of the fish looked at her.

‘They can see me!’ she said. The idea that fish might look up through water seemed to open up another world; one in which fish saw everything. What were they thinking about the sky, for instance? Did they recognise clouds? Would they know about bombs and missiles?

Yawning, Samantha watched Alice watch the fish. ‘They’re pretty things,’ she murmured indifferently, ‘but they wouldn’t survive in the wild.’

‘Why not?’
‘Oh, they’ve had all the fight bred out of them, I suppose. When you pick a fish for its colour you don’t pay attention to its ability to find food or whatnot. It’s the colour that gets passed on to its babies. That’s a bit like people, too: most people born in cities today wouldn’t survive without help, social services and so forth.’ She suddenly stopped herself, but Alice kept watching her closely. ‘I suppose,’ she said more carefully, ‘it’s good to have pretty things around for the time being.’

‘Can we take the fish back inside with us?’ Alice asked. ‘We could put them in a big pot or something. They wouldn’t eat much.’ She saw Samantha looking away and added quickly, ‘I’d look after them, I know how.’

‘I’m afraid we can’t bring animals inside, Alice. Besides, think of the story about the ugly duckling—that duckling wouldn’t have become a swan without spending winter in the ice. Sometimes being outside helps a creature become what it should be. Actually, I think that also applies to people.’

‘Then why are we going back in there?’ Alice hadn’t meant to talk sharply, but by the start it gave Samantha she knew she had. Then Samantha got up and, sighing, came forward to take her hand.

‘I want to show you something.’ She led her around the garden path to the base of the tall marble statue, and pointed up at its face.

Alice glimpsed two raised eyebrows and a down-curved mouth inside the hood of its marble robes. Two marble hands clasped together against the statue’s breast.

‘Do you know who that is?’ Samantha asked.

‘No.’

‘It’s Mary. The mother of Jesus, who supposedly died for our sins. Whether he took away our sins or not, you can see what a trial that woman went through.’ She wiped a green algae smear off the statue’s cheek. ‘Imagine it, Alice—she knew her child would be born into a world of suffering, and yet she went ahead. She had him in a barn in front of donkeys when nobody would let her give birth in an inn. She saw him mistreated by Romans; she watched him get nailed to a cross. Mary doesn’t teach us humility and grace. She shows
us the link between civilisation and suffering. Do you know what I mean by “civilisation”, Alice?’

‘Like big cities.’

‘And “suffering”?’

Alice didn’t answer, though she knew.

‘It means being in pain a lot. Civilisation and war are twins. Suffering is just inevitable. What we have to do, as people, is make it mean something. See, if all that pain helps a community, then it's worth it.’

A yellow, pearly fish came up to the water’s surface, its sucking mouth opening and closing. Alice watched it, mesmerised. She didn’t want to keep looking at the statue’s tragic face and white eyeballs. It reminded her of all the times she’d felt lonely or sad at school, and nobody had come to help her.

‘Sometimes,’ Samantha said firmly, ‘war is even a _good_ thing, Alice.’

Alice gasped and turned on her. ‘Even if _everyone_ gets killed, like in Armageddon?’

Samantha shrugged. ‘Maybe.’ She spoke as though to herself, crouching down to toss a pebble into the water, watching the fish suddenly head toward the splash. When it picked up the pebble and tried to eat it, she smiled faintly and lobbed another one.

‘People don’t have to fight,’ Alice said. ‘I could share all my toys. I wouldn't mind.’

Samantha laughed dryly. ‘It's not about toys. It's about the energy we need to make our food. And as for sharing food, two people will starve sharing food that one could survive on. If they fight, and one lives while one dies, isn’t that better than both starving?’ She sighed and stood up, dusting her hands.

‘Maybe I should forget about parables. If we opt for peace and decide not to help our friends, Alice, we won't get to use the resources either. See, we're part of the same supply route. If we lose out, all your lovely friends and neighbours who used to have such easy lives will be blaming the government for the shortages. They’ll take your daddy and put his head up on a pole. Then whoever they vote in after him will be pulled down too. Society will become
this giant revolving machine, each revolution getting faster and faster, until eventually the enemy moves in, because they can see we’re weak. So you see, in a way, war is a good thing. The trick is to be ready for it, and to have the best survival plan.’ Then she gestured at the corridors and the building around them. ‘See, underneath these levels, we’ve got a huge support system. A hundred people can survive down there, if we have to, for ten years. That gives us a pretty good advantage, wouldn’t you say?’

‘But why would we have to stay there for that long?’

‘Look,’ said Samantha, ‘this isn’t strictly the right kind of conversation for us to be having.’ She began to edge along the path, plucking at Alice’s sleeve. ‘Let’s just say that there are some types of missiles that stay dangerous for a long time after they explode.’

‘You mean nuclear missiles, don’t you?’

Samantha went red, her mouth turned down. ‘Yes,’ she said, ‘I guess I mean that.’

‘Mummy said they can kill everyone.’ Alice’s chin began to quiver and she ducked back as Samantha reached for her hand.

‘Well—an artist would say that!’ Frowning, Samantha reached again, this time grasping Alice’s hand and pulling her back toward the corridor, her heels sinking into gravel. ‘We’re perfectly safe, Alice. You have to believe me. None of us would let a girl get hurt. I can tell you, we’re in the best place possible should a nuclear situation occur.’ She fumbled at the door clasp, tucking Alice’s hand under her arm and pulling her hard.

Alice screeched, ‘I want to wait here for Mummy!’ She tried to plant her heels into the gravel, but Samantha scraped her along. Gritting her teeth, Samantha towed Alice into the corridor and resealed the door.

Then she turned and glared into Alice’s eyes, waggling a long, pointed finger. But at that moment a beeper went off at the level of her belt. She stared at it dully for a moment. ‘Well, that’s a relief.’ She straightened her collar and smoothed out her sleeves. ‘There’s no need to wait for her now, Alice. Your mother’s here.’
Her mother had a lime green suit on, but it looked twisted up by wrinkles, and a bit of her pale vanilla petticoat showed at the hem.

‘Oh my goodness,’ she kept saying, and, ‘I’m so glad you’re all right.’

Alice didn’t ask what ‘all right’ meant, or, rather, what not all right might have been. She clung to her mother all the way down the corridor, past the doorway where she and Samantha had come in. Now Samantha led them into a room not far from the mess, closing the door so Alice and her mother could sit quietly together for a while. ‘I’ll be back in a little while,’ she said.

Her mother moved around the room picking at the furniture. Two small black couches hugged the walls and a box of tissues sat on a low oval table. ‘This looks like the crying room,’ her mother observed.

‘What’s a crying room?’

‘Oh—I’m just joking, darling.’ Her mother sat on the couch and eyed Alice pensively. ‘What sort of mood was your father in?’

‘What?’

‘Was he happy? Was he upset? Was anything major wrong?’

‘I don’t know,’ Alice shrugged.

Her mother’s bright red lipstick curled up one side. ‘Well, I mean, there was this news, I was very worried.’ All at once she began unconsciously combing her hair with her fingers, teasing out snags. She looked haggard and dispirited, but next instant she leaned forward and pulled Alice closer and gave her a hug. ‘It must have been extra scary for you.’

‘Why?’
'Oh—never mind. Being here, I just meant. All these awful military people.'

'I think Clifford’s nice,’ Alice interjected. ‘Samantha’s okay.’ It surprised her to realise she didn’t think Samantha all that special any more; that she had demoted her in her mind. ‘Clifford’s a car parking Prime Minister,’ she said. ‘He’s got to look after all the cars.’

‘I’m pleased they found somebody so appropriate to look after you,’ her mother sniffed. Then her mobile phone rang. She took it out of her purse and stared at it for a moment. Her mouth looked like a crushed flower. ‘Who is it?’ All at once she sounded breathless, one hand up to her chest. ‘Oh. Christ, Gerald, does it have to be like this? What’s happening?’ Then she clipped the phone shut and dropped it on the couch beside her, as though it had germs. ‘Alice,’ she said, ‘I need you to pass me that box.’

Alice picked up the tissue box nervously, holding it out. Her mother took one and poked for a while into each eye. Then suddenly she snatched a whole handful and buried her face in them, not making any sound.

There seemed little Alice could do except gaze at the walls. She knew her mother was crying, but it didn’t seem right to interrupt. After a while she went and put her hand on her mother’s shoulder and patted awkwardly.

Her mother caught her hand and turned it over and kissed it, leaving a red smears.

‘What’s the matter?’ said Alice.

‘Nothing,’ Her mother looked up, and Alice saw black smudges below her eyes. Her lipstick had almost all wiped off. ‘Your father wants to see me.’ Her bottom lip twitched crookedly as she spoke. ‘I suppose I ought to leave you with Samantha. But I don’t feel like it, do you?’

Alice shrugged. She didn’t know what she felt.

‘What do you want to do, Alice? Come with me when I talk to your father, or stay here?’

‘Come with you!’ The answer blurted automatically.
Her mother crouched and took Alice’s hand, peering into her face. ‘You might hear some things that are pretty frightening. Some difficult things.’ She brushed Alice’s fine straight hair behind her ears. ‘But I’m glad you want to come. I’ll feel better if you’re there.’ She went to her bulging handbag and opened it, pulling a small dirty notebook aside to find her compact mirror and lipstick. Her new red mouth glared so brightly her skin looked ashen. Suddenly she noticed the book she had pulled out, and looked at Alice. She picked the book up by one corner and held it out. ‘Do you know what this is, Alice?’

‘No.’

‘It’s your Aunty June’s journal.’

Alice blinked in confusion. ‘Aunty June?’

Her mother’s cherry lip quivered. ‘It came three days ago, but I couldn’t bring myself to read it till today. I thought it would be too upsetting.’ Her hand shook, making the pages flutter. ‘But it’s not upsetting. It’s wonderful. She didn’t die in an avalanche, Alice. My sister’s alive somewhere.’

‘But where?’

‘I don’t know.’ Suddenly her mother’s mouth drooped. She poked the book back into her handbag. Her face looked paler than ever, but she didn’t cry. ‘The colleague who was with her knows the story. He hasn’t been contacted yet. I tried the university where he worked, but they say he handed in his notice last month. His wife can’t seem to remember if he’s in Madagascar or Borneo. Fancy that—you’d think a wife would know, if anyone would.’ She slumped on the couch, sitting in a way she never sat, not anywhere. She didn’t bother crossing her knees. ‘I can’t even contact the embassy that handled her disappearance. There’s just recorded messages, and a promise to reopen when the civil disturbance is past. What on earth I’m going to do now, I don’t know.’ Alice’s mother started toying with a strand of orange hair. She looked at the strand and blew on it, making it fluff up in the air. ‘Tell me what to do, Alice? Is it too late to stop the chaos? You’re the smart one.’

‘I don’t know.’ Alice began pinching at the webbing on each thumb, first one and then the other. Her fingernails left little score-marks that deepened
each time she pressed. She began to get a tight feeling in her stomach. ‘Tell me what you’re talking about, Mummy.’

‘Oh—everything. June. Your father. Your—your school, for God’s sake. Why on earth can’t you stay at school for once, Alice? We don’t send you there for no reason! It’s a place where you’re supposed to learn!’ Then she frowned and stopped, coming forward to stare at her knees. ‘Forget I said that—it doesn’t matter. School’s not even important. I’m sorry, Alice. I’m just—I’ve spent my whole life worrying about the wrong things.’

Alice went and sat beside her mother, trying not to say anything upsetting. After a while, her mother began idly stroking her arm.

‘Why did Aunty June go away?’

‘Oh—she was always like that.’ A crinkly smile stretched her mother’s face. ‘She used to go off on wild goose chases. She made everyone furious in high school by running off to tag swans when she was supposed to be helping set up the geography camp. Then she wrote a brilliant essay about it and topped her class.’ She smiled more broadly. ‘She used to make our father furious.’

‘Why?’

‘Because he thought she was too clever to waste her life on animals. He wanted her to be a philosopher, or a psychiatrist. But I think June understood people better than he did.’ She took a deep breath. ‘I miss her more now that I know she’s probably alive. Isn’t that odd?’

Alice peered at the small, grubby book on her mother’s clean lap. It had a spiral binding and a cover headed: ‘Notes’. The pages bulged out, thickened and rippled with dried-out damp. She could see stray lines and words peeking between the loosened pages. ‘How come we never visited?’

That made her mother’s mouth gape a little. She closed it, and her fingers tightened on the book, pressing it downward onto her lap. ‘There was never time to get away from things here. With your dad, I mean. Politics is a bit of a drain like that.’ Her mouth quivered and then firmed. ‘I should have gone looking for her when I first got news. I wanted to, Alice. Your father said “leave
it to officials”. Well, here we are in an underground bunker, and I don’t feel any better off being surrounded by “officials”, do you?"

Alice scraped at an itch on her shin. ‘Aren’t you scared about the bombs, Mummy?’

Her mother shook her head. ‘Bombs aren’t the biggest problem. It’s the secrecy I hate.’

Alice said, ‘What about nuclear bombs?’

‘Who said anything about nuclear bombs?’

‘Samantha.’ Alice gulped. ‘She said we might have to stay down here for ten years.’

Swiftly her mother stood up. She forgot the book and it almost fell off her lap until she caught it; her face had gone bleach-white. ‘No, we won’t,’ she said, ‘not if I can help it.’

The door knocked and opened immediately. Sergeant Marron stood there, blotchy and sullen. ‘Major Kosh asked me to take you to the south wing. Are you ready, Ma’am?’ She wouldn’t look at Alice.

‘Yes,’ her mother said faintly, and then her voice hardened. ‘We both are.’ She put the book into her bag and pushed Alice ahead of her, so that Alice found herself trundling down the corridor without any sense of direction at all. But shortly Sergeant Marron, striding jerkily, took the lead.

They went down in the lift—down two whole floors—and emerged in a wider corridor. White walls and white tiles made the eyes burn. At the end of this broad hallway sat a square of red carpet outside a glazed, but non-see-through double door. Everything, even the glass itself, seemed to radiate whiteness.

Just before the last doorway, Marron gave a stiff kind of head-tilt. ‘Ma’am,’ she said, putting out a hand, ‘I’m supposed to take Alice up to the tea-room. Those were my orders.’

‘Oh, really?’ Her mother smiled at the woman and took hold of Alice’s hand. She pulled Alice against her body and began smoothing her hair, looking steadily at Marron. ‘I don’t think so,’ she murmured.
The Sergeant stiffened; then a sharp smirk slid across her face. As you wish, Ma’am,’ she said, and marched back the way she’d come. Nobody else came into the hall.

Alice’s mother breathed in and out deeply. Then she put a hand up to a button beside the doorframe. Her arm hovered. ‘This is it,’ she said. ‘You and me against the world, Alice.’ Then the doors began to slide back into the wall.
Her father stood in the centre of an L-shaped room, which, like the corridor, had been painted white. Three pale couches sprawled around a coffee table on a plush snowy rug. Despite its whiteness the room had a dim feel, and her father’s face looked almost the same colour as his sideburns.

He stared from Alice to her mother. ‘I thought one of the military women was looking after her?’

Alice’s mother sat on one of the ivory couches and straightened her skirt over her knees. ‘She wanted to come here, instead. You don’t mind, do you?’

‘No, I suppose not.’ Her father cleared his throat and poured three tall glasses of soda from a low, plain sideboard. Alice took hers carefully, but her mother frowned at the glass and sat it in her lap as though she didn’t know what to do with it. Her father perched on the couch opposite them and sipped his drink, every now and then jiggling his ankle up on his knee.

Alice had never been in this room before, but it reminded her of her father’s official aeroplane, half bedroom and half lounge. Around the corner of the L she saw a wide ebony bed with grey bolsters instead of pillows. The walls lacked any kind of adornment. She wondered what it would be like to live here permanently.

‘Daddy,’ she said, ‘is there a television?’

‘What? Oh.’ He frowned around the room. ‘Somewhere, I guess. I don’t think there’ll be anything worth watching now, though.’

Her mother drew a sharp breath. ‘Why don’t you tell her why that is, Gerald? While you’re at it, explain why she’ll have to stay indoors till she’s eighteen.’
'Christ, Bea, I’m trying to keep things calm.’ He turned to Alice. ‘Your mother’s going off half-cocked. I believe this situation will work out. If we show the enemy we can survive a war and they can’t, the battle’s ours. It’s as simple as that.’

Her mother snorted. ‘We’re being locked in.’

‘We’re making this a safe-house, yes.’ He wiped his hands on his pockets. ‘I’m not ashamed of being cautious. The bottom line is, in the unlikely event this goes pear-shaped, we want to protect our cultural heritage.’

‘What’s the point of cultural heritage?’ Alice’s mother said.

‘Really?’ His mouth lifted on one side. ‘You’d say that? An award-winning artist just on a comeback—is that really your view?’

‘It is now,’ she said flatly. ‘Cultural heritage has to be worth saving, and I’m not sure ours is.’

Alice’s father got up and started pacing the room, dodging between coffee table and chairs. ‘Well, I am,’ he said. He counted on his fingers. ‘We’ve got independent judiciary, we’ve got democratic leadership, we’ve got women who can work or have children or both. We’ve got humane gaols, schools, preventive medicine, social equity, relatively speaking. Why should we lose any of it?’

‘Democracy’s a lie if people aren’t told what’s going on,’ she glared. ‘Don’t fool yourself it’s not dictatorship.’ She shook her head, looking at her knees. ‘We should have kept out of that earlier war. It was a dirty war, and we’re dirty because of it. All those prison photos. We’ll never get the stain off our hands.’

‘Well,’ he shrugged, ‘that wasn’t my decision. But these days, Bea, I’m starting to think it was necessary. We need that alliance—we need the tactical support and the weapons. But if you’ve got a better system for keeping Australia safe, I’d love to hear it.’

Alice’s mother looked up, and a kind of desperation filled her face. ‘Gerald,’ she said, ‘we could bow out.’
'Surrender?' His forehead scrunched. ‘Wonderful, Bea. Very creative. I can’t wait to see what the strategists think of that.’ He took his jacket off and laid it over the couch back before loosening his tie. Then he leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, shaking his head. ‘We’ve been through a lot, Bea, most of it good. You’d say that, wouldn’t you? We’ve been happy?’

Alice’s mother failed to answer. When Alice looked up she saw two tears rolling down her cheeks. One slid faster than the other and ended up splashing inside her collar, while the other slowly beaded its way down her jaw. She wiped at them with a careless hand and her soda glass jumped.

‘Bea?’

‘Yes: what?’

‘Can you at least look at me?’

‘Christ, I am looking at you!’ In a sudden motion, Alice’s mother shot upright. Something went flying out of her hand — flying in all directions at once, like a waterspout — and shards of broken glass pelted the coffee table.

Aghast, her father jumped to his feet and brushed flecks of soda off his shirt and waistband. ‘That was uncalled-for,’ he said, purse-lipped. Tiny glinting chips sparked off the couch back. He shook his head and dusted glass off his collar. ‘What did it break on, anyway? Am I bleeding?’

‘It smashed off the tabletop; it didn’t hit you.’ Bea looked down at her shaking hands. Then she sat back on the couch and put her hands to her face. Grimly she said, ‘I’m sorry. I don’t even know why I did that.’

‘Neither do I.’ Her father eyed Alice sharply. ‘Don’t tread here, pet. Do me a favour, go for a minute and sit in the bedroom. Your mother needs a moment to herself.’

Alice did as she was told. She tiptoed through the glass shards, even though she had shoes on, and then she sat on the bed edge peering back into the other part of the room. She felt the way she did at school when the teacher asked for homework she hadn’t remembered to do. Her brain felt too full of blood. Her hands trembled.
A book case blocked the view of her mother. Her father had crossed the room and stood nearby, leaning forward. Alice heard murmuring, until, rather quickly, her father stepped back. He scratched his head, darting a glance at Alice.

‘She wants you here.’

‘Okay.’ Alice hopped off the bed and walked back around the L. Her gait felt clumsy. She sat on the couch between her parents, her twin shoes touching, ‘Why do people always have to fight?’ she dared.

Her father gulped. ‘It just happens, I guess.’

Her mother had taken out a ball of scrunched tissues and begun wiping beneath each eye. ‘Differences of opinion, mainly.’

Alice said, ‘People can have different ideas, but still be friends.’ One of her socks had fallen, so she pulled it up to make them even. ‘Can’t they?’

Her father said, ‘Alice, making friends isn’t easy. You’ve tried it plenty; think how hard that was for you.’ Then he got off his couch and came toward her gingerly, stepping between fragments of glass. Mechanically her mother got up and began gathering the pieces. Her father, stooping, took Alice’s hands and held them tightly. ‘Remember the Coyote? Remember Roadrunner? Imagine if Roadrunner could stop the Coyote from chasing him, Alice. If one clever bomb used at the right time could make that old Coyote stop and think.’ He looked over his shoulder at his wife picking up pieces of broken glass. ‘Wouldn’t he want to give that a try, just in case it worked?’

‘She,’ said Alice.

‘What?’

‘Roadrunner’s a “she”?’

Her father blinked. ‘A she? Really? How about that?’ He tilted his head, surveying her. Then he brushed the idea aside with a hand. ‘This Roadrunner, this female Roadrunner, she’s got a bomb, and it just might be the end of all the world’s problems. Wouldn’t you say she ought to give it a try?’
‘What time is lock-down?’ Alice’s mother had placed the glass pieces on the coffee table and straightened the cushions. She stood up, patting her hair.

‘Gerald? What time?’

‘Oh—four o’clock.’ He creaked upright, his knees snapping. ‘Fifteen minutes. Why?’

‘Because I want to get out before the doors close.’

‘You what?’ His jaw dropped, clapping as it shut again. ‘You want to what?’

‘I want to leave.’

Alice said, ‘Mummy!’

Her father’s mouth worked over and over. Finally he breathed, ‘You’re not going without an argument, Bea.’

‘This is still a free country, or was.’ Her mother clipped her handbag open, checked inside and took out the notebook. She straightened her skirt.

‘Alice,’ she said, ‘come over here.’ Her chin wobbled, making the words hard to hear. ‘I want to say goodbye.’

But Alice didn’t move. Going to her mother would make this all real. She sat tighter, hunched, hands clenched between her knees.

‘Jesus, woman,’ said her father, ‘don’t do this.’ He made a move to grab Bea’s wrist, but Alice’s mother stepped back, and the coffee table separated them. He dropped his hand.

She went to Alice’s side and pulled her hand out of her lap, kissing it. Then she poked Aunty June’s diary into Alice’s palm and closed her fingers up. She whispered, ‘Keep this safe till I come back.’

Alice nodded, tear-struck.

‘Why are you doing this?’ Alice’s father rubbed his forehead. ‘You don’t like the job I’ve been given. That’s your right. But for God’s sake, stay and we’ll work this out.’

She got to the door and paused, pivoting on her heel. ‘Do one thing for me, Gerald. Think of me out there before you push the button.’ Then she punched the wall and the doors slid back, revealing the empty corridor.
He started talking louder, his voice filling the room. ‘What is it you want, Bea? I can’t make promises. You know I have to listen to advice. Christ, Bea, come back and let me finish!’ Before he’d stopped talking, the doors had already begun to close. Then the room went silent, and Alice couldn’t see her mother through the white glazing.

Her father stood in the middle of the room, frowning at the doors, his head slightly cocked. Then slowly, one by one, his shoulders slumped. He went and sat on the couch across the room and put his head in his hands.

Alice stared at his hunched shoulders and rumpled outline. Suddenly she thought: he’s not my father now.

‘I want to go with her,’ she said.

He looked up at her, one eyebrow raised almost to his hairline. ‘Why?’

‘I don’t like it here.’

He rummaged in his suit pockets. His hands came out empty. Frowning, he scanned the sideboard and shelves. ‘Your mother will be back,’ he said. ‘Don’t worry. It’s a little demonstration, something to let me know she’s still got principles. Tell you what, I’ll give her a call and see where she’s got to.’ He got up and began searching the room. ‘She has to make it look like a done deal, but it isn’t. I know your mother, Alice. Stay here, and I’ll track her down, you’ll see.’ He went into the bedroom and found his mobile phone on a bedside table, bringing it out while pressing buttons. ‘No signal.’ He threw the phone onto the couch, grimacing at Alice. ‘But listen, she’s here somewhere. Upstairs won’t let her through; not five minutes before lock-down. She’s the Prime Minister’s wife.’ He crossed the room and picked up a wall handset near the doorway, murmuring into it. By the time he replaced the receiver, his face looked ashen. ‘Okay,’ he said, ‘she’s already argued her way past the cordon. But she’ll change her mind. They’re keeping the gate open for stragglers. She’ll come back.’

Alice put her head down, feeling sick and tired. Aunty June’s book slid off her lap. She picked it up again and put it on the couch beside her.
The man who used to be her father walked around the room. She heard the rustle of his clothes as he went toward a shelf. He riffled pages and read out: *So the Lord said, “I will wipe mankind from the face of the earth, for their presence grieves me unutterably.”* He cleared his throat. 'Well, it has to be accepted as a possibility. And I don't mind saying, it's the worst. But I don't think God's that mean, do you?' She didn't answer, but he hardly seemed to notice. 'Anyway, this isn't Armageddon. It's survival, pure and simple—the oldest game on the planet. Somehow a leader has to make these decisions. Your mother—your mother isn't rational. You know what Beatrice wants? She wants a world where everyone can be Switzerland! Braces and cuckoo clocks. Everybody hugging each other. It just isn't possible. When you live in the world, Alice, you have to play by its rules. Nobody, but nobody, can live outside. It just isn't possible—it's the road to extinction.' Suddenly he sat down. He went very still, as though a battery had run out.

An alarm began to sound in the corridor.

Neither he nor Alice moved for the entirety of the alarm. It went for what seemed ages, so loud it blocked the brain. Alice couldn't hear anything else.

Finally the alarm stopped. Gerald stared at her, his face unreadable. Then suddenly he knelt down before her and took one of her hands. ‘Alice,’ he said, ‘I have to make a decision. Tell me you’ll be okay, whatever I choose.’

She didn’t answer.

'Just tell me you won’t hate me.'

Her knee jumped, and she pulled back from actually kicking him. She hadn’t meant to do it; not exactly. And yet, at the same time, she almost had.

He stood away from her, swaying mildly. It seemed he’d say something else, because his mouth kept opening and closing, but he didn’t. At last, lower lip twitching, he bent to look at his knee. As he and Alice watched, a shard of glass fell out through a hole in the fabric and plinked onto the floor. Blood broadened from a dot on his trousers. He stared at it numbly. 'She got me, didn’t she? She meant to hurt me.'
Alice said, ‘You’re going to start the bombs now, aren’t you?’

For a while he looked as though he meant to answer. His jaw hung open. Then a buzzing noise sounded from the hall. They both turned their heads. ‘Come in,’ her father said gruffly.

A familiar female voice sounded as the doors swished open. ‘One minute to meeting time, Sir.’

Her father straightened. He said nothing more to Alice, but turned on his heel and went out.

As he left, Sergeant Marron entered. Her eyes looked narrow and puffy, and as soon as she saw Alice a tiny tic began tormenting the corner of her mouth. But she brought out a small child’s colouring book and a pack of crayons. She tossed them onto the coffee table and sat on the opposite couch with her arms folded.

‘There you are, genius,’ she said unpleasantly. Then her gaze settled on the broken glass, and her eyebrows lifted.

Alice said, ‘I want to go find Mummy.’

Marron sneered, ‘I want Mummy!’ A false smile plastered itself over her face, ugly as a clown’s leer. ‘Well, guess what? You can’t.’ She looked satisfied for the first time all day, shuffling her body down so she could stretch out her boots and put them on the coffee table. ‘And I can’t go home to my kids, either, so don’t expect sympathy.’

Alice whispered, ‘I’m sorry.’

‘What?’ Marron looked incredulous.

‘I’m sorry you can’t be with your children.’

The woman’s face twitched. Abruptly, she reached for a remote control and made a television come out of a slot in the wall. She flicked through channel after channel until she found a lone live one. The Coyote began to unpack an Acme rocket. The Roadrunner stooped to peck at food. About them stretched a crazed network of looping roadways between canyons so high you couldn’t see the ground.

Numbly, she and Alice began to watch.
EXEGESIS
HEROINE AND BACK AGAIN: BEYOND BUTLER'S HETERO-NORMATIVE IMPASSE
INTRODUCTION

I began this project as an investigation into the ways that the notion of the fictional heroine intersects with the various waves of feminism toward the production of a new 'heroine' speaking to that account. Central to the theoretical investigation was to be the shift between 'equality' feminism—Beauvoir, for instance—and 'difference' feminism—such as Irigaray and Kristeva—and the implications of this shift for the 'heroine' as well as narratology.

Unfortunately for an 'easy' doctoral thesis, the ground of what constitutes 'feminism' has shifted enormously since the early 1990s, when this project was first envisaged. Judith Butler posed very good reasons why thinking of 'gender' in the ways prior feminisms had done needed to be overturned, not merely because radical intervention posed a figure (or intellect) outside the social artefact being changed (an impossible fantasy), but because to speak of 'gender' at all reinforced the heterosexuality that underpinned it in the first place. Since Butler's findings problematised any notion of a female-gendered heroic figure at all, as well as 'her' position in relation to narrative and social context (either literary setting or, speaking of a book, its readership), it became most crucial to find a path through Butler's work before I could set about incorporating 'the heroine'. Accordingly, this entire exegesis has become an attempt to work a path through the 'heteronormative impasse' in order to construct a 'heroine' that can answer to postfeminist terms.

To define further, it should be said that by 'postfeminist' I mean a complicated and disparate array of work, basically feminist in intent, that has been produced at a removal from either equality- or difference-feminist
theoretical positions, and that has developed a scepticism toward gender categorisation while not yet wishing to offload all the political tools and outcomes of earlier feminisms. To a certain extent this is a populist movement, but it also includes branches of postfeminist scientificism (geneticism) and academic theory concerned with the ways in which, in the light of Butler, gender roles are 'performed'.

Outside the scope of this exegesis, but of interest to it, are the works of various feminists remaining true to either radicalist visions or socialism with feminist aspirations in mind. Some have also worked through Butler, or, more properly, around Butler, using various combinations of other theorists such as Deleuze.iii These approaches, too, form part of the array of work in the postfeminist milieu, for it is far more a milieu than a theoretical suitcase, and it is full of contradictions and ruptures. To highlight one such rupture, feminists working in practical areas have pointed out a gulch between recent poststructuralism and feminist practice, with Kuhlmann and Babitsch criticising the impracticality of Butler's preferred kinds of activism among fields of feminist work in which real bodies are to be helped.iv Butler's reliance on a negative view of identification—for instance, the notion that embodiment exists as discourse's unknowable outside—has also been criticised by Abigail Bray and Claire Colebrook for reaffirming the same dualism that underpins dichotomy.v While an interesting and productive perspective, the task of recrafting the 'heroine' is a specific goal that may not suit all theoretical approaches. Indeed, where 'heroine' implies exactly the centrality of 'her' as a construct that Bray and Colebrook seek to dismantle from primacy—in their view, the answer to Butler's heteronormativity conundrum is the dismantling of the primacy accorded to gender as an identificatory question, to the extent that: '[s]exual difference would not be the question of our epoch [...] but would be one of many possible questions'vi—that their work may not suit 'Heroine' at all. That is, in thinking through the 'heroine', I need to get to the core of the problem for feminism before disregarding feminism's (or gender's) primacy. Thus, despite the disparate variety of feminisms still working to define an area of interest, I
remain drawn to apprehending, thinking through and, if possible, moving beyond Butler's heteronormative impasse to create my heroine. At present, despite widespread feminist work engaging with theorists who seek differential paradigms regarding 'gender', Butler's heteronormative impasse blocks the road to constructive uses of 'woman' in political as well as agency terms, and to the extent that my project specifically concerns constructive uses of 'woman' in literary narrative, I must confront it.

The 'Context' part of this exegesis will outline the ways that Judith Butler's negotiations through identity politics and the 'discursive limits of sex' have impacted on feminism, and whether, indeed, any kind of feminism at all remains possible. It will reconsider earlier feminist positions using Judith Butler's work on performatives in finding that each prior feminist mode remains heterosexually normative. It will also explore the finding Butler makes that, since heterosexual normativity is enclosive of all subjective as well as gender effects, it cannot be radically transformed by intentional political acts. Indeed, this seems the gravest of all Butler's findings for feminism, since feminism has always concerned itself with transforming (de-oppressing) sexed social roles. My most pressing question, then, is largely practical: might 'gender' be rethought (yet again) in a way that does not foreclose against intentional intervention, or that might allow an escape from heterosexual hegemony, or is feminism (as such) entirely dead? Furthermore, is it possible that heterosexual hegemony in particular circumstances is intrinsically part of a larger and definable system requiring sexing in the first place, but that remains hidden precisely because of heterosexuality's apparent dualism? Is it possible that opening onto gender roles in situ—in particular tropes and traces of sexing that appear to contain similarities in terms of the reiterations and norms applied; particular cultures, in other words—can illuminate the intrinsically attached processes that make heterosexuality only a partial equation? Is 'gender' only foreclosing (and self-thwarting) as a study because it is only two parts of a triad, where the third term contains the purpose of that gender construction in any one sphere?
The ‘Context’ part of the thesis will explore the ways that my introduction to Butler’s post-1990 work has resulted in a complete re-enterprisation of my own fiction (and to some extent social) goals. This means a movement away from thinking in terms that cement the apparent naturality of heterosexuality toward an examination of collective interests behind social roles in an identifiable (but by no means sequestered) cultural sphere in which ‘gender’ appears to operate with heightened emphaticity. As it happens, for historical as well as personal and intellectual reasons to be expanded upon in the exegesis, the style of ‘gender’ approached for this analysis is to be that enforced in traditional warriorship, or war.

