The old man trick and The neurotic in Nana: a study of textual sexual dynamics

Luke Mathew Johnson

University of Wollongong
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THE OLD MAN TRICK

and

THE NEUROTIC IN NANA:
A STUDY OF TEXTUAL SEXUAL DYNAMICS

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

MASTER OF CREATIVE ARTS—RESEARCH

from

UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

by

LUKE MATHEW JOHNSON, BCA

2009
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THESIS: ‘The Neurotic in *Nana*: a study of textual sexual dynamics’
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Prologue

You must give yourself credit for some things, old man. Give yourself credit for your driving. Or if you are too modest to give yourself credit for your driving and your long hours, then how about giving yourself some credit for your knot-tying? Surely you are the goddamned knot-tying champion of New South Wales and Queensland put together. Them Americans probably have a name for knot champions like you. Something decent and salt-of-the-earth-sounding. Rope-wranglers. Or knuckle-ringers. You should have asked your brother about it when you had the chance. You could have asked him how to get one around your neck while you were at it. Or is that more your sister’s speciality? You cannot give your sister credit for everything, old man; she did not persuade you to start tying such decent goddamned knots. You became all decent and honourable on your own. Give yourself credit for that much, at least.
‘Get out of that.’ The dog licked its nose and looked up at him. ‘Dirty black bastard,’ he said, and he flicked at her with the thing in his hand. A thin line leapt from it and through the air and landed on her back. Droplets beaded off her coat and rolled about unbroken in the bulldust. ‘Piss right on you, if you like the smell so damn much,’ he said, and he flicked it at her again. She trotted away and found a spot alongside the fence where no nettles were growing and she sat down.

She was a good dog and the boy knew it. He was not proud about it but he knew he had himself a good one. He fed her and gave her a kick in the guts often enough that she ought to have known it, too. He would not have kicked or fed a useless dog, much as he would not have done any of the things that can ruin a good dog. Good dog can be a funny thing, his father had told him, and he was not wrong about that. The boy had seen more than one that had gone funny and needed shooting.

‘Best thing for a shiny coat. Didn’t you know?’ He cocked his hips forward and squeezed the lazy last dribbles from the end with his fingers. The early sunlight made each drip look like a drip of sap until it hit either the ground or his boot and left a corrugated ringmark the way piss does and sap does not. When there was nothing left he tucked his shirt into the front of his trousers and told her to get over and she did. She flexed in the shoulders and was over the fence like that, barely the powdery slap of her landing on the other side before the cold dry smell of dust. He watched her stalk down the yard then with her head hung like a fox, those two shoulder blades twitching back and forth against each other as she strode.

‘Wayback. Wayback,’ he shouted after her, and she lengthened her stride.
When she had found the far end of the yard he yelled something else at her and she understood what he meant and began working the sheep toward the shearing shed. One tried to stand its ground and she bit at its hocks. The taste of lanolin did not excite her, as it can with a young pup, but it sat soberly in her mouth and the boy knew by the way she held it there and went limp-jawed that it was the same as the taste she got from licking the back of his hand. It was the taste of his skin in the afternoons when he had patted her on the chest and told her she had done all right.

Afternoon is the best time of the day, the boy often thought. Morning is the best time of day for dogs, but afternoon is the best time of the day for everything else. In the afternoon you know the day is beat and it feels good to think about all the work you got done. Only a dog likes to think about all the work that is yet to be done. Dogs can be stupid. He knew that. So can sheep, though. Sheep can be a hell of a lot stupider than dogs. Dogs do what you tell them to do, at least. But then, a dog will go funny unless you treat it just so.

He picked up a length of polypipe that was lying in the bulldust. It was a good length for mustering sheep with, about a metre and a half long, and the roughened edges and bowed middle were testament to its use over the years by all the other rouseabouts that had been and worked at the shed and shouted their dogs around the yards outside.

‘Come on, move them up,’ the boy said, leaning over the fence panel and swinging the piece of pipe at the sheep. The dew on the top rail of the fence made a straight dirty line across the belly of his flannelette shirt. ‘Come on, come on. Push up, you bastard.’ He brought the pipe down against the hindquarters of an animal too slow to get out of its way.
They were a craggy old mob in the yards that day. Slow and stubborn with age, heavy with fleece and udder. They had the same dim grey reflection in the eyeball sheep being loaded onto a truck headed for the abattoir will have and the same dumb unwillingness to cooperate. Amongst them there was more than one that was all slack and hollowed-out with cancer, and when they moved past him the boy could smell the cancer sweet and thick and it smelt something like the way rum does.

‘Christ sakes,’ he said, spitting it back out against the corrugated shed wall.

Cancers were worth two to the shearers. So were flyblows and ones with prolapsed ringholes. None of them went much in the way of shearing, but a double over the board was a double over the bar and the boy’s father did not need anyone teaching him that lesson. If the old man drank like an abo it was because he thought he was one. That was what they all reckoned. They told the boy that he was black in the guts and black in the nuts, and the boy knew enough about alcohol and enough about himself to understand what they meant.

The old man and the boy lived alone now and it had been that way for a while. The last one had packed her stuff into a garbage bag and walked out on them four years earlier. Truth of it was, like the rest, she was not worth so much as the hole between her legs, anyway. And because the old man was not one of these types who finds it impossible to forget about a thing once they no longer have it, she was not missed now that she was gone. That is just how it was with women. With him, too.

Some nights though, when the boy had been lying in bed for a long time but had not yet fallen asleep, he would hear the old man talking to himself in the kitchen. If he had had a skinful he would be mumbling about what a bitch that so-and-so was and then
he would be getting his boxes of bullets out of the pantry and counting them onto the kitchen table. Fifteen of them in the big box and another eight in the small faded box he kept in the bottom of an empty coffee tin. The sound one of those little bronze-coloured bullets made when it rolled off the table in the middle of the night and hit the floorboards was a sudden crack of laughter, the sound of an unexpected cackle that startled you and made your nose tingle on the inside no matter where you were in the house. Then, when your ears and nose had stopped fizzing, you would hear him on his knees clumsily fisting the floor right in front of his eyes—because when he was drunk it was easier for him to remember with his hands than see with his eyes. The boy fell asleep many nights listening to the old man laughing at his own drunkenness out on that kitchen floor.

The old man was a rum man. A devout practitioner all year round. He knew how much was needed for getting himself religious and how much more after that for riding the mattress right through into a half-decent sleep. The boy had tried doing the same once and had been spun out of his bed and made sick all over the carpet. He promised himself it was only because he had drunk it too quickly and had gone to bed too soon. The old man told him that he was a damn idiot for drinking in the first place if he could not handle the taste. He agreed with the old man in principle and decided he would practise enjoying the taste in secret until it was real enough that he did not have to.