Obviously this is a long way from considering either ‘feminism’ (post- or pre-Butler) or ‘the heroine’ singularly. However ‘feminism’ may be viable in terms of its goals, if not strictly in terms of earlier arguments, and ‘the heroine’ can be seen very interestingly alongside discussions of soldiership and war, particularly in the light of post-2001 world events. In short, though originally the fiction part of this project was envisaged as an exploration of ‘heroine’ in social (feminist) as well as literary terms, the discussions outlined above about ‘gender’ make it clear that war can be an integral part of the discussion, where warriorship reveals a massive interest in the sexing and policing of sexed, penetrably defined bodies and psyches. This material will be elucidated in the exegesis proper.

To set this out more succinctly, then, my project has moved away from its earlier tenets of exploring ‘the heroine’ as some kind of feminist exemplar through literary heroineship (a tall ask, bringing in all the difficulties Butler exposes) and toward seeing warriorship as an integral part of the gender trope in that sphere (that perhaps has power via the emphaticity of its reiterations elsewhere). This means a refusal to continue the self-negating politics of exploring dichotomy in favour of an expansion to include interests—a trichotomy, if must be. While this approach necessarily reduces some of Butler’s complexity (the situation is recalled from being one of multitudinous, multivalent definitionalities producing any ‘I’viii to a set of three intra-
definitional constructs), it also, I think, permits a re-engagement with political possibility, not so much because it thwarts the notion that a self can exist outside culture (it can’t) as that it provides one more field in which to work at shifting, exposing, delegitimating or perhaps even to some extent overturning norms.

The question then remains how thinking in terms of ‘gender’ in relation to interests (such as warriorship) might permit a rethinking of possibilities for intentional change? It is possible that ‘gender’ always opens onto a set of interests, such as warriorship and the policing of communal boundaries as well as psycho-sexual (internalised, self-definitional) ones. If (strictly speaking) gender studies is prone to reconstituting heteronormativity, rendering feminism to some extent self-thwarting, then does this extent lessen when ‘gender’ opens onto a trichotomy (masculine, feminine, war)? Can inverse dichotomous interrelativity (the fact that one term of a dichotomy always invokes its opposite, or what-it-is-not) operate in the same way if ‘gender’ practices and reiterations bear intrinsic links to warriorship—if in essence definitional exclusivity is at best a ruse? At the very least does an admission of a third subject into the supposed ‘dichotomy’ (given that it is no longer possible to think of ‘gender’ as purely about heterosexuality) lead to renewed possibilities for radical artistic practice and agitation outside Butler’s preferred tactic of ephemeral destabilisation? Lastly, can this approach impact on gender relations that seemingly have nothing to do with war?

An affirmative answer to the last question would pose gender as a side effect of social operations that have ramifications beyond sexual embodiment or sexed social role, while allowing for future research into the extent to which warrior cultures affect wider social forms. For the purposes of this exegesis, however, it is sufficient to illuminate the motifs at hand, being those relating between gender and warriorship, and their relation to the fiction. For instance, my research will explore strong connections between warrior masculinity and a devalued ‘penetrable’ femininity used in the creation, strengthening and policing of warrior bonds. It would seem obvious that devalued views of
‘penetrability’ seem widely influential outside warriorship, but that is not for my present study to delineate; it is enough for the fiction to work at exposing, comprehending and delegitimizing some of the operations involved.

The results of these theoretical repositionings will be explored against my project’s original intentions in the ‘Methodology’ section, which will argue from my research and reconsideration of the repudiative impasse to a consolidated account of how a fiction about all this material might proceed. Notably, this will explore what that fiction’s poetic, narrative, linguistic and, in essence, performative strategies might be.

For instance this section of the exegesis will trace, by moving between specific thematic concerns and concrete poetics, the ways that the novel will bridge the kinds of feminist theory that originally informed its goals and postfeminist considerations of ‘intersubjective’ agency, as well as the political ramifications of any new findings made in the ‘Context’. Specifically, I will find ways of fictionally exploring multiple definitions of ‘the heroine’ in context: the literary sense (in which a ‘heroine’ merely occupies the space of narrative centrality); the layperson’s sense (the ‘heroine’ being a heroic woman, or one who sacrifices her safety for the benefit of those unable to help themselves; and variations of feminist and postfeminist (the equality heroine who seeks equal status to masculine heroes; the difference heroine, who champions aspects of her supposed embodiment and its relation to metaphors; and postfeminist (absent, or perhaps only discursive, ephemeral, repudiative, self-thwarting, conflicted) heroines. While not all of these ‘heroines’ are to be depicted in the fiction (which would then seem like a list), I want to set out the ways in which a three-part story structure, with three quite different voices and narratorial tactics, can hint at the theoretical material and its form (trichotomy) while exploring seemingly fragmented experiences of ‘being female’. This three-part approach will also hint at the impossibility of defining ‘female’ as any one set of particular (let alone exemplary!) characteristics without invoking the reiterational circumstances they are enmeshed in, and without showing some of the complex interactions between intention and outcome that make political
intervention so difficult (such as the way that a feminist heroine in the equality sense—one who fights to be able to join the male-dominated military, for instance—can perform acts that make 'her' seem worse than an equivalent 'man' in that context).

In short, this ‘Methodology’ will set out the ways that narrative techniques, imagery and poetic leaps both depict and attempt to delegitimate the performatives and intended bonds that are produced at the expense of whole classes created by them.

My ‘Conclusion’ will return to my original concerns (being how to straddle definitions of ‘the heroine’ while somehow moving past the dichotomous impasse in order to resurrect a feminist ‘heroine’ in some form), suggest ways forward that may have become obvious during and after the writing of the fiction, account for the ways the novel might have answered some of the queries raised in thematic terms, and, hopefully, find in the novel a parable for progress when revisiting feminist aspirations through a postfeminist, but now (for gender reasons) antiwar, lens.
1. the feminist background

The theoretical background for this work originally included that branch of feminist theory that considered 'ordinary' language an enactment of phallogocentrism and therefore found emancipatory possibilities inside a poetics drawn from narrative disruption, elision, antilogic and other strategies.

The chief theorists under scrutiny included Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, in whose works the links between an allegedly alterior 'feminine' speaking position and tangible poetics were most fully formed. As Elizabeth Grosz phrases Kristeva's position:

The semiotic, the maternal chora and the abject are all placed on the side of the feminine and the maternal, in opposition to a paternal, rule-governed symbolic.

Accessing this more 'maternal' state meant using tactics from surrealism and psychoanalysis such as dream-narration, stream-of-consciousness, illogic, and privileging subordinate dichotomous terms. As for Irigaray, who said that primacy is 'the name(s) of the father', a system imposed and maintained despite the fact that '[t]he aporia of the "primary" identification of the "feminine" continues to break through the barriers created by [phal]logic, as they are built up[...]', the quest to produce a 'female' language involved arriving at non-phallic metaphors and logic derived from specifics of feminine embodiment. According to Irigaray:

Sexual difference would constitute the horizon of worlds more fecund than any known to date—at least in the West—and without reducing fecundity to the reproduction of bodies and flesh. [... T]his would be a fecundity of birth and regeneration, but also the
production of a new age of thought, art, poetry, and language: the creation of a new poetics.

The bulk of the metaphors and imagery contained in a work of this nature would supposedly invoke ‘feminine’ embodiment—not phallocentrism but gynaecentrism; not a narrative order reminiscent (allegedly) of male sexual experience (arousal, climax—a long build to an explosive end) but of ‘female’ experience (supposedly multi-climactic, for a start). Without having a linguistic base outside phallogocentrism, these works would have to depart not only from phallogic but from logic at all; hence a reliance on stream-of-consciousness, dream narration and other psychoanalytic devices accessing the unconscious (which in Kristeva’s work is accorded the position of the maternal).

Therefore, at the outset of this project, the relation of theoretical work to the ‘heroine’ in literary terms seemed a matter of adopting a range of disruptive strategies and crafting deliberately non-phallic images and metaphors. The ‘heroine’ would be, essentially, the character crafted out of the most effective and complete use of these linguistic tactics inside a narrative in which that heroic becoming would be played out.

2. The postfeminist impasse

However Judith Butler’s investigations into the way ‘performatives’—reiterations that attempt to create the relations they describe—work has utterly changed this project and caused a thorough rethinking of its aims.

Essential to Butler’s critique of emancipatory feminisms is the presence behind each of an underlying heteronormativity, or the pressure to produce sexual distinctiveness in an either/or form. That is, Butler finds in Kristeva, Irigaray and Beauvoir a similar heterosexism to that which provides the legitimative basis for the variables of gender each theorist critiques. For instance, Butler says that, by using biological morphology to arrive at her metaphors, Irigaray produces two possibilities, neither of which escapes the heteronormativity of the system under critique:
Whether feminine sexuality is articulated here through a discourse of biology for purely strategic reasons, [...] or whether it is, in fact, a feminist return to biological essentialism, the characterization of female sexuality as radically distinct from a phallic organization of sexuality remains problematic. xx

Similarly, missed in Kristeva’s account, according to Butler, is the way in which ‘[t]he female body that she seeks to express is itself a construct produced by the very law it is supposed to undermine.’ xxi That is:

[t]he female body that is freed from the shackles of the paternal law may well prove to be yet another incarnation of that law, posing as subversive but operating in the service of that law’s self-amplification and proliferation. xxi

Even as discourse produces the effects it supposedly names, the very same motifs used to express ‘femininity’ in emancipatory terms convey heteronormative goals, and therefore perpetuate the principles they attempt to defy.

The failure of ‘difference’ feminism to escape the heteronormative bind is not a personal failure but, in Butler’s view, a generalised impossibility. Behind this position is Butler’s view of sex as something always produced via its performatives rather than any direct vicissitudes of embodiment:

“[s]ex” is always produced as a reiteration of hegemonic norms. xxiii

The subject who speaks of sex has already gone through a process of (in its very formation) submitting to the reiterative norms of language. xxiv

Thus while, according to Butler, ‘every effort to refer to materiality takes place through a signifying process’ that itself remains partly material (the material of inscribed words and performed repetitions). xxv the material realm achieves its intelligibility—its ‘naturalistic necessity’—through discursive means.

The unknowability, in Butler’s terms, of what counts as ‘outside’ discourse removes the possibility of exactly those ‘feminine’ metaphors that would have enabled structural reparadigmatisation. Butler even goes so far as to rule:
There is no ontology of gender on which we might construct a politics, for gender ontologies always operate within established political contexts as normative injunctions, determining what qualifies as intelligible sex, invoking and consolidating the reproductive constraints on sexuality, setting the prescriptive requirements whereby sexed or gendered bodies come into cultural intelligibility.xxvii

Indeed:

[…] the feminist subject turns out to be discursively constituted by the very political system that is supposed to facilitate its emancipation[,]xxviii

and, where the political system produces masculine subjects ‘[…] along a differential axis of domination’, she finds that, ‘an uncritical appeal to such a system for the emancipation of “women” will be clearly self-defeating.’xxix

In exploring the discomforts of the term ‘woman’, Butler explains that the inexhaustivity of it provides yet another baulking point:

[i]f one “is” a woman, that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive […] because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities.xxx

In other words the globalisation of ‘woman’ as a signifier used politically has proved exclusional and ultimately disenfranchising given the plethora of other identificatory constructions involved. In Butler’s argument, then, the idea of an essential female self remains as unhelpful as the notion of a universal patriarchy.xxxi

It is in and through discursive interreliance that Butler explores normative terms; yet this same interreliance simultaneously provides the occasions for and impetus toward contest and resignification in gender terms. In her discussion of the Althusserian ‘hey you!’ of naming, she describes the action of being called to subjectivity as a kind of deformative instance that produces the conditions for resistance, provoking a consequential ‘rearticulation of the law against the authority of the one who delivers it’.xxxii Paradoxically, according to Butler, ‘It is this constitutive failure of the performative, this slippage between discursive
command and its appropriated effect, which provides the linguistic occasion and index for a consequential disobedience.'xxxiii In other words, it is not vicissitudes of embodiment or integral desire that provide the ‘occasion and index for a consequential disobedience’, but rather the impossibility of a ‘discursive command’ to ever produce exactly the relations it requires. Given her specific rejection of a metaphysics of substance (in favour of a metaphysics of metaphysics), Butler’s account of the occasional contest and ‘disobedience’ can only derive from this slippage between performative and ‘appropriated [lived] effect’ via the way that ‘[…] bodies never quite comply with the norms by which their materialization is impelled.’xxxiv That is, when compared to the ‘regulatory ideal’,xxxv the ‘disaggregation of the field of bodies’xxxvi inherently accounts for historical attempts to structurally undermine gender terms.

In Butler’s view there is no subjectivity outside normative heterosexuality, and consequently no speaking ‘I’ who can refuse the call to order.xxxvii Thus although she says:

if I have no desire to be recognised within a certain set of norms, then it follows that my sense of survival depends upon escaping the clutch of those norms by which recognition is conferred[…]xxxviii

for Butler there is no ‘escape’ once the call to order has been made: these norms ‘will only do me in from another direction’xxxix should they be repudiated.xl

This dire view of normativity (‘do me in’ and ‘survival’xl) hints at a strong wish to relax gender norms even as Butler locates the essence of feminist work as being to trouble normativity ephemerally, and without aiming at ‘the impossible fantasy of […] full-scale transcendence’.xli Indeed, since the strategies that enact this unintelligibility cannot structurally erode the normative system, the process is automatically constrained to operating within the ongoingness of the system itself. That is, the ‘Hey you!’ that in an Althusserian sense produces the conditions for resistance in the subject itself must always predicate (and predate) the politics involved.
For these reasons any agency must be ‘a reiterative or rearticulatory practice, immanent to power, and not a relation of external opposition to power.’ Enmeshed in speaking practices, called to subjectivity in the first instance via heterosexual norms, and unable to repudiate without reinvoking the same norms under scrutiny, the subject has no self-identical agency and cannot deliberately imagine, let alone achieve, transcendent gender goals. The only explanation of change remains Butler’s description of flaws in the reiterative system, which relies upon repetition to achieve some appearance of stability and so is prone to error. There are no ‘doers’ behind the ‘deed’ of gender, which remains paradoxically set apart from human agency even as there can be no ‘gender’ performatives without carriers of its terms.

For Butler, the result of this closure of agency is not, paradoxically, the thwarting of all avenues for political agitation but, rather, an opening up of a new set of principles toward reworking gender possibilities in ephemeral instances. Butler sees subjectivity itself as:

the nexus, the non-space of cultural collision, in which the demand to resignify or repeat the very terms which constitute the “we” cannot be summarily refused, but neither can they be followed in strict obedience.

Put more simply, ‘The [...] process of being named] thus functions as a kind of prohibition, but also as an enabling occasion.’ In her words, ‘[i]t is the space of this ambivalence which opens up the possibility of a reworking of the very terms by which subjectivation proceeds—and fails to proceed.’ To position the opportunities for resistance as part and parcel of the very call to order suggests both an inescapability and a structural weakness that, for Butler, provides a way forward in political terms.

As a result of this paradoxical inescapability and (yet) structural weakness, in Butler’s view, political activism ought to aim for no more than the temporary destabilisation of reiterative instances and the illumination, also ephemeral, of the way ‘nature’ is used to legitimate gender. Her preferred artistic practices embody these tenets, with texts like ‘Paris Is Burning’ favoured for their lack of readability and closure as against the entirely readable
‘certainties’ of repudiation and reiteration, which both return hetero-norms. Against the dualism of reiteration and repudiation, then, is posed the destabilisation and subversive repetition of the means through which identity is reiteratively enacted.

Butler’s ambivalence toward *Paris Is Burning* expresses a kind of desire for all subversive matter to be multiply readable—indeed for it to be both subversive and dominant-reiterative, to expose the kinds of processes that go on within reading. Her analysis concludes that ‘Paris is Burning documents neither an efficacious insurrection nor a painful resubordination, but an unstable coexistence of both.’ To Butler (following on):

\[\text{this is not an appropriation of dominant culture in order to remain subordinated by its terms, but an appropriation that seeks to make over the terms of domination; a making over which is itself a kind of agency, a power in and as discourse, in and as performance, which repeats in order to remake—and sometimes succeeds.}

With this ‘ambivalent’ construct, the outcome can go either way: either serving to complete the commodification of heterosexual gender ideals; or:

...opening a distance between the hegemony of gender and gender’s ‘critical appropriation’. While Butler’s view of political action tends to void feminism and ‘gender’ as workable instruments, instead focusing on troubling heternormativity at the level of norm transmission, she remains sympathetic to the quest for loosening the burden of oppressive norms. Butler says:

...We no more create from nothing the political terms that come to represent our “freedom” than we are responsible for the terms that carry the pain of social injury. And yet, neither of those terms are as a result any less necessary to work and rework within political discourse.

Thus, while at the same time, Butler cannot accept the claims of structuralist feminism that gender is inherently a matter of subordination and dominance, her desire to rework (or trouble) norms would seem to connect her work directly to preceding feminisms. At the same time, the relation...
between the experience of gender norms and sexual practice does dictate some circumstantial discretion that might be harnessed in thinking of ‘the heroine’ through a postfeminist lens:

Sexual practices[…] will invariably be experienced differentially depending on the relations of gender in which they occur.\textsuperscript{lv}

It is perhaps in the discretionary ‘relations of gender’, then, that I need to delve now. That is, analysing particular gender relations inside discursive systems or styles of culture might expose a way to bridge the impasse between postfeminism and feminism(s) (a bridge already part-formed out of the subjective desire to interrupt the ‘hey you!’ of naming), and between textual fictions of identity and intersubjective agency. My general goal is to try to understand to what extent identification is \textit{inescapably} bound by norms and, in essence, what new permutations of ‘the heroine’ might be useful in strengthening the feminism-postfeminism bridge (and to some degree in re-evaluating intersubjective agency).

This means considering in notional as well as contextual—that is, \textit{material}—terms what particular norms require and delineate in their calls to order, a matter that may perhaps only be appreciated through a thorough analysis of linked reiterative tropes that seem hinged to the most \textit{emphatic} heteronormativity, or sex distinction. The strongest necessity will be to work at exposing certain normative genealogies without reinstituting stale essentialism; as Butler cautions:

Perhaps, paradoxically, “representation” will be shown to make sense for feminism only when the subject of “women” is nowhere presumed.\textsuperscript{lvii}

However it is the \textit{desire} to loosen the hold of norms, whatever that desire’s origins (whether in the sheer matter of being called to order under a sign, or out of some antagonism where it relates to specifics of that calling) that makes a bridge between Butler’s work, my project’s subject matter, and, ultimately the prior feminisms whose Utopianism proved so oppressively reconstituting of normative heterosexuality.
At the same time, it is necessary to continue to question to what extent a poetics of ambivalence as espoused by Butler might answer quandaries posed within the very ‘relations of gender’ under investigation inside discrete spheres of normative influence. Before I can work through the logic of Butler’s metaphysics in closer detail, it is necessary to see their overview implications in terms of ‘intersubjective agency’ on notions of ‘the heroine’, and, therefore, to set out the proportions of the challenge posed.

3. the heroine

Joseph Campbell says individualism began as a warrior concept embodied in Zeus as ‘the individual who matters’, and it is from this set of tropes that the material meanings of ‘hero’ and ‘heroine’ derive. According to Campbell, the invasive ‘warrior principle’ posed a new cosmology (above earlier Vedic cosmologies) in which the ‘hero’ could introduce a new order and effect historical change. If taken via particular reading of (hero-centred) texts, the ‘heroine’ carries the notion of an interaction between ‘self’ and ‘society’ in which the ‘self’ eventually triumphs. This links well to earlier feminist views of political agency; however against this strand of thought is Butler’s specific view of the impossibility of pure agency and the inescapability of heteronorms, not to mention the specific rebuttal of research inclined toward the revelation of ‘origins’. The heroic figure, in suggesting by its historical traces the ability of individuals to impact in broader terms, may posit exactly the sort of identificatory agency and essentially-embodied ‘selfhood’ that Butler’s performative investigations reveal to be fictional. There is some sense, in other words, in which the literary ‘heroine’ and postfeminist theories are mutually exclusive.

Indeed, taken literally, Butler’s account troubles a literary ‘heroine’ at the level of any representation of ‘femaleness’ at all. Apart from connecting to parables of agency, the sheer presence of that ‘heroine’ connects to other fictional histories of embodiment and to heteronormative naturalism. That is, to the extent that a ‘heroine’ depicts a ‘female’ person, and that ‘femaleness’
accords with embodiment or meanings given embodiment, it is actively
heteronormative and to some degree essentialising. As Butler points out about
identity politics, essentialism acts in an exclusionary way, keeping the political
grouping from being a stable, cohesive force;\textsuperscript{lxiii} thus the notion of a ‘heroine’ is
an integrally divisive term. (Elizabeth Wilson makes a similar point: ‘The whole
concept of the feminist heroine carries with it an implication of identity over
difference, and of exceptional women, of rampant individualism. It is therefore
very contradictory.’\textsuperscript{lxiii}) Even as an attempt to institute feminist poetics (with a
‘female’ god, ‘female’ logic and ‘feminine’ metaphors\textsuperscript{lxiv}) is tied to the same
heteronormativity that legitimates gender in its most oppressive forms, a
‘heroine’ in a feminist sense—a heroine whose very form embodies the
principles of gender agitation toward some emancipatory goal—is
fundamentally self-defeating.

This impasse parallels the situation between feminism(s) and
postfeminist understandings of intersubjectivity. To paraphrase some of
Butler’s comments on the way that identity always resurrects its ‘other’,\textsuperscript{lxv}
insofar as the notion of a ‘heroine’ \textit{presumes} some oppressive view of the
background against which the heroine acts toward her own alleged
emancipation, ‘she’ becomes the carrier of extreme victimology; to be a
‘feminist heroine’ is to simultaneously resist and perpetuate that version of
oppression. At the same time, when the notion of monologic oppression is
dismissed as a fiction, the ideal of a single, idealised ‘heroine’ cannot be
maintained.

Clearly, post-Butler, any exploration of ‘the heroine’ must determine a
way to embody nonessentialism and identificatory complexity \textit{within} its
poetics; that is, within the very terms by which it confers ‘heroine’ status, or
refuses to confer that status, and by its narratorial and other strategies. Yet at
the same time, it is exactly this diffusive, anti-singular quest—a quest for the
dissolution of a consolidated form of ‘femaleness’ within the text—that
undermines the notion of even a strictly literary ‘heroine’ in the first place.
The same impasse in relation to feminist politics therefore tends to haunt the literary ‘heroine’: either I must find a way past Butlerian metaphysics, with its repudiative bind, its rationality, its ambivalent artistic preferences and its disavowal of radical change; or there is no ‘heroine’ to speak of. By its very terminology, a fictional ‘heroine’ cannot embody disaggregation (which opposes normativity); at the same time, without any semblance of a ‘heroine’, a text would be completely decentred even as its language, via linguistic norms, continues to reproduce heterosexuality. Butler’s preferred ambivalence might produce some shifting interplay between disaggregation and normative installation, or between the normative aspects of heroineship and legitimative destabilization, but those very processes would deny its intelligibility as ‘heroic’.

Having arrived at the vanishing point of ‘the heroine’ as ‘she’ intersects with Butlerian metaphysics, there does seem to be a tiny aperture leading out of the impasse. That is, it is possible to reframe the discussion via the pure literariness of its constructions. Thus, while there is no ‘heroine’ in a feminist sense to speak about, it is still possible to use a literary ‘heroine’ ironically to capture the impossibility of the ‘heroine’ as an exemplary cultural/textual mode. Indeed, in the wrong-headedness of ‘her’ very claims toward emancipation, and in the impossibility of a nondiscursive biological essence of ‘femininity’, a feminist literary ‘heroine’ might embody exactly those quandaries set out by theoretical accounts of intersubjectivity. However this would seem to break forever the literary genealogy of ‘the heroine’, where ‘she’ intersects with histories spoken by and through feminism(s), as a construct engineered partly toward the development of new ‘gender’ norms. That is, it would operate without recourse to earlier feminisms exactly as one of my intentions is to bridge between modes of thought.

The question remains whether there are other ways out of the various impasses between feminist aspirations and postfeminist intradiscursivity, and between feminist notions of ‘the heroine’ as a champion of gender emancipation, and a literary recrafting of ‘her’ terms responding wholly to
heternormativity. In a way, this is to ask whether Butler’s account of intersubjectivity and her notion of ambivalent poetics are to be taken as the proper modes of expression here. Clearly, to the extent that her work forms a rupture from previous feminisms, it cannot provide its own discrete bridge to reconnect the two. That is, insofar as Butler’s argument brings feminism to its (necessary) crisis, it appears irreconcilable with earlier formations and histories of materiality, both of which lead elsewhere.

There seem two choices at the present point in the discussion: either writing in some wholly ironic way of a ‘heroine’ who illuminates the structural impossibility of escaping gender norms; or, alternatively, crafting a deliberately ambivalent account that never arrives at stable subjectivity in any form, but fleetingly passes between identifiable sub-moments as Butler suggests. Condemned to reproduce heteronormativity anyway, the latter would achieve only transitory destabilisation at the level of discrete norms which, parodied, flaunted, denaturalised, repudiated, and haunted by exclusions, would hopefully deny that heteronormativity the agency it assumes in general discourse. For this reason, which is the acknowledgement of the way heteronormativity prevents the ‘feminist heroine’ from being more than an impossible figment, such a text would not contain a ‘heroine’. Alternatively, a wholly ironic textual ‘heroine’ would perhaps only serve to cement the closure of texts from embodied experience and, hence, to negate politics, which definitely intends to infuse ideas into lived experience. In its very irony, such a ‘heroine’ would not serve any functionally ‘heroic’ end, but would indeed be the negation of its cause.

The problem, thinking beyond this either/or, is perhaps the way in which each manages to thoroughly thwart a more necessary desire to relink postfeminism with feminism(s) through notions of a recrafted, intersubjective ‘heroine’—with, indeed, some notion of intersubjective (limited) agency. Where any agency to effect change is possible, the heroine becomes possible. In a way, then, what must be done is the thinking through of Butler’s metaphysics to craft some notion of inventive possibility.
There is a sense where Butler’s notion of coalitionary politics might open onto a singular ‘heroine’ as a literary construct, and therefore convey some of the constitutional requirements of heroinism. That is, the ‘heroine’ might be the category of effects installed at the level of gender by discursive means at such a level that they appear connected to embodiment. This fiction might work at the more crucial areas of that entity’s impossible negotiations toward self-freedom even as the complete interrelativity of subjectivities and normative contexts make freedom impossible. Without denying Butler’s account of the problems inherent in identity politics, that ‘heroine’ might be represented non-ambivalently without suggesting essentials of embodiment or omnipresent norms; ‘her’ presence inside coalitionary workings merely inscribes ‘her’ as the recipient of a chain of moments of subjectivation, a concretisation that both hinders and enables her position in the (fictional) world. The novel might then open onto the ways that performative aspects of gender ‘identity’ (those intersubjective collisions that produce naming instances according identity to ‘her’) might be harnessed to work against the substance of individual aspects of norms, rather than against entire heteronormativity that underpins language and identity at all. Without implying durable structural change, this way forward might use a fabricated, unreal ‘heroine’ whose positionality cannot undermine its own constructedness, but who can depict, exaggerate, mime and experimentally play out new ways of loosening normative aggregations.

At the same time, this loosely-constructed and utterly fabricated ‘female’ character (a character drawn entirely out of intersubjective and normative collision), still central to the fiction and therefore invocative of the ‘heroine’ in exemplary terms, might expose some of the ways that the fiction of identity has been used constructively as the agent of change, despite Butler’s findings that identity politics is constrained to reproduce heteronormative hegemony.

Is there yet one more way forward, in literary terms? Perhaps, even as gender reiterations transmit normative heterosexuality, in terms of social role, onto lived embodiment in remarkably durable ways despite the phantasmic nature of performatives, the naturalised status of ‘sex’ embodied in ‘selves’ and
taken as a requirement of feminism may well have helped produce the remarkable *effectiveness* of its activism when taken historically—not an effectiveness to delete heterosexism, but an astonishing effectiveness when taken in terms of individual norms. Thus the ‘woman’ used as a grouping force in feminism, while recognisably *constructed*, might provide a sense in which such forceful identifications are necessary even in the repudiation of their own self-grounding normativity. In this case, a notional ‘heroine’, formed out of intersubjective collisions, might become less a figment and more a solid-seeming persona as the novel goes on. In the process of becoming ‘realistic’ (a process drawn out of increasingly aggregated meanings), it might be suggested that, even as the outline of identity enables some semblance of political effectiveness, the ‘identity’ formed out of constructions might become able to achieve some of the agency it recommends.

While speculative, such a possibility makes increasingly pertinent the need to be wary of jettisoning ‘identity’ politics in favour of ambivalence toward structuring norms, even where this ‘identity’ poses the impossible possibility of transcendent ends. That is, it may be the unfulfillable promise of this ‘transcendence’ that provides some of the political impetus required to effectively challenge norms in the first place.

Even as disaggregation without cohesive political intentionality risks collapse into minor, individuated, ephemeral flauntings in the face of contextual regimes of normativity (its very point), the hegemonic nature of normative heterosexuality, and the way that non-heterosexually-aligned practices can cause those persons to seem (and, arguably, *experience* themselves) as ‘developmental failures or logical impossibilities’ within the framework of compulsory heterosexuality, makes it vital to underscore the ways in which self-allegedly ‘alternative’ non-heterosexual ‘identities’ (an impossibility in Butlerian and linguistic terms) can provide moments inside which those entities attached to such impropriety can experience the fleeting impressions of what it might mean to attain subjective *comfort*. Thus the fiction of ‘alterior identity’
produced in difference feminism may have been at worst a convenient fiction, and not necessarily or in all cases an inapposite one.

To put this more squarely in terms of my project, the notion of a workable ‘heroine’ bridging between feminist aspirations and postfeminist contingency—a ‘heroine’ whose status as ‘female’ comes via intersubjective negotiations as well as linguistic and ritualistic norms—might perhaps still be a useful fiction in political terms, and not entirely an unwitting conveyor of heterosexism. ‘Her’ self-effective agency might tend to produce actual changes in wider circumstances that a belief in non-agency might never achieve; even the construct of self-agency (this is to say) might be real enough to acquire some impetus in social terms. For this reason, the subject of the ‘heroine’ as a figment of both literary and feminist dreaming is not foreclosed.

4. hegemony

The notion of hegemony is central to Butler’s work on performativity, and is vital here. The term ‘hegemony’ derives from Gramsci, seeking to understand the phenomenon whereby members of classes most seemingly antipathic to capitalist values were likely to espouse them. According to Gill and Law:

Gramsci went as far as to suggest that certain types of ideas can become akin to material forces, in that they can incorporate themselves into the way reality is perceived and understood by the mass of society.

Of course, in the light of Butler’s work, ‘class’ is not to be understood as a concrete structure in which privileges accord with essentials of embodiment or even relations of fixed power. In gender, the reiterations that ascribe vagaries of embodiment to categories of subjectivity and police those boundaries simultaneously enact (and in doing so, at the moment of enactment, reify) the invention of that ‘class’. Anyone can ‘police’ gender in this way; everyone participates, whether resentfully or not, no matter what the substance of the norms.
At the same time, in Butler’s account, there is no transhistorical asymmetry in gender terms. Feminisms arguably saw a clear asymmetry in terms of the injuriousness of naming; and yet in Butler’s work, ‘man’ is not necessarily any more a ‘subject’ denoting a category than ‘woman’, and the ‘naming’ of ‘him’ produces arguably equal resistance. Seeing heteronormativity itself as the issue, she is not inclined to elaborate on a possible relative difference in terms of subjective discomfort with gendering between ‘male’ and ‘female’ or ‘men’ and ‘women’ across histories, although she does ask:

Are there other ways of being addressed and constituted by the law, ways of being occupied and occupying the law, that disarticulate the power of punishment from the power of recognition[inherent in being named]? For Butler, all namings confer punishment as well as recognition, where punishment counts as the deforming nature of the norms, which seek the alignment of bodies and selves, as well as spectres of abjection. For Butler the question of disarticulating punishment from recognition counts as politics: what might be done inside the moment of naming to reduce its injuriousness and/or trouble its recognisability?

The source of heteronormativity’s hegemonic power, in Butler’s account, is the human desire to acquire subjective intelligibility, alongside the (punitive) threat of non-being (‘abjection’). Butler suggests that it is the conferral of recognisability conveyed via norms that renders acquiescence to them not only desirable but necessary, where to be unintelligible may be experienced as to not be human, or alive, at all. (To paraphrase the old joke: norms—can’t live with ‘em, can’t live without ‘em.) Butler says:

‘I may feel that without some recognizability I cannot live. But I may also feel that the terms by which I am recognized make life unlivable.’