When the dog had wheeled the mob through the gateway and past the boy, he told her to get right up. He got his fingers under her collar, his four knuckles ribbed across the back of her neck, and hoisted her over into the middle somewhere.

‘Come on, get them moving,’ he said. ‘You haven’t got bludging rights yet. Get them moving, you black bastard.’
She worked at the mob from the inside, turning the sheep over on themselves and up along the edges of the ramp. It was the newest thing about the shed, that ramp. It was all metal and concrete and had been put there as a replacement to the old wooden one that the white ants had got into. Beneath the galvanised grating an eaten-away piece of the old railing reminded the boy of a hip bone or a pelvis bone or whatever that one with the hole in it was. The white ants had chewed it smooth the way cork is smooth and had left it there misshapen and useless.

‘Look what happened to the last rousey,’ the boy said. ‘No sign of his dog, though.’

At the top of the ramp the dog stopped and barked the last of the sheep through into the shed. When they were right through and out of the boy’s sight, she swung her head across the tan of her chest to show him that she had been victorious and that none of the sheep had been a match for her and that all angles had been covered. The boy spat against the side of the shed and climbed up to close the gate behind them.

‘All but,’ he said to her. ‘You’d be a speciality dog if you knew that one. I tell you what.’ She put her nose against the leg of his pants.

Apart from the occasional dam bank, the country around Bribbaree was flat and you could see a long way from the top of the ramp. The paddocks were full of dirt and burs, the burs peeled-up and sharp as paint coming off the outside of a house and the dirt as eroded as weatherboards underneath. Along the fenceline, trees crowded and arm-wrestled each other and fought over root space and who had rights to the drain and spillway. On the entire property there was only one which did not look hard done by and disgusted with the general state and lack of water, and that was the peppercorn growing
against the side of the shearing shed. She was feeding her way through by sucking at some vein the others did not know about: a cracked pipe between the shed and outhouse, or perhaps a rust-hole in the bottom of the rainwater tank. Some secret spring that was giving her a warped, unnatural-looking health.

During the summer the peppercorn was a good tree to have growing there, it kept the sun off the shed until mid-morning and made the inside cooler than it would otherwise have been. In the winter, though, when the main shear was on, the whole place stayed cold and dark until lunchtime. It had been cut back many times, the peppercorn, and leaked sap like blood from everywhere the chainsaw had touched it, but the damn thing always grew back faster and thicker than previously. Somebody should have ringbarked it. That was what it needed.

The boy stood for a moment and watched as if he expected it to do something. For all its ugliness and contemptuousness it was just a tree and it did not do anything no matter how he looked at it. His dog watched it, too, and she barked at it for measure and he told her to sit. The tree was full of spite. He could see it. Spite for each and every bastard who had tried to cut her down. Spite for the gums in the paddock with their roots that knotted the ground around them. Spite for the broken water pipe that was keeping her alive one drip at a time. A tree can be ugly and contemptuous and spiteful, the boy decided.

‘It’s not going to shut itself. And make sure you shut it properly or there’ll be sheep everywhere, for Christ’s sake.’ The old man rolled his lips over the cigarette in his mouth so that it bobbed up and down like a piece of straw being chewed on. He had lips that were yellow and callused like his knuckles that were yellow and callused from
shearing and his voice was a closed dry suck: the colour and fragrance of a fireplace that has just been swept.

The boy pretended not to hear him. He put the chain over the bolt as he would have done anyway and leaned back on the gate to check the certainty of the latch. It did not come open. He checked it again and when it did not come open again he eased his weight off and let go.

‘That proper enough?’ he asked his dog. She had no answer. ‘I’ll teach you how one day. Then you’ll be a specialty dog.’ She looked at him. ‘Over,’ he said, rubbing his hands against the front of his trousers. And she got over.

Inside the shed the smells were more physical than fragrant. Broken skylights in the roof tugged at them and mixed them with fumes lifting off the animals and floor as thick and languid as a warm milk skin. It was a rinse that stung your eyes and made you squint, made the tendons in your forearms ache and seized all the finger and carpal joints. If you bent over you felt it threatening to snap in the tops of your legs, otherwise it pushed like a knee in the middle of your back. The shearers did not notice it as much because they had already ignored it for so long; the boy, though, was only young and he was still able to see it and touch it and inhale it and he enjoyed the stiffness it put in him. It was a recognisable stiffness, he thought.

At twenty-five past seven the first catching pen was full and the boy had started pushing sheep into the next. Along the board the shearers were greasing the downtubes and checking the cutter-throw on their handpieces.

‘Listen to that, would you,’ Nick Cant said.
‘Listen to what?’ Ray said. Ray was the classer and overseer. He wrote the payslips and signed the wool book and organised the men.

‘To this.’ Nick Cant played the cutter back and forth, making a serrated key of it against the comb teeth. ‘Singing like an absolute bastard.’

‘That don’t mean anything,’ Ray said.

‘Bullshit. Fifty a run without breaking a sweat. That’s how sharp I’ve got the bastard.’

‘Who? You or the sheep?’

‘Hey?’

‘Breaking a sweat.’

‘I said, without breaking a sweat, you dumb bastard.’

‘Yeah, you or the sheep?’

‘Well, if it’s not breaking a sweat, what do you mean, me or the sheep? Neither of us. Without breaking a sweat means without breaking a sweat.’

Nick Cant was a shearer from out west somewhere. He was short in stature and had been bred for the sheds and he sheared naturally with the sort of ease they try their hardest to teach in learning schools. He never told anyone where exactly it was out west that he had come from, but it must have been some place where they still knew how to breed shearers the proper way. Shearing will do that. It will propagate its way right into a family’s bloodline so that after two or three generations, young flat-chested mothers start dropping knock-kneed, pigeon-toed sons, and daughters with sharp elbows and sharper tongues. Nick Cant had not brought a family east with him when he had come, only a
1979 Kingswood which he reckoned was not all too different from a wife, anyhow. If it has tits or a motor, it will wind up costing you money, was what he used to say.

Nick Cant was tough, too. He could shear quicker than most blokes, drink more and could take a punch as well, and that was what made you tough when you were working in the sheds. Fearlessness was the only other measure and Nick Cant did not fear much of anything. He had stories about picking fights with abos and ones about outrunning the coppers in his car and then one about jumping into the wheat dump from the top of the Milvale silos. The boy had heard them all.

In his fourteen years the boy had never tried picking a fight with any abos and no copper had ever bothered chasing him down the laneway in the old man’s Land Cruiser, either. The only claim he had was getting head-butted between the eyes by a crossbred ram on his first day of work and not being knocked out. As they told him, though, that was not any sign of toughness, that was just the colour coming out. The boy knew enough about colour and about himself to understand what they meant. Nick Cant had told him that abos had heads like garden shovels and had shown him his hands to prove it.