Political necessity therefore becomes:

[…] an interrogation of the terms by which life is constrained in order to open up the possibility of different modes of living; in other words, not to celebrate difference as such but to establish more inclusive conditions for sheltering and maintaining life that resists models of assimilation.
Butler’s view is, in a sense, to propose that recognition is the *motor* of normativity; it is the golden apple offered to the hungrily disaggregated passer-by. With this in mind—and perhaps in the avoidance of essentialism, naturalism and improper certainties about embodiment—her critique is firmly wedged in the substanceless realm of discourse. Embodiment is not addressed by Butler except in its dualistic relation as discourse's other. While this position has not gone uncriticised (among others, Bray and Colebrook see this as reaffirming 'a cartesian dualism'\textsuperscript{1xxiv}), it has certainly allowed Butler’s theoretical work to achieve a broad-ranging status: where she speaks of ‘[t]he tacit cruelties that sustain coherent identity, cruelties that include self-cruelty as well, the abasement through which coherence is fictively produced and sustained[...’],\textsuperscript{1xxv} it is any identificatory moment that is concerned. In her view:

Something on this order is at work most obviously in the production of coherent heterosexuality, but also in the production of coherent lesbian identity, coherent gay identity, and within these worlds, the coherent butch, the coherent femme.\textsuperscript{1xxvi}

Thus, for Butler, the *coherence* of the identificatory construct ‘woman’ used to enable feminism is its chief problem; her only account of why the category ‘woman’ might be *uninhabitable* refers mainly to its never being a ‘complete’ mode of identity: it is a shell inside which the complexities of ethnicity, region, background and so forth have been excluded,\textsuperscript{1xxvii} (which is only the problem of any kind of identity constructed in that way; hence ‘man’ should be an equally discomfiting term). This focus on the failure of the normative category ‘woman’ to produce a transcendent politics (while alleging to do so) is both necessary (in terms of appreciating that very historical failure) and limited, because it tends to overlook the power of change so-called radical strains of feminist action did appear to have. At the same time, the focus on recognisability inherent in the adoption of any identificatory category, while allowing Butler to split recognition from punishment, tends to keep abjection in the background. Even as the normative operation of naming privileges the domain of proper subjectivity, Butler’s account tends to privilege intelligibility as the mode through which, by destabilising it, to execute a politics; in her
terms, there is no way of speaking *via* abjection, since abjection wholly discounts all constructions of subjectivity that permit occasions to speak (or objects to speak about). Even as the domain of the outside, necessary to abjection and subjectivation both, provides the limit to what is able to be spoken, it exists in potential within her work, conceded to by ambivalence, but in the end foiled by her view of the inescapability of heteronormativity overall. At the same time as it is necessary, in Butler’s politics, pure abjection is impossible to capture within terms.

Butler sees no inherent inequality of status between heteronormative terms besides the mutual exclusivity offered by dichotomous interrelation. However if the moment of naming produces resistance, then it is salient that the namer (in the account, via Althusser, that Butler develops) adopts a position of instigator-power over the named. In this account, based on Althusser's description of the 'Hey you!' as the moment of arrest formed by naming, it is precisely this privilege of instigation—which is not to speak of instigation in originary terms but something looser, adopted from prior reiterations, a kind of repetition Butler calls a ‘citation’ of a pre-existing law—that provides some concession to a notion of class in more structured terms. Butler says, speaking of naming:

> The authority/the judge [...] who effects the law through naming does not harbour that authority in his person. As one who efficaciously speaks in the name of the law, the judge does not originate the law or its authority; rather, he “cites” the law, consults and reinvokes the law, and, in that reinvocation, reconstitutes the law.

However, unattached to necessities of embodiment, the class of persons-in-becoming who *adopt* the privilege of instigating the moment at which both primary and devalued ‘others’ are created terminologically attains a kind of primacy in discursive terms. This is to say precisely that Butler’s ‘judge’ is still a judge whose word, in a real sense, becomes definitive.

However naming also operates as a kind of challenge, such that the call to order is not only the citing of an overarching or pre-existing totalising law,
but, rather, a kind of gauntlet thrown down in the path of the other. Thus it is in the process of attempting naming at all that the namer issues both a definitional certainty of self-subjectivity and a call to the other to either assemble under those auspices (which is an acceptance of the naming subject’s status above that of the named), or risk abjection, which is the status of being outside the grouping. Even as anyone can ‘cite the law’ of gender (as Butler would have it), it would seem that, without the citer having some intrinsic connection to a grouping in the first place, such citation could not work.

Thus, to be named or to have a law of naming ‘cited’ invokes the challenge of repudiation or acceptance at the outset as well as a relation of subordination, specifically in relation to a notional group. That is, the same notion of strength (belonging) that permits the arrogation of the right to name is threatened to be revoked (or never granted) in the case of the other; this strength comes invariably from a position of inclusion. In other words, the central power of norms comes from an idea of a communal strength. Thus naming can never operate outside certain differentials of power reinforced not by bodily absolutes but the very presence behind those norms of communities apt to house and defend their terms. Without the auspices of that community, repudiation or objection to individual norms, as much as the challenge posed by naming, becomes futile. Without community, the figure opposed to naming becomes abject, ceasing to exist for that community, exactly in the way that Butler characterises in relation to identity overall.

In this sense, the question as to why humans would wish to accord with normative signification in situations where those norms produce relations of domination and subordination, and in that way exacerbate perceptions of injury among the named, might be answered by relations of group power behind the norms, and not intelligibility per se. Is it possible, then, that norms are reiterated because they offer a status-oriented definitionality to otherwise utterly illegible moments of human interaction? Put another way, is it the inherent allure of status that draws those who acquire the positionality of namer against the class of persons thence named? In that case, the privilege of naming—the judicial
robes—would seem aligned to the dominant category between any two terms. Put another way, it is in its predisposition toward a structural asymmetry that heteronormativity might also achieve its reiterativity, which allocates relations of instigator and named and transmits those relations along (as it happens) distinctly sexed lines.

If status is the motor of normativity, via accord with community as opposed to isolated individualism, then might subjectifying interactions tend inherently toward the establishment of status at the level of the classifications inside norms? For that matter, would a namers relation to a larger community, or to some perception of great force, permit greater degrees of status relativity, and, in that sense, more desubjectifying forms of naming according to the impressions of power involved?

If status is integral to normative transmission (and transmissibility), then it would seem that histories in which certain genders have inferred positionalities aligned with ‘namers’ are histories of genuine subjective asymmetry; the subjectivities called forth in that naming are of lesser inherent status than those who do the calling. The very power of namer above named (which is the arrogation of the power to make that challenge in the first place, a power that would tend to accord with some self-perception of strength or importance within community) might well tend to concretise itself in and via its norms; might even attempt the situation of naming rights to be part and parcel of its normativity. That is, if to name is to arrogate a right as well as to call the other being to order, then the quality of that name would invariably be infused with its relationality during naming. In that sense, perhaps it would seem innate to heteronormative practices that the traces of status differential between namer and name are infused into the performatives used; that those performatives may well trace histories that accord with histories of naming and named.

This is neither to suggest embodiments inside those dominations or subordinations, or to suggest transhistoricity; in fact, such material relations may well have all the hallmarks of accident. Yet once instituted, a relation of
dominance and subordination inside specific norms would tend to be reproduced. That is, a particular named ‘sex’ that arrogates the power of naming would become systemically embedded as that epoch’s progenitor—or its oppressor, as may be.

Thus if in English the terms ‘woman’ and ‘man’ seem to suggest a primacy of ‘man’ (being without the added definitiveness—a kind of deformation—posed by ‘womb’), then unequal access to speaking rights would be expected in histories, exactly as suggested by feminisms. However the baseline availability within naming of subjective inequality would not seem tied to any one ‘sex’ or being in an intrinsic way unless there are structures that tend to functionally prefer the primacy of those who, in heterosexing, become ‘male’ or ‘female’ as a class via their relations to naming. By no means is this utterly discounted as a possibility, for if to name is to issue a challenge, then it is precisely the strength (of community but perhaps in some way also of body) that is used to back up the moment at which the other is called to submit to law under the jurisdiction of that namer. This opens onto both the ways in which ‘to cite’ can be used by all, and, at the same time, the prospect that inherent differentials such as attachment to community might make such ‘citations’ favour the values of those with stronger communal ties or implied personal strength. In other words, the power of naming might be arrogated more often, or with greater status differential, by those more able to have the backup of communal bonds and/or physical prowess. This is to argue very strongly that hegemony is tied to notions of communal power and relativities in terms of physical, mental and bonded strength between those who harness the performatives in their own positional reification, and those who must negotiate with, against and under them.

Indeed, if it is the phobic possibility of exclusion in relation to larger community that maintains heterosexuality’s hegemonic power, then that exclusion must be threatened continually without being made real—for what is the absolutely excluded via its supposed ‘class’ (as the refuser of ‘class’) but an alternate culture in the process of being created? In this model, then, the
continual reiterativity of heteronormative discourse occurs not so much because of inherent instabilities of transmission but because abjection needs to be threatened reiteratively to achieve precisely the acquiescence necessary for the achievement of status differentials. Thus, while Butler maintains that the process of exclusional definition that affirmatively produces identity must be reiterated ‘to become efficacious’, it may be especially in the reiterativity of the threat of exclusion that normative terms achieves their power in cases where the norms attempt to install categories of subordination in relation to dominant terms.

In that case, histories that connect ‘the feminine’ to ‘abjection’, or to punitive instrumentalities, might be somewhat closer to circumstantial truths of heteronormativity than is poststructurally supposed. For these reasons, ‘intelligibility’ is not the central or only issue about which opposition to naming—to heteronormativity—might hinge. Perhaps the notions of ‘strength’ and ‘community’ need to be specifically undermined in the pursuit of a gentler, more inclusive, more habitable world, even if the overarching heteronormative instruments remain locked inside tendencies impossible to shift using words.

Discussing the ‘forming of a subject’, Butler says:

identification takes place through a repudiation which produces a domain of abjection[... that, while disavowed,] will threaten to expose the self-grounding presumptions of the sexed subject, grounded as that subject is in a repudiation whose consequences it cannot fully control.

In her argument, given the dichotomous interrelativity of the terms of heterosexuality, repudiation is a non-event politically. That is, it can only ever usher in the spectre of the norms being resisted; it is no more than a futile attempt to escape the inescapable.

However if repudiation provides for no alternative identity but only the imprecise status of non-existence shimmering inside that moment, then it is precisely that infinitesimal moment of non-existence that offers a space inside which the ‘other’ might become real according to a different status, if not different terms; or that multiplicities of ‘otherhood’ might be cojoined inside
similar status particulars in the order of naming. This space of possibility, even as Butler defines it, might be opened into an ideal that, by its attractive nature as a space in which the non-existent ‘subject’ might become such a being without unwanted impositions, becomes the exact moment of the possibility of that subjectivity. That is, the expansion of the moment of repudiation opens up a locus for ideals, and ideals open up a locus for communities of identifications based in them.

In other words, if (speaking hypothetically) the named claims existence under a different category, or under a similar category with a different relation to naming—that is, amongst an other community with its own perhaps slightly different precepts and norms—then acquiescence to the terms dictated by the namer becomes a matter of doubt such that acquiescence to the terms of the namer might be offered only temporarily, with an acknowledgement of the interaction occurring without intrinsic basis, a little like notions of dual citizenship. The problem for (historically speaking) ‘women’ is, as Butler outlines, that there is no ‘other’ realm outside discourse; to be named within discourse is apparently the only process via which to enter subjectivity at all, in any community. The question then is whether it is necessary for a supposedly oppositional community—that envisaged ‘other’ realm, with its ‘different’ principles—to be real at all. What would happen if the ‘other’ brought norms in from an idealised, impractical, materially nonexistent realm—say, the realm of pure (impossible) equality? Could not such a realm materialise—become ‘real’—in precisely the same way as the namer’s community? For that matter, is the namer’s community ‘real’?

In a sense, even as every namer occupies that positionality in a transportable way, without the existence of a physical army at his or her behest to back up the challenge, the namer’s community must be largely a fiction. That is, the notion of ‘strength’ posited in the challenge of invoking a norm upon another is only notional. Is not the challenge posed by naming also a kind of feint, a gestural ambit that can be followed up by either hostility or cowardice, exactly like the aggressive postures adopted by wild dogs? In that sense, to
what lengths would a namer go, being in general only notionally supported, in
pursuing the requirement for the named to occupy _that_ name, and to acquiesce
to _that_ moment of subjectivation? Would war inevitably result, or is war only
possible in cases where two cultures each want to best the other (or is war
something else entirely)? In other words, _might_ it be possible to repudiate
norms in favour of some idealised versions backed up by a purely idealised
community—a Utopia—and yet still achieve tangible effects such as a lessening
of the new normative impositions?

Put bluntly: is this not what feminism practically achieved?

Against this set of tactics, Butler proposes ambivalence acting on the
intelligibility of norms. Without identity, without community, it is the very
delineations naming sets for itself that are to be subverted and resignified.
However if the power of norms derives from the notion of community behind
them, and behind the status of the interlocutor who cites the name by way of
challenge and who is cognisant of the body of community behind those norms,
then the loss of a notion of community behind feminism would seem to
significantly reduce _any_ power to respond to oppressive norms at all, even with
a set of ideas in formation.

In that sense, critiquing identity (as Butler does) continually erodes the
very notion of ‘community’, and, to the extent that her political notion of
ambivalence cannot pretend to erode categories further than ephemerally—and
to the extent that the ‘feminist’ community had not achieved concretisation in
more than limited ways, given its short experience of providing an alternative
community for certain beings—in effect brings about a destructuring of
opposition to norms of gender. Even as ‘woman’ is a performative intended to
produce heterosexuality, Butler’s exposure of the futility of feminist politics
effects that futility. Where Butler says, ‘the political task is not to refuse
representational politics’\textsuperscript{xxxvi} but to ‘critique […] the categories of identity’\textsuperscript{xxvii}
themselves, her account futilises opposition to norms even as it produces a
‘community’ arguably more concerned with self-erosion than destructuring or
disinhabiting or delegitimating the arrogation of the right to name. In this
sense, Butler’s position arguably offers more of a politics through which to critique politics than a politics to intervene in processes in the ways made necessary, arguably, by regimes in which heterosexuality has operated with heightened oppressiveness.

The loss of community enabled by feminism using ‘woman’ as an identificatory signifier is not to be underestimated politically. The very logic that dismantled ‘woman’ as an identificatory signifier for feminism (and hence helped to effect the logical dismantling of feminism) may have taken away a powerful construct toward opposition to particular norms, if not to heteronormativity overall. On the other hand, Butler’s observation that such identities reproduce heteronormativity seems acute: such a ‘community’ is only ever likely to dissolve at the moment its politics begin to become effective (in dismantling gender categories). Yet perhaps this dismantling, born of repudiations, would be a moment inside which ever-new constructs obtain some liberty to emerge. If so, perhaps what is needed is a politics of grouping and regrouping: a politics impregnated with its own ability to resurrect in opposition to the linking of particular practices and embodiments to devalued subjectivation, or to abject forms. Perhaps the easiest way is the fiction of a Utopia in which abjection is not connected more intrinsically to particular names, and in which occupation of the seat of namer is up for grabs.

It seems overly rigid to count repudiation as without political usefulness alongside a discrediting of identity as politically enabling, for both might be required before the evolution of modified terms. If so, it is not ‘identity’ that must be countered by ambivalence, but status differentials between those who arrogate the position of namer as a class, drawing from whatever field of legitimation (community, bonds, physicality), and those who are challenged and devalued by the attempted application of the name. Yet the pre-gendered person does not exist, so this would require not attention to heteronormativity overall (an impossible construct to gain agency from) but attention to those norms that feminism has already traced as oppressive. Whether this would
mean using heteronormative ‘identity’ as it exists, or some other grouping principle that might allow resurrectibility, is open to suggestion.

Perhaps, as naming is inevitably an aggressive act, opposition to naming is inevitably defensive, and any oppositional community developed out of a position of being named (however transitory the norms involved in the original instance) would contain as its founding premise a notion of injury (this is very much a Butlerian depiction). However, what is salient in feminist history is not merely the victimology of it as the rapidity with which it evolved past that point. The risk Butler runs is in replacing small gains amid identificatory cohesion with a politics built out of an acknowledgement of self-defeat is that it may escalate opportunities for arrogation of the right to name and to heterosexualise that naming. Is it enough to house a notion of a disaggregated ‘community’ whose interests, plethorised by the very differences between their relations to naming, are called into the contest as backup to the resistant or wayward subject who challenges the limitations set by naming? Surely this would tend to provide a decreased notion of ‘community’ than one made up of those exposed to norms in more similar ways at the level of ‘identity’ or ‘embodiment’ (which is simultaneously the power of gender norms: that they are applied onto bodies, taken as the core being of the self). For that reason, while the notion of structural patriarchy may have been (transhistorically speaking) a fiction, it may well also have been partly an enabling one. However, exactly insofar as that fictional patriarchy tied oppression into the ‘masculine’ gender and gave the identifier ‘women’ in a feminist sense a structural reason to exist politically, self-defeat was inevitable. To resurrect, then, a notion of ‘woman’ identificatorially in political terms is only to experience the same fundamental instability of being without the recreation (also problematic) of the underlying structurally oppressive norms ‘she’ exists toward the erosion or dismantling of.

If there is an underlying structural tendency toward oppressive relations inscribed into gender, and if it is not tied inherently or necessarily to aspects of biology such as relative morphologies, then it would seem it exists only at the
level of community. That is, as naming relies for its power on a notion of communal strength behind the namer, there would need to be some connection between masculinity and communal bonds to enable a politics drawn from oppositional identity to have some fundamental principles against which to rally. In the sense that this is posed toward the creation of a fictional identity used toward the production of a fictional Utopia, this is not an attempt to reinstitute structuralism. Rather, given the inherent inequalities of processes of naming, which produce instances of domination and subordination and perhaps saturate heterosexual terms with such relations, this is an attempt to understand in what ways relations of domination and subordination might tend to connect themselves to genders, if, indeed, they do this in overarching ways at all. If, for instance, the processes of naming, in some cultural spheres, accord with the development of strong bonds between masculinities so created—if there is a way to link gender naming processes generally to masculine bonds inside that sphere—then one account of connections between masculinity and the prerogative to name might be in the communal strength of those bonds, which give the citer (the namer) the very perception of invincibility it takes to issue the challenge. The quest, then, is to find a culture in which these ideas might be tested, for on it hinges the notion of whether ‘woman’ as a political identifier is useful at all, or whether some fundamentally more durable principle might be found.

Whatever the case, it seems possible, despite Butler’s preference to undermine delineations that require exclusions and repudiations, that repudiation at the point of being named—if it can be attached to notions of community (for instance, the Utopia of feminist fantasy)—might attain a power to disrupt norms more forcefully than expressions of fundamental disaggregation or ambivalence backed up by continually reforming coalitions. Put simply, the power of threat and the challenge of status implicit in naming relations seems to suggest that, even as feminist political identity is a compromise, it might have been a necessary one; and somewhere out of that set of developments, some genuinely remodelled Utopia might have evolved at the
level of ideas that, in producing affective connections to psyches, could achieve a greater influence than disaggregative tactics.

5. material fictions

The tension between discursive overview and material specificity is a very pertinent one for my project. Put simply, fiction is material. That is, in its fixity as a text—albeit available to ‘readings’—fiction sets limits by choosing words that cannot be, for all their literary interpretability, other words.

In discussing gender outside questions of the ‘materiality of bodies’, Butler shifts into a mode of argument in which embodiment tends to seem forgotten, almost as though reiterations can exist without action. As Abigail Bray and Claire Colebrook argue:

[Even Butler’s challenging discursive account of sex still posits a duality between signification and matter, where matter is seen as radically anterior [...]lxxxviii

—albeit unknowable in discursive terms. Perhaps, then, the problem for a fiction writer thinking about ‘the heroine’ now is not so much in the abstraction of discursive operations but the very distinction between whatever lies outside discourse and discourse itself, and in trying to choose an exemplary system of poetics from such oppositionality. If texts might be considered as intrinsically linked to materiality, then a politics drawn from the disavowal of that interrelativity can only fail.

At the same time, it is in the inescapability of heteronormativity installed in language and legitimative of gender reiterations, and the attempt to derive a politics in overview, that the situation comes to seem a little like a pulsar star, prone to cycles of restitution and collapse. That is, at exactly the point of vanishment of the ‘feminist heroine’ ‘she’ becomes (historically, materially) necessary. In the absence of disaggregated political identificatory constructs (indeed, in its very structural implausibilitylxxxiv), disaggregation would be tend to be met by still-circulating, emphatic, engendering norms that tend (whether they intend to or not) to bring society to particular kinds of order, even if only
by virtue of the fact that they came from an unknowable time in which those particular kinds of order might have been circumstantially dominant. Certainly some norms may produce their own survivability—reiterative instability notwithstanding—more effectively than others.

However to call some norms ‘emphatic’ or able to survive more effectively than others seems to imply a different motor to norms beyond mere reiterativity. Even if norms are seen as contingent, residual performatives with no attachment to intention or origin—free-floating reiterations, part mistaken transmission, part refugia from earlier social epochs during which a kind of urgency called them into being, part modern reinscription, part fad—it is their attained dominance as norms that tends to produce its own conservatism even as every reiteration produces its own imperatives that may or may not tend to reshape the norms. In that case it is significantly the context in which performatives are reiterated—the presence of the mass of persons also subject to norms and across which some definitional averaging probably applies—that continues to hold norms, however loosely, to any particular form. For this reason—the massivity of context, which requires not just loose disaggregation but epochal, collective definitive review and seismic shift—it may be that epochal (and, taken historically, structural-seeming) conditions of oppression are likely to return across smaller epochs (like the 1970s) in which radical shifts at first seemed to occur with complete permanence. Furthermore, in the sense that norms underlie language as well as material relations (but influence the influentiality of both), they may be integrally resilient to change. Since a norm is not attached to immediate necessity, but diffused through custom and language, it may linger long past its moment of historical relevance inside communities unaware of its immodality; indeed (going further), its very immodality may allow it to appear as guiding abstraction, achieving the durability of scripture (indeed, one things precisely of Scriptures).

I could go further—indeed, with religion in mind, I probably ought to go further. An individual norm may tend to shape the very ‘immediate necessity’ that appears to cause its requirement in the first place. In other words, a norm may help
to produce the conditions under which it appears, the selfsame conditions that
the norm is at some level supposed to manage. This implies a kind of
escalationism within the normative aspects of human cultures, an escalationism
that could be exemplified in certain Biblical narratives, particularly the concept
of Armageddon.

With this in mind, I take very seriously the notion that an invested
gender politics ‘ought’ to avoid attempting full-scale transcendence and
instituting exclusional identifications in favour of ephemerally troubling
normative signification at the level of intelligibility. Once again, it appears that,
in confining politics to this model, questions of subjective asymmetry between
categories, and the uses of (non-satirical) Utopia in thwarting fixations of
devalued subjectivity, are set aside. Furthermore, the question of repudiation
seems unforeclosed given the presence behind any process of naming of some
notion of community. In that case, there is no simple dichotomy, but only an
appearance of dichotomous relation that masks a third operation (being some
kind of communal form). To put this another way, mutual exclusivity is
perhaps a fiction hiding the way that to occupy the position of namer (citer) is
an assertion of relational status backed up by community.

But even if to enact repudiative politics can only resurrect the norms in
question, a politics that aims at ephemeral destabilisation over full-scale
transcendence still seems to me to be acquiescent at heart. Even as normative
signification poses abjection as the space of non-being that threatens to engulf
the subject should he or she stray too far, Butler’s preoccupation inside and
between subjective terms effectively resurrects abjection in the same way, as
unknowably outside the discussion. This is not so much a problem for logic—
indeed, it is supremely logical, given the inescapability of normativity—but it is
a supreme problem in formulating a politics, which is intensely discursive even
as it seeks to apply change across milieux.

In discussing the ways that threatened exclusion works in producing
alignment with perhaps desubjectified (but not thoroughly abject)
positionalities, it seems necessary to consider material instances of normative
behaviour and performative transmission *in situ*. This is not so much a reconnection with materiality—that structurally incomprehensible, *difficult* realm—as a recognition that, as Bray and Colebrook argue:

> Matter, or the body, would not be thought’s “other”, if thinking were seen as a desiring production, a comportment, an activity, or an ethos.\(^{xci}\)

That is, even as there is no realm of pure matter, there is no realm of pure discourse or thought, as Butler has well appreciated. The difficulty remains that she has not constructed her *practical* politics in this way.

The challenge for me, then, is not to continue to think in fundamental ways either inside or outside the materiality of bodies, but to erode the notion of an inside and outside at all. Speaking of literature, in the very formulation of fictional poetics, one makes decisions about context drawn from the mishmash of lived experience, theoretical considerations, representational histories and Utopian ideals. In a way, then, fiction is an *enactment* of the fluidity between textual material, thought, discourse and materiality generally.

Given the crucial relation of abjection/community to normative processes as explored earlier here, it seems useful to look at those cultural modes in which performatives of ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ seem unusually productive of social outcomes in segregative terms along heterosexual lines. That is, inside fields of greatest *apparent* heterosexism, one might find sets of norms that can be explored not merely in their accord with hegemonic heterosexuality, but in their specific tropes of meaning and uses of abjection, and in their relation to wider discourse.

I have asked the question whether heteronormativity predisposes toward differential power relations, and argued, indeed, that differential accounts of subjective agency may be structural to heteronormativity by providing a class of subject-granted persons privileged in the process of that naming. So far this remains an overview of privilege within heteronormativity. Despite Butler’s preference to consider heterosexuality aside from material moments, it may still be arguable that there are some norms that are older and
more embedded in the ‘trunk’ of our behavioural history, our linguistic
frameworks and our identificatory processes than other norms, and that this
alone may make them hard to shift (explaining why, despite several attempts at
normative overturn, the word ‘underpinning’ still often seems apt in relation to
gender norms). However, despite the complete contingency of the system as
delineated by Butler, she is adamant that there is no radical alteration available
to politics.

As Terry Threadgold has perceived:

certain kinds of racist and sexist discourses[…] remain stable across
a century of what looks like constant change and variety.xcii

It seems obvious that certain kinds of norm do appear relatively similar
across epochs and between vastly differentiated culture-groups, and that one
reason for this might well be the way those particular norms are attached to
cultural protections such as exclusion and secrecy. As it happens, there are
certain groups (or cultures) where entry into the realm of that privilege is
especially guarded, and that heteronormativity especially imbued with status
and notions of exclusion versus inclusion.

The history of feminism is one of introspective criticism as much as
progressivism;xciii as Butler’s revelations about heteronormativity in
feminism(s) show, feminism itself seems to have undergone some major
dissolve at the same time as naturistic discourses such as gene research seem to
have acquired a new legitimative power.xciv Perhaps this is the affirmation of
Butler’s critique of feminism(s), or perhaps Butler’s critique has fed into a
dismantling of effective oppositional strategies—or perhaps some strains of
naturalism within heteronormativity are especially pernicious, or especially
focused on their own reiterativity. In the latter case only a close examination of
particular norms in situ might show in what ways Threadgold’s perceptions of
particularly durable kinds of discourse (specifically in relation to ‘sexism’)
might lead out of the heteronormative bind without reinstalling the discussion
inside purist geneticism.
With all the above in mind, I would now like to consider some of the profound shifts—some would say regressions—that have occurred in the fields in which gender tends to operate most explicitly (that is, with most ‘difference’), for instance the military. Indeed, if I am looking for a cultural sphere in which heteronormativity operates with most profound vehemence, and in which heterosexual segregation helps to foster the transmissive stability of norms as well as segregational emphaticity, I could probably do no better than consider militarism.

It is, then, toward two memoirs of military service that I would like to turn now. Both are reasonably contemporary, and both offer accounts of naming, shaming and the uses of community that are extremely illuminating, and that may provide some ideas for fictional approaches to the embedded terms.

**6. penetrability**

There is a moment in Kayla Williams’ memoir of female military service in Iraq, *Love My Rifle More Than You*, in which, having driven a Humvee up a hill so steep the vehicle nearly flips, she feels she has earned the respect of a nearby group of males:

> The other team cracked up laughing—but I could tell right away that they were laughing with me, not at me. I had won their respect by driving while the guys walked.

But in almost the next instant (which is conveyed as part of the same moment, almost as though the two sets of ideas run together) the mood seems to shift:

> ‘Boobs,’ a FISTer said, like it was some genuine insight. ‘Look, this one’s got *boobs.*’

Without imputing a necessary disrespect in the observation about ‘boobs’, it still does seem that Williams’ apprehension of their laughing with her might be premature, or perhaps affected by wishful preference on her part. Maybe they laughed at the *other men* with Williams forming the joke’s linchpin,
like the idea of ‘girl’ in the way interdictions about how boys should behave work: ‘You are to tell your men to stop acting like women[,]’ says the former commander of the United Kingdom Special Forces in Iraq, Lieutenant Colonel Tim Collins, in his own memoir of desert service.xcviii

The reason for this suspicion in relation to Williams’ perception of fraternal respect is that throughout Love my Rifle it is precisely her position as being among the men at all that is in question. Her desire for inclusion is obvious but ultimately she has, it seems, no real control over the ways this inclusion and its alter-aspect, shunning, works:

I was getting shunned. The cold shoulder from guys I used to hang with all the time. I had no […] idea why. No one was talking. No one was telling me anything.xcix

Inside the story of Williams’ working through her position inside the culture of warriorship there is a second story, one of the mistrust with which the culture of bonded warriorship, especially in times of increased stress, views being female. Thus while at times Williams appears to use what used to be called ‘feminine wiles’ to get herself a break from duty—

We’re both pretty small, so our survivability position was supposed to be approximately thirty-six inches deep[…] But about a foot down we hit a thick, hard layer of salt. It had to be broken up and then removed, along with big rocks. Luckily the guys decided to show us how it should be done, and what strong men they were, and they did it for us. A rare moment when I took advantage of the benefits of being a girl.c

—at other times her perception is that the closure of the male ranks and her exclusion from being part of it is extremely unfair and incomprehensible:

Why the hell won’t the guys in our platoon ever talk to me anymore?ci

Thus it is that Williams, who seems surprised by these moments that are, in part, engendering of her, exists so uneasily as a narrator, sometimes attempting to occupy positions that cast out somebody else (but not entirely else) as being subhuman (the ‘hooker’) as though hoping that her status as ‘above’ the figure told in the joke is reified in the telling—
‘Listen, now,’ Travis says. ‘What’s the difference between a hooker and an onion?’

‘Ah, that’s my joke,’ I complain, passing the can to him. ‘No one ever cried when they cut a hooker. Hey. What’s the first thing a woman does when she gets back from a battered women’s shelter?’

None of them know.

‘The dishes, if she’s smart.’

—and at other times painfully cognisant of being outcast. The troubled way she approaches (which is not to say ‘inhabits’) either position illuminates the contingency of gendered personhood and the integral relationship between perceptions of subjectivity, society and status. There is no ‘being’ a woman in any one sense, and therefore the subtitle of Williams’ work—Young and Female in the US Army—becomes no more than a series of implausible feints, none completely capturing what the book is really about. If the Army makes ‘her’ female by rituals of debasement and shunning, then ‘she’ is not ‘in’ the Army; neither is ‘she’ essentially female. Yet the book is still about femaleness in the US Army—a psychic, reiterative and ritualistic ‘femaleness’ that exists flimsily and fleetingly when called into being by a constructed (and, in this set of cultures, integral) relativity to the notion of the bonded ‘male’. As it happens, such ‘femaleness’ is profoundly confusing for Williams, existing as it does almost outside the legitimacy of subjectivity in warrior terms (which is always, paradoxically, an identity-in-formation, a group subjectivity in which individuality is always in danger of being completely undermined). Against the loss of identity supposed in masculine warriorship’s notion of unity is posited Williams’ further loss of identity in becoming (its) figure of abjection. This is not to say that ‘identity’ ever existed for her in any structural sense, but that the negotiations she had made in her past social life toward an expectation of continued status (as another person, with intersubjective agency) appear to have been proved moot. The suspension of disbelief that let her feel whole, safe, respectable across contexts had gone.

The link between group behaviour, identity and abjection seems particularly fraught—intense, emphatic and ritualised—in masculine bonded
warrior culture. Looked at in terms of theories about trauma and subjectivity the links are clear:

In the aftermath of intergroup fighting, rituals are established as large groups try to keep their identities distinct from each other [...]; in this way, they begin to see others through externalizations and projections as less than human. One such ritual is an obligatory process of purification which intensifies the group identity by eliminating its unwanted aspects.\textsuperscript{ciii} [My emphasis.]

In this light Williams becomes the ‘unwanted aspect’ of the military unit; her redefinition as, in some intrinsic way, opposite to the militarised males makes her ironically vital to their bonding process. For her, this constant ping-ponging between extremes of apparent status, from friend to something worse than foe—for instance, Williams’ repetition of what may be read as a somewhat misogynist joke comes shortly after she finds herself called ‘hatchet wound’, producing ‘a nasty shiver’\textsuperscript{civ}—is some indication of the complexities involved in negotiating survival (and selfhood) inside the intensely hierarchical, heterosexing and penetration-obsessed world of the military, a world in which certain kinds of bodies are taken as penetrable and definitionally excluded from the bond of brotherhood, and others, in the very process of acceding to the bond, attain only a precarious security that is itself perpetually under (penetrative) threat. Thus where Williams can see in even the most ‘asshole’ of males some personal touchstones to like on an individual level—‘he and I shared a lot of musical tastes’\textsuperscript{cv}—when she joins a warrior bonded group, there is always the threat of its turning on her, targeting her in a way she can never predict:

Everything shifted sometimes that August, like water once simmering coming to a boil. You could feel the heat in everyone’s mood. We were not in this together any longer. Nasty down the mountain, the insurgency gathered strength day by day. Ugly up here, too.

Like the day some of the guys—tossing a football—told rape jokes. (Are there any jokes about rape that are funny?) My blood—how else to put this?—‘froze.’\textsuperscript{cvi}
The trauma of a perceived increase in threat concurs with an increased reliance on definitional exclusivity, which has as its byproduct Williams’ sense of abjection among the group; this is her gender in warrior terms. Put another way, ‘gender’ in this venue is not a matter of heterosexuality; rather, the reification of difference occurs as part of rituals aiming to produce that most emphatic of identities, the unified warrior bond. It is impossible, indeed, to consider heterosexuality without considering homosocial warrior unity in this culture.

Caught up in ritual and reiterative operations that do worse than sideline her, Williams can only react with flimsy attempts to shore up her own self-definitionality, which inevitably fail. The idea of other women—abject women—that had allowed her to negotiate her status among these males with some sense of (false) security proves infinitely unreliable when the joke involves those women who have not consented to any penetration (the jokes about rape). While behind some of Williams’ shock lies the unspoken idea that to consent to penetrative sex in the way of prostitution or sluttishness negates any ability to refuse other penetrations (such as being ‘cut’), it becomes clear that in military culture the whole subjective being of the one considered sexually penetrable is coded as weak and open to wounds. Indeed, to be female, in warrior culture, is to exist precariously alongside the threat of being considered penetrable by both enemy and friend, a threat that seems only deferred, never entirely resolved.

It is precisely in this interplay of openness and closure (the impenetrable body of the bonded warriors; the sluttish openness of the sexual female) that the memoir fixates; yet it is an investigation largely unaware of the systemic, structural principles at work. Indeed, every moment at which the fragility of Williams’ status is revealed is painfully surprising to her:

So they decided to make this big bullshit judgment on me. And it was really painful.\footnote{vii}

Throughout the memoir a wobbly polarity exists between the way Williams sees herself socially—as a subject, a person able to make decisions
with self-respect, even if her life prior to joining the army had not been without interpersonal difficulty— and the way the bonded warriors decide to treat her. It seems essential to the shunning process that she is not told what she has supposedly done wrong, perhaps because in the refutation of unjust accusations the accused may speak up for herself and so unwittingly cause some instability in the bonds whose very existence seems so dependent upon that kangaroo court style of judgement. This disjunction between the self Williams believed she presented to the men she worked with and the ‘slut’ they invented to enable a ranks closure against her results in an experience of profound trauma. As Adam Thurschwell defines the situation:

Trauma occurs when the conscious experience of an event that befalls a subject fails to coincide with the event itself—typically, when that experience is delayed […]

In other words, the peak of Williams’ trauma occurs not so much during the experience of being shunned but when through her own persistence and an unusual circumstance she finds out why the men have been behaving in this way. The absence of knowing through the duration of the shunning and then the sudden revelation—the traumatic delay—seem wholly connected to the abnegated way Williams comes to see herself, especially in her consideration of suicide. Indeed, once she knows the reason for their behaviour she seems to only feel worse:

And now the guys I considered my friends were treating me like a girl. I was tits, a piece of ass, a bitch or a slut or whatever, but never really a person.

Bros before hos, 

In Williams’ use of self-abasing lingo, which is not fully subversive, she comes to faintly embody those ideas; her text is affected by the memory of abjection, which continues to traumatisse her long past the time of deployment.

The unity of ranks produced in this shunning process is apparently seamless. Only a close superior about to leave Iraq is able to break rank sufficiently to explain why:
‘They think you’re a big whore,’ Quinn says, looking away. ‘They think you’re a slut. And they don’t want to have anything to do with you.’ cxii

By ‘have anything to do with you’ Quinn means as a person, having status in the ways that they perceive themselves, namely being consolidated, impenetrable, bonded. Men she once considered friends make off-the-cuff comments: ‘And by the way, I think you’re a whore.’ cxiii The episodes in which these fellow soldiers try to physically penetrate Williams illegally merely play out these beliefs, albeit never to their conclusion:

It’s dark, but not so dark that I can’t decipher at some point that Rivers’s pants are open. That he’s got one hand on his penis. And then, suddenly, he’s also got one hand on my arm.

He’s pulling me pretty firmly toward him, maneuvering my hand toward his crotch. cxiv

Of course, Williams’ sense of hurt and frustration does produce a kind of retaliation on her part; but the retaliation itself becomes yet another flange of the consolidated bonding process. After Williams brings a complaint, she experiences the effects of a cascading diffusion through the male bonded ranks of an alternate story to the one she told—a complete, unified refutation that redefines her once again as penetrable:

He [the unknown soldier] just launched in.

‘Rivers tells me that you came over here in the middle of the night one night. He says you said: “Oh, please let me suck your dick. I want to suck your dick so bad.” And that he said: “Oh, no. I have a girlfriend, and I love her so much.” And that you said: “Oh, that’s so sad ‘cause I want to suck your dick so bad.” And he said: “No, no. We can’t.” And that you were very disappointed. Very upset.’ cxv

The story Williams told (in confidence) of her being isolated and groped becomes a story diffusively spread throughout the ranks of her being not only open to penetration but specifically via the mouth (the means through which she rejected the sexual advance and also told of what had happened).

Overall the men decide she has committed some sin of penetrability; they see her, therefore, as too open sexually. Their reaction is to close against her; it is therefore her alleged openness that accords them the opportunity to
become ‘whole’. Notably, when the experience of being soldiers in a dangerous environment becomes most anxious generally, the men’s interest in forcible penetration (at the level of the joke, those most anxious and also anxiety-channelling of expressive forms) reaches its public peak.\textsuperscript{cxvi}

Having come to the decision about her, the majority of the men she works with have no desire to revise the consolidated view, almost as though revision itself would impute weakness; or perhaps because, in the channelling of interpersonal sexual rivalry, the decision to call someone a ‘slut’ is a way of neutralising their presence that their re-admission into selfhood would seriously undermine. Like all rituals there is no knowable singularity of function, and yet the reification of male-male solidarity seems to underlie everything; it is hard for a reader not to think in functional terms. Behind the scapegoating of Williams (and, one assumes, other female soldiers) seems to lie the indefinitely deferred promise that someone will be targeted; someone will be rendered penetrable in order to give the ranks their allegation of impenetrable unity. In other words, without this cast off idea of penetrability (and the possible shunning not only of the person but also the sexual rivalry their presence might foster)—perhaps without some newly devised method of channelling internal aggression and rivalry—warriors might not bond at all. Perhaps, given definitional exclusivity (one is one thing to the extent that one is not other things), it is not strange that militarily bonded males require an ‘other’ to act out this process of becoming consolidated in a bond; but there is a certain curiosity in the result whereby females of the warrior’s home ‘team’ arguably become devalued even below the status of ‘enemy’ soldiers.\textsuperscript{cxvii}

In the meantime the fact that the entire field of practical warriorship has undergone major technological change is perhaps moot inside a hierarchy so connected to tradition and so powerfully emphatic in its terms as the military; it doesn’t matter to the rituals of inclusion and exclusion that a female warrior might shoot as accurately as a male or utilise other technological advances successfully against an official enemy. The structure of military reiterativity seems to contain itself remarkable unchanged across massive shifts in
community; in a way, it is possible to see its entire function as one of conservative transmission of reifying principles—which is never to say that reiterations succeed completely or equally in every epoch. Indeed, that most of the male soldiers seem almost as unhappy as Williams merely shows the disjunction between rituals and the intersubjective beings who perform them.

Nevertheless the experience of being subjected within such a realm remains dire for Williams. Her very survival is at stake among the machinations of shunning and inclusion; she experiences these matters far more forcefully than even the death of a man before her eyes: ‘Why is it I can watch a man die and not freak out? Then I have a powerful physical reaction to a small—and completely unjustified—hassle from a [male] superior?’ This feeds into the arguably overdetermined part of the narrative where Williams, having been passed over in the awarding of medals, is kindly given an unofficial service award by a group of male soldiers. Their gesture seems to rescue Williams from a remorseless kind of self-abnegation; they remind her that she might one day be permitted inclusive subjectivity again. However the men who redefined her penetrably make no attempt, apparently, to overturn their judgement.

Rituals and reiterations are not remorseless behavioural codes people adhere to, like robots. Even within the ranks closest to Williams, there remain male soldiers who refuse the physical acting out of the impenetrable-many and penetrable-one ritual; they don’t exactly stick up for Williams, but on at least one occasion they refuse to participate:

‘Just push me into her, man,’ Hodgson is whispering loud to Matt. ‘Push me into her.’

[…] ‘Push yourself, man. I’ll have nothing to do with this.’

However the normative generality of misogyny seems very real. As Williams says of the general view housed in bonded male warriorship of females in the service:

It was around this time that I first heard that a female in the Army deployed in Iraq was either a bitch or a slut.
Williams understandably decides to choose the role of ‘bitch’ even as, to the reader, it seems clear that she has very little choice in terms of self-definition at all (one senseless slip—really a mistake of perception—and she is branded the other thing). Even her official status is routinely ignored:

A male friend of mine whose team leader was a girl and also the same rank had already told me that when people came to his site, they would talk to him—not to his team leader. And that would bother him.

He would say: ‘She’s the team leader.’

People would say: ‘Uh-huh. Yeah. Okay.’ And then keep talking to him. And repeatedly address him as if he were in charge.

He would again say: ‘No, no. She’s in charge.’

Now the same thing happened to me.

Note that it is a ‘male friend’ who first describes this situation to Williams. Even as a few of the male soldiers seem able to function with more civilised demeanours toward Williams, it remains clear that the cultural presumptions that accord status with bonded impenetrability also inform her own perceptions of other females. The sexes of the soldiers who ignore the female team leader in preference for the (male) underling are not divulged, but where Williams’ narrative provides most interesting examples of the paradoxes in a female-described subjectivity emerging among so many arguably antipathic rituals and behaviours is when she talks about those females who become her immediate superiors—Staff Sergeant Moss and Staff Sergeant Simmons—who occupy Williams’ narrative in negative terms for many pages. In both cases Williams finishes her account of their incompetence with a description of each bursting into tears, in Simmons’ case explained (by the Sergeant herself) as premenstrual syndrome, an even worse gaffe given, perhaps, the notion of PMS ushering in the very bleeding that evokes the idea of a wound:

[…], in front of everyone, she blames her crying on PMS. Yet another thing that is absolutely not acceptable in the Army. It encourages men to think what most men think already: that PMS makes girls do incompetent things.
Williams’ reaction to each superiors’ tears is profoundly hostile; even as the bonded warriors have seen her on occasion in abject terms, she says:

Is it happening? Is that what I think it is?

Staff Sergeant Moss is crying. It isn’t anything huge. Just a tear or two. But I see it, though I might not have noticed if I weren’t studying her.

The bitch [my emphasis].

If rituals and reiterations had no effect upon a person’s internalised view of the world and of people in it then there would be no need for Williams to police these female soldiers on the behalf of fraternal expectations. Yet in both cases Williams experiences each breakdown as a likely reinforcement of male soldiers’ views of the females as weak and overemotional:

You never cry in front of a subordinate. Especially if you’re a woman in a position of authority. The guys already think we [female soldiers] can’t handle this. It just isn’t done.

Her disapproval is partly their disapproval; she seem to feel in it, perhaps, the same phobic transferral of hostility that she has experienced elsewhere. Of course, to a lay reader the picture gleaned by Williams’ account of both superiors is one of feminine incompetence in positions of command; in its own way this narrative cements that view. At the same time, it seems clear that Williams is scrutinizing her female compatriots substantially on the men’s behalf, watching for signs of weakness. The dualfold definitonality offered females (bitch or slut/whore) partly infests Williams’ depiction of SSG Simmons as a needless flirt, a woman who invites male infantry to play cards, says, ‘“Don’t worry. I won’t bite… unless you want me to[...]”’, continually brushes her hair in front of the men and announces to all and sundry her intention to cheat on her second husband. That is, despite Williams’ disdain for the widespread notion that women serving in Iraq are either bitches or sluts, she inadvertently (but not without intelligence) makes a similar distinction herself. For this reason, it is inadequate at the very least to view ritualistic motifs and ejections as performances separate from internalised beliefs, visceral embodiment and future behaviours; the affectiveness of language itself can
bridge a gap between embodied experience and normativity. In a culture in which ejections, rituals and other identificatory injunctions operate as emphatically as the military, the possibility of ongoing subjective trauma seems almost so obvious—and certainly well represented in literature—as to be hardly worth pointing out.

It is precisely in the formation of the group bond as opposed to the singularity of the abjected (or cast out) person that the genderising moments in warriorship achieve their direst effects. The problem as Williams experiences it is not that women in positions of relative power fail to act in ways delineated by the ‘bitch’/‘slut’ divide, but that the ‘bitch’/‘slut’ distinction itself delineates the abject (shunnable) soldiers from the masculine-bonded ones. The presence of women who seem to bear out some of the abhorrent behaviours associated in the militarised male mind with femininity causes a good deal of worry for the narrator of *Love My Rifle*. In situating herself with the men on this point Williams says, of the moment at which Simmons made a probable sexual overture toward a male soldier:

Matt turns her [SSG Simmons] down politely enough to her face, but he tells me later he can’t stand that ‘scary troll bitch’.

As revealed by this episode, the male soldier’s prerogative to name the female does not imply her ability to self-name even if that naming seems identical (you can’t choose to be the slut; you are named.) Once more, the suggestion that gender works heteronormatively seems inadequate to explain the precise heteronormativity at work inside warrior bonding. There is a disequivalence at work: a pejorative bias against penetrativity that requires the female to embody penetrativity to the extent that she cannot refuse (hence the ‘bitch’ is the one who seems to think she can refuse). To be female here is not to be different or even merely opposite to male; in the sense that being female is coded as pure penetrativity, ‘being’ female is impossible; ‘woman’ is not a subject-denoting term.

The dire way Williams experiences the disjunction between her former (fluctuating) opinion of herself and the behaviour of the male-bonded warriors
highlights the power of intersubjectivity, or how injunctions work through a structure that cannot even be defined as ‘structure’, for its participants are never (either) fixed subjects but themselves provoked and recalled reiteratively. Yet I would put it that the question of subjectivity is so connected to status (especially in warriorship) that in this sphere we can use the terms almost interchangeably. As Williams finds, the devalued, isolated status on offer to her for a large part of her time among the male bonded soldiers is not compatible with selfhood at all:

The shit was too overwhelming. Everything was. No one asked or cared—or even noticed—what the fuck I felt. I withdrew even more. Felt increasingly lethargic[...] And I felt this powerful desire to be even thinner and thinner. Until I could simply slip away. Disappear.

Eat less and less...

It was around this time that I contemplated offing myself.\textsuperscript{cxxxii} Her time among the mostly male warriors results in a thorough and ongoing disquiet; paradoxically, after her deployment she finds the world in which she had located a sense of identity before serving in Iraq no longer satisfying to her, and her Iraq war service achieves a kind of primacy in her imagination (nobody says nostalgia must always be for pleasant experiences). Thus while, ironically perhaps, Williams’ experience of the military is described overall as one that has helped shaped a stronger sense of self when dealing with others,\textsuperscript{cxxxiii} her melancholia remains long after her deployment finishes. She yearns for those periods of preoccupation with duty in which subjective questions were (momentarily) forgotten; she yearns, in fact, for the brotherhood whose very inclusiveness of her was only ever a product of fantasy. It is with some apparently unconscious irony, then, that she realigns her melancholia with the melancholia of the male bonded soldiers who, finding themselves back on home turf, also fail to adequately reach true rapprochement with the civilian world:
Sometimes now I end up around a bunch of soldiers who were also in Iraq, and we can talk about what it was like. *We can bond pretty easily.* [My emphasis.]

this melancholia remains despite occasional moments in which Williams’ military experience grants her status in wider society, such as when a group of ‘hippies’ vociferously approve of her role in Iraq and even ask her about how to sign up. It is hard not to see Williams’ melancholia as related to the trauma that must be ongoing in her dream of returning to bonded warriorship, a return that would surely expose her to similar threats of subjective denial. If there is a trauma in this nostalgia then it resides in the precise slippage between the fantastic recollection of inclusive bondedness and the conspicuous (but in part denied) revelation that her inclusion in the bond had only ever been sham. In other words, it remains possible that Williams’ melancholia results from the exposure her sense of identity had to its own complete contingency. She saw the abyss that is intersubjectivity at its least survivable; she found that negotiating one’s status requires reciprocity and admission. Perhaps only in the face of exclusion can one no longer continue the fantasy of self-coherence in status terms (having a position in the world). Yet what remains special about Williams’ melancholia as opposed to the melancholic dispossession of the men she approaches later on is that her exclusion is wholly connected to ideas of gender; indeed it is her very position as a member of a gender that arguably becomes the basis for her exclusion from military brotherhood. However this is not to say the men who operate within militarism are not subject to its most vehement traditions of expulsion—does not any inclusion always presuppose the threat of abjection in being left out?—and a further investigation into warrior masculinity might find good grounds for arguing against its various methods used to divest people of their sense of free will and subjective reasoning.

Indeed, the question of how males experience subjecting moments inside warriorship is undoubtedly a charged one, considering the morbidity of texts like Anthony Swofford’s *Jarhead* or *Amongst the Marines: The Untold Story,* which highlight the unease with which not only gender but also any
selfhood at all is reiteratively produced and managed inside discretely militaristic spheres. Like Williams, Swofford’s self-narrator experiences a moment of subjective disjunction—the difference between how he wants to view himself and his military status as ‘jarhead’—so great he considers suicide.

Yet the man’s ‘suicide’ moment is interrupted and ultimately foiled by the intervention of a fellow soldier, who reminds him (via the devaluation of the woman whose infidelity is interpreted as being causative: ‘[s]he ain’t suicide-pretty’) of his position as part of ‘a blood bond’. In the narrative there follows a reminiscence of Troy (the fellow soldier) having bought Swofford’s first encounter with a prostitute, and also of their having bonded via the shared consumption of pornography. Thus where Williams experiences the ultimate abjection of having nobody in her unit notice that she is alive—this low point forming the emotional climax of her account of her time in Iraq, and almost the *sine qua non* of its meaning—Swofford’s suicidal moment is contextualised by questions of infidelity, a sister with suicidal tendencies, plus a large bolus of existential ennui, and his crisis (which contains a longer description of the effects of a bullet upon various brain structures than of his inner life) occurs before the halfway point, and is not the substantive climax of the narrative. Williams’ melancholia seems the finale of her time in Iraq; his becomes an occasion for further bonding reiterations delineating himself as one among other (equally desubjectified) males. In other words, where the military bond that in some ways reduces Swofford to contemplating suicide also provides his (subjective) rescue, the narrator in Williams’ memoir operates largely on her own. Neither emerges from the war unscathed, but whereas Swofford positions himself inside a whole trope of literary nihilists and existentialists who can at least ensure that his narrative is read partly as the story of a writer trapped in a jarhead’s (positioned) body, condemned to chronicle its varieties of excess, Williams is left without apparent voice for the exact range of emotions she felt during her stay. Thus her gravitation toward other returned soldiers seems one of compromise, achieving the
sympathy of some similarity of outlook (melancholia, status disjunction), and forgetting (erasing and continually predisposing toward the re-enactment of) the way the warrior bond used her to enable itself.

For all the reasons outlined above, it remains vastly insufficient to see within military culture only the most surface, unidirectional, non-gendered assault on subjectivity (the devaluing of individuality in order to produce compliance), though that is there; at work also is the specific devaluation of femaleness via its superstitious expulsion as penetrability. Hence, whatever the brutality of a soldier’s devaluation inside military culture, the female soldier troubled by masculine warriorship’s use of ‘her’ is devalued yet again. Despite what feels a genuine subjective confusion in Jarhead (often played out as hostility\textsuperscript{cxlv}), Swofford’s narrative seems to wind its way around a metadespair—an egoistical, aggrandised, knowing and masterful despair—that perhaps comes from a strongly developed sense of personal status confronted with the reality of being a marine. This is a highly literary despair with its own elevated self-view as well as identificatory and rhetorical purposes:

When I despair, I am alone, and I am often alone. In crowded rooms and walking the streets of our cities, I am alone and full of despair, and while sitting and writing, I am alone and full of despair—the same despair that impelled me to write this book, a quiet scream from within a buried coffin.\textsuperscript{cxlvi}

Even as the narrator specifies the inescapability of his aloneness, the narrative’s frequent use of the terms ‘we’ and ‘us’,\textsuperscript{cxlvii} and his own self-definitionality as a certain type of soldier thoroughly embedded among others of the same ilk, pose it otherwise. Indeed, the bonded unity of the soldiery as expressed by Swofford at times forms a kind of fourth person (as opposed to first, second and third) in terms of address:

We stayed drunk for many months[...] Why was our friend dead? [...] We blamed the economy and the failing town [...] We blamed his fiancée [...] We stayed drunk for many months.\textsuperscript{cxlviii}

At other times, notwithstanding undercurrents of irony that may reveal some of his ambivalence about the status of marines and his own self-view,
Swofford’s use of the term ‘jarhead’ is almost interchangeable with the word ‘we’:

- the jarhead does things to his dog tags that aren’t regulation,
- and:
- the jarhead knows the difference between the dog tag press at Camp Pendleton and the one on the amphibious assault ship[…]

Despite its profound ambivalence about human relationships generally, *Jarhead* narrates a vehement inclusiveness that remains fundamentally the bastion of men.

It remains possible, as with Williams, that some of Swofford’s post-event melancholia—in essence, his *trauma*—may come from the transition from a world in which warrior bonds matter immensely to one in which diffusive reiterations from civilian life produce a less central view of warriorship. However it is Williams’ position in relation to *horizontal* bonds that marks her crisis from Swofford’s ennui. Thus while status is inherently conflictual in both works, it is most nakedly in Williams’ account that one sees the complete contingency with which self-value is accorded (or revoked), and Swofford’s literary references and Shakespearian grandeur hint at the scale of his melancholia referring more to the enormity of the disjunction between official status and self-goal than to any fundamental abasement of person. In other words, his mortification at the hands of the military occurs officially, via subjecting rituals that brand him one of the men, while hers take both that form and its contradiction, the revocation of being included in the bond at all.

In this case it is possible to see that Williams’ crisis has no limit; her subjective dislocation seems ongoing, unresolved in any fixed category (such as the existentialist writer condemned to chronicle warriorism, which is what Swofford becomes even as he shelves himself most neatly among other marines). In fact Swofford’s narrative remains both an *enactment* of warrior normativity and a story of its pressures and insecurities. Thus while it would be highly simplistic to call Swofford to account for the way his narrative produces a limited depiction of females, it remains interesting that the main female
characters are the wanton girlfriend\textsuperscript{cliv} or sexual tricksters humiliated in the process of their tricks,\textsuperscript{clv} such as the subjects of (albeit second hand) hate inscribed on the ‘Wall of Shame’ in terms of their sexual exploits (or bitchhood).\textsuperscript{clvi} The narrative positioning of these highly gendered sub-stories and the starker exploration of modern combat that, alongside family concerns that precipitated Swofford’s entry into the military, remains the climax of the memoir,\textsuperscript{clvii} shows the extent to which it is through its own expulsions (of femininity) that Swofford’s work partly achieves its aims. While Swofford also pauses among his account of warriorship to recount at least one episode of sexual love,\textsuperscript{clviii} the chief mode in which females appear in \textit{Jarhead} is through discussions of cuckoldry, a relation that characteristically produces stronger accounts of the two male protagonists than of the wanton female allegedly at the core.\textsuperscript{clix} Narratively speaking, all but the most transient love narrated in \textit{Jarhead} (the love of ‘whores’\textsuperscript{clx}) produces an ultimate betrayal, and the occasion of Swofford’s best love marrying another is used as (yet) another moment in which to reify male-male bonds:

In late December I receive a note from [lover] Yumiko announcing her marriage to a man I haven’t heard of before. The announcement arrives in a black lacquer box, and also inside the box she’s packed a Japanese pear, wrapped in foam. I ask Troy to go through a walk with me, and as we pass through the perimeter, I share the pear with him, and the news of Yumiko’s marriage. I’m not saddened as much as stunned, and Troy understands this, as he always understands me. After we each take a few bites, I throw the pear, and when it lands, sand attaches to the moist fruit, like memory to the soft parts of the brain.\textsuperscript{clxi}

The marriage of Yumiko is no less a cuckoldry for being softened by ‘moist fruit’, and this is the same Troy ‘who can casually call your mother a bitch and make it a term of endearment’ when the woman has just committed another form of cuckoldry, having ‘married a stranger’ while her son was away\textsuperscript{clxii}—in other words, a Troy whose understanding of the life of the jarhead is not short on nuance. While tempting to see the sharing of the soft moist fruit and the unspoken understanding between the men (Troy and Swofford) as homoerotic, such a reading seems almost sideline to the crucial way notions of
cuckoldry operate in reifying male-male bonds. The Troy of this episode is also the Troy who, sharing a moment of intellectual self-denigration that forms (yet another) bonding instance, says:

Your little Iowa girl, she’s got a boyfriend, all of those girls have boyfriends! They’re using you. They’re using all of us! We think we’re using them, laminating their senior portraits and jerking off to them, but we’re wrong. We’re the ones being used!\textsuperscript{113}

As with all the more emphatic expressions of hostility toward females occupying the narrative, this occurs inside quotes, as something another person (or character) has said, but nothing the narrator offers does much to counterbalance this point. Given the character of the girlfriend who seems to embody most of what is to be inferred about female inconstancy, Swofford’s positioning of himself as above the field being narrated (the literary elevation) and perhaps his unease with the lowly status of the jarhead seem more implicated in this quotational removal than a vehement distance from its sentiments. Yet even this (allegation) is not the point of \textit{Jarhead} in gender terms.

It is precisely the relations between the men of bonded warriorship that Swofford’s narrative seems most concerned even as the climax of the story fixates on the results of warriorship on a battlefield. Indeed, even as cuckoldry and the theme of the inconstant or unfaithful girlfriend often bring males together (whether uneasily or not),\textsuperscript{114} the narrator’s camaraderie with his official ‘enemy’ when speaking (rhetorically) to the corpses of Iraqi men strewing a battlefield is luminous:

It would be silly to speak, but I’d like to. I want to ask the dead men their names and identification numbers and tell them this will soon end. They must have questions for me. But the distance between the living and the dead is too immense to breach. I could bend at the waist, close my eyes, and try to join these men in their tight dead circle, but I am not yet one of them.\textsuperscript{115}

That camaraderie extends to imagining the men died ‘telling a dirty joke or repeating a rumor he’d heard about the major’s wife’.\textsuperscript{116}

It is tempting in some ways to see Swofford’s fixation on morbidity—the ‘buried coffin’ of \textit{Jarhead}’s ‘quiet scream’\textsuperscript{117}—as part of an ongoing quest for
some essentially masculine space in which to continue age-old rituals of warriorship in a time in which females now occupy the non-battle ranks.

But this would be to discredit the genuineness of a search for cohesion and mastery when the limit of selfhood is revealed as pure contingency. Above all, where Jarhead uses military distinctions to shore up an identity of group form at the same time as literary singularity seems to call for its being dismantled (the ‘I’ of the literary narrator versus the ‘we’ of bonded militarism), it is in Williams’ account that one finds the most emphatic links between domination, subordination and masculinised bonds, and, therefore, some possible ways forward for continuing to engage with gender politics.

7. wider culture

The year 2004, when I began this degree, was an interesting one. It was the year of football rape and ‘female’ participation in battlefield torture. In 2004, there were at least twenty alleged assailants across the professional football codes alone\textsuperscript{clxviii} (probably more if the Rape Crisis Centre’s view that eighty percent of assaults go unreported is taken seriously). The issue of vexatious litigations aside (there is a long mythology of spurious rape reporting: Robert Graves, for instance, details a number of ancient Greek myths in which the female character, having approached the male protagonist requesting sex and been rebuffed, vents a vengeful claim of attempted rape\textsuperscript{clxix} a famous legal maxim holds that rape is a claim that is ‘easy to be made … and harder to be defended by the accused tho’ never so innocent’\textsuperscript{clxx}), there did appear to be a link between certain team sports in which the ‘masculinities’ being performed required strong intra-player bonds, and a version of ‘woman’ that housed penetrability to such an extent that ‘she’ could not legitimately say ‘no’. According to gender and women’s studies theorist Michael Flood:

American research documents that sports players are over-represented among the men who commit acts of sexual assault and domestic violence. Two studies found that, while male sports team members make up two or three per cent of the university population, they are responsible for 20 to 30 per cent of reported
incidents of violence against women. Another study found that male athletes are more likely than other men to agree with rape-supportive statements.\textsuperscript{clxxi}

It is salient here that the defence of sexual assault is so very commonly the claim that the ‘woman’ wanted to be penetrated. The myth that in sexual situations ‘no’ may mean ‘yes’ is case in point.\textsuperscript{clxxii} Besides, when a body such as the National Rugby League admits to an ‘attitude problem towards women’,\textsuperscript{clxxiii} one might as well take it seriously.

Drawing from my earlier discussion of the role of ‘penetrability’ inside militarism, it would appear that some similar version of that very bond-identification trope is alive inside team sports. This naturally opens onto the extent to which views of female penetrability that may inform rape are harboured by wider western culture through various institutions that foster similar bonding requirements. Michael Flood’s account of a recent survey finds an alarming one fifth of general ‘male’-identifying respondents believing in the myth that women who say ‘no’ to sex often mean ‘yes’.\textsuperscript{clxxiv} Clearly, the implication of strictly military cultures (or militaristic masculinities) in strikingly similar scandals to those of the football players would imply similar tactics at the level of producing tropes of bonded identity.\textsuperscript{clxxv}

In his research on warrior culture,\textsuperscript{clxxvi} Barry McCarthy finds enormous and direct channels for the purveying of warrior masculinity into wider culture; in this sense, peacetime team sports may function as one of the channels through which military principles are purveyed. Overall, McCarthy’s account of the tidal influence of warrior masculinity seems to impute an enormous pressure toward warriorship, generally kept in a kind of waiting, that tangential shifts of dominant ideology may use to legitimate violent excess. Although McCarthy’s finding is phrased (to my mind) inappositely, his conclusion is that the perpetuation of combat as a possibility requires ‘the evolution or adoption [...in wider society] of some system of warrior values’. What he finds are ‘[c]ontemporary male role prescriptions’ such as those exemplified in ‘an enormous world-wide market for film and video representations of combat’.\textsuperscript{clxxvii} For McCarthy, there is no small-scale hegemony but, rather:
an inescapable emergent theme: the almost universal, intimate bond between warrior values and conventional notions of masculinity.\textsuperscript{clxxviii}

The slippage of this project into being about war was an unanticipated one. However it is notable that several theorists concerned with gender have written prolifically on war. For instance, Michel Foucault's 1975-6 \textit{Society Must Be Defended} lecture series described the evolution of civilisation in terms of an overriding, omnipresent impulse to defend society at any cost. For Foucault, this impulse concealed a perpetual struggle between levels of society in terms of power.\textsuperscript{clxxix} McCarthy also clearly sees societies in general as warrior-based, with sport acting in the service of warrior values.

Notably, segregational tactics and the casting out of penetrability in a way that seems related to group rape\textsuperscript{clxxx} are used in both military and team sporting ‘rituals’.\textsuperscript{clxxxi}

To speak of ‘rituals’ in the present age is more than a little passé. Judith Butler rightly warns against reading present constructs as related to accounts set in ancient pasts,\textsuperscript{clxxxii} exactly the terrain of ritual studies. To link prior descriptions of ritual (a term itself thoroughly problematised) to enactments in the present is to tend toward a view of cultural objects as fixed and in some manner homogenous between epochs, a position seriously put down long after Claude Levi-Strauss’s reductive (if delightful) accounts of the ‘equivalence’ of various elements in myths.\textsuperscript{clxxxiii} For instance, Levi-Strauss found a mythic equivalence based on his view that:

\begin{quote}
the man with the long penis and the clinging-woman...have symmetrical qualities: he can reach a mistress from a distance, and she can only be a wife by sticking to her husband’s back [...]\textsuperscript{clxxxiv}
\end{quote}

His finding that two enormously separated myths are one and the same cannot be sustained; it is precisely \textit{his} equvailing that is on display. This fixture of cultural object, and the homogenising involved, presents the researcher as very much above the material, unimplicated in critique.