At twenty-nine minutes past seven a tin door opened at the front of the shed and the old man came inside. He was wearing a pair of leather-felt moccasins that had had the shoelaces chewed out of them and a singlet that hung baggily over his shoulders. As he walked he scuffed the floorboards with his feet and the toes of his moccasins were polished smooth and black. He was a lean man all over, tall, with the type of tired, drawn face a priest might have and two thin grey arms that softened in colour as they neared the tabernacle of each pit.
‘Where’d you grow up?’ Nick Cant said to him.

‘Wherever you say, Nick,’ the old man said back.

‘Then, shut the door, you old bastard.’

‘Not that cold, Nick.’

‘Bullshit it’s not. Me dick’s shrivelled up inside me like a second arsehole.’

Ray laughed. It was easy to make Ray laugh. Ray was supposed to be in charge of everything that went on in the shed, but getting him to laugh was never difficult. Truthfully, nobody thought much of Ray, only that it was good to have him on side when you were trying to cut down somebody else.

‘Put your jumper back on if you’re so damn cold,’ the old man said.

‘Jumper ain’t a busted condom, mate. Once it’s off, it’s off.’

Ray kept with the laughing.

‘If that’s what you say,’ the old man said.

‘You should know,’ Nick Cant said back.

The old man did not say anything then. He only tightened his eyes a little and shook his head to one side and locked his handpiece onto the end of the downtube. Nick Cant circled around in front of him the way a cocky young boxer who has just slipped one through would. He kept his eye square on the old man but tilted his head so that it was the crowd he was really playing up to.

‘Don’t worry about it, though,’ he said. ‘I’m sure none of them old gins was worth wasting two new ones on, anyways.’
The boy was working hard to fill the last catching pen. He could feel the hollow curve of his back livening with sweat and the tickle behind his knees where the denim was beginning to cling.

‘Isn’t a woman alive worth two,’ was all the old man said and he did not look up to say it.

Nick Cant grinned. He had a whiskery grin.

‘My oath,’ he agreed. ‘I don’t doubt that. But then again, I’ve never stuck me dick in any gins to find out, neither, I must say.’

‘I’m sure you haven’t,’ the old man said.

‘I’ve had it in plenty of other places, don’t worry about that. I can’t figure out what’s so special about one of them outback ginnies, anyway?’

‘Go ask your hand.’

‘Me hand hasn’t been up no outback ginnie. It isn’t going to know the answer.’

‘I’m sure it hasn’t.’

The way the old man spoke when he was sober amused Nick Cant, and his amusement was all air and spit, like he was trying to sip something off his top lip.

‘Well, tell us, then,’ he slurped. ‘What desires a decent bloke such as yourself to want to go and stick his wire in the dirtiest rotten blackest holes he can find?’

‘I’m sure I don’t know, Nick.’

‘You don’t? It sounds like some sort of competition to me.’

‘Well, then.’

‘So it is, is it?’

‘Must be.’
‘Christ, you’re a hard old bastard,’ Nick Cant said to the old man.

‘Aren’t I?’ the old man said.

‘He’s a hard old bastard, isn’t he, Ray?’

‘He’s hard, all right,’ Ray agreed. ‘But he ain’t that old.’

‘Bullshit he isn’t,’ Nick Cant said. ‘He’s a hard bastard and an old bastard. Aren’t you?’

‘And you,’ the old man said, pulling the drive into gear to calibrate the handpiece’s tension.

‘Nah, I’m not a hard bastard,’ Nick Cant raised his voice. ‘Too small to be a hard bastard like you. Just how hard are you, anyway?’

‘Just as hard as you say, Nick.’

‘He’s a hard old bastard, all right, isn’t he?’ Nick Cant said. ‘You going to teach the boy how to be a hard old bastard?’

Behind the chutes the boy was using his knees now to force a last sheep down the race and into the pen. Above him the broken skylights were sucking the fumes and voices out into the paddock and he could feel the updraft against all the places he was wet. It made the skin around his Adam’s apple dry and tight.

‘Don’t need teaching,’ the old man said.

‘In the blood then, is it?’ Nick Cant asked him.

‘Just don’t need teaching, that’s all.’

‘What else don’t need teaching?’

‘Why don’t you ask your hand?’

‘Why don’t I ask your hand? Why don’t I ask both your hands, old man?’
‘Why don’t you ask both your own hands?’ the old man said.

‘Why don’t we ask both the boy’s hands, old man? He’s got nice-little, soft-little hands, doesn’t he?’

The boy grabbed the last sheep by the snout. He twisted its head back over its body and drove it forward bluntly and blindly and neck-first.

‘Which one’s softer, old man? Boy’s nice-little black hands, or the nice-little black hole he came out of?’

The old man sniffed and looked up. He spat into the bottom of the chute, then sniffed again. He was smiling in spite of himself and Nick Cant was smiling, also, and Ray was smiling and looking back and forth between the two smiling and smiling shearers.

‘If you like, old man, I can shear the arsehole out of one of these poor old sheep?’ Nick Cant suggested. ‘See if that’s softer than a dirty old gin hole. Less trouble. Surely.’

‘I’ll do it,’ Ray said. ‘I’ll shear the arsehole out for you. You’ll like the way I do it. I do it the Kiwi way.’ He stepped toward the old man and tried to grab hold of his handpiece. The old man pushed Ray’s arm away and the live handpiece jumped up. The whole downtube came with it and recoiled just as awkwardly when its extension ran out at Ray’s forehead. Ray did not baulk or jerk back—it was too slow to baulk or jerk at. He put his hand on his brow and opened his mouth and that was all. There was a small amount of blood—nine or ten prick holes, each with its own thin red tail—and that was all.

‘What does that remind you of?’ Nick Cant said. And he was the only one to say anything.
In the pens, the boy stopped pushing and swallowed hard and looked at his father. The old man did not look back, he just took an oil pot off the shelf and re-oiled his handpiece. It was a tin pot and when he pressed on the base of it with his callused yellow thumb it hiccupped oil over the nine or ten blooded comb points and that was all.
It will be fifteen years before he kills her. And he will. But first.

The old crow will flap her way up and tell him that she has a young unbroken one and he will laugh because of what he remembers of these young unbroken ones. The men standing nearby will laugh, too, and the publican will threaten the old crow with a bottle of glass cleaner that he keeps behind the bar. This old crow will be afraid of the publican’s glass cleaner, she will remember how it stung her eyes the last time. But listen, this will be a young, young one—not even on her bleeds yet—and this whitie will be able to do it right inside her if he wants. You just trust her, whitie: thirty dollars and she knows what you whities like. There will be so many old crows in this town and all of them will promise the same hopeless thing for the same hopeless price. He will not be so old himself that he can forget that. Drunk men always think they are old men and he will not be so drunk, either.