Rather than seeing rituals as in some way ‘the same’ across epochs, it is more than ever crucial, post-Butler, to argue for complexity and difference in
the ways performatives like rituals are explored. Their very abstraction may
indeed render them multiply readable. That is, there is no necessary
correlation between norms and the ways that those who participate in the rituals behave,
think or feel. To keep this in mind is to allow the fundamental truth that
normative operations do not necessarily (or indeed ever) produce what they
intend, but always some combination of resistance, antipathy, denial, abjection
and disavowal alongside cohesive regulation. clxxxv

At the same time, structuralist investigations into rituals and rites of
passage from ancient Greece, such as Pierre Vidal-Naquet’s work on Greek
adolescence, clxxxvi describe a number of rituals that have aspects in common
with rituals in both team bonded cultures and garrison warriorship. Gennep,
read by Vidal-Naquet, finds that segregation disrupts ordinary socialising so
that the segregated warriors may be ‘associated with irregular activities in
war’. clxxxvii A general motif is that of expulsion through some enactment of
casting out. For instance adolescent rites of passage cast the adolescent outside
society and attempt to performatively expunge prior associations and precepts
such as the feminine sphere of maternity (a gestural accomplishment elaborated
in the discussions of Joseph Campbell in the sixties on rites of passage in
myths clxxxviii). According to Laurence Coupe, clxxxix Gennep outlines the body of
rituals, classifying them by threes: rituals of separation; rituals of exclusion; and
rituals of (re)incorporation. Some rituals provide a temporary turning into
woman of the adolescent boy in order to then exorcise it, an interesting motif to
read against theories of ‘drag’ as well as ‘cross dressing’ rituals among sports
players.

Judith Butler speaks at length on the topic of drag, both because of her
initial use of it as an example of subversive resignification and because in later
accounts she is at pains to narrow her definitions past the popular view that
performativity meant genders could be donned at will and that therefore drag
was necessarily subversive. In fact, her finding remains that:

[At] best, it seems, drag is a site of a certain ambivalence, one which
reflects the general situation of being implicated in the regimes of
power by which one is constituted and, hence, of being implicated in the very regimes of power that one opposes.\textsuperscript{cxc}

The problem with refusing to look more closely at what constitutes ‘drag’ to what may preoccupy its parodies beyond ‘gender’ or ‘heterosexuality’ in the grossest terms is that the possibility that some commonality between the norms themselves is overlooked. And it is in precisely this territory—the question of what drag parodies, and whether this is related to the cross-dressing of more overtly heterosexist ritual-laden cultures—that I also want to stake some exploratory claim.

Butler is clear in spelling out that cross-dressing can be both heterosexist and antinormative; that it can carry both subversive and reenforcement intent. Would this also be true of cross-dressing inside warriorship? Is cross-dressing in queer culture an offshoot to cross-dressing in warrior masculinity, or is it in some way an extension of it (or does it bear no relation at all)?

Butler’s account of the exclusions necessary in delineating subjectivity are interestingly paralleled by ritual expulsions. Both structuralist accounts of rituals and postfeminism have accounted for aspects of ‘gender’ in exorcisms, in abjection, in casting out. For instance McCarthy finds that, in warlike societies, ‘feminine identification and behaviour [among boys] are harshly stamped out. […] In many cases this is achieved by initiation rituals…’\textsuperscript{cxcii} The idea of casting something as outside the social body is wholly connected to views of subjectivity: Butler sees any naming as operating by exclusions; namely, one simultaneously effects identity as one casts out what one is not.\textsuperscript{cxcii} She is right, then, to investigate drag, not because it forms the \textit{sine qua non} of cross-dressing (has she never been to a footballer party?) but because it operates \textit{inside} the instability of naming and identification itself. If identity works by expungement and by setting up artificial, reiterative and hence necessarily flimsy barriers between what it included and what, by definition, is excluded, then rituals of exorcism become profoundly important moments through which identification is (in wholly performative terms, which is to say incompletely, fragmentedly and transiently) lived as well as parodied. Rituals are the language of bodies; to
enact is in some ways both to produce and to become. It seems possible that the very action of segregation by which warriorship produces the grounds for its placing of warriors in a position immune to the ordinary precepts of society\textsuperscript{cxciii} may be seen as yet another kind of ejection dividing the soldierly self from (devalued) civilianism. In creating this special identity, warrior masculinity therefore acquires the privilege of being able to enact further castings-out without cross-infection from those not considered part of its bond; the initial self-expulsion therefore also makes sense of the way that the grouped warrior identity returning to civilian fields, as examined earlier in this thesis, always maintains a distance from it, and reserves its closest associations with other returned soldiers.

This, then, is the real problem of cultures that enact segregation: unless one is ‘one of them’, or a failed ex-member, one might never know the culture except by its effects. Yet at the same time, nothing handed-down, ritualistic or reiterative is ever completely knowable; the idea of ‘effects’ as some tangible outcomes that do not vary over time is mythological. Nothing in the reiterative system can be stable even as the very traditionality and reiterativity of militarism afford degrees of transhistoricity unavailable to more ephemeral formations such as feminism. All the same, without wishing to draw too strong a link, I am reminded of those whose accusations of sexual assault are situationally difficult or impossible to prove, thereby rendering any first-hand knowledge under-represented in discourse.

Not very many years ago it would have seemed extremely outmoded to have been talking about warrior masculism at all, let alone ideas of ‘woman’ inside it. The territory had moved on to affirmations of plurality, for instance ‘queering’ the fields in which warrior masculinity operates (a continuing goal).\textsuperscript{cxciv} This must be set against the extreme reticence of the official military cultural juggernaut to overturn its historic presumptions: the British Army entered a contingent in the Gay Pride festival for the first time ever in 2005\textsuperscript{cxcv}; anti-sodomy laws were still in place in the US up until 2003\textsuperscript{cxcvi}; and the degree to which military cultures may have excised what has been characterised as
‘misogyny’ from their performatives is dubious given an ongoing refusal to employ Australian ‘female’ troops in combat roles at the front line. The importance of the notion of ‘women’ to military warriorship is tellingly self-quoted by Lieutenant Colonel Tim Collins in Iraq, where he tells the men to stop acting ‘like women’. Emphatic expulsions of penetrability cast off onto notionally ‘female’ figures preoccupy militaristic cultures in ways that seem, despite warrior segregation, influential of performatives in civilian gender forms. To take this to an extreme, the notion of ‘war’ itself is taken to be wholistic: when a nation is ‘at war’, all its civilians must expect to be at war also. In that way, perhaps the realities of war are used like stencils to reshape and reorder societies along warrior forms. This would tend to posit that the purpose of war (or one of the purposes of war) is to operate upon the home community rather than an ‘enemy’, who becomes, in that trope, almost irrelevant.

Meanwhile, to speak of historical contexts, I am reminded of the picture from Abu Ghraib of Lynndie England holding a dog’s leash attached to the throat of an Iraqi man, an image that has already had consequences in terms of the ways the debates about female participation in the military at a combat level are both opening and tending to close. The year 2004 was of course not only ‘about’ football rape. It was also the year of the ‘outing’ of torture at the hands of (among others) Lynndie England, who,

[a]sked if she ever physically abused a detainee, […] said, ‘Yes, I stepped on some of them, push them or pull them, [sic] but nothing extreme…

Of the seven military reservists charged with offences relating to prisoner abuse in 2004, three were female. This compares with the fact that in the US military contingent in Iraq, only eight percent are ‘female’ generally. This ratio becomes especially salient when one considers not only the claim by each protagonist that she (or he) was following ‘orders’, but that these orders came ‘not from military police, but from military intelligence officers…’ Is there some link between the (to use an old fashioned term) gender relations
depicted in several of the Abu Ghraib photographs and the way military cultures have so reluctantly opened up to female participation at all? Or did media selectivity choose to emphasise the ‘female’ roles? Given the overall refusal of military cultures to include ‘females’ in combat (perhaps because that admission would be in direct contravention of the self-grounding principles of the military bond) the leaking of the photographs outside the military is curious, to say the least.

The photo I am thinking of shows a slightly slouched short-haired female soldier holding a leash slackly in one hand; at the other end of the leash sprawls a naked and apparently distressed male prisoner. As a reminder of the difficulties in interpreting any one gender-connected moment, it is worth wondering whether Lynndie England is a ‘good’ feminist by being strong, militaristic, anti-stereotype, having power ‘over’ a man and being able to follow rules; or a ‘bad’ feminist for willingly participating in something that might bruise the chances of females to achieve status both within and without the military. The picture is troubling not merely for its abhorrent cruelty (though it certainly is for that); the appearance in the figure of Lynndie England of both ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ coded attributes (disconcertingly unstable to a viewer, like the rabbit that turns into a duck even as the mind chooses to see it that way) certainly goes some way toward making the photograph’s sexual politics unreadable as much as it clearly says how impossible any kind of ultra-definitiveness is when dealing with so many contingencies. That is, the power of the photograph to do anything at all gender-wise is still up for grabs, given that to speak in any way of ‘her’ attributes or ‘his’ relation to ‘her’ remains heretosexually-normed. However more is happening in this photograph, I would submit, than a soldier abasing a prisoner; something to do with gender is going on. Whoever submitted the photograph to media channels and resulted in its reproduction outside the market of its origin seems likely to have had some view on its effects on the role of females in military service overall. What seems possible to read into the photograph is not only the obvious (reprehensible, shocking, undeniable) brutalisation of a human male but also,
via subterfuge, the isolation of the military perpetrator, who in the long run becomes the dupe of both military intelligence and the (also military) photographer. Put most simply, this is a picture that stays in the mind, and that seems somehow to cut to the heart of everything I have discussed about warriorship, gender, and the trauma of exclusion, as well as the way that normativity is not only linguistic but ritualistic as well. This also exposes the necessity to plumb secrecy in all its depths.

If ‘warrior bonding’ is one cultural mode that produces performatives along a normative grid aligned with interests (such as bonding), then it is vital to see how these norms and the performatives that attempt to induce the relations named also work outside the spheres of militarism and sport. In other words, an abiding interest in wariorship is not merely because we are ‘at war’ now (in which case militarism studies are most apt), nor even that ‘female in a culture’ is partly contested inside that war (the relation between clad/naked in the photographs seems to reflect on western views of the fundamentalist Islamic preference for women to be covered up, but also that warrior culture and its bonding tropes appear hegemonic outside their relevant spheres.

Without acceding to a simple structuralist view of power—and without essentialism—it still seems possible to speak in ‘interests’ terms. However such a (reworked) notion of ‘interests’ needs to be divorced from any notion at all of individual benefit. The ‘interests’ of gender inside the military appear to operate in favour of abruptly hostile, self-definingly impenetrable warrior bonds. The extent to which these bonds are necessarily ‘male’ cannot be known, nor does it seem profitable, in a field in which essentials of embodiment have come to be seen as outmoded in postfeminist terms, to portray them as innate; if anything, one might argue (as women entering the military have had to) that technological advances in the field of combat have tended to even out a requirement for embodied strength.

Given the reign of interests, a view of gender that only deals with the system of normatives in overview—that is, in and through discourse—forecloses against exactly the kind of multivalency of political options that
Butler alludes to when she says, ‘[T]here is no one site from which to struggle effectively. There have to be many, and they don’t need to be reconciled with one another.’

Ultimately, there have to be myriad ways of troubling heterosexism, even if some of those ways may only achieve fleetingly troubled outcomes through sheer errors in reiteration or normative diffusion. But if the radical project of structurally altering gender norms is thwarted by dichotomous interrelation (which reinvokes heterosexuality in its very denial) as well as sheer reiterativity (there is no solid structure) then a gender field opening onto some intrinsically connected third term—masculinity, femininity and the warrior bond—may provide new possibilities for subversive intervention. If close warrior bonding is the intention behind expressions of gender inside warriorship, then the notion of dichotomous interrelativity and the repudiative impasse, connected as they are to a notion of mutual exclusivity, seem structurally inadequate.

Yet the question of how one intervenes if one is not a ‘one’ (a subject) without first having undergone the process of assuming a sex remains a clingy one. Clearly any intervention is to be an embedded intervention, an interested intervention whose aims arise partly out of resentments ordinary to subjectification and partly out of an embedment in personal and cultural histories themselves normative and interested, not neutrally posed.

Warriorship is a highly fraught field, and not only because ‘woman’ seems to form part of the process through which militaristic bonding occurs. Certainly Tim Collin’s non sequitur mentioned earlier informs us that old tropes about ‘feminine’ weakness still have currency. To act like ‘women’, in this instance, means to fall apart in panic, risking group cohesion and inviting (enemy) penetration. Roger Horrocks details football as, among other things, readable as ‘a consolidation of masculine solidarity against women.’ The sheer strangeness of this phrasing—after all, what have men to fear from women where their specific bonded purpose is generally to engage against assault by males?—makes it clear that the ritual expulsion of penetrability via the identity
of ‘women’ is dominant among warrior cultures. In this sense it remains possible that, rather than being somewhat difficult to inhabit because of its being an empty shell whose specificities have been removed, the category ‘woman’ derived from (or perhaps influenced by) warrior repetitions is, as many former feminists argued about western culture in broader terms, inherently devalued, that is, reduced in subjective terms.

The above becomes a bridge between a whole host of feminist positions. The prospect that, in warrior masculinity, ‘woman’ may not be a term denoting subjectivity in the way that ‘man’ does permits both Simone de Beauvoir’s ‘second sex’ and Irigaray’s ‘outside the signifying system’ to remain historically true, while also adding to the notion of ‘woman’ as being an uninhabitable term. In this case the Abu Ghraib photographs are not ‘about’ the fact that women can be just as nasty as men, or even that women can be nastier, but strategically about the expunging of women from a field of operation in which it has historically and specifically been ‘warrior masculinity’ that is being performed via the casting out of what ‘she’ represents (to it). At the very least, the ‘outing’ of the female hand behind prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib shows why it is dangerous to view ‘gender reiterativity’ as a field providing gender-mantles that can be donned and doffed at will, as some misread Butler’s position after her 1990 work, Gender Trouble. Clearly, more than heteronormativity is being conveyed here.

8. escalations

If the question for engenderment inside warrior masculinity then becomes ‘What is behind the expulsion of penetrability?’ the account may be drawn into the work done by Roger Horrocks, David Buchbinder and Eve Sedgwick on what may lie at the heart of the intense ‘masculine’ bond.

Eve Sedgwick’s work on Gothic literature provides a clear answer. Her research into the way that the female protagonist in Gothic literature functions as a conduit for male homosociality focuses on the motif of the cuckolded man; this notion of cuckoldry, according to Sedgwick, is the playing-out of the
underlying ‘extreme, compulsory, and intensely volatile mastery and subordination’. (This perhaps explains the overplaying of the theme of cuckoldry in Anthony Swofford’s *Jarhead*.) Sedgwick’s understanding of the Gothic frames it as being not about homosexuality, but about the circumstances under which homosexuality is driven underground, with ‘woman’ functioning as a conduit through which to channel ‘homosocial desire’ without revealing its abjured aspects.

For Buchbinder, the ‘heart’ of homosociality is an illicit homosexuality-in-waiting: gay porn exposes the ‘presence and dynamics of male homosocial desire’ as erotic, or potentially erotic, while heterosexual pornography masks the fact that homosocial desire may be homosexual ‘by the presence of the woman-as-desired-object.’ The highly popular pornographic motif of the woman penetrated doubly by two men provides, for Buchbinder, an example of the female posed as a kind of conduit through which male homosociality may come to meet while hiding its homosexual aspects.

However it is easy to conflate this position with the rather obtuse view that warrior masculinity is necessarily homoerotic, which seems faulty. If it is not homoerotica (homosexual love) that is cast out by warrior interdictions but rather some highly devalued notion of penetrability, then neither is it the case that the relationship between homosexuality and heterosexuality is about definitional exclusion forming homosexuality as heterosexuality’s ‘other’, at least not in mutually exclusive terms. In other words, if homosocial masculinity uses notions like ‘penetrability’ to consolidate its own allegation of seamlessness in order to categorically deny (or channel) intra-member competition, then the discursive system makes its own room for interests and for functional relations between terms as well as between bodies and culture, and an understanding of the relation between homosexuality and heterosexuality must take penetrability into account.

Behind ejections that produce the devalued ‘woman’ object of homosocial warriorship is the relation that Sedgwick, reading Shakespeare’s *The Country Wife*, found in shape ‘not that of brotherhood, but of extreme,
compulsory, and intensely volatile mastery and subordination. Thus penetrability is no more than a motif through which this ‘competition’ is paraded, invoked, denigrated and denied, in which case there is more in common between drag and warrior bonding than between drag and gender.

The implications of this branch of thought for postfeminist politics seem potentially profound, even if one deals with warrior masculinity alone (reserving judgement on the extent to which its reiterations may have influence outside the closed cultures of the military). The important thing in this fluid system of performative values is in the ways that conflict, through being disavowed, cast off and channelled, is nonetheless only ever temporarily put into abeyance. As a disavowed presence it can never be properly (which is to say, committedly) assuaged, but only ever dismissed, hidden, shirked and sent underground. Indeed, its presence, in shadow, may serve to help consolidate the bond by way of threat of being singled out and turned-upon by it. To that extent, the presence of vertical status differentials and the generally dehumanising and painful aspects of military training might even act to exacerbate aggressive desires, while the rituals attempt to channel and convey those desires outward. Even as Butler finds inside the very rubrics of identity-formation the structural disintegrity that threatens the self, it is in the very presence of rituals enacting expulsion, and the condemnations of terminologies expelled, that intra-rank conflict achieves its appearance of permanence, and the whole system the categorical instability that appears to necessitate those very ejections.

However there is more to that culture than simply an ongoing practice of performativity during which certain threats are kept in abeyance by the production of other threats. Both Swofford’s and Williams’ memoirs reveal the way that, caught in a system of perhaps escalating vehemence, it seems that the soldiery might well find itself unable to continue in bonded form past a certain point without collapsing in on itself—or without being pitched into battle. Swofford’s narrative in particular tends toward an escalation of mental states and a extremity of hostility (revealed momentarily) between homosocially-
bonded soldiers, as though the ghosts of reiterations and notions of penetrability tend to increase so long as the soldier is contained outside civilian life. Just so, Williams’ perceptions of ever-increasing motifs of casting out and abjectification via penetrabillity seems wholly connected to the same escalationism. The reifying power of war is outlined by Philip Bobbitt, who says, with astonishing directness given his background as a White House advisor:

Absent the threat of war, it is very difficult to believe that the publics will be eager to follow the urgings of their political leaderships to make the sacrifices that states often require.\textsuperscript{cxviii}

What all the above seems to suggest is that war must be made \textit{real}, and warrior bonds proven against actualities of combat, for the spectres of disaggregation and conflict behind threat-contained groupings to be kept from dissolving the structure those reiterations rehearse. This is to suggest that the escalationism of such cultures, whether outside war and in the threat of intra-rank conflict, or during war and against an ‘other’, is \textit{integral} to them.

Clearly some reshaping of military traditions and rituals is already underway in some western nations as a result of intrusions of those cast out as ‘penetrable’ into modern western warrior ranks. However the sheer resilience of warrior cultures, using tactics of secrecy, an embedment of warrior principles inside team sports, and perhaps even the very escalationism that may induce wars to cause the reification of warriorship as an embodied necessity, would tend to suggest that one reason why gender norms appear to resist change even during profoundly reinscriptive epochs (such as 1970s and 80s feminisms) is contained within their form. That is, their reiterations tend to continually harness conflict and so bring about the return of the relations of domination and subordination, via gender, that enable it in the first place. If this seems fanciful, it is worth wondering at the embedded nature of the notion of \textit{climax} and the domination of conflict in modern stories. The idea of Armageddon contained inside religious tropes as well as wider cultural output seems relevant here and may have a role to play in rehearsal. Perhaps the persistent
notion of Armageddon is merely one indication of the degree to which escalationism is contained in narrative, or, conversely, the degree to which generalised narratives are imbued with warriorship.

To return to my project, arriving at a map for antinormative politics (which is to say, political poetics) in the light of a focus on warrior masculinity would necessarily involve a shift away from discursive interruptions and the call to trouble normativity per se, and toward specific attempts to reveal the hostility behind warrior bonds and the role of penetrability, not to mention the effects of trauma upon those termed ‘penetrable’. If it may be possible to explain the durability of warrior depictions of penetrability (and devalued concepts of ‘female’) outside both the tropes of ‘nature’ and pure, contingent, infinitely mass-produced reiterativity—if there is some motor to these apparent facts beyond simple diffusion through language, namely a set of interests pertaining to wider group dynamics, and perhaps even the structural requirements of civilisations to find ways to channel aggression outward—then heteronormativity is not the only lens through which to understand gender performatives or their (apparent) results on subjective positions and status relativity.

At the same time, if heterosexuality is considered non-dichotomously via its usefulness in the production of male-male bonds, then the whole question of heteronormativity becomes inflected by the managing of conflict and the style of bond under reification through the expulsion of penetrativity in that sphere. Indeed, to the extent that penetrativity also delineates certain kinds of homosexuality (the penetrable male), the term ‘homosexuality’ (as with ‘heterosexuality’) can be said to achieve legitimation through the very hidden nature of the bonding principles lying behind gender in that instance, submerged as they are beneath the appearance of dichotomous interrelativity. In this case, speaking politically, it is precisely the bonding interests and the potentials for conflict they modulate and hide that need exposure, and the bond itself that needs delegitimation via explorations of its hidden precepts. In this sense, gender exclusivity in overarching terms (or as a functional precept of
heterosexuality) is in fact a misnomer: there is a precise attribution of relative values within these bonding reiterations and rituals. The unspoken nature of the rules that make gender seem dichotomously exclusive by not speaking the interests of bonding (perhaps because of the potential for the exposure of conflict and hostility within the bonds) may be utilised politically. Indeed, it is possible to suggest that it is precisely this context—the necessary hiding of intra-male conflict within the (re)production of heterosexuality—that produces an ongoing discomfort with a perceived asymmetry that in turn provides the background against which warriorship must continually reiterate its own performatives. Whatever the case, it would seem that, to trouble ‘gender’, one is also likely to trouble the delineations that play some part in war.

This seeming ‘return’ to antiwar idealism need not be a totalising move; in the same way as Butler suggests that political activism should be proliferate in its approaches, feminists/postfeminists who want to challenge what can still be experienced as excessively pejorative gender effects (reiterations, rituals, instances) are free to do so in any sphere of influence. This is also not to suggest that some acultural subject exists in the body of ‘woman’ (all categories soundly critiqued in poststructuralist feminism) or that there is some neutral position of agency from which to affect culture, but, rather, that in the great unknown that is individuality inside the mesh of wider society, there might be myriad influences suitable to harnessing toward the production of less oppressive norms. The very isolation that Kayla Williams documents inside military masculinity, and, to speak more broadly, the overarching presence of war as a possibility even during peacetime, makes the dream of cohesive group action, identity politics (and their comprehensive critique) notwithstanding, a necessity.

In this sense, the equality feminism that brought women into military spheres (as warriors) in the first place might well prove to have been more powerfully influential than even its originators supposed. Indeed, if warrior masculinity has the effect that Barry McCarthy supposes in terms of being perpetually available to (convenient) necessity, it might be that the presence
of those accorded the status of ‘female’ who have been grudgingly admitted into certain military ranks might well prove to be more dangerous to masculinity inside warriorship than has been widely predicted.

This is not to discount a Butlerian politics of destabilisation, of reminding normative discourse of what it disavows, of shadowing structure with an uninterpretable occasion that is both reinforcement of structure and denial in immeasurable relation. However if heterosexuality contains this third term—the notion of warrior bonding—then it is not merely the case in cultures influenced by it that gender operations are entirely dichotomous. It may well be true that the appearance of an either/or masks a more interested set of normative requirements, and that ‘gender’ is a kind of byproduct of militarism in that sphere. In this case, a focus on homosocial warriorship may well provide some road out of the heteronormativity impasse that has come to provide such a stumbling block to radical intervention, and may open up a new field in which to seek the reworking of what passes for ‘gender’ wherever ‘penetrability’ is housed.

As a final point, we live in a world in which the experiment to dismantle gender has inserted those ascribed ‘femaleness’ as a sex into military systems where their identity will continue to be greatly problematised by traditions integral to warrior bonding. Perhaps it is worth saying, at the risk of sounding too practical, that female suicide among male bonded institutions may be the price to pay for such an unsupported experiment. Indeed, if exclusion from bonded ranks forms the chief way in which emphatic military normativity works, and if its effects may be so dire as to feed into concepts of self-harm, then a politics of destabilisation and unintelligibility seem intrinsically insufficient (how can the already destabilised self affect further disaggregation? All it seems to provide for is the eternal destabilisation of the self). If warriorship bonding reifies itself through the formation of a penetrable ‘other’, and if one’s sense of self comes contingently, through intersubjective negotiation, then one is never in a position to combat military tropes without wider group action targeting the specific moments of transmission of those
norms. The fact remains that women are *not* inevitably penetrable, and the chain of interpretive causalities from a view of penetrability caused in the formation of warrior bonding to a belief that rape is permissible or obligatory seems likely, if structurally unable to be proved.
METHODOLOGY

1. beyond ambivalence

With all the contextual considerations in mind, it remains to be asked: how might a novel produced out of feminist concerns and postfeminist theory arrive at a cohesive set of structuring principles and poetics, let alone function as literature? To put it more concretely, how can I use fiction as a device for thinking through the challenges posed by Butlerian argument as to the viability of ‘the heroine’ in literary as well as political terms?

The answer cannot be simply a re-invocation of feminist poetics, even if I have tended to suggest that there may be some further uses for a politics of identity housed in gender, and for the Utopianism of former feminisms. Early drafts of the novel attempted to speak using non-literal (metaphorical, dreamlike) language and imagery working against traditional literary logic in terms of narrative and meaning in order to disrupt phallogocentrism and access Kristevan jouissance, the interplay between referential language and this ‘other’ (the language of slippage and misprint) was to be the crux of the experiment in terms of femaleness, literary discourse and heroinism. There seem many positive aspects to using these tropes in literary creation, not least being the sheer unexpectability of the final work, whose word-choices, after all, would not come directly from a ‘knowing’ but, rather, from a kind of libidinous guess (a surprise to author and reader both). To an extent that enterprise remains part of fiction’s creative component anyway. But since ‘feminist poetics’ contain essentialist ideas of identity and sex, they remain heteronormative, and even though my goal is not the dismantling (as if it can be
done anyway) of heteronormativity, the problems of exclusionism and normative definitionality, as Butler has defined them, remain valid.

I have already considered the necessity to consider discrete teleologies such as western militarism, which is almost histrionic in its insistence on gender (or at least on impenetrability) alongside ‘the heroine’. Indeed, I can see some truth in a claim that traditional militarism (assumedly less so than military systems consciously reformed in the light of universal suffrage humanism, such as the Israeli military, which includes women in combat rolesccxxii) creates a version of gender that suits its own purposes and is a source of gender reiterations far beyond its immediate influence. Indeed, there is also a sense where these gender reiterations may tend to return militaristic social formations (such as male-bonded warriorship) after even lengthy (perhaps transgenerational) periods of military inactivity. To talk of heteronormativity alone, then, risks ignoring a substantial part of the reiterative equation, which is its social use, and which does cross out of purist ideology into the practicalities of warriorship.

At the same time, Butler’s work is at pains to account for heteronormativity outside materiality, while the very specifics of writing—making representational decisions about place, time, methodology, characterisation and so forth—render the work produced entirely historical, local to the moment and situated between theoretical and personal influences. In other words, there are some inconsistencies in relying upon a non-material, abstracted work of theory to produce a concrete vehicle in which to explore its terms. To rephrase the above point even more bluntly, it would seem that the enterprise of considering gender norms entirely in their discursivity renders the whole process of marking a page almost a transgression, or at the very least a kind of compromise, even as a doctoral candidate who began with gender studies could hardly hand in a blank ream.

Butler’s answer to the materiality conundrum is to avoid emancipatory intentions, preferring hetero-ambivalent (both denying and reinforcing) artistic practices like drag that ‘reflect […] the more general situation of being implicated in the regimes of power by which one is constituted’ccxxiii. For Butler,
the artistic answer to the quandaries of exclusional identity politics and the limits of dichotomy (repudiation returning its disavowed other) is ephemeral destabilisation via a poetics of disintelligibility, ambivalence and interplay between resurrecting and disavowing heterosexual norms.\textsuperscript{ccxiv} This would seem to both enable and confine artistic practice; at the same time as traditional associations between identity and embodiment (or, fictionally speaking, naturalistic representation) may be utilised, the text produced also needs to disrupt this naturalism at every turn. It would seem, in a way, that Butler’s concession to the immovability of heteronorms is also her concession to readability: in the end, the norms will outlive the duration of reading, and naturalistic interpretation (bodies and sexes equate) will outlive its moments of shimmering delegitimation. Perhaps it is also worth pointing out that this choice of ephemeral destabilisation seems geared to its own negation in a way that might effect the \textit{intensification} of political powerlessness even as it might also, in that moment alone, perform the antinormative delegitimation Butler intends.

However if gender in warrior culture is reiteratively configured during \textit{the creation and policing of masculine bonds}, then an understanding of gender performatives rooted in dichotomy (heterosexuality; gender; the return of the repressed) is structurally inadequate in this field, and so, by inference, is an artistic practice based on it.

Furthermore, if the hegemonic power of norms derives from notions of community acting to reify impositions of apparent domination expressed as subjectivities created during moments of naming, then politics might open naturally onto notions of community and social bond, rather than confining itself to \textit{gender}.

For that matter, identity (that arresting conceit) may prove a more powerful political instrument than ambivalence in terms of subversively resignifying norms, even in cases where ephemerality is expected or hoped-for. Even the radical dream of self-agency (the dream of resignifying the terms by which one is identified), if depicted as based in a notion of an embodied
‘reality’ with its own legitimative practices, might produce unknowable effects, including the development of freer norms. A fictional self-forming identity might obtain a reiterative power unavailable to a politics drawn from coalitionary engagements, which tend toward their own self-disaggregation.

Insofar as regulatory processes enact the cojoining of ideas to lives, perhaps ideals set inside notions of emancipation and alterity might begin the grounding processes by which norms can be shifted beyond circumstantial modes into relations of less oppressiveness (in whatever way oppressiveness is taken). The feminist notion of alterity therefore becomes a notion of Utopia that, while self-defeating in absolute terms, might represent the very first step toward a community in the process of becoming powerful (if never ‘real’).

Even further, the hegemonic power of norms might be tied not only to community but also to intrinsic relations of status that become impregnated in the very norms themselves. This is perhaps Butler’s very point in describing the ‘Hey you!’ of naming in injurious terms; and yet, insofar as norms might tend to inscribe those relations in a kind of fixity (or at least semi-stasis), they might also achieve a circumstantial durability that really can form institutions and structures of a definitive oppressiveness in gender terms.

At the same time, the ability of warrior norms to assemble outside the immediate scope of militarism means that certain strains of norm may continue to be hegemonic overall. That is, by their uses of segregation, secrecy, generationality and by the urgency acquired by their tendency to call forth real conflict, they may tend to structure gender norms among civilian life intergenerationally. This secrecy must be combated by exposing, denaturing and troubling the processes during which warrior relations are (unstably) achieved. In order to address the intergenerational nature of warrior politics it would also be necessary to install a process of self-reification among oppositional politics (a problematic I can appreciate, but not solve in such a short exegesis). However in the meantime, a poetics of disaggregation—Butler’s ephemeral destabilisation—would continue to focus on heterosexuality in a dichotomous sense, thrusting all readerly meaning (and thematic consequence)
onto the identities problematised by it rather than addressing the issue of their relation to warrior bonds.

For many reasons, then, a politics of ephemeral destabilisation is not sufficient to handle the questions posed. Indeed, to limit artistic practice to a model drawn from pure dichotomous interrelativity may well be a politically dangerous foreclosure setting unnecessary limits on possibilities not only for structural change (the field is not a stable object, although military cultures do seem enormously conservative), but also for troubling the norms themselves.

2. beyond militarism

With the emphasis shifted from troubling heteronormativity onto the field of warrior bonding—a shift that asks not ‘What is the basis for sexual difference?’ but, rather, ‘What are the connections, motifs, genealogies and interests producing this mode of sexual difference?’—the enterprise in artistic terms must also evolve, reframing itself out of discussions of gender or heterosexuality per se toward understanding and troubling homosocial warriorship, at least in its most penetrability-obsessed forms.

Can there be a politics of gender without considering heteronormativity as the central issue? I’d like to propose that there could be—in this case, a politics geared toward troubling the warrior bond that produces and shapes heteronormativity toward a military end. Given the insistence on dire reiterations in traditional warrior culture, and the suicidal imaginings apparently invoked in those subjected to (and by) it, the warrior bond would seem inherently fragile, prone to turn upon itself at the least provocation. Perhaps, in that sense, troubling it via a political poetics could be more effective as a gender politics than taking on some overarching view of heteronormativity or sexual roles.

My purpose, then—strangely given its origins—has more in common with antiwar philosophy than gender; and yet it is squarely in response to questions of the latter that the project arose in the first place. How, then, do I bridge the material through the fiction?
To start with, I take the military material thematically, exploring the
following: the substance of warrior reiterations and rituals and their uses of
penetrability; the impact of these reiterative forces on wider communities; the
tactics such as secrecy and abstraction involved in their resilience to change; the
faulty, unstable structure this inevitably produces; the complexity of human
interactions notwithstanding military (or indeed other) calls to order; the
productive uses of Utopia; and some outcomes of bond-driven reiterations,
tactics and behaviours on human interactions, sexes and ‘selves’.

For these purposes I need to define ‘explore’ more closely: as a process of
delineating, furthering, speculating and meditating upon the thematic material
to the extent that the fiction produces and highlights extremes of association
that may not be visible in daily life. Indeed, if militaristic gender hegemonies
are to be combated at all, they must first be estranged from habitude\textsuperscript{xxv}, and
fiction is one ideal way to do that.

Indeed, since secrecy and indirectness are hallmarks of military cultures,
I want to use speculation and free-association as ways of arriving at linchpin
ideas for depiction in the novel itself. That is, even as military reiterations act
without open admission of their own tactics, a work based on them needs to
employ speculation and (educated, or sometimes uneducated) guesswork. For
instance, I want to explore the idea that military hierarchies exist in order to
appear to offer would-be soldiers a ‘reward’ for their participation, yet at the
same time, soldiers are expected to bond only horizontally; the tension between
these two strata could produce enormously conflicted psychic states, even
conducive to violence. As another example, I would like to portray ways that
the emphaticity and direness of military reiterations, which rely so heavily on
tactics like shunning and other punishments, may be intended specifically to
maintain an extremism that can approach battlefield extremism so that soldiers
might be less prone to running away (in which case, direness and emphaticity
are never going to be reduced in the formation of military ranks—a potentially
interesting point in terms of political strategy). These speculations will provide
grounds for depiction, exploration and ‘testing’ against other indeterminate motifs.

However, beyond the immediate tactics of military training, I want to open thematically onto the ways warrior culture may try to shape society to a particular order—an order based on the importance of the warrior bond—that tends to produce the conditions (war) under which its reification is called for in the first place. This is a self-escalatory culture with acutely internal interests (the bond); yet the presence of female soldiers in some circumstances shows that it is in no way immune to change, if the abstract nature of its rituals (in many military cultures, if not perhaps all) tends to make it seem almost categorically rigid, and the experience of women among those ranks apparently highly fraught.

This is to be a fiction, then, that chooses aspects of military culture as well as hegemonic installations among supposedly non-military cultures to explore heteronorms and their uses of the notion of penetrability. Since I want to think about the substrata of reiterations—their commonalities and thematic import—the work tries to bring to logic operations that generally take place outside the realm of acknowledgement. For reasons of a desire to combat secrecy and for the reason that feminist poetics as well as Butler’s ephemeral destabilisation remain incomplete approaches to such an embedded topic, realism remains the general mode used, while the material also refers to feminist and postfeminist poetics (for instance via a poetics of narratorial instability in the first section, ‘Heroine’).

This is not a poetics undoing the very terms by which logic or identification work. Rather, it is a harnessing of the means of making sense in a delegitimated way (that is, seeing past the supposed nature/culture divide to politically valuable questions such as ‘What interests do these reiterations serve?’ and, ‘In what ways are the terms of bonded warriorship hegemonic?’). This is intended to be a work wherein the first purpose is exposure, and the second (and subsequent ones) the troubling and delegitimation of bonded norms.
Of course this fiction could never ‘solve’ military gender problems, but it hopes to open a space inside which to consider possible new directions for postfeminist work without disparaging—and indeed in some part harnessing—radical feminist ideals.

3. a methodological overview

The novel inquires into shifts in the thematic terrain even as it reworks the boundaries of what must be taken as ‘gender politics’ (for instance, to incorporate warrior bonding).

In historic terms, there is already a strong connection between feminism, postfeminism and specifically literary representation. The origins of feminism were partly informed by fictional narratives—female-centred stories set amongst the vicissitudes of history and using the transfiguring possibilities of the novel via the creation and elaboration of a ‘female’ point of view and other technologies. Some forms of feminist theory have structured themselves knowingly as fictions: for instance, Irigaray’s claims occupy the fomentive, embodied and historicising status of manifestos. More recently, while Judith Butler’s work occupies itself largely with critique and analysis, a good deal of her most influential material aims at suggesting a future for postfeminists working in representational fields: that is, conceiving new art forms based on her theoretical grounding. For much of feminist history, which has concerned itself with producing new tropes of society outside heteronormative operations (of course an impossible goal), speculative ideation is not only a useful constructive mode, but a necessity. For all these reasons, and for the reasons to do with military secrecy as outlined in the ‘beyond military’ section above, to approach the various considerations through speculative fiction seems ideal. As a further indication of this intent, the setting of the three pieces is just slightly to the future of its writing: that is, somewhere around 2012; my intention is to make the material seem both about now, and yet about not yet.

Meanwhile, in the spirit of bridging between feminism/s, postfeminism and other theoretical strands, it seems useful to consider the work of prior
theorists on the place of story, ritual and society (not in the spirit of arriving at a ‘truth’ to underpin my fiction, but in the sense of recouping what is useful in depictive terms). Even though poststructuralism critiqued the work of prior structuralists for their unacknowledged embedment in the subject being determined, structuralist explanations of the place of stories in installing group identity and providing psychic rehearsals for situations of wider social meaning remain interesting alongside a comprehension of the way that reiteration changes the material being transferred. That is, a heroine in a novel may perform several identificatory functions even as we accept, post-Butler, that identity is a fiction. If reiterative psychic installations can only be partially effective, this may be not only because they are reiterations (unstable and prone to error) but also because between fiction and lived experience lies an unknown boundary that is constantly shifting. The dreamlike qualities of novelistic narrative work precisely inside the psychic terrain, (just as reiterations about penetrability in militarism seem to operate on the psyche, unacknowledged in their intent). Thus, while one answer to legitimative gender-penetrability reiterations is to speak to them directly (to accuse them, as it were), another is to work at loosening their reiterative goals inside a part-unacknowledged, part-dreamlike realm.

Thus while the Context research has led me to propose certain tenets (such as that warrior bonding may be a third element of gender creation in any war-oriented culture, and therefore, since our country is presently ‘at war’, we need to harness this moment as postfeminists), I want to explore these tenets in an uncertain way. The fiction therefore explores situations that are not (or at not quite) ‘real’ and employs characters in such a way as to highlight intersections between ‘identities’, readers (who invest in character, particularly through the ‘focaliser’ or main character), and embodied themes or ideas. In that way the fiction itself may arrive at connections that can bring new focus to the fields under thematic consideration.

To help answer this need for experimentation and indeterminacy (bearing in mind the infinitude of bonding/gender reiterations available to
critique), my preference is to use than one style of narration and set of narratorial devices. This work refuses a sole perspective, taking instead a series of viewpoints and perspectives, in order to convey some of the complexities of the field in which reiterations operate. For instance, the first part of the novel is set inside a discretely military sphere (albeit with some channels running out into non-military life), while the second part takes wholly different frame of reference (being a more scientific, almost anthropological viewpoint and involving a journey). A third section involves an entirely different view again, being the world of a small girl. While the links between the sections will be explained in due course, for the moment it is enough to mention the range of voices at work in the novel as a whole.

The work also approaches experimentalism through its uses of language, which sometimes derive from free-association or other creative techniques, and at other times from realism. For instance, parts of the novel reveal an enhanced attention to dreamlike elements (such as extravagant imagery or heightened emotion), using narration that undercuts its own allegation of ‘veracity’ by strategies such as unreliable narratorship, internal contradiction, linguistic extremism and so forth. All of these strategies, it is hoped, help to produce a story that remains nakedly storylike; a piece of writing that never says, ‘This is the way things are,’ but only, ‘These are the ways some things could be interpreted and, perhaps, changed.’

In terms of its depictive resources, the novel draws from contemporary public discourses on gender and war as well as personal (lived) experiences, as it is my embodied present that allows for (yet another) an opening out of pure discourse. That is, while some of the depicted material comes from contemporary history, news and criticism (and past personal experiences), it is through the illogic of creativity using the familiar tools of literary juxtaposition, metaphor, narration, characterisation, plot and imagery as well as colour drawn from my own background that the material hopefully works to draw links, connect theories and bridge divides.
Ultimately, the question has to be not ‘How might I best display my research results?’ but, rather, ‘How might this fiction be used in a way that progresses the theoretical exploration and continues some of its lines of inquiry, wherever they might lead?’ In this sense, fiction is a device for uncovering connections unavailable to the conscious mind. There is no ‘right’, but only threads and traces that occasionally (as with any social experiment) hit a poignant or telling mark.

4. Bridging post/feminism

I have explained that this is no longer a novel only ‘about’ the heroine, or ‘about’ feminism, but about the necessity to think beyond dichotomy—for instance, to expose the degree to which some elements that seem outside ‘gender’ reiterativity may be integrally connected to it.

This necessity to bridge divides seems almost a third element in the feminism-postfeminism conundrum. Having already spoken in the ‘Context’ about the possibility of ‘trichotomy’ as a more useful term than ‘gender’, I’d like to reflect this terminology in the work itself, which consciously takes three separate but interconnected parts. The tripled separation allows for increased complexity and a range of perspectives (no singular feminist or postfeminist ‘heroine’), while also showing some of the extreme differences between identificatory states produced out of each character’s differing relations to (and among) normative operations—differences that indeed suggest the unlikelihood of a term like ‘woman’ (as Butler suggests) ever feeling comfortable across the board. Without relying on any notion of embodied essence (and yet without making the perhaps obtuse claim that there are no interests in common between ‘women’, since a relation to the expletives of militaristic bonding working through hegemonic processes would make this inaccurate), my exploration into postfeminist ‘heroinesship’ incorporates some of the complexity and ‘disaggregation of the field of bodies’ (as well as in the field of histories). Thus each character’s relation to the category ‘woman’ as well as to other ‘females’, homosocial warrior bonds, maternity, ‘penetrability’
and reiterative norms produces entirely different psychic and behavioural effects.

For instance, the first narrator, Susie Bickerts, is a brash, forgetful, injured and injurious young woman on the verge of discovering important connections between war and civil society, but for the main part unable to comprehend her own subject position as part (derided, precarious and never secure) of homosocial military culture. This traumatically posed character/narrator speaks in cycles rather than direct linearity and, having no identificatory borders (no defined ‘status’, perhaps), jumps between useful intuition and gross expletive seemingly without consciousness:

There’s always this part that remains outside sex, that watches from above or two one side, aware of being watched. Being watched but doing the watching. That’s what I learnt.

I was getting a fucken certificate.\textsuperscript{cxxxvi}

Importantly in this sense, this character is also the only ‘woman’ in the novel who undergoes what could be seen as a significant ‘gender’ change—that is, she moves from a position of precarious (and purely nominal) status in relation to warrior bonding (a ‘woman’ precariously included inside traditionally ‘male’ systems) to a mother at the cusp of inventing a kind of Utopia—rejecting militarism, though still influenced by its reiterations—out of her relationship with her daughter.

Her journey contrasts with that of the far ‘wiser’ June Lesky in the second novella, whose desire to leave an unsatisfactory and ultimately conflict-torn human world is borne out in a final identification with the society of a new species of ape. While far more ‘knowing’ linguistically—and far more literal—than Susie Bickerts, June Lesky remains somewhat ruefully nonmaternal, and her social identity proves to be more prone to a form of ‘self-annihilation’ via her rejection of ‘home’. However her final removal from human society cements her link to the ‘Heroine’ narrator: both characters arrive at a version of Utopia, albeit differently. In that sense, it is precisely this dream (which is a dream that
the world might be different) that links the novel’s first two parts and feminist radicalism to postfeminism.

The third section of the novel is also linked thematically and in terms of certain character relations, but here the issue of gender complexity takes a smaller role. In the same way as the ‘trichotomy’ involves two supposedly oppositional ‘genders’ and an ulterior element (‘interests’), the third section of my novel moves out of strict ‘gender’ discussion and looks at the reasons why it is important to oppose some of our cultural traditions such as militarism (one might call this my ‘ulterior motive’). The point is that, whether ‘natural’ or ‘cultural’ (or an escalatory meld), there are strong reasons why activism needs to continue to work at altering the ways we organise ourselves (and are organised). This section of the novel remains tangentially part of the ‘bridge’ concept insofar as it provides a mother-daughter depiction from the daughter’s point of view (with the mother, essentially, as ‘the heroine’); and yet the main purpose of ‘Our Lady of the Sorrows’ is to underscore why gender activism remains vitally necessary.

Overall, then, the bridges between sections are chiefly thematic: the depiction (whether backgrounded or highlighted) of militaristic hegemonies including injurious calls to order hinged around ‘penetrability’; psychic effects of those calls to order; enormous differences within the supposed ‘female’ gender that make identity politics enormously difficult (or even impossible) to marshall; and yet, at the same time, similarities of discomfort with engendering reiterations derived from militarism, and a wish to change society to something more bearable.

Further linkages between sections occur internally and are aimed at reminding a reader to consider the novellas structurally as a whole. For instance, one of Susie Bickerts’ military acquaintances is the same Samantha Kosh who eventually shepherds Alice around the military complex in the final section, ‘Our Lady of the Sorrows’. In ‘Heroine’ (the novella narrated by Susie Bickerts), Kosh is clearly seen as an unempathic character, at least where other ‘women’ are concerned, though the military dedication she shows during ‘Our
Lady of the Sorrows’ is obvious in both sections. This sectional character link is intended to connect the war underway during ‘Heroine’ with the final conflict during ‘Our Lady of the Sorrows’, providing a strong motif of escalationism overall.

To further this point, June Lesky is the sister of the final novella’s mother-character, Bea. The sisterly relationship, while fraught by historical rifts and competitions (just like identity politics), eventually proves a powerful instrument in helping to inform and bring about Bea’s decision to leave the military complex and take her chances out in the unprotected, missile-prone city. This act of courageous defiance also proves the making of Bea as a heroine in a complete sense, since she uses her life as (she hopes) a barrier between her husband’s military imperatives and global nuclear annihilation.

It is in all the above linkages, then, that I want to provide a bridge between historical feminist notions of ‘the heroine’ and postfeminist intersubjectivity; between radicalism, post-radicalism (and something else?); between fiction and subjectivity; personal lived experiences and reiterative complexity. This complexification of ‘the heroine’ in a literary sense will try to claim that, even as there are myriad kinds of gender performatives (and probably myriad competing interests vocalised through reiterations) available to view, there are myriad ways of arriving at a notion of a literary ‘heroine’, some of which may not be classically heroic at all (but may become so against interpretations of personal oppression and so forth)—and some that may seem actively antiheroic (such as Susie Bickerts’ equality-feminist aspirations in performing a traditionally ‘male’ job, albeit in a highly fraught way). The latter is also meant to serve as a reminder that any intervention in the sphere of gender reiterations may produce outcomes entirely at loggerheads with its aims.

Thus while the main character (and narrator) of ‘Heroine’ might be, by most accounts of morality, a particularly reprehensible human being, she is both the logical outcome of equality feminism (women can be as ‘bad’ as men), and a victim of a particularly masculist culture (one that helped to foment
equality feminism in the first place), set among a conflict that has its roots in both of the above and in a pragmatic western conservatism that has interpreted the decreased relevance of Christian morality to mean that anything can circumstantially be right. Her actions are therefore not the brutally reprehensible actions of a chooser of violence inside some egalitarian field of culture, but the part unconscious, part historic, part learned behaviours of a misfit in a culture she did not design and that, for reasons she cannot be privy to, shuns her whenever it needs to consolidate.

Importantly, since there may seem to be some contradiction in the choice of separation (of parts) and the desire to bridge discursive realms, I want to point out that it is also in the gaps between the novel’s three structural elements that I hope the novel to work at a psychic level. That is, I intend the disjunctions between the three parts to encourage further reflection and interpretation on the themes under view—a bridge, after all, includes the notion of a gap, and the wider and deeper the abyss, the more likely it is that a person crossing will wonder what’s there.

### 5. a literary (post)heroine

As John Stephens says in *Language and Ideology in Children’s Fiction*:

In aligning themselves with a focalizing character, readers match their own sense of selfhood with ideas of self constructed in and by the text, not principally because of the inherent nature of events and characters described, but through the mode through which these are perceived.

More recent theories of affect have also convincingly linked stories to real emotional life through notions of rehearsal, scripting, empathy and so forth. At the same time, I cannot forget the Butlerian conundrum that to say ‘female’ is to enact normative reiteration. In that sense it would appear that a story invoking cohesive, gendered identities runs the risk of performing the former operations (associating texts with emotional lives in normative ways). That is, a writer working on ideas of contingent ‘selves’ and their
intersections with reiterative and normative practices ought perhaps be careful to not reproduce the effects of norms in naturalised ways within the text.

In this case the form (narrative position, mode of expression, physicality, interiority, cohesiveness or incoherence) of the chief ‘focalizing character’ seems vitally important. When combined with the notion that my project set out to explore ‘the heroine’ in feminist as well as literary ways, the problem obviously becomes even more complex.

I have already partly negotiated this by multiplying the nominal ‘heroines’ of the novel, thus invoking a little more complexity in gender terms. Furthermore, the heroine (in a literary sense) of ‘Heroine’ is hardly a cohesive or seamlessly integrated ‘woman’. Indeed, the choice of first person narration in this novella as well as ‘Pan Osculans’ reflects some of the chaotic interiority of a negotiated and negotiable subjectivity where to ‘look at’ such a character by the use of third person narration may have implied more subjective fixity. However the third section—‘Our Lady of the Sorrows’—maintains a distance from those thematic matters, preferring third person narration as a way of exposing itself as a kind of parable (which is to say that the third part of the novel is consciously written as a story ‘acting out’ the speculated results of thematic tendencies without being so absorbed in exploring the matters of gender/sex/bond). The focalising character of this section is not particularly related to the material under closest question; hence her young age and naïve point of view, though she is not absolved from questions of heterosexuality altogether.

At the same time, as I have also pointed out, the heterosexing aspects of gender are not in themselves the chief problem (for a feminist or postfeminist); rather it is in their relation to bonding interests during processes in which inclusion/exclusion, penetrability/impenetrability, inferiority/superiority and so forth are specifically avowed, and also the way that warrior reiterations can actively escalate situations that require their existence in the first place. These indices tend to remove the focus from heterosexuality or identity per se onto interests and the motifs embedded in particular strains of norm. (For that
matter, if militaristic intentions lie behind the most emphatic, exclusionary and juridical of norms, then it would also seem that heterosexuality can theoretically work in the service of alternate interests as well, for instance, homosocial maternal bonding.) This strain of thought frees my depiction from the obligation to trouble sexed identity in character terms.

It is important to note, too, that a literary heroine is inevitably a gross product of fiction, not a fact; even as it is tempting to infer a view of subjectivity from characterisation, it is not necessary to do so.

For all these reasons, the central speaking position (or centralised point of view) contained in each section of the novel is not contradictory.

Even if my goal were still the exploration of heterosexuality in purely discursive terms, it seems crucial to remember that anything is permissible in literature, even the discursive formations that espouse radicalism, or that continue the fiction of a cohesive subject despite intersubjectivity elsewhere. Butler’s call for art practice to ephemerally destabilise normative signification perhaps might lead practitioners to miss the degree to which an ironic literature might function as a way of reminding readers of the flimsiness of norms. At any rate, the very situation of fiction between modes of entertainment, aesthetics and ideology makes a notion of what is ‘disallowed’ inevitably premature.

But even as instances of performatives, without irony, textual ‘heroines’ may still provide psychic models (focalisers) to foster identifications at an imaginary level in readers, recouping the fiction of identity in Utopian terms. In other words, even as the chief criticism Butler has of gender performatives is their coerciveness, this same function might be constructive where those performatives act against the interests of warrior bonds.

For instance, June Lesky’s decisiveness in the conclusion of ‘Pan Osculans’ is a result of resilience in her subjective positioning prior to that point. That is, her final decision to stay among the apes is intrinsically connected to her sense of self. This character/narrator has not been exposed to significant trauma like the narrator of ‘Heroine’; while her experiences of romantic love have been troubled, she has never been shunned. Thus when a
small moment of shunning occurs in a mountain village, the narrator can comprehend it as shunning even as, having no major history to give the moment significance, and having no desire to truly be a part of the village she is only passing through, she can be sanguine and see it as an example of the problems of crossing cultural divides. There is no slippage in the recognition of what has occurred; no trauma to speak of. Perhaps the threat of shunning only works when some direness exists behind the requirement to be a part of a group; or perhaps the notion of a stable ‘self’ connected to a (fictional or actual) community can inure the individual against trauma. That is, Lesky’s belief in a selfhood is a convenient fiction that, almost by happenstance, provides its own semblance of strength. It is this self-belief that allows Lesky to finally achieve her goal, which is, paradoxically, a kind of transformation.

6. the ghost of radicalism

In both realist and speculative ways, I want to re-evaluate the project of radical politics in the light of flaws within the repudiative bind, which derives from dichotomy now problematised (at least in my account) by the hidden presence of interests. This is not to claim that gender can be dismantled, but, rather, that a politics of repudiation may still work with some success at shifting, exposing and delegitimating the more oppressive forms of norm.

Since a poetics of ambivalence speaks only to the discursive operations of normativity as a whole, and not its concrete instances or its connection to genealogies of interests, I want to use the fiction to reveal some of the hostility behind emphatic warrior bonding and the ways in which bonding, through the production of an abject non-identity aligned with penetrability, and through the explicit threat of segregation and expulsion, becomes self-policing.

Certainly this involves emphasising conflict, aggression and instability within the warrior bond itself. Yet given the outset interests of my project—to explore ‘the heroine’ in postfeminist times—it is important to see these operations from within a subjectivity impacted by them as a ‘female’.
Thus my novel will focus on moments at which these bonding interests are most nakedly available to view (for instance, during failed warrior bonding sessions, or during exacerbations of intra-rank conflict the bonding superstitions are meant to assuage). I want to exaggerate depictionally the techniques used in this bonding and their effects at the subjective level. That this produces a narrative extraordinarily similar to theories of the intense relationship between trauma, identity and repetition is an indication of the emphaticity and injuriousness involved. For this reason, the ‘heroine’ of ‘Heroine’ provides what may be a difficult, and certainly confrontational, read. Trauma certainly leads her toward injurious repetition, for instance in her choice of ‘partners’ (Cutter, who certainly does not accord her the status of ‘person’) and her willingness to abuse prisoners. This is not a simplistic or powerful ‘heroine’ able to reconfigure gender on her terms (an impossible ask) but, rather, a conflicted and unstable figure who nonetheless regroups an ability to decide for herself out of a fairly dehumanising past. In that sense I’d like to think she does become somewhat heroic, albeit with elements that invoke disgust—certainly I want her to appear in some way ‘radical’, by which I mean that her view of society is not society’s view of itself. In the beginning she has no stable position (even as a fiction within the fiction) from which vantage to adjudicate on behaviour (hers or, to an extent, others’). The fact that she manages to recoup a kind of identity (which is a critical identity separating itself from the world even as the world separates her out of it) and her ultimate plan to build a kind of Utopia (through the upbringing of her daughter, Tuscany) is meant to suggest the flawed but perhaps necessary task of continuing to believe in radical change.

However I also need to think beyond discrete warrior culture to the ways that the military bond tries to restructure civilian interests that may to some degree compete with it, and so a substantial part of the novel concerns civilian life. June Lesky remains a discretely non-militarised character, and although her progress through the jungle ushers in matters to do with militarism (for instance a described raid on villagers), her deportment and
language have all evolved out of a life spent between family, nature (in the commonly-understood sense) and academia. Even though the diffusion of military gender norms seems almost complete in this section, the pressing likelihood of a return to a full-scale militarised society (as perceived in different wording by the narrator) is intended to make it clear that normative diffusion and military recouping may be largely cyclical.

Whether this shift in focus from the operations of heteronormativity to bonding reopens the question of radical potential is undecidable, but certainly interesting to hang a fiction upon. Interests remain under-critiqued elements of gender, and it does seem possible that warrior bonding interests have been hidden (covered up by reiterations) for reasons of that bond’s sheer unreliability, which may make of it a site of potentially effective contest. In this sense, the exposure and delegitimation of warrior ‘interests’ is crucial to my fiction, in all its parts.

7. beyond penetrability

If ‘interests’ might be sites of potential troubling, the notion of penetrability, like ‘heterosexuality’, seems something of a ruse. To put this in political perspective, a focus on penetrability and impenetrability, like the massive feminist investment in heterosexuality, risks remaining stuck inside effects rather than working at destabilising traditions more complexly. This is not to deny the extent to which ‘drag’ (for instance) may ephemerally loosen norms in relation to penetration, but I want to argue that norms can be approached and perhaps destabilised more forcefully through exposing and delegitimating the interests involved.

It therefore seems important to move away from both heterosexuality and penetrability as keys to the novel’s poetics, while not denying the vehemence with which each works as part of traditional warriorism. In fact, it seems that the penetrability/impenetrability dualism may be less important to warrior bonding than shunning. That is, shunning remains the chief method by which behaviours are policed in entirety, while ‘penetrability’ is only one of the
identificatory constructs involved. Therefore, despite emphatic reiterations that attempt to delineate Susie Bickerts in terms of penetrability (the crude attempt to force her into sex, for instance ccxliii), penetrability is not as important to her psyche as the fear of being abandoned. ccxliv That fear has its roots in school (also depicted as a militaristic institution), where examples of shunning occur daily:

The other girls who didn’t like me anyway called me Chook Girl[…]

[T]he point of school was more like ritual humiliation. ccxlv

Hegemonic reiterations about penetrability certainly do occur in Bickerts’ pre-military life, but these are depicted in some association with shunning. For instance, Bickerts’ expulsion from religious camp (which occurs partly because of her hinted sexuality, for instance her short dress) leads immediately to a situation of forced penetration by two (bonded) men. This penetration, importantly, is rejected in its involuntarism by Bickerts, who would prefer to see herself as a willing participant in a moment of painful learning than a victim of rape. In this sense, she parades penetrability as a matter of incidental consent rather than a mark of identification. As Bickerts points out, the usual warnings of religious camp leaders to girls are ‘Girls don’t go out by yourself, Girls don’t talk to men, Girls don’t catch public transport,’ ccxlvi so the camp organisers’ preparedness to let her catch a bus home alone makes it clear that they consider her outside the bonded ranks of those who (by agreeing to the rubrics of the bond) deserve protection. At the same time, the men who take Bickerts down a private track in order to rape her use the notion of penetrability to infer lower status and justify rape to themselves: ‘She’s a fucken pro.’ ccxlvii As fiction, these narrative moments and psychic elements are perhaps conflatable with differing political viewpoints as well (indeed, it seems paramount not to use the fiction as a kind of ‘spelling out’ device). Much of the political effect of this text would hinge around the way ‘penetration’ (and forced penetration) is viewed by a reader of ‘Heroine’. However, at the very least, the obsession with penetration is intended to be shown as the (bonded) men’s fetish, not Susie’s. I want to say that penetration and impenetrability are
significant motifs, but to construct a politics upon them without considering their role in warrior bonds may merely reify their status as fetish.

8. ‘heroine’: beyond trauma

The first novella, ‘Heroine’, addresses warrior bonding and a female subjectivity semi-created (and, literally, abused) by that culture as well as by emphatic military delineations expressed elsewhere, in its hegemonic offshoots. This part of the novel will have the closest link to notions of trauma and repetition; however insofar as this thesis does not explicitly concern notions of trauma, but rather the interests behind traumatic dis inclusion and devalued penetrability coded as ‘feminine’ in that realm, ‘Heroine’ explicitly examines warriorship’s insistence on shunning and other desubjectifying practices.

In a way, however, it is to be acknowledged that some of the descriptions taking place in ‘Heroine’ will prove, in their own ways, traumatic to read. If trauma occurs through slippage between an event and the understanding of it, then some of the linguistic devices at work in ‘Heroine’, which specifically delay understanding (or require understanding to be based on what is unspoken or mentioned elsewhere) would theoretically tend to heighten the sense of trauma aroused by the material being depicted. For instance:

I looked into this nonperson’s crooked lap and saw two puny balls squished underneath a bit of blackened cock-stump, and said so.

‘That’s two rotten peaches under a dog’s turd.’

The civilian laughed. Over in the corner a translator who didn’t matter closed his legs and spouted out some local gobbledegook. The figure in the chair groaned a little.

‘Tell him what those bits of crap get used for.’

‘Oh,’ I said, ‘for bait and burley and what-not.’ I was thinking freely. ‘At home we generally staple those things to the door above the chook shed to keep out cats.’ It didn’t make sense. ‘Or throw them into a dog pit, watch them fight.’ I wondered how much a translator could get across, but the warble flew. The prisoner-
spectator cringed. The translator wouldn’t look at me because of being female.

The soldiers didn’t look at me either, because of being men.

In the above excerpt, the contrast between occasional shrewd insight (for instance about the way the male soldiers view the narrator), and Bickerts’ extreme lack of insight into the fact that her behaviour constitutes abuse, occurs without mediation, with one perception almost violently abutting one another. There is also a strangled sense of who is actually doing what; at times in Heroine, the matter of who stands where and performs what activity can seem confused.

There are also frequent oddities of word-usage meant to also delay (or refract) understanding. For instance:

For a brief instant I was maybe attracted to him. Like, he had a chubby physique, a fat neck, a soft face. He wasn’t feminine. I wasn’t masculine. Or both.

The uncertain comment ‘[o]r both’ makes the preceding comments intentionally vague, rendering description (in gender terms) somewhat unreliable. This not only reflects insecurity in Bickerts’ world, but also undermines a link between ‘gender’ and heterosexualist desire in broader terms. At the same time, however, Bickerts remains quite a ‘sexist’ person, reserving her greatest disdain for other ‘women’ cast into position by militarism. Other ‘women’ barely exist for her, as they remain outside the polarities of self/group:

The woman I didn’t look at.

Overall, Bickerts’ narration moves from one to the other extreme (insight and ignorance; perpetration and victimhood; light and dark) almost haphazardly, even as the linguistic style itself—for instance short, sharp words with highly discordant vowel sounds such as ‘throw them into a dog pit, watch them fight’—furthers the jarring nature of the material and helps to foster this slippage between reading-moment and comprehension. A similar point is made through using expletives and (perhaps) repugnant imagery:
It smarted like bee-stings. I remember cocks and fists and the saturating smell of ammonia. Gravel eating into my buttocks, grinding in. ‘Yeah, I like it—I want it!’

and,

Children, men, women, rats, we were all so sick of being here we felt like vomiting. It wasn’t fear or phobia. I didn’t have bellyache. We just felt like we had this giant animal in a cage, and every day we had to feed the thing... Had to water the thing... Had to stroke its belly. Take out its cock...

The purpose is not so much to ‘teach’ a reader to find the situational behaviour abhorrent—that would surely be assumed—as to explore the way that trauma replicates itself through repetitions largely outside conscious scope (a similar territory to that claimed by fiction generally). In other words, I want to explore the notion of trauma partly by visiting repugnant imagery within the fiction. All through ‘Heroine’, linguistic juxtapositions are intended to provide motifs of jarring and discomfort as a reflection of the narrator’s state of mind and a discomfiting underscore to its themes.

In the section as a whole, it is largely Susie Bickerts’ experiences of trauma throughout her deployment—a trauma based largely on her supposed inclusion in the warrior bond and the delayed recognition that the bond never included her at all—that account for her behaviour with prisoners as well as other soldiers (particularly in situations involving sex). However, the fact that she refuses shame—for instance, turning an experience tantamount to rape into a partly pathetic, partly self-inscriptional, but in either case vehement rejection of rape’s abusive terms—means that she also has some way beyond trauma. Her desire for Cutter, which is connected to abuse—

No matter what we did, marching, up and down, sentry, shit-hole, whatever, I kept thinking about that time Cutter nearly drilled me. And what he said, which was like a promise or threat[...]

—is eventually overturned by Bickerts first transferring some of that desire onto a hapless newcomer, and then using this as a powerful way to reject Cutter:
‘Listen,’ he spat, ‘you know it’s not just fucking, you know that. Every time I’ve done it to you you’ve cried out so much. If you didn’t love fucking me you wouldn’t come begging.’ Ego swarmed. ‘Like you can’t live without my dick shoved up you.’ His warm breath stained my earlobe. Then he pulled away and looked at me. ‘Did you have sex with that jarhead?’

I shrugged. ‘Maybe, maybe not.’

We heard footsteps. He hissed, ‘Those marines are fucken disgusting. You’ll get pox and scabies.’

‘Oh, no I won’t.’ I couldn’t care less about condoms. It didn’t matter. Certain things were more important than my life. The army teaches you that first of everything. ‘This one, he’s a real nice guy. He’s clean.’ I began to get this picture in my mind of Nathan Richards, a ‘nice person’. I saw us making marital love tenderly—on a rose printed bed in suburbia. I’d meet his parents, who’d like me straight up.

Cutter snarled, ‘You’re shitting me, cause I haven’t looked at you in months.’ He put a hand into my waistband. ‘You can’t wait to get into it again.’ His fingers hurt me. I could tell he didn’t even have an erection. ‘You’re dying for it.’