Doing it right inside if you want is something all of these gins will trust in, something they will teach their gin daughters to trust in. They will be more fiscal with their daughters than themselves, and their daughters will be indifferent and ageless and not at all fiscal. He will learn that when he is fourteen. His father will hold one against the bonnet of his car and use her body like a thing for flogging. When his father has finished she will be made to let him inside, too. She will smell to him like dirt and rum and semen and after he has emptied his own cloudy smell into her, she will show him how else she has been taught. She will squat forward against the grill and let it run back out and her old crow mother will rub a clawful of earth into the brining, smiling gap left between her legs. This will be the trick all these daughters must learn to trust in, their
contraceptive against whities who like to do it right inside and who pay extra if their whitie sons can do it in there as well. This whitie son will be smart enough to understand the commerce and value of emptying his money into the right hole—one that is indifferent and ageless and obedient and not at all fiscal or cunning like the crow standing behind it—and the virtue that comes with such pragmatic commerce as this will be something he keeps with him for the next twenty-eight years.

‘You damn whities are no good.’ The old gin will cock her elbow so as to cover her eyes. ‘You don’t want to do it in anything but your own hand, you damn whities.’ The publican will give her another squirt and she will retreat outside, quailing and hissing and spitting his window cleaner as she goes, her tongue as blunt and comical as the dripping, grinning hole of any unbroken daughter she might have waiting.

‘These gins need some new unbroken daughters,’ the whitie will say.

The whitie will be a man called Graham Johnston. Of all the men here, all of them dressed in the same blue dungarees and shearing singlets, so that when they stand up to laugh and slap backs they look like sarcastic, guffawing, ill-bred imitations of each other, Graham will have been visiting this town the longest and will know these gins and their unbroken daughters the most soundly and most virtuously.

‘Are any of them unbroken?’ a young rouseabout, here for his first time, will ask Graham.

‘Yes, and they have scotch fillets for cunts, too.’

The shearers will arrive at the beginning of each February. Teams and teams of the damn whities. Here to shear. Born for the unshorn. Gluttons for muttons. Over a period of nine or ten weeks they will do nothing but earn and spend and talk to each in
practised, rehearsed witticisms. Light, tight, full of fight. Black skins, pink grins. Daughters for the slaughter. In the two and a half-odd months they will earn good money—fifteen hundred dollars a week, some of them—and what they do not spend on alcohol and cigarettes they will want to spend on a young black runt. Bunt. Shunt. Grunt. Drunk man’s treasure hunt. There will be no combination they have not already worked into their patterns of speech.

The young rouseabout will skol the last of his beer then and squash the emptied can between his palms.

‘Do their tits squirt butter sauce, Graham?’

‘Yes,’ Graham will answer him. ‘Their tits squirt butter sauce and their shit tastes like escargots.’

These shearers are not the only whities who will bring industry to the gins in this town. Late in the springtime, combine harvest machines will show on the horizon like convoys of elephants. Colours converging in the heatwaves, motors rumbling like hungry circumcised bulls with blunted tusks and trunks tucked economically behind. The gins will teem together on the street, peering at them like flat-footed curators. They will count the number of vehicles in each fleet and discuss the colour meanings and then order their daughters inside accordingly, telling them to keep out of the sun for the rest of the afternoon. Any gin without a rightful unbroken daughter will have to march herself in and pick the spags of road tar from her own feet. They will have hard, cracked soles, these daughterless gins, and will know the sort of soft-heeled competition favoured on the opening night’s marketplace.
Graham’s Land Cruiser will not be like a bull elephant processing back into town at the beginning of February, but like some half-domesticated dingo returning to the place where it once found an easy meal. His toolbox and esky and bedroll will be tied onto the tray behind him and his dog will be asleep on the floor at the passenger’s side. The duffle bag for his clothes and toiletries will sit broken-zippered on the passenger’s seat and his rifle will be cased and laid behind the seat along with the tyre iron and jack and shooter’s spotlight. The radio in Graham’s ute will be turned down and the only time he will speak is when the dog stirs and does something wrong, like puts its nose against his hand which he keeps rested on the gearstick. Go back to your dreaming, he will say to the animal. You must have been imagining that you were somebody else’s dog. She will lick her nose and go back to it.

Remember when the gins in this town seemed pleasant as the moon or an upturned rock? When each would watch you baste her daughter’s arsehole-tight mouth with your beaked hand, then nod and point if you needed extra encouragement with sticking that other, more-principal thing of yours in there? From his spot at the bar Graham will spy the old crow watching him, her eyes yellow and waxy, her ugliness carbolic and black. Beads of fluorescent light settled on her skin and caught in her hair will be like the oxygen beads which cling to a submerged spider. For men as virtuous as Graham—who can never be as virtuous as they remember their fathers, flogging the thing in front of them, being—there will be no difference between virtue and age now, anyway, and the difference between age and drunkenness will be limited by the rate of inflation.

All the gins in this town will possess these yellow waxy eyes. Their men will have matted beards and red bloodshot eyes, and their children will have eyes the colour of
rotted pear flesh. You and I are not so old, Graham will toast her—drunk and a touch apologetic; we still remember when we were young and pleasant together, don’t we, sister? The gin will keep watching him, as if to answer yes. Yes, brother whitie, we are not so old that we forget the pleasant way things were. Now, how about that thirty dollars, brother whitie? Did I tell you it is now thirty-five? For thirty-five you can do it right inside this one, brother whitie.

After an hour of courtship the old crow gin will quit her post at the window and re-enter the pub and it will be a sound fifty. Graham will be at his most virtuous when she comes through the door this second time still smelling of diluted cleaning spirits. The rouseabout who watched with excitement earlier on—the excitement of being in a place so far from home, where the women you once heard your uncle talking about actually exist with skin black as purple—will not notice her as she sidles past him and toward the bar. Instead he will continue with his drinking and horseplay over by the pool table. This is how he must behave: the way all youths must behave when they are drunk and amidst men they look up to, noticing nothing that is not first pointed out to them and then noticing it far too enthusiastically.

‘You want this girl for yourself, before some other damn whitie has her,’ the gin will say to Graham, personal as a whisper, emphatic as a mutton having its throat cut, strategic as bird dissecting road kill.

Graham will smile at her and lean in close.

‘How much for me to have her before some other damn whitie goes and has her, then?’
‘Fifty dollars and you can have her first. You’ll like this one, whitie. This one’s young and she hasn’t had no other whites in her before.’