‘I’m off to work.’ I wasn’t shouting. I wasn’t wet.

Bickerts also comes to see the effect military bonds (and exclusion from them) have on herself, and she makes the effort to recognise and understand these traces elsewhere as well. In the end this recognition (which effectively separates her from her supposed compatriots) provides a link between herself and the prisoner she abused:

Maybe the prisoner I tortured was my true ‘countryman’. We were both refugees from war. He got put in prison by a countryman who spread the word to soldiers. I got put in prison as a perpetrator by fellow Australians. We both existed outside the places we’d been born in. Neither of us could call our places home.

Inside, but outside—him and me.

In the end, without (as the empathic reader might prefer) coming to a position in which she fully appreciates the horror of prisoner abuse as she engaged in it, Bickerts at least arrives at a recognition of the way trauma fed into her abusiveness, and of the need to avoid situations that dehumanise people to that extent in future. Her desire to become friends with the ex-
prisoner—a desire most readers would probably view as somewhat deluded, given the abuse—is meant to seem naïve but also, in some way, redeeming, and a way forward past the likelihood of continued war.

In entirety, ‘Heroine’ intends to speak to the triad created by ‘man’, ‘woman’ and homosocial warriorship. Like Eve Sedgwick’s exploration of homosociality and the place of ‘woman’ in Gothic literature, my aim is to work at the faultlines, revealing some undercurrents and gross superstitions that are elided or unapproached in general understandings of both ‘gender’ and male homosociality. Thus while Susie Bickerts cannot be said to be a ‘heroine’ in a strict moral sense, I see her as an intersection between reiterations and warrior interests, and a way to explore their effects (and the effects of escalationism and crisis) on the psyche. For this reason, the observational interlude where Bickerts describes civilian existence in violent terms is meant to seem both excessive and potentially galvanising in a radical sense, leading as it does to the acknowledgement that there is no way out of hegemonic military ‘culture’ even as she must keep trying to start anew:

Across the road lay pubs and then the beach. A bunch of neo-Skinheads sat opposite a skater park from six Aussie surfer guys with zinc-creamed noses. No smell or hint of war, but it was already here. I could feel the hatred inside sunburned skin. The whole world wanted people to fight without seeming to. Battlefield men dressed in civilian clothes sat on swivel chairs in buried ship containers playing video games that steered aerial drones to target, kaboom, kabam! Over here, men dressed in fatigues threw balls and carried baseball bats. The beach seethed with litter and volleyball games. Sky ruffled like curtains. Men and women pushed giant rugby streamered prams attached by leashes to Dobermans. This was the beach where Aussie surfer guys and Aussie Muslim Lebanese had violent clashes. It didn’t matter what over. The beach was just plain white sand that wouldn’t grow anything. The sky looked lifeless. Teenage females with belt buckles paraded girl-power. Boys thundered missiles from one end of the foreshore to the other. Sky high reaching arcs. Cracks and tat-tats and fists and slaps. A man wore billboards pinned to every shoulder announcing death from Godly sources. High trees the shape of spearheads formed sentry gates.
I wasn’t thinking life was war because I’d been in a warzone. I was thinking it because of being here.\textsuperscript{cclxi}

This paragraph refers to a several-page observational interlude in \textit{Catch 22} where Yossarian weaves his way through a series of civilian violences occurring in the shadow of war (first a dog being hit; then a boy being beaten; a string of fallen teeth near a crying soldier; a pitched battle between policemen and Italian civilians; an old woman chasing a younger female; culminating in the murder of a girl by Yossarian’s compatriot Aarfy\textsuperscript{cclxii}). Without drawing a major parallel, I want to say that antiwar messages from prior texts may be useful in a resurrectionist sense. Even as postfeminism may need to recoup some of feminism’s utopianism—not in a ‘real’ sense, but as one necessary step in a movement away from oppressions as they appear—‘post-postfeminism’ may need to bridge between formal ‘gender’ studies and texts that denaturalise aggression and warrior bonding, in order to appreciate the ways that gender and warrior masculinity are historically linked. This may, indeed, have repercussions for studies of literature and hero-focused narratives as well.

Overall, if trauma is occasioned by slippage between an event and the understanding of it, then the inscription of that event on the psyche—a \textit{reiterative} inscription, which replays over and over in mind—is most definitely one of the ways in which the trauma of reading ‘Heroine’ might prove productive in thematic terms. In other words, the traumatic poetics of ‘Heroine’ might produce a more emphatic understanding of the links between warrior bonding, gender and dehumanisation—an experience that could possibly make these connections more overtly apparent in the ‘real’ world, or at least provide new glimpses into their cojoined effects.

\textbf{9. ‘Pan Osulans’: feminism and Utopianism}

The second section of the novel will move away from strict militarism into a more playful field, that being a female academic’s desire to find a new species of ape in whose social arrangements she might find naturalistic legitimations preferable to the ones she sees as dominant in human societies.
This segment of the novel navigates between anthropological humanism, feminist/postfeminist intellectualism, and the limits of an over-exploited environment (indicated by the backgrounding of a petrol crisis and associated increases in global conflicts).

The narrator has left a position in a university to move into field research, however she has cut all her official ties, and now finds herself inside the nameless city of X without a guide. Of central concern to this section of the novel—indeed, running as a thread through each novella—is the matter of place, or, rather, placelessness. None of the cities is named, and each ‘place’ functions as a point from which to reflect on civilisation itself (in its various forms) rather than on regionality or specifics of locale beyond rough geography (for instance, X being located somewhere in Africa). The lack of place specificity is also another means by which the novel refuses the status of ‘truth’ and attempts to declare itself a fiction, albeit a fiction in which a few underlying rigours apply. This (hopefully) allows a consideration of thematic issues without being drawn into a ‘real’ materiality in which, for instance, setting might be equated with direct historical commentary. This tactic parallels the use of a speculative timeframe, not by way of forecast (this is not my view of what ‘will’ be in 2012), but in order to investigate tendencies.

Indeed, June Lesky’s Utopia is not (or not only) a place, but a set of relational principles driven by the use of infants and nurturing rituals to quell aggression and achieve collective harmony. In the days before she comes upon the apes, Lesky believes that the western world has reached a point (scarcity of resources, unwillingness to alter methodologies, economic dependency) where organised conflict can only escalate, and in the course of that escalation, all the ethics she has acquired through a lifetime of intellectualism will shortly mean nothing at all. While not spoken explicitly, these feelings are exposed in the text as loosely connected asides, revealing an uncertainty (and perhaps also ambivalence) about survival:

I posted my resignation letter the day I booked the flights. The faculty sent flurries of emails to my old address asking whether I
might have made a hasty decision: ‘Dear June, please consider the consequences for your future career!’ It’s funny how bureaucracies produce ideas of permanence, as though social decay can be kept out by a few granite walls and a touch of lawn.

At the same time (speaking of the ubiquity of environmental and social erosion, even in ‘wilderness’), Lesky notes:

> [E]very now and then the carpet of jungle bares itself to reveal scars of excess and exploitation: singed villages; flattened scarps; felled valleys and swathes carved into iron-red clay streaking up entire ridge-lines. The logging roads now go all the way north to south, dissecting the country.

The place in which the apes supposedly reside is hardly to be immune from human exploitation for long, since as Lesky notes the progress of clearing appears unstoppable. However at the same time (lest her view of exploitation around X be seen as commentary on dubious practices in developing nations alone), London is also expressed in terms of decay, with Lesky observing when she wakes:

> I keep expecting to find my London flat with its radio clock alarm blaring out a babble of war zone reports and a foghorn of traffic queuing up for petrol rationing on the street below.

The point is that all societies depicted in ‘Pan Osculans’ are undergoing rapid change and some degree of destabilisation, albeit in different directions. This is a future scenario in which western nations are struggling to maintain their institutions and their veneer of ‘civilisation’ while less ‘developed’ countries have been able to resurrect traditional survival modes, with some success in terms of harmony. The country that Lesky loses herself in is not a war-torn and terrifying dystopia, but a nation presently enjoying a gap between recent military excess and, perhaps, increased development (with the ever-present threat of over-exploitation). Neither world is particularly stable.

In the end, rather than remain among the familiar western world as it self-destructs, Lesky prefers to remain in the ape sanctuary, at least for a year (the year being a concession to her fellow adventurer’s wish to make the find
Scholl will explain to the world that poor June Lesky, who had delusions about helicopters in her middle years, fell into a ravine on the way down. With our maps so faulty, it won’t surprise anyone when my body isn’t found. The expedition will be deemed a failure. The funding bodies will prefer to forget they invested in it.

But twelve months later, back in German comfort, Scholl will make his announcement. The world will see the first glimpses of a new species of ape, one that lives in perfect harmony within a limited environment and uses infant care as the basis for social rituals. The first of the helicopters will start buzzing the skies above the crater. Presumably I’ll be down here waving to them to keep back.

The implication that Lesky might not survive the year—to some extent she appears to think her survival less important than that of the apes—is perhaps unclear, but the sheer impracticality of the situation must make it seem a likelihood even as Lesky remains optimistic. Her belief is that the apes can provide new concepts for humankind, a belief that may seem as naïve as the final position of Susie Bickerts in ‘Heroine’, but which is also perhaps necessary:

Think of how our society could benefit from this information! We might find ways around aggression, Bea. Ways to survive being human—I’d like to think it isn’t too late to try.

This is a psychic Utopia more than a physical one. For instance, Lesky finds the only food available to her (figs) to be somewhat gritty and unpalatable. That is, she stays despite the appearance of lush plenitude, and not because of it. This is paradise, certainly—

...the cool moss of the log, moisture dripping from undrenched leaves, puddles in the dark earth that would never dry, and overhead this rich dank green filled with the quiet rustlings of animals, now that we have gotten off the hunting tracks—if I’ve ever been close to Eden, it’s this...

—but it is not likely to be a paradise of physical comfort, and neither can it be permanent. However, while this fact tends to agree with Butler’s view of the inability of any radical enterprise to entirely escape normative society, June
Lesky’s narrative stops at exactly the point of her immersion in the new culture, implying that, beyond the point of attempting radical change, nothing—not even failure—may really be known. She leaves the reader and her sister Bea pondering the question of to what degree pacifist cultures can be transmissible:

Yet I keep thinking back to that old zoo matriarch. Somehow she had it in her to be a leader. What would have happened if she hadn’t been forcibly returned to a ‘natural’ state? Would she have taught her young to behave in the same way? And if her offspring had learned to quell aggression by forming strong female bonds, then would they have become a whole new species of ape? And if those apes had gone out in the world and thrived and on the way bumped into aggressive male-bonded apes... Well, who would be the ones ruling the world?cclxx

The allure of this Utopia for Lesky remains the extent to which the local apes have evolved a set of bonding rituals that accord status to nurturing, while at the same time they alleviate conflict and aggression through kissing. Protected from the aggression of common chimpanzees by the granite walls of their volcano rim—a crater inside which the population of newfound apes have apparently survived for many thousands of years—but very occasionally prone to human predation when they leave their sanctuary, the apes virtually seduce Lesky into remaining with them:

It was watching me. Not only watching me as a wild animal watches, but, I would almost say, studying me. And then it put something to its mouth—a leaf?—and blew softly through it, making a tiny, almost inaudible whistle. Have you ever been whistled at by a man on a scaffold, Bea? Of course you have. Well, this sound had the same risqué timber—the same sexiness—as those human sounds.cclxxi

Despite the predicted failure of radicalism from Butler’s critiques, I believe that the desire to live in a delimited way, at peace with one’s bodily wants, forms a strong bridge between radical and postfeminist theoretical positions and politics.

‘Pan Osculans’ does, however, acknowledge the extreme difficulties faced by politics lodged in notions of gender. Apart from the fact that, as Butler says, the category ‘woman’ intersects with and is divided by notions of race and
class, it is also possible that postfeminist industrialisation (combining contraceptive education with careerism) tends to split ‘women’ along lines of maternity/non-maternity, and this split is reflected in June Lesky’s relationship to her sister, Bea, to whom Lesky’s journal is ostensibly addressed. In social terms this is no neat split, but cuts across various other fields such as conservative politics (the most conservative of which wants more babies for nationalist purposes including warfare: hence Peter Costello’s urge during the 2004 Federal Budget for women to have ‘one [baby] for your husband and one for your wife and one for the country’), feminisms, postfeminism and so forth. In my own experience, I want to add—having been brought up with four sisters—the adult lives of each of us as women have been divided more strongly by our differing positions in relation to maternity than by access to tertiary education, position in the family, economics, maternal stress during early childhood, or any other single factor. The question whether other connections bridge these apparent ‘genders’ (if they are ‘genders’, notably if ‘gender’ can be freed from strict ‘heterosexuality’) remains undecidable, open as it is to the various ways that ‘maternity’ and ‘non-maternity’ are normatively positioned, and, of course, to the extent to which identity politics is divisive anyway. These issues are not played out in the story, but they inform the ways its narrator speaks of and to Bea, as well as the ways in which she relates to other ‘women’ positioned by their varying relational influences—a newly-married Japanese woman; a single French woman; her mother; and so forth.

The notion of ‘sisterhood’, of course, refers as much to a 1970s notion of feminism as sibling status. Given the staccato nature of feminist enterprises (the history of irruptions and revolutions, including postfeminism, already mentioned in the ‘Context’ of this thesis), the ‘sisterhood’ at work in the novel is a particularly complicated one. Separated by vast physical distance, but in some ways bonded by a shared history of parental separation, the two sisters remain intimately linked even as the links contain hints of emotional trauma (such as divorce). But with the distance of hindsight and maturity, June reflects on their childhood as well as their present lives with equanimity, and to an extent it is
the absence of competition for parental or other favours now that provides the strongest bridge between June and her sister on the other side of the world. June Lesky is no longer searching for status security through either career or coupled child-rearing; and in any case she can see marriage dispassionately, having witnessed instances in which the couple bond proved no more than a ruse:

A lustrous, dark-skinned and very pretty woman in a black cocktail dress had stepped out of a sleek silver car. She didn’t chat to Gerald [Bea’s husband] in the way that anyone I knew talked to a man; she draped herself over him, only peeling away when our cab arrived. Later, in the hotel bar, you shrugged and said, ‘She’s his girlfriend.’ You can imagine how much that shocked me—prudish June the spinster.

Unspoken in that passage is a hint of rivalry that June Lesky tends to displace slightly, for instance by accounting for herself in de-sexed terms (‘prudish June the Spinster’). This does not portray a rivalry for that particular husband, but for the status of being ‘successful’ in a marital economy, and Lesky’s expedition coincides with a kind of ‘letting go’ to the extent that she can acknowledge a sexual interest in her fellow expeditor, the married Helmut Scholl, but sanguinely confine it within approximately ethical behaviours.

The insight gained by removing herself from competition (sexual as well as status-oriented) allows June to recoup camaraderie out of childhood differences between herself and sister Bea when she says,

I realised with a jolt how hard you’d had to try, as the second born in a marriage already failing. I only had to do a few sums, learn a few tricks to do with intellect. You, Beatrice, you had to fill our father with sunshine, because he couldn’t forgive you for taking after her.

In the end, despite the differences between the sisters (differences that make their nominal ‘gender’ almost irreconcilable), the matter of shared experiences through sisterhood does achieve a concrete political end: June’s extended apostrophe to her sister becomes an important factor in Bea’s final act of heroism in ‘Our Lady of the Sorrows’, ending the novel as a whole. The latter point will be expanded on in sub-section 10 below.
In the meantime, I want to say that the persuasiveness of reiterative fictions (fictions about selfhood, about status, about desire, about ‘nature’) as well as the reiterativity of humans makes its mark in terms of an ongoing desire to shape ourselves in the way of ideas. If ideas have influence, and if even a flawed, derivative Utopianism can be used profitably, then there is no reason not to continue trying to transfigure norms.

Overall, what June Lesky does is find a source for as-yet undiscovered social behaviours that may have a bearing on how discourses of ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ in human terms apply. Without trying to claim infant-protection and nurturing as principles to hang a ‘new’ culture on, I want to say that it is enough to continue working to broaden our view.

10. ‘Our Lady of the Sorrows’: Apocalypse

The third section of the novel, while thematically the least complex, remains integral to the novel’s entire message. Its speculative basis concerns the possibility of Armageddon and (therefore) the need to think through tendencies in overview before committing to actions (whether political or, indeed, personal).

‘Our Lady of the Sorrows’ takes as its starting point the speculation that cultures that use rituals and reiterations to exacerbate group tendencies like aggression may not need to be ‘good’ for anyone involved in order to become globally dominant; they just have to be highly successful at passing themselves on. This observation can help explain the (perhaps unusually) hegemonic nature of warrior reiterations—that is, it is possible that a culture that at first and indeed second glance appears bad for so many of its members can only be passed on if its legitimating and transmitting tactics are enormously effective. This is not necessarily a complete ‘truth’ of warrior norms—nor does it seem likely that an aggression-exacerbating cultures really would fail to provide benefits to anybody—but it is very hard to view the massive loss of life of the Twentieth Century’s various wars without some astonishment at the degree to which militarism can override other communal formations and
individual interests. These, then, are the starting points providing ‘Our Lady of the Sorrows’ with its basic themes, and, like ‘Pan Osculans’, it is set in the near future, in this case a year after Lesky’s journal was written.

Using a closely focalised—that is, maintaining Alice’s point of view—style of narration, the story moves through young Alice’s view of school and difficulties making friends to the increasingly dangerous escalation of a missile crisis involving her father. Alice’s father happens to be Prime Minister. His ultimate dilemma concerns the question of whether to launch a pre-emptive strike against an unnamed enemy—a strike that will spark off greater conflict and, most likely, given the linkages of allegiances and treaty obligations, global nuclear disaster—or to wait and hope that the unnamed enemy backs down. The background to this dilemma is, of course, the conflict taking place in the time of ‘Heroine’ and also the fuel crisis mentioned in ‘Pan Osculans’, a matter only made explicit around the section’s climax, when Bea (Alice’s mother) says:

‘We should have kept out of that earlier war. It was a dirty war, and we’re dirty because of it. All those prison photos. We’ll never get the stain off our hands.’

‘Our Lady of the Sorrows’ provides a necessary focus for the links and threads running through Heroine as a whole. That is, character and situational linkages become most obvious in this section. For instance, Bea is the sister of June Lesky (from ‘Pan Osculans’), a matter made clear when she shows Alice her sister’s journal, which has just arrived, and explains its import:

Suddenly she noticed the book she had pulled out, and looked at Alice. She picked the book up by one corner and held it out. ‘Do you know what this is, Alice?’

‘No.’

‘It’s your Aunty June’s journal.’

Alice blinked in confusion. ‘Aunty June?’

Her mother’s cherry lip quivered. ‘It came three days ago, but I couldn’t bring myself to read it till today. I thought it would be too upsetting.’ Her hand shook, making the pages flutter. ‘But it’s not upsetting. It’s wonderful. She didn’t die in an avalanche, Alice. My sister’s alive somewhere.’
Samantha Kosh, initially seen by Alice as an ally, is the same Major Kosh who sat in on at least one of Susie Bickerts’ tribunals in ‘Heroine’, where she revealed a certain ruthlessness, albeit through Bickerts’ jaundiced eyes:

In the corner near the venetians sat Major Kosh from the military tribunal, as an observer. Her steely eyes went dart-dart between the questioners and me. Her chocolate hair stretched in a bun and her eyes formed lance-points. I could see she didn’t care a shit for anyone. But when the interrogators asked me if there were any orders ‘direct from government’, she clapped her notebook shut and stood up.

‘If you want to question the private along political lines, this interrogation is finished.’ She wasn’t my lawyer. She didn’t care. She had a job protecting government.

In the end, Alice develops a similar perspective on Kosh, having demoted her in her mind after a conversation in which it becomes clear that Kosh is not particularly concerned by war’s impact on human life.

This section of the novel is deliberately written as flatly as possible, using third person narration to show that it is not intending to work ‘inside’ matters of identity/gender, but, rather, depictively and situationally. The use of a child’s point of view (which tends to feel ‘closed’ by virtue of a lack of wider experience) is used to enhance this descriptive plainness even as this is a remarkably observant child who happens to have strong abilities with language.

As a third person tale, ‘Our Lady of the Sorrows’ is intended to present itself as a story packaged in the manner of a parable: a fleshing out of something thematically plain and reducible to a single sentence, in this case the question of why we must act to rebalance norms. ‘Our Lady of the Sorrows’ answers this simply: we can’t put aside the matter of oppressive norms because escalationism will always produce a crisis point. This section of the novel intends to make the point (singly and clearly) that militaristic norms are special categories of norms, requiring special interventions, and we can only ignore them at our peril.

While the first two sections of the novel take their themes inside their narratology—for instance, using first person narration as a way of remaining
undecided about questions of ‘human nature’ and ‘identity’—‘Our Lady of the Sorrows’ takes a backward step out of that morass. Instead of questioning identificatory certainty, it follows Alice’s piecing together of a situation through some of its visible (child-height, as it were) effects.

At the same time, there are certain conscious poetics. As a child, Alice has not yet developed a full understanding of situations, and hence her perspective can be useful in exploring behaviours that might otherwise seem perfectly naturalised. For instance, the security guard Clifford’s dismay over the escalating military situation—a dismay connected, at least in part, to its requirement that he perform irritating duties— is given equal gravity, in Alice’s mind, to the matter of his ability to amuse her by acting the clown after she reveals that she can spell the word ‘missile’ (and has hence understood something of the nature of the crisis):

Suddenly he stopped in the passage and turned to her, hands on his hips. His voice stayed low and quiet. ‘You are a smart girl,’ he said. ‘I forgot you’re clever. See, when I was a kid like you, I didn’t know nothing at all. Now I’m a grown up and I still know nothing! See this?’ Stooping in the middle of the hallway, he put his thumb between two other fingers and, reaching into a pocket, pulled out a pen to draw two dots on the knuckles. ‘Know what this is? It’s a bulldog.’ She stared in amazement. His knotted hand did resemble a bulldog. He opened and shut his thumb and made barking sounds. ‘What I really want to be when I grow up is a circus clown,’ he told her. ‘Do you think I can be a circus clown if I grow up some day?’

The idea that he might have some growing to do made her laugh.

Despite her cleverness at language and deciphering, Alice maintains a childish propensity to be distracted by jokes—in essence, she shows her own failure to fully understand the situation’s gravity at that point. Indeed, as a child, Alice remains at the mercy of those around her. Not only do their jobs entail consequences that may affect the world she lives in, but their lies and fobblings-off are the leitmotifs of her development. She resists her father’s references to Roadrunner (a cartoon he uses to justify his intended course of action) even as she finds herself, at the end of the novel, watching it.
The ‘heroine’ of ‘Our Lady of the Sorrows’, at least in conventional-heroism terms (self-sacrifice on behalf of others), remains Bea. Arriving late in the story, but preoccupying many characters beforehand (for instance, she is the addressee of ‘Pan Osculans’ as well as the ‘mother’ described a little negatively by Alice), Bea occupies a very ‘gendered’ position that she has not comfortably been able to live up to. Her dissatisfactions with the life she has chosen—having deferred a career as an artist for many years, and having married a man who has not always been faithfully sexually—inform her readiness to question her husband’s attitudes when he shows his willingness to make a pre-emptive nuclear strike. However it is the contents of June’s journal that precipitate Bea’s decision to leave the bunker to try to stop her husband firing the missile. This act of throwing herself into the firing line is intended to make her husband think seriously before committing to the escalation, but the book makes it clear that destruction may happen anyway, as her husband Gerald’s motives and guiding principles are far more embedded in the structures of militarism than she can know. Like all the characters in Heroine (and perhaps all people), Gerald cannot act alone, but in terms of his relation to other people, including his advisors. As Samantha Kosh has already spelled out by the time Gerald comes to make the decision (left open in the book), there are strong government-consolidating reasons in favour of war:

‘If we opt for peace and decide not to help our friends, Alice, we won’t get to use the resources either. See, we’re part of the same supply route. If we lose out, all your lovely friends and neighbours who used to have such easy lives will be blaming the government for the shortages. They’ll take your daddy and put his head up on a pole. Then whoever they vote in after him will be pulled down too. Society will become this giant revolving machine, each revolution getting faster and faster, until eventually the enemy moves in, because they can see we’re weak. So you see, in a way, war is a good thing.’

These imperatives are let slip by Samantha Kosh in her conversation with Alice specifically because Alice is ‘only’ a child—another example of the way that a child’s point of view can be narratively profitable.
Thematically speaking, while short, this section explores the ways in which various normatively-housed sets of interests may compete to ‘win’ individuals using rhetorical strategies, and in militarism’s case using dire threat (for instance, the unspoken threat of expulsion from sanctuary). Alice finds herself specifically wooed in opposition by father and mother: the father using Roadrunner logic (and a few elisions)—

Her father said, ‘You have to understand, Alice, this might all turn out to be part of a game. It’s like—’ he floundered, casting his eyes up to a television screen above a cabinet, ‘—it’s like the Roadrunner cartoon. Remember the old Coyote? He likes to pretend to catch Roadrunner, but he never will, because that’d be the end of the cartoon[...]

—and the mother using a maternal relationship already problematised by complications such as the father’s comparative social importance, the use of nannies, and various other elements. Further complications include the reiterative effects of schooling, visible, for instance, in Alice’s response to both her parents, during the denouement, that people should be able to maintain differing opinions without fighting:

‘Why do people always have to fight?’ [Alice] dared.

Her father gulped. ‘It just happens, I guess.’

Her mother had taken out a ball of scrunched tissues and begun wiping beneath each eye. ‘Differences of opinion, mainly.’

Alice said, ‘People can have different ideas, but still be friends.’ One of her socks had fallen, so she pulled it up to make them even. ‘Can’t they?’

Unfortunately for Alice, her naïve proposal is neatly trumped in the next moment when her father reminds her of her own difficulties making friends at school.

The question of human negotiations like the above, I want to say, is not a matter of individuals disagreeing because of something integral to themselves (though integral things may remain), but of whole hosts of embedded, normative strands of thinking that compete for primacy. In that case it is worth exploring the view that, since militarism contains the seeds of its own
escalation, and since, moreover, it brings issues of life and death to the very core of its institutions, it may tend to become effectively dominant (in an ideological sense), even in eras and situations in which pacifism might be expected to win more hearts. As a sideline thought, one of the means through which militarism might maintain itself is through its very relation to matters of dire consequence—a motile harnessing of the powers of trauma at the level of entire societies. These ideas and suggestions inform the ways that both parents, as well as Alice, attempt to shape the future of their world and negotiate for primacy—though in Alice’s case, her ambitions tend to be limited to keeping what she knows.

This section of the novel contains vague hints at the Greek myth of Persephone; indeed, I’d like to say that the novella produces a similar account of the dual nature of whatever might be called ‘female’ narration, split as it is in both the Persephone myth and ‘Our Lady of the Sorrows’ between mother and child. In the former, Persephone is taken to the Underworld, and her mother lapses into a long, fraught search during which she refuses to supply the upper world with nourishment, so that it starves. In ‘Our Lady of the Sorrows’, it is important to iterate that the girl (who, like Persephone, is taken underworld into a realm geared around the might of a male leader) remains the heroine in literary terms (the chief focaliser) while her mother becomes heroic in the moral and mythic senses. Even as there is no one way of ‘being’ whatever is negotiated as ‘female’, both feminism and postfeminism cannot forget the ways that maternity reconfigures selfishness (and, hence, self-centred narration) to include the child, a dualism that is not ordinarily discussed in relation to literary or mainstream heroes. As a sideline, the sheer abstraction of the ancient myth, which in part accounts for the presence of global seasons, feeds into this section’s interest in religion and religious conflict.

In overview, to the extent that a child occupies a position of both privilege (being considered ‘innocent’ and, therefore, not forcibly coerced) and ignorance (that same ‘innocence’ incurring an inability to ‘know’ hidden motives), the girl also represents the way that such competitive logics may
never actually meet their goals of producing perfect psychic alignment. When Alice finds herself sitting and watching the Roadrunner cartoon, she is hardly a resolved and resolute being. Indeed, she has already revealed a willingness to kick her father—a man she no longer counts as such. This is a recalcitrant Persephone, and one who, armed with her Aunty June’s book, which her mother has pressed on her to mind, might one day achieve something outside the auspices of her father and the military institution surrounding most of the narrative.

In this novella I use adult-level language combined with a child’s limited point of view. The result may be a discomfiting mesh of knowledge and unsophistication at certain levels, but its purpose remains to use a straightforward realist depictional mode, including a character whose sex is implicitly presumed as female even as, being a young girl, the meanings of that sexing are still in some way open. Her status is both unfixed (she is a child) and fixed by her relationships to the status of her parents, but in no ways do these facts completely dictate the ways that others behave toward her.

Since the question of to what degree militaristic cultures become annihilatively self-escalating necessarily involves speculation, Alice’s role in the novella becomes largely that of ingénue, and no certain outcome resolves. The reader should be left with the impression that dire events will probably occur, but there may still be hope. This, then, would tend to reflect my own point of view now (having come to the end of the thesis).
Even as Butler delineates the impossibility of radicalism, her work shows how important it is to not deal only with dichotomous representation, but to try to approach the appearance of dichotomy in purposively non-dichotomous ways. Thus I have structured my novel, in its poetics and its form, not from practices of subjective destabilisation but strategically from moments of engenderment themselves—warrior language; intellectual language; intersubjective negotiations; rituals; and narrative outcomes.

At the same time, however, a political expression or poetics deriving from Butler’s account of gender interrelativity seems risky in the extreme. While the very questions of gender and heroineship that roused my desire to work in this field have been greatly altered by an understanding of Butler’s terms, I now consider that it is not heterosexual normativity that must be opposed, ungrounded and delegitimated, but something to do with the call to arms where it intersects with gender, as well as the possibility that this culture is escalatory. The presence of Armageddon as a textual trope seems connected somehow to the ways in which the embossing of militarism is always shadowed by that extreme. Most importantly, if warriorship might tend to escalate the situations that require it, then Armageddon is not a Biblical fabrication but a warning. In that case, political agency is a fiction that we put aside at our peril.

Thus, while I want to talk about what it means to ‘be’ female (being arraigned by militaristic culture), this is now not a novel about gender so much as about the idea that masculinity produced in a bonded form within warrior culture produces both the material sensibilities gendered by it and the cultural
conditions (war) under which its strategies achieve importance in survival terms. That it does so using motifs of penetrability retains a focus on ‘gender’ (in its arguably ‘worst’ form) and links this project specifically to histories of militarism, team sport, and rape. The above would appear to suggest that there remains a good deal to be said on the combined topic of ‘gender/war’ in postfeminist times, even as the notion of penetrability connects the field squarely to other subjectivities devalued by exclusion from apparently impenetrable bonds.

This shift in focus from my original project, which concerned ‘feminist poetics’, has also impacted on an earlier problem with regard to the (radical) dream of a reinventive ‘heroine’ in feminist terms. Emancipation is no longer, for obvious reasons, a certifiable goal even as the direness of militarism suggests that some degree of intentional intervention must remain an idealised possibility. Alongside a shift in emphasis to the bonding methods of warriorship, the notion of a ‘female’ has strict relevance where she is devalued penetrably; hence questions of penetrability, and the behavioural implications of their application to bodies accorded devalued status as ‘women’, are vital even now. Those reiterative instances that segregate bonded masculinity from penetrable femininity absolutely confer upon the expunged gender category lesser rights (for instance the right to bodily integrity); these notions have implications for any further study linking texts to behaviours (via, say, the notion of affect\textsuperscript{ccxiii}), and for these and other (personal, historical) reasons, it continues to be important, in my view, to work at exposing the warrior interests in male bonding, rather than to consider ‘gender’ solely through dichotomy and the processes of exclusionary identification.

In conclusion, I want to say that ‘gender’ itself may constitute the overt, performative concretisation of a set of relations including those whose agenda lies in the production of masculine warrior bonds, and their ability to reassemble toward war. The opening of gender onto an integral warrior bonding trope avoids the discussion miring down inside ‘pure’ discourse (which simply cannot be) and, I think, allows for a renewed focus on the ways
in which performatives achieve legitimative primacy. The extent to which, in this sense, culture produces the circumstances that necessitate their own performatives becomes part of the quandary for the fiction to explore.

Thus, rather than produce a text that embodies (in its linguistic practices and narratorial impositions) a full account of interdiscursivity and problems of repudiation, my novel hopes to pick at the seams of the cultural practices of warrior masculinity, highlight instability among the bonds intended to be produced, and explore associated ‘female’ engenderment rituals to expose, elaborate, defamiliarise and delegitimate their effects. Further, it moves from these discussions into a reminder of why we need to continue working to dislodge oppressive norms. Given my arguments about the perhaps unnecessary foreclosure into ambivalent postures, and the possible dangers of such politics in real terms, I would also like to explore, through fiction, some relation between Utopia, oppositional identity in terms of repudiation, and a possible recreation of the notion of agency.

Given the breadth of material factored into the resultant poetics, there is no one stable form, but, rather, a loose working through of literary suppositions in which no one ‘heroine’ exists to suit all purposes even as there can certainly be ‘female’ types of heroism. This it to suggest that, even as one gender cannot undo ‘gender’ per se, some degree of intentional change—so long as the warrior bond is taken into account—may well be possible. There is no way within this particular fiction to assess the likely degrees of change, or to gauge their outcomes; that would possibly be for another (speculative) novel. For how, however, it is to be hoped that the gaps between sections within the novel act as psychic bridges into realms outside the text, and in that way illuminate further possibilities—fiction is to be, after all, food for thought.
ENDNOTES

1. introduction


v See Abigail Bray, Claire Colebrook, op cit: 43.

vi See Abigail Bray, Claire Colebrook. ibid: 57.

vii 'Cultural' is not to be taken as the opposite of a nature-culture divide, with 'nature' according with inherent biological necessity, but as an indication of something transmissible by the imperfect practices of reiteration and copying outlined in Butler (see both the above citations).

viii Butler discusses the process of identification producing the 'I' of the self as not just a flat definitional exclusivity but an inexhaustible series of repudiations, disavowals and abjections that produce, at best, 'a false unity' by virtue of their ongoing necessity. See *Bodies That Matter*, op cit: 113.

ix Butler elucidates this tactic in 'Paris is Burning' in *Bodies That Matter*, op cit: 121-140, speaking of the way the text 'Paris Is Burning' '…documents neither an efficacious insurrection nor a painful resubordination, [of heterosexual hegemony] but an unstable coexistence of both.' This, for her, opens 'a distance [...] between that hegemonic call to normativizing gender and its critical appropriation.'

2. context


xii See Elizabeth Grosz. *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1989: 78. Put briefly, the 'semiotic' refers to Kristeva's notion of a pre-Oedipal realm in which maternal signification figures most strongly, before the imposition of the symbolic system (which is 'the [paternal] law-abiding operations of socio-linguistic systems': 42).


xiv According to Elizabeth Grosz, Kristeva finds that the mother remains 'the necessarily unspoken underside of social and psychic order.' See *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists*, op cit: 78.

xv A performatve, in Butler’s view, is any term such as ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’ that attempts to install the relations that it supposedly describes. Performatives, in other words, are: ‘the reiterative and citational practices by which discourse produces the effects that it names’. See *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*. New York: Routledge 1993: 2. (Hereafter called *Bodies That Matter*.)


xvii Butler says that Irigaray's association between metonymy and 'the repressed and insurgent feminine' means that 'the feminine is "always" the outside, and the outside is "always" the feminine.' According to Butler, 'to enforce such a monopoly redoubles the effect of foreclosure performed by the phallogocentric discourse itself[...]'). *Bodies That Matter*, op cit: 48.

xviii Butler says that, by characterising gender as a 'mark' applied to the female body, 'Beauvoir maintains the mind/body dualism, even as she proposes a synthesis of those terms[...] The preservation of that very distinction can be read as symptomatic of the very phallogocentrism that Beauvoir underestimates[... in herself]. By itself, the 'mind-body distinction that is supposed to illuminate the persistence of gender asymmetry[...]' is historically a conveyor of heterosexism: 'The cultural associations of mind with masculinity and body with femininity are well documented within the field of philosophy and feminism.' *Gender Trouble*, op cit: 12.

xix The term 'heterosexism' is not used by Butler in earlier works, but in later work she explains that it was the 'heterosexism' of prior feminist writings that brought her to critique. *Undoing Gender*. New York: Routledge, 2004: 207.

xx See *Gender Trouble*, op cit: 30.

xxi *Gender Trouble*, ibid: 93.

xxii *Gender Trouble*, ibid: 93.


xxiv Butler says, a ‘bodily norm’ is not ‘undergone by a subject, but rather[...]the subject, the speaking “I”, is formed by virtue of having gone through such a process of assuming a sex[...]’ *Bodies That Matter*, ibid: 3.

xxv *Bodies That Matter*, ibid: 68.

xxvi *Gender Trouble*, op cit: 33.

xxvii *Gender Trouble*, ibid: 148.

xxviii *Gender Trouble*, ibid: 2.

xxix *Gender Trouble*, ibid: 2.

xxx *Gender Trouble*, ibid: 3.

xxxi An idea that no longer, in Butler's terms, has currency: see *Gender Trouble*, ibid: 3-4.

xxsii *Bodies That Matter*, op cit: 122.
xxxiii *Bodies That Matter*, ibid: 122.

xxxiv *Bodies That Matter*, ibid: 2.

xxxv *Gender Trouble*, op cit: 136.

xxxvi *Gender Trouble*, ibid: 136.

xxxvii Outside heterosexual norms are not alternative subjectivities (or social beings) but, in Butler’s account, figures that are improperly posed, that appear as ‘developmental failures’. That is, outside She says, ‘The cultural matrix through which gender identity has become intelligible requires that certain kinds of “identities” cannot “exist”—that is, those in which gender does not follow from sex and those in which the practices of desire do not “follow” from either sex or gender. “Follow” in this context is a political relation of entailment instituted by the cultural laws that establish and regulate the shape and meaning of sexuality. Indeed, precisely because certain kinds of “gender identities” fail to conform to these norms of cultural intelligibility, they appear only as developmental failures or logical impossibilities from within that domain.’ *Gender Trouble*, ibid: 17.

xxxviii See ‘Introduction: Acting in Concert’ in *Undoing Gender*, op cit: 3.

xxxix ‘Introduction: Acting in Concert’ in *Undoing Gender*, ibid: 3.

xl The connection between subjective coherence, repudiation and abjection is elaborated in the chapter ‘Phantasmatic Identification’, where Butler describes the process of identification as ‘[…] the compulsive repudiation by which the subject incessantly sustains his/her boundary […]’ *Bodies That Matter*, op cit: 114.

xli See ‘Introduction: Acting in Concert’ in *Undoing Gender*, op cit: 3.

xlii *Gender Trouble*, op cit: 124.

xliii *Bodies That Matter*, op cit: 15.

xliv According to Butler, because phallogocentrism has to be reiterated to remain viable, it is open to ‘variation and plasticity’. *Bodies That Matter*, ibid: 89.

xlv *Gender Trouble*, ibid: 25.


xlvii *Bodies That Matter*, op cit: 152.

xlviii *Bodies That Matter*, op cit: 124.

xlix Butler says, ‘…in my view, the normative focus for gay and lesbian practice ought to be on the subversive and parodic redeployment of power rather than on the impossible fantasy of its full-scale transcendence.’ *Gender Trouble*, op cit: 124.

l In her earlier work, Butler uses drag as an example of the kind of subversive resignification she later finds in more nuanced (or indeterminable) examples. Butler says ‘As much as drag creates a unified picture of “woman” … it also reveals the distinctness of those aspects of gendered experience which are falsely naturalized as a unity through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence. In *imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency.*’ *Gender Trouble*, ibid: 137. While drag proved an unstable and inadequate example, the logic remains: productive and engaged art can persevere at illuminating these false naturalisations in order to, albeit momentarily and never completely, open a space inside which context and resignification might operate.

li To read Butler is to struggle with often unresolved and unresolvable ideas. This indeed is her preference, where ‘…“reading” means taking someone down, exposing what fails to work at the level of appearance, insulting or deriding someone.’ *Bodies That Matter*, op cit: 129. Her account suggests that to be readable is only to bear a logical (or repudiative) and in any sense derivative relation to dominant norms.

lii *Bodies That Matter*, ibid: 137.
Bodies That Matter, ibid: 137.

Butler discusses Catherine MacKinnon's 'deterministic form of structuralism' regarding sexual domination and subordination in Bodies That Matter, ibid: 238-239.

Bodies That Matter, ibid: 238.

Gender Trouble, op cit: 6.


Butler says, 'The postulation of the “before” within feminist theory becomes politically problematic when it constrains the future to materialize an idealized notion of the past or when it supports, even inadvertently, the reification of a precultural sphere of the authentic feminine. This recourse to an original or genuine femininity is a nostalgic and parochial ideal that refuses the contemporary demand to formulate an account of gender as a complex cultural construction. This ideal tends not only to serve culturally conservative aims, but to constitute an exclusionary practice within feminism, precipitating precisely the kind of fragmentation that the ideal purports to overcome.' Gender Trouble, op cit: 36.

Irigaray says, ‘To achieve a different social order, women need a religion, a language, and a currency of exchange...’ See Sexes and Genealogies, op cit: 79.

This a reworking of Butler's argument about repudiation: that is, the very process of opposition creates an 'other' that requires the first concept as its foundational term, thus producing an interreliance. This is the same mechanism at play with homosexuality, which, she says, where it 'construct[s] a gay/lesbian identity through [...] exclusionary means[...] institutes precisely the relation of radical dependency it seeks to overcome: Lesbianism would then require heterosexuality.' Gender Trouble, op cit: 128. This interrelativity may be the reason why the notion of 'feminist heroine' tends to produce resoundingly contradictory tropes. For instance, the notion of feminist paragons opposed to 'patriarchy' managed to rope in figures such as Marilyn Monroe (see Caryn James, 'Rescuing women from the myths'. International Herald Tribune. 10 Feb. 2005. Web. 23 Oct. 2007.<http://www.iht.com/articles/2005/02/09/features/marilyn.php>). Later figures such as Xena: Warrior Princess refused to be positioned relative to 'patriarchy' and instead (it can be argued) took as their chief bugbear the victimology of prior feminisms. See, for instance, Atara Stein, 'Xena: Warrior Princess, The Lesbian Gaze, And the Construction of a Feminist Heroine'. IAXS project #007. whoosh.org. Condensed from a paper presented at the Popular Culture Association of America's Annual Conference. Orlando, Florida: 9 Apr. 1998. Web. 11 Oct. 2007. <http://www.whoosh.org/issue24/stein1.html#.feminist>. Stein says: '[W]hat makes Xena stand out in contrast to other action heroines is the fact that her gender is simply not an issue.' Her gender is 'not an issue' because she defines herself against the feminist victimology that posited gender as an issue in the first place.
A notion explored more fully in the Methodology.

See Judith Butler again: "Sex" is always produced as a reiteration of hegemonic norms... Bodies that Matter, op cit: 107.


Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex begins from an account of culture in which males arrogate the right to speak for and about females. This places males in the role of 'namers', where in Butler's version to 'name' is never to originate, but only to cite. See The Second Sex. US: Vintage Books 1989. First published in France in 1949. Arguably, the very term 'woman', which derives from the addiction of 'womb' to 'man', does posit a secondariness in naming terms. However it is possible, if strained-seeming, to see this in the converse—'man' is 'woman' with something removed.

Bodies That Matter, op cit: 122.

'Acting in Concert' in Undoing Gender, op cit: 4.


Bodies That Matter, op cit: 115.

Bodies That Matter, ibid: 115.

Butler says one of the problems with the category 'woman' as a political identifier (feminism) is that in the signifying system that 'woman' is drawn from, the other essentials of identity: class; race; ethnicity etc are not included. It is 'decontextualised'. These are 'the constraints of the representational discourse'... She says that the insistence on a 'stable subject of feminism'... invariably generates multiple refusals to accept the category' To her, women refusing feminism suggest 'the necessary limits of identity politics'. Gender Trouble, ibid: 15-16.

To be abject in Butler is in some senses not to be. See Bodies That Matter, op cit: 3.

Bodies That Matter, ibid: 122.


This paraphrasing of Butler's capture of Althusser is necessary to lead into questions of the political value of identity.

Butler says, 'The forming of a subject requires an identification with the normative phantasm of "sex," and this identification takes place through a repudiation which produces a domain of abjection, a repudiation without which the subject cannot emerge. This is a repudiation which creates the valence of "abjection" and its status for the subject as a threatening spectre.' Bodies That Matter, ibid: 3.

Bodies That Matter, ibid: 107—and to the extent that this contains the notion of identity-through-abjection (the self is what the other is not), my account agrees.

Bodies That Matter, ibid: 3.

Gender Trouble, op cit: 5.

Gender Trouble, ibid: 5.

'The Haunted Flesh' in Signs, op cit: 44.

Hence Butler's comment, 'Obviously, the political task is not to refuse representational politics—as if we could.' Gender Trouble, op cit: 5.
Gender Trouble, ibid: 124.

Bray and Colebrook, 'The Haunted Flesh', op cit: 56.


Meaghan Morris says that 'feminism makes political discourse "stammer". In her view, 'To act, as I believe feminism does, to bring about concrete social changes while at the same time contesting the very bases of modern thinking about what constitutes "change" is to induce intense strain, almost a kind of overload, in historical articulation[...]’ See 'Preface' to Too Soon Too Late: History in Popular Culture. USA: Indiana University Press, 1998: xv.

According to Coco Masters, 'neuroscientists at Newcastle University conducted a color-selection experiment with 208 volunteers between the ages of 20 and 26.' Although both sexes preferred blue, the females preferred redder-hued blues; the males more green. The segue is then made backward into the supposition that in fact informed the outcome: '[study author] Ling speculates that the color preference and women's ability to better discriminate red from green could have evolved due to sex-specific divisions of labor: while men hunted, women gathered, and they had to be able to spot ripe berries and fruits.' Coco Masters. 'Study: Why Girls Like Pink'. Time Magazine. 20 Aug. 2007. Web. 13 Sep. 2007. <http://www.time.com/time/health/article/0,8599,1654371,00.html>. The original study was 'Biological components of sex difference in color preference'. Current Biology Vol. 17. R623-R625. 21 August 2007. Web. Sep. 13 2007. <http://www.current-biology.com/>.

John Ralston Saul explicates a great resurgence in the three fields represented here, expressing surprise that such monumental resurgences could have occurred in so short a space of historical time. For instance, he argues that we are in the midst of ‘a revival of Western racism, something we thought we had defeated in 1945.’ The Collapse of Globalism and the Reinvention of the World. London: Viking, 2005: 98. Although speaking through the prism of a critique of globalisation in which returns to nationalism (ibid: 140) were out of the failures of globalisation to offer what it said it would, he nevertheless charts a strong resurgence in all these fields. For instance: ‘European countries that had long ago separated religion from their politics are suddenly describing European culture as fundamentally a child of Greece, Rome and Christianity…’ (ibid: 253) and, ‘…God is clearly back in his old public, but non-religious, role, as a political sidekick, ready to justify whatever is required.’ (ibid: 256.)


Love My Rifle, ibid: 161.


Love My Rifle, op cit: 159.

Love My Rifle, ibid: 90.

Love My Rifle, ibid: 175.

Love My Rifle, ibid: 168.


Love My Rifle, ibid: 171.

Such as negotiating identity alongside a violent relationship: see Love My Rifle, ibid: 40.


Love My Rifle, ibid: 214.

Love My Rifle, ibid: 175.

Love My Rifle, ibid: 213.

Love My Rifle, ibid: 207.

Love My Rifle, ibid: 212.

The rape joke episode. Love My Rifle, ibid: 212.

Anthony Swofford's Jarhead makes this plainer: while the enemy soldiers are enemy soldiers (that is, until they surrender or are captured and rendered 'safe'), he says, 'I'd been able to imagine them as men similar to me[...]'. Indeed, there is a sense where their very oppositionality as similarly bonded men makes them almost his comrades.

Swofford, Anthony. Jarhead. New York: Pocket Books, a division of Simon & Schuster Inc., 2003: 323. Conversely, almost all of the female characters in Jarhead are seen in terms of their relation to bonded warriorship (Williams' sluts or bitches) and in the few cases where they cannot be slotted into one or the other trope, they are granted an almost indifferent kind of respect: 'She was a nice woman, and smart and tough, and being grunts, we'd spent minimal time around women marines, and at first we weren't sure how to treat her, but eventually we treated her as a peer and the former fiancée of our dead friend.' Jarhead, ibid: 104-5.

Love My Rifle, op cit: 165.

Love My Rifle, ibid: 228, a moment Williams casts off from being about her subjectivity by claiming its importance as being due to the fact that '[i]t was from the infantry, and they almost never recognize support elements.'

Yet they are also not entirely about free will: see Judith Butler, speaking of gender reiterations and agency. Gender Trouble, op cit: 148.

Love My Rifle, ibid: 173.

Love My Rifle, ibid: 259.

Love My Rifle, ibid: 261.

Love My Rifle, ibid: 259.

Love My Rifle, ibid: 91 and 268.

Love My Rifle, ibid: 268.

Love My Rifle, ibid: 91.

Love My Rifle, ibid: 263.

All three of the first person military memoirs studied for this thesis make references to suicide.


'I hated being a marine because more than all of the things in the world I wanted to be [...], I was a marine.' Jarhead, op cit: 43.

Note the existentialist angst in Swofford's summary: 'Some wars are unavoidable and need well be fought, but this doesn't erase warfare's waste. Sorry, we must say to the mothers whose sons will die horribly. This will never end. Sorry.' Jarhead, ibid: 361. Existentialism arguably placed man (in all his unacknowledged masculinity) at the centre of human experience; in this case Swofford remains thoroughly centred even where statedly suicidal.

'I considered masturbating on the captain's desk, but instead I called him a faggot addict cum sucker bitchmaster dickskinner dickfuck fuckforbrains nopecker lilywhitebitch.' A jovial moment: Jarhead, ibid: 62.

Particularly in times of narrative emphaticity, such as during battle movements (page 245, the first paragraph showing a congruence of interpretation as well as behaviour) or the funeral of a mutual friend, at which moments the collectivity loses any ironic intonation and becomes the seamless 'we' of absolutely mutual behaviour. Thus: 'We were all hurt badly, [by Troy's death] and ready to die, to join our friend.' Jarhead, ibid: 104.

Possibly a matter of the leftovers of 1970s antiwar reiterations; according to Williams, a reverse trend is coming true, with 'hippies' turning into military wannabes: see Love My Rifle, ibid: 280.

'Internal references include Camus and Nietzsche. See Jarhead, ibid: 73.

Jarhead, ibid: 101: 'And we are actors running around the stage.'

At one point in particular Swofford describes himself as one of the many 'cuckolded jarheads'. Jarhead, ibid: 131.

'Jarhead, ibid: 130: 'the guy next to him [...] began describing [a sexual encounter with] a woman who sounded a lot like the grunt's wife [...] And then the tanker mentioned that the woman was married to some dumb grunt—and that's a quote from her[...]'] Jarhead, ibid: 130.

Combat and the vicissitudes of active duty occupy pages 246 to 341 inclusive, aside from a short interval in which Swofford discusses his enlistment and the importance of family in that decision. Jarhead, ibid.

The simplicity of this is followed by the even further reductionism of: 'I know you're a jarhead. That's all I need to know.' The connection between the whore/bitch/lady divide and identity for the male protagonists is constantly made and remade through the theme of cuckoldry.

At any time the warrior bond might shift, turning on one of its own. The story of the jarhead whose wife's neighbourly indiscretion was inadvertently replayed in his presence as group pornography becomes a moment at which the same operations that produce warrior bonds invoke an outsider whose cuckoldry renders him penetrable; the marine's suicidal feelings afterward make him a figure of ridicule. In the words of Swofford's friend Troy: 'That poor jarhead! Half the battalion plus assorted tanker assholes have watched his wife getting fucked, really getting fucked, by the neighbor. But I'd watch it again tomorrow.'

Robert Graves's choice of myths, not to mention the style of his rewriting of them, must surely slant any understanding of what the 'original' myths meant: since that cannot be known, it can only be assumed that for some reason Graves' context was one in which the falsified rape mythology was particularly pertinent. Nevertheless the stories are pertinent now for their similarity to the sorts of claims (or, rather, counter-claims) made in the context of rape allegations. For instance, Graves writes of Phrixus, who, being handsome, was desired by his aunt Biadice who was married to Cretheus. When he 'rebuffed her advances, she accused [him] of trying to ravish her.' Proteus' wife fell for Bellerophon then when rebuffed accused him of trying to rape her. Phaedra fell in love with Hippolytus (son of Theseus and the Amazon) but she was Theseus's new wife so he recoiled from her advance. She cried that he had ravished her, and then hanged herself from the lintel leaving an accusing note. Graves, Robert. *Greek Myths*. London: Cassell, 1981: 66, 75 and 103. In the context of so many mythological rapes that were not contested—rape appears to have been the chief method of acquiring a wife: see Graves' accounts of Zeus; Thyestes; Orion; Boreas—the myth of falsified claim is a particularly weird one. Nevertheless ideas of female motives behind spurious claims have produced traces inside judicial systems, and 51% of sexual assault and related cases are acquitted in the higher courts: *Football Fans Against Sexual Assault* n.d. Web. 28 Aug. 2006. <http://www.ffcasa.org.au/>. Alternate citation: Web. n.d. 7 Oct. 2008. <http://www.vwt.org.au/docs/CassidyPrentReport.pdf>.


c1xxv See Michael Flood, ‘Deconstructing the Culture of Sexual Assault,’ op cit: 4.


c1xxviii ‘Warrior Values’, ibid: 118. Interestingly, inside this normative system, McCarthy poses rape as a perversion of warrior values. It is worth asking to what extent devalued notions of penetrability may in fact be promoted within warrior masculinity, not as stable tropes unavailable to change but nevertheless with some integral resistance to outside interference?


c1xxi Karen Willis of the Rape Crisis Centre put it most baldly: “…‘In football, you’ve got […] group bonding and you’ve got secrecy.’ See Christine Jackman’s article,
Speaking of feminist writing that derived contemporary theories from readings of irrecoverable prehistory, Butler says, ‘by telling a single, authoritative account about an irrecoverable past, [the teller] makes the constitution of the law appear as a historical inevitability,’ *Gender Trouble*, op cit: 36.

For a wonderfully compelling version of the structuralist paradigm see Claude Levi-Strauss. *The Origin of Table Manners: Introduction to a Science of Mythology* 3. London: Johnathan Cape, 1978, hereafter called *The Origin of Table Manners*; and *The Naked Man: Introduction to a Science of Mythology* 4. London: Johnathan Cape, 1981. In both of the latter works Levi-Strauss finds commonality between myths of different cultural origins and tends toward a view of all mythology as collapsible; a great deal of complexity—and also delight in reading, it must be said—is jettisoned. An accord between what Levi-Strauss concludes and what he believes to be true in general (and a summation, therefore, of precisely the poststructuralist conundrum vis-à-vis structuralism) is nicely (albeit seemingly naively) phrased when Levi-Strauss opines, ‘For it is a fact of experience that there are clinging women and woman-chasers...’ (*The Origin of Table Manners*, ibid: 85). Poststructuralist thinking tends to highlight the conundrum that one’s beliefs always tend to be reinforced by one’s researches.

See her discussion on the ‘forming of a subject’, in which ‘identification takes place through a repudiation which produces a domain of abjection[...]' And yet, this disavowed abjection will threaten to expose the self-grounding presumptions of the sexed subject, grounded as that subject is in a repudiation whose consequences it cannot fully control.' *Bodies That Matter*, op cit: 3.


Butler goes from saying, ‘I would suggest[...] that drag fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity’ in *Gender Trouble* (op cit: 137) to calling into question ‘whether the denaturalization of gender cannot be the very vehicle for a consolidation of hegemonic norms[...]’ and saying, further, ‘I want to underscore that there is no necessary relation between drag and subversion[...]’ *Bodies That Matter*, op cit: 125.


*Gender Trouble*, op cit: 87. Although speaking of a form of femininity that requires the expunging of masculinity the principle is the same.


As at August 2005, after an Australian Defence Force request, women were to be permitted in combat zones in Iraq; however not in combat roles. Note that the request arose (and was acquiesced to) out of a perceived skills shortage, not a change of ideology. See (anonymous) ‘Women headed for front line’. ABC News Online 22 Aug. 2005, 8:08pm (AEST). Web. 18 Feb. 2006.<http://www.abc.net.au/news/newsitems/200508/s1443159.htm.>


Kate Zernike, ‘We took photos because prisoners looked funny, says guard’. Sydney Morning Herald 17 May 2004: 8. (Note: the majority of news reports noted that England, photographed in Abu Ghraib prison mistreating prisoners, was pregnant.)


See Luce Irigaray: ‘Theoretically there would be no such thing as woman. She would not exist. The best that can be said is that she does *not exist yet...* Outside of this process [the dialectic of ‘the essential task and ceaseless effort...to bring or bring back to the fulness of the self’s possession of substance’] is nothing: outside of this process is the nothing that is woman.’ Irigaray poses that ‘woman’ is not merely the ‘other’ of ‘man’, but that she exists wholly and only outside the entirety of ‘his’ signifying system, utterly unrelated in ‘his’ logic. ‘How to Conceive of a Girl’. *Speculum of the Other Woman*. Gillian C. Gill (trans.). New York: Cornell University Press, 1985: 166. First published in French, 1974.

Consider also the following account of a ‘male’ bonded culture trying to rid itself of a troubling ‘female’ presence: the quotes concern a female football player who, upon complaining of harassment and rape, was described by her coach in extremely pejorative terms. ‘The scandal gained momentum this week when Hnida told Sports Illustrated that she was raped by a teammate and that she was verbally abused, harassed and molested by her fellow players... ‘Barnett was placed on paid administrative leave Wednesday after he called Hnida an “awful” player who “couldn’t kick the ball through the uprights” on Tuesday[...]’ Barnett explained that he was trying to show support for Hnida but was asked a specific question about the player’s talent and ability[...] “I was trying to communicate that we cared about Katie[...]” he said[...]’ Anonymous, ‘Sixth rape allegation surfaces at CU’. *CNN.com*. 20 Feb. 2004, 3.44 AM EST (0844 GMT). *Cable News Network LP, LLLP*. Web. 8 Oct. 2008. <http://www.cnn.com/2004/US/Central/02/19/colorado.football/>.

A view that, incidentally, Judith Butler seeks to separate herself from: see for instance ‘Extracts from Gender as Performance: An Interview with Judith Butler’. *op cit*.

See Roger Horrocks, *Male Myths and Icons*, *op cit*.


See my earlier analysis of *Jarhead* in the Context section of this exegesis.

Eve Sedgwick says, 'The paranoid Gothic was the novelistic tradition in which the routing through women of male homosocial desire had the most perfunctory presence[...]’ See *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. *op cit*: 118.


Although my research arrived at this suggestion differently, Foucault's work on the ubiquity of the imperative to defend society, and its relation to the hidden war between classes inside that society, seems apt here. See *Society Must Be Defended*, *op cit*. 
3. methodology

Jouissance is the name Kristeva gives to non-phallic pleasure, which can include textual pleasure. Grosz says, 'Art, then, [according to Kristeva], serves to "legitimise" non-phallic jouissance by giving symbolic expression to the semiotic. The avant-garde goes further than other artistic practices; not only does it introduce jouissance to the social; it makes jouissance exceed the socially tolerable boundaries of representation, problematising the very concept of identity…' Grosz, Elizabeth. Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1989: 56.

Interestingly, according to the BBC, speaking of the Israeli Defence Force: 'While some women soldiers perform highly demanding roles like tank instructor, more than 60% of the young women doing national service are assigned to dreary desk jobs.' See 'Israel's army struggles with its image'. BBC Special Report 27 Apr. 1998, 07:20 GMT, 08:20 UK time. Web. 16 Sep. 2008. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/events/israel_at_50/israel_today/79619.stm>.


See 'Gender is Burning', especially 'Ambivalent drag'. Bodies That Matter, ibid: 124.

Russian Formalists saw the purpose of art as to make strange (or defamiliarise) habituated language and imagery so that the object could be perceived anew. See for instance Terry Eagleton's discussion of the politicisation of this technique by artists like Bertolt Brecht in Literary Theory: An Introduction. Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1983: 136.

See for instance Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre. London: Penguin Books, 1996. First published 1847. The main character moves from painful and poverty-stricken childhood among well-to-do relatives to life in a charity home, and thence domestic servitude to a reclusive, rich gentleman (Edward Rochester), during which she falls for and marries him. After the marriage is revealed as a sham due to Rochester's bigamy, Jane leaves the estate and literally falls into the household of a painfully upright man intent on a missionary life. He proposes, she rejects him, receives an entitlement by way of a deceased uncle, and returns to Rochester's estate a self-sufficient woman, where she finds Rochester seriously disabled by a fire that killed the mad wife and destroyed the mansion, happily rendering him eligible for marriage. The links between romantic love and financial security are heavily underscored in the novel.


Irigaray often uses 'would' to delineate the projective, inscriptive, dreamful nature of her prose: 'Sexual difference would constitute the horizon of worlds more fecund than any known to date—at least in the West—and without reducing fecundity to the reproduction of bodies and flesh. For loving partners this would be a fecundity of birth and regeneration, but also the production of a new age of thought, art, poetry, and language: the creation of a new poetics.' Irigaray, Luce. An Ethics of Sexual Difference.
The conclusion of *Gender Trouble* and a good deal more of *Bodies That Matter* concern the ways that artistic practice might intersect with Butler's findings about dichotomous interrelativity and the return of the repudiated (hence, the impossibility of radical transformation in gender terms). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990: 143. Hereafter called *Gender Trouble*. See also *Bodies That Matter*. Op cit.

Terry Eagleton says, 'Structuralism is among other things one more of literary theory's series of doomed attempts to replace religion with something as effective: in this case, with the modern religion of science. [...] However, it seems impossible to eradicate some element of interpretation, and so of subjectivity, from even the most rigorously objective analysis.' See *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Oxford, England: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1983: 121-122. Looking back now, it is hard to read Joseph Campbell without baulking at certain grandiose suppositions, for instance the masculine certainty of the 'hero' centred by Campbell's 'monomyth': see Joseph Campbell. 'Prologue: The Monomyth', *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*. London: Fontana Press, 1993: 3. First published USA: Princeton University Press, 1949.

Campbell summarises: 'Rites of initiation and installation [...] teach the lesson of the essential oneness of the individual and the group[...]'. See *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*, ibid: 384.

Campbell again: '[T]he purpose and actual effect of [...] [rites of passage and, as I use it here by extension, heroic narratives] was to conduct people across those difficult thresholds of transformation that demand a change in the patterns not only of conscious but also of unconscious life.' *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*, ibid: 10.

John Stephens explains the notion of a 'focaliser' and its relation to an implicitly sympathetic subjectivity: 'A subject position is frequently constituted as the same as that occupied by a main character from whose perspective events are presented, that is, readers identify with the character.' Stephens, John. *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction*. England: Longman Group UK Ltd., 1992: 57.

*Gender Trouble*. op cit: 3.

*Gender Trouble*, ibid: 136.


This is not the place to get into the contradictions of US foreign policy; however for a description of the end of 'master narratives' like the notion of a moral, over-arching 'God', see Jean François Lyotard. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. USA: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

*Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction*. op cit: 68.

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In studying 'performatives', Butler studies 'the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names'. See *Bodies That Matter*. op cit: 2.

'Cathy Caruth says: '[T]he survival of trauma is more than the fortunate passage past a violent event, a passage that is accidentally interrupted by reminders of it, but the endless inherent necessity of repetition which ultimately may lead to destruction.' From this (from Freud), she forms the view that '[T]he formation of history [...] is the endless repetition of previous violence.' See Caruth, Cathy. 'Violence and Time: Traumatic Survivals'. *Assemblage* No. 20, *Violence, Space* (April 1993): 24-25. MIT Press.


See for instance where Bickerts goes wandering through the town looking for Cutter and the men of her unit, only to find them back at the barracks, having been out socialising without her. 'Heroine'. *Heroine*: 64-66.

After sex with an American marine, Bickerts briefly feels cleansed of her attachment to Cutter. 'Heroine', *Heroine*: 60.


Pan Osculans'. *Heroine*: 119.

Pan Osculans'. *Heroine*: 97.

Nagell *et al* set a human demonstrator to the task presenting chimpanzees of various ages, as well as two year old children, with a rakelike tool and a desirable but out of reach object. There were two ways to use the tool. Tomasello says, ‘What we found was that human children in general copied the method of the demonstrator...’ whereas ‘Chimpanzees...used the same method[...] no matter which demonstration they observed.’ He says, ‘Moreover, the children persisted in reproducing adult demonstrator behavior, *even when it meant that they would be less successful* than if they had simply used individual learning strategies, as the chimpanzees apparently did.’ (My emphasis.) Tomasello (strangely, if you remove the expectation that human infants would be *necessarily* cleverer than chimps) deduces that humans learn via direct imitation, where this is counted as *understanding the intention*, whereas chimps learn through emulation *without* intentional understanding (a conclusion that seems strained given the outcome of the experiment). Rather, I would glean two separate things from that example: one, the possibility that humans are better than chimps at learning purely by rote imitation; two, that humans learn *in the absence of inquiry* into whether a particular learned task (or behaviour) is necessarily beneficial. See Tomasello, Michael. ‘The Question of Chimpanzee Culture’. *Chimpanzee Cultures*. Wrangham, McGrew, de Waal and Heltne (eds.). USA: Harvard University Press, 1994: 304-5.

An apparent accident involving the nanny Geraldine precipitates Alice's entry into the bunker at the start of the section, since her mother is away. See 'Our Lady of the Sorrows'. *Heroine*: 192.

'Our Lady of the Sorrows'. *Heroine*: 223.

Graves, Robert. *Greek Myths*. London: Cassell, 1981: 36. Note: Graves uses the name 'Core' where I have used 'Persephone'.

'Our Lady of the Sorrows'. *Heroine*: 227.

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