The inflated price will amuse Graham, and he will try explaining the amusement to himself as though it were some kind of virtue he had not been aware of, one to enjoy and prolong and discuss as pleasantly as possible. You are twenty dollars drunker than you were an hour ago, he will consider. That is true enough. You were not so drunk an hour ago and now you are twenty dollars drunker and you are still not so drunk. How does your sister know how drunk you are? That is why she is your sister. She is your sister because she knows that every hour of drunkenness equals twenty dollars, and you know it, too, and now you can be happy to pay a good price for her little unbroken daughter who is also your sister—though does not know it yet—and you can tell yourself that your little gin sister is unbroken and unbroken and unbroken all you like, because she is your sister and all your sisters are unbroken until you break them, and then they are your broken sisters and you have to keep loving them until they stop being your sisters, and when do they ever stop? That is the amusing part. And do you know what the really amusing part is?

‘Come out here with me, whitie,’ tugging at the front of his shirt, peeling him from the bitumen with her black and sharpened beak.

‘Fifty dollars is not very much.’ Graham will begin amusing himself some more as he goes—aloud this time, hoping the other men might hear, might enjoy, might join. Yes, you want as much from the transaction as you can get. ‘Do you know how much white girls charge when they are still so unbroken and young as this?’ as he allows himself to be led out onto the street.
‘White girls charge too much,’ the old gin will cut him short. ‘You come with me for fifty.’ She will be in control now. Absolute. And she will know a thing or two about these drunk whities who look for comfort in the strange memories they have. Damn whities.

‘White girls charge like they have scotch fillets for cunts,’ Graham will call at her. The old gin sister will not respond to his joking about white girls having fillets for fronts. She does not understand. It is not one of her words. Yes, it is a woman’s word, old man, but not a gin’s word. A gin does not understand it any more than she understands fuck or screw or pussy. These words are for white women, white whores. Go to a white brothel if you want to use words like that, old man. Get yourself excited somewhere else with as much fuck and screw and pussy as you like. Not here, though. Not with these ones.

‘All them white girls unbroken?’ the old crow will ask the old whitie.

‘None of them are unbroken,’ he will answer, sampling her good and pleasant vernacular for himself.

These are the words for getting yourself excited now, old man, he will think. And do you like them, old man? Pleasant and unbroken, old man? Ah, stop your nonsense: old man this, old man that; you cannot fall back on your old man rot so easily. How come you cannot be more like your sister here, who gets herself excited with words like unbroken and inside? Why do you have to start this old man nonsense? This scotch fillet nonsense? Is that what gets you excited? You are not so drunk that you can rely on that one. You get yourself excited the decent way—like your good and virtuous sister here, who is older than you are, anyway, and who knows more about virtue and age and cuts of
meat than you will ever know. It will be a futureless, faithless tense in which Graham speaks to himself.

‘This one’s young and unbroken, whitie,’ the good and virtuous and old, old sister will say once more. ‘Fifty dollars so that you can do it right inside, whitie. You come with me and I’ll show you. You don’t want any of those white girls that cost all that money. No white girls in this town, anyway.’

Graham will give himself over to this sister of his who is older and more virtuous, and who knows that drunk men and virtuous men both look for their futures in reflections of their pasts and that those principal things of theirs, built for perforating mouthholes and pissing crude shapes into the dirt, are nothing more than pieces of currency left behind by fathers too dead to keep flogging.

‘You got that money in your pocket, then, whitie?’ the crow sister will question him as they proceed. ‘You aren’t going to make me follow you back here afterwards? Them white girls get on their bleeds too easy. Not this girl, whitie. This one’s not even fourteen yet. You give me that money first, whitie. Fifty dollars is still cheap, then. Up front.’

How do you like all this young and unbroken rubbish now? Graham will ask himself as he is led through the car park. The charismatic humidity, which seemed like a warm and private bath only minutes ago inside the pub, will now be uncomfortable and suffocating. Damn fool, how do you like it? Is this what got you so excited? Giving up all your money to be pulled around like a dog sniffing after a lousy bitch? Remind yourself this fifty business is not so unlike letting it run back out afterwards. Are you a damn fool enough to suddenly believe in that one, also? Or have you been too busy enjoying the
drinking and playing nice games with your gin sister here who uses words like bleeds and fifty and fifty? Hit yourself on the chest, damn fool. Clear your lovesick throat. You want to believe in superstitions and tricks? Why not believe in some of you own tricks? Some of the tricks your father showed you? Your father was a great one for tricks. He knew these damn gins are more fiscal with their daughters than themselves, and their daughters are indifferent and ageless and not at all fiscal.

And:

‘How much for you, old gin?’

A good trick, that one. He will congratulate himself. Keep going like that, old fool.

‘How much to put it in that rotten broken trap of yours?’

‘I’m old,’ the old gin will answer him. ‘You do it in this young one, whitie. You can do it right inside this one. You wait. I’ll take you.’

‘Forget young and unbroken,’ he will persist, breaking her hand away from his singlet and stopping the procession dead. ‘Fifty to do it right inside you.’

‘You damn whities,’ the gin will tell him, looking him in the eyes. Green-coloured eyes. She will take one of the stubs from her shorts pocket then and try lighting it with a plastic lighter almost empty. Flick. Almost. Flick. The sparks will be enough to show the breaks and crinkles either side of her mouth, but not enough to spark the. Empty. The gin will throw the spent lighter onto the street. Click.

‘You got a lighter for this smoke?’ she will charge him.

‘Not for that smoke,’ he will reply, taking one of his own out and lighting it and feeling quite sensible about the whole thing once more.
Now she has seen your cards, he will say to himself, drawing from the cigarette. Yes, now you are both playing the same game. She is your sister and she let you get too sensible for one moment and that is why you are in the lead now. And you must bet courageously when you are in the lead. Ah, bullshit to courage. You bet like you have been betting, old man. And when did you grant yourself permission to call yourself old man, anyway? To hell with that, you are still twenty years younger than your father ever was and you leave the courage and the old man talk to him. It is easy to be courageous when you are dead. You can be courageous yourself one day. Now, though, you must be clever and sensible and pleasant and remember the tricks you have picked up along the way. There will be no chance for tricks when you are dead. The dead have courage and they can keep their courage to themselves. Tricks are for the living and for the gins.

‘No, fifty is too cheap for an old gin like you,’ he will continue cajoling her.

‘How does sixty sound?’

The old gin will scowl back, the centres of her eyes oil-coloured and fireless.

‘For fifty I’ll do it right inside you and you don’t have to be courageous about pretending to like it, either,’ he will continue. ‘You can buck around all you like. For sixty I’ll even let you call me damn whitie.’

‘You can do it in this young one for thirty-five, whitie. Then that’s it. Thirty-five.’

‘Thirty-five? What happened to thirty? One hour ago it was thirty. And she was younger and more unbroken one hour ago.’

‘This one is still unbroken, you damn whitie.’

‘There you go.’

‘Thirty-five is cheap.’
‘Twenty-five, gin. I said twenty-five. Thirty-five to do it in you.’ And he will tell himself that he is sensible and clever and sober now, and unbeatable, too. Tell your sister you want to see where your money is going. For thirty-five you want to make sure you have something reasonable to put that thing of yours inside. It has not fallen off dead yet. There are still some tricks keeping it and you alive, old man. ‘I have to do all the labour, anyway. All she must do is lie there. And you don’t even have to do that. When you start doing some of the work, that’s when you can have thirty-five, gin. Or you can have your fifty now and do all the work?’

‘You damn whities.’

‘And you damn gins.’

‘You can’t do it inside this one for twenty-five. You have to pull out for twenty-five, whitie.’

‘Is that what keeps them so young and unbroken? I will remember that, gin.’

‘You damn whitie,’ the old gin will say again.

The town these gins do their business, which interrupts the highway three hundred kilometres north of the New South Wales border, will be barely a glint in the fast-flowing slick of black Queensland bitumen. Most of the traffic that passes through will not slow at the eighty-kilometres-an-hour road signs which feed into the main street but drive through at one hundred or one hundred and ten, even. And how many of these passers-through will know that just behind the fast main street is a slow, lecherous laneway with some houses and a service station? The houses in this laneway, which look fatigued from the outside, will have some of the most lovely things inside them. All types of lovely and sensible thing in there, Graham will tell himself as they walk together, he and his gin
sister, down that slow and lecherous laneway where a father once parked his car and taught his son a valuable trick, taught him to haggle.

‘You give me the money and wait here for a second, whitie,’ the crow will say when they reach the threshold of the sixth house along, a small one with watermarks on its fibro walls and nil light coming from its windows.

Graham will produce his wallet from the back pocket of his dungarees. It will be brown and leathery like a failed skin graft just this moment unstitched and plucked painlessly. Inside, a laminated driver’s licence and some money.

‘Do you have some change, gin?’ he will say, holding two twenties in his hand like reneged jacks smiling uncontrollably at each other.

‘What change, you damn whitie?’ she will spit. She could be the oldest, most well-feathered and cunning crow alive now and she would not be able to turn things in her favour from here. ‘You give me forty, then, whitie. You can have her for forty.’ She will attempt to snatch the two twenties away from him.

The damn whitie will pull back and laugh, because he knows he has won something from her and here it is. Another five.

‘You damn whitie,’ she will curse.

‘The both of us,’ he will correct her.

‘I’m no damn whitie.’

‘No?’ he will continue laughing, putting one of the twenties back in his wallet.

The gin will be made to accept her defeat. Twenty. Not twenty-five. Not thirty-five. Not fifty. Twenty.
‘You, don’t you do it inside her, you damn whitie. You pull out. You make sure.’

This is how she will console herself.

‘You can have this when I’m finished.’ He will roll the single note and put it behind his ear. Then step past into the house.

‘You leave the littlest one sleeping, you damn whitie. You go down to the back. Don’t you wake the littlest one. You hurry, too.’

You remember all of your sisters now, old man. You remember how they get. And it is true that you never play tricks with any of them unless they play first. Turn around and tell her that one. She will remember for next time—when her daughter is young and unbroken again and costs twenty dollars more than she cost when she was young and unbroken the first time you heard about her.

‘Not the littlest one, whitie. You stay away from that one, damn whitie. Don’t you fall asleep in there, either, whitie.’

‘You old gins used to be so pleasant,’ he will respond—though much too quietly to be heard by anyone other than himself.

There will be a sanctity about this house now. The hallway leading through like a narrowing path to the altar. Then the door. The door. Silently he will open it. And a young girl. Black, yes. Tussled. Naked below the waist. Littlest sister asleep alongside her. On top of her. You leave the littlest one sleeping, whitie. You go to hell. Damn gin.
The boy and the old man arrived at the pub at the end of each day, still in their dungarees which were bloodied and sweated in and smelt like oil. The old man sat at the bar and drank rum and the boy sat behind him in one of the low chairs by the window, not drinking anything. The boy liked that he was able to be in there and he always behaved a certain way and nobody minded too much at having him around. Gritter would not have allowed him to drink, but he was sometimes given the tobacco and papers which his father had paid for and he would roll them into cigarettes for the old man to smoke. He rolled them thin and tight for the old man, putting his thumb into his mouth before twisting each end to seal it, and the flavour on his thumb would make his mouth ache and then dry up disobediently. The boy had come to appreciate the taste, though—the mature earthiness which stayed at the top of his gums for the entire night after—and he knew that it outweighed such discomforts as a dry mouth.

Gritter was the publican. His real name was Robert Griffiths. He was a small man with muscular forearms and he had a brown moustache which made his face look both droll and serious at the same time. Gritter was a decent enough nickname for him and everybody agreed on that. The ones who drank beer enjoyed saying it aloud and rhyming it with schooner of bitter.

‘Where did we leave off?’ the old man said when he and the boy arrived ahead of the other shearers that evening.

‘In the dark,’ the publican answered.

‘Give us one of those, then,’ the old man said.

Gritter took the unfinished bottle from the night before and screwed the cap off.
Without measuring exactly he tipped some of its insides into a glass and placed the glass
in front of the old man.

‘That dark enough, old man?’

The old man picked up the glass and looked at it.

‘We’ll finish her tonight.’

The old man had seated himself on the wooden stool which had the flat, deep-
brown leather cushion. All the other stools in the bar were black and metal, with black,
well-padded cushions and low, unpadded backrests.

‘Don’t be so sure, old man,’ Gritter said.

‘Why’s that?’

‘Because.’

‘She on her rags or something, is she?’

‘Has been since I married her.’ Gritter took the rolled note the old man had laid
down and he straightened it out and put it into the till.

‘Why don’t you bring her down here and slip a few of these into her, Grits? She’ll
be all right then. You could drive a tractor round the bar and she wouldn’t complain.’

‘She’d find something.’

‘Not enough ice,’ the old man said.

‘Wrong colour tractor.’

‘No straw.’

‘Too much horsepower.’

‘Too much horsepower.’

‘You know what they call a bloke whose wife isn’t complaining?’ Gritter said.
‘Lucky.’

‘Widower.’

The old man raised his glass.

‘To the lucky widowers and their beautiful dead wives. And to too much horsepower.’

When the old man had finished the first drink, Gritter poured him another and he drank it as well. He drank with ease and did not seem at all put off by the taste or strength. Watching him relax into a more comfortable slouch the boy tried to understand the trick. Partly it was the way you did it, he thought: a glassful in three proper sips. You tipped your head back and held each mouthful for a second, then you threw it back a gulp further and it was in your stomach. And it was as heavy as a meal, and as warm. He could tell that by the way the old man nursed himself. The other thing was what you did between mouthfuls, made a routine of it, kept your head down and your fingers tight at the base of the glass, as if that was where your centre of balance was. You only let go when you wanted to bring the smoke between your knuckles up for a suck, and then it was a sincere suck just like the mouthfuls of rum. Sincere and worthwhile, the boy told himself.

For four glasses the old man drank this way: seriously and meaningfully and decidedly. On the fifth he began taking the drink at muscle reflex. His Adam’s apple bobbed and his knuckles whitened. The glass came away from the bar and toward his mouth. Rum dammed around his lips and his eyes focused along the length of his nose as if they were in charge of telling the hand when. It was an undisciplined, reactive way of drinking and the boy could not understand it or instruct himself on how to learn it. He
could only watch it and tell himself that it was the most impressive and advanced kind of display.

Nick Cant and Ray arrived when the old man was at his sixth. They came through the side door and Nick Cant had both arms behind his back and was already grinning. Ray was beside him and was grinning, also, and nodding along and showing everyone inside how this grinning business belonged to him first—or at least second.

‘Pick a hand,’ Nick Cant said.

‘Pick one,’ Ray repeated.

Gritter looked at Nick Cant and the boy looked at him, too. The old man looked at his glass and did not look at anyone. Apart from Gritter, the old man and the boy were the only two in the pub and it had been at least a half an hour since they had sat down and made their individual declarations by putting money, and not putting money, on the bar. For four glasses the old man had been declaring absolute clear-headedness and now, two glasses on, he was declaring absolute instinct—which was something more divine and more enviable—and the boy was trying to declare empathy and admiration for that fact and Gritter was making no declarations, just feeding other people’s.

‘I’ll have the one that isn’t shoved up your arse,’ he said non-declaratively.

‘They’re both shoved up me arse,’ Nick Cant told him. ‘Guess again, Gritter.’

‘The one that’s up there the furthest, then,’ Gritter said, taking two schooner glasses from a tray beneath the bar and sitting them on a tray beneath the beer taps.

Nick Cant adjusted himself painfully and obligingly, screwing his face to one side and switching his weight from the left leg to the right and back to the left. It was all part of the trick. Moments of relief came into his expression when whichever hand it was that
could not find the opening acted at finding the prostate gland instead, and by the end of
the prostate pantomime Ray was really laughing. The performance finished between Nick
Cant’s legs: one dead kitten.

‘How’s that, Gritter? How do you like my pussy?’ He poked the kitten’s head
around like it was the one asking the questions and being clever. Ray wheeled about,
pointing at the thing and wiggling his finger.

‘No pussies allowed on weeknights,’ Gritter said. ‘More trouble than they’re
worth.’

‘Like cars,’ Nick Cant said. ‘If it’s got a pussy or a motor it’ll end up costing you
money.’

‘Or if it’s got tits,’ Ray said.

‘Same fucking thing, Ray. What do you say, old bastard? You should know.’

Eyes down, the old man was not knowing anything more than the plain instinct
which governed the glass in his hand. Instinct was a complex thing and could be easily
confused with both centrifuge and gravity, and as the old man made the glass turn round
and round inside his hand and the boy waited for him to answer, the three forces seemed
identical all at once and no single one of them seemed any stronger or weaker than the
other two.

‘Free to good home,’ Nick Cant said.

The old man’s throat clicked and his fingers synchronised themselves and the
spinning stopped. The boy studied the sequence that followed and he did not comprehend
it any more clearly than the last time but he knew it was an important thing and a
valuable thing, and he was able to appreciate that it was much more than just a run of
actions, that it was something more like an alignment. Nick Cant put his thumb at the base of the kitten’s right ear and made it twitch like a dog’s. Dogs exaggerate all their actions when they are being watched. And when the alignment was over, the old man wiped below his lip with the knuckle of his thumb and turned to face Nick Cant properly. It was perhaps six or seven metres between the old man and Nick Cant, and the distance between the boy and Nick Cant was almost the same—though, the line of sight was not interrupted by any beer taps, nor by the bar itself, and the line of sight between the boy and old man via Nick Cant as vertex had grown to almost sixty degrees. It was becoming an L-shaped bar. The boy stopped looking at his father and looked at Nick Cant, too, and he saw that there was a second kitten now. Both were broken-skulled and Nick Cant’s boot was bloodied at the heel and Ray was still wriggling his dirty middle finger and the whole thing was a real puppet show which you had to find amusing on account of its preparation and committed cast members.

‘I’d stop putting milk bottles up my arse, Nick,’ the old man said.

‘Though, you might try a shotgun,’ Gritter added.

Nick Cant held the first kitten up and looked it in the eyes. It had milk-drunk eyes. Pulled from the teat and kicked in with a steel-cap toe. The way a fish hauled onto a boat is spiked at the back of its head before it has the chance to sense the pressure collapse or the hook’s release or the ice. The other one, still dangling between his legs, had damaged and explicit eyes. Dogs’ eyes. Where iris had become pupil and pupil had been pushed back into the skull to become clot.

‘That what your wife calls it, Gritter?’ Nick Cant made the second one say.

‘Twelve-gauge,’ Gritter answered it.
There was a picture of Gritter’s wife on the mirror behind the bar. In the picture she was wearing a dress and was smiling and sitting at a park bench with a birthday cake in front of her.

‘Twelve-gauge,’ Ray repeated. Ray was getting it, all right. He laughed and said the words again, aloud and impressively and familiarly and hyphenatedly. The grinning thing was his and now twelve-gauge was his, also.

‘Don’t take too much credit, Ray,’ Nick Cant said. ‘You’ve already taken more than your share of credit today.’

Ray was silent then. Handpiece-in-the-forehead silent. The words had turned on him. The hyphen had turned on him. A familiar construction like twelve-gauge is your friend one minute and then it does this to you. And because you have relied on it so many times, you do not know its weaknesses, only its strengths, and there is no angle you can call upon for counterattack. Only silence.

The boy thought Ray did have some credit which looked like proper credit on his hands, particularly in the web of each finger and thumb where he would grip the wool in staples and stretch it apart in order to judge its strength and its tenderness, to make some guess at its micron rating. But the credit on his forehead, to which Nick Cant was referring, was a pantomime credit and it was like the picture of Gritter’s wife which had been stuck to the mirror with Blu-Tack and looked grandiose and ironic among the topless-lady postcards from places without beaches, and faded comic strips which showed sheep receiving salon haircuts, and farmers with hats pulled down over their eyes saying, is it raining or am I crying?

‘How much credit is that, Ray?’ Gritter asked.
‘Stuff you,’ Ray said.

The boy doubted whether Ray at all understood the difference between these types of credit. Comic-strip credit and real-life credit. Is-it-raining credit, or am-I-crying credit.

‘Cranky, isn’t she?’ Gritter said.

‘It’s PMT,’ Nick Cant advised him. ‘Cunt got his period today.’

‘Cunts will do that.’

‘Show him, Ray. Show Gritter where you got your menstruals.’

Ray tilted his head back. The bleeding had stopped and the damage was a lovely bruise—a purple lacquer with dark individual spots where nine or ten comb teeth had gone in and bunted against his skull.

‘What do you reckon about that, Gritter? And that’s the old bastard that did it to him, too.’

‘Give me a proper look.’

Ray pulled his fringe back and made his forehead go tight. One of the scabholes started trickling blood again and the blood ran down the centre of his forehead toward his nose. At the last second it streaked left into his eyebrow and thickened out.

‘Would you like a tampon?’ Gritter asked. ‘Nick’s wife might have one upstairs you could borrow.’

Ray let go and his face slipped back into place.

Gritter laughed.

‘What?’ he said.

‘You’re a prick,’ Ray told him.
‘I’m not the one that did it to you. Don’t go calling me nasty names.’

‘He’s a prick, too.’

‘Takes a prick to stab a cunt.’

‘I’m not a prick.’ Gritter and the boy both looked at the old man and Nick Cant held one of the kittens just above his head to see whether it was male or female and Ray used his sleeve to pad the blood on his forehead which had already started to clot again.

‘I’m a hard old bastard,’ the old man explained. ‘How’s that, Grits? Am I hard enough and old enough for the Bribbaree pub? Nick wanted to know, you see? Him and Ray were arguing about it today. That’s what started the whole thing. Tell him.’

‘I don’t know,’ Gritter said. ‘You shoved any dead cats up your arse lately?’

Nick Cant stopped looking at the cat’s genitals and looked at Gritter.

‘No,’ the old man answered.

‘What about Ray’s twelve-gauge?’

‘No. Tried shoving my own up there once.’

‘Doesn’t sound very hard or old to me.’

‘Hear that, Nick? Gritter says you’re full of shit.’

‘Christ, you’re a hard black bastard,’ Nick Cant said to the old man.

‘Aren’t I? Bloody black bloody bastard. Have a look at me, would you? You ever seen a blacker looking face than this? What do you think, Grits? Am I a black bloody bastard or what? Nick knows black bastards when he sees them. Doesn’t know hard bastards real well, but he knows black bastards.’

The old man was a little gone. Gritter was grinning and the boy could tell it, too. The boy enjoyed it when the old man got to this stage each night and started indulging
himself in such a way. It was with a kind of spite he did not like in most people, a self-spite which usually seemed pointless and unconvincing; coming from his father, though, it was believable and encouraging and was not at all unconvincing or comic strip-like.

‘You mightn’t look real black,’ Nick Cant said. ‘But you carry on like a fucking black.’

‘How’s that, Nick?’

‘Like a useless bastard who knows he ain’t worth shit all.’

‘You don’t have to be a black bastard to know that. Just an old bastard. Hard old bastards know it the best. You’ll know it.’

‘Age hasn’t got anything to do with it.’

‘What’s it about, then, Nick?’

‘I told you.’

‘What’s so useless about us black bastards, then, Nick?’

The boy knew.

‘Nothing,’ Nick Cant said. ‘You’re good at sniffing petrol and being dole-bludgers.’

‘That’s two things we’re good at,’ the old man said.

‘Can’t shear for shit,’ Nick Cant said.

‘Can’t shear,’ the old man repeated. ‘That’s true, isn’t it?’

‘Can’t rouseabout neither,’ he butted in—the boy, that is. He heard himself say it before he heard himself think it. Cannot rouseabout. Not for shit.

The old man loosened his grip on the glass. The spinning stopped. The three forces quit each other. The boy pushed back in his chair like a planet just dropped out of
orbit.

‘Watch yourself, boy.’ The old man sounded neither drunk nor self-indulgent. He sounded sure and sober and square.

The boy leaned forward and his chair came back down onto four respectful legs.

‘Smartarses, too,’ Nick Cant said.

The boy looked at the ground. A stain in the carpet turned crude and out of focus. He looked away from it. The quickshear poster on the wall looked like an illustrated inferno. The clock above the fireplace seemed backward. Reflexive spite is not something you can teach yourself, and you were a damn idiot for thinking you could use it or parade it so easily, the boy told himself.

‘Don’t have to be black to be a smartarse, neither,’ the old man eventually said.

‘That’s an age thing as well.’

‘You better fix it out of him before it becomes a sitting-down thing.’

‘You can do it, Nick,’ the old man said.

It had been done before. The boy had been sat down. Only once, but he knew what it was like when it came. It was a fist that landed just below your left eye—not for being smart, for being stupid. Not hard enough to break any bones, either. Only, hard enough to take your feet right out from under you. And when you were on the ground and did not want to get up, it was a fist that grabbed hold of your shirt and told you that you were getting up anyway. It hit you again and you knew this time that you were supposed to stay on your feet. This was a fist that would keep putting you on your arse until you stayed up. You learned quickly enough what that was about.

‘Not my job to do it,’ Nick Cant said. ‘You’re his old man.’
‘You know what us black bastards are like, Nick. Whose job does that make it?’

‘Don’t talk like that, old man. Boy doesn’t need to hear about his ginnie mother getting done up the arse by a bunch of useless abos.’

Ray padded his forehead with the rolled-up sleeve of his shirt some more. The blood looked brown and soily where it was soaked into the flannelette above the elbow. On his eyebrows it was brown, also, and gristly, because it had dried there during the day and the hairs were sticking through at pointed singed-looking angles.

‘Up the arse? Is that where babies come from?’ the old man said.

‘That’s where gin babies come from. Where do you think they get their colouring?’

‘I thought they pulled them out of dingo holes.’

‘Dingoes don’t dig holes,’ Nick Cant said.

‘You sure about that? What do you think, Grits?’

‘Nick’s the expert on holes.’

The boy looked at the clock again. Almost twenty to seven. Big hand and little hand jerking away from each in second-split intervals.

‘I told you this cunt was hilarious,’ Nick Cant said back.

‘Cunt’s a different sort of hole to the one I was thinking about, Nick.’

‘There he goes.’

‘Cats dig holes and bury their shit,’ Gritter added. ‘But, I guess you know that?’

‘Stop,’ Nick Cant said.

‘Okay, Nick. It’s just, I know how much you like holes.’

‘Not as much as this old bastard,’ Nick Cant said. ‘Look what he pulled out of
one.’

The boy watched the old man take another swig then. The old man had returned to being declarative, and now the declarations were in the very bottom of the glass and he held it at his mouth until he had found them and drunk them cleanly. Gritter took the glass away when he was finished.

‘Maybe I ought to have told him that you were his dad, Nick? Boy needs a good role model for a father,’ the old man said.

‘Like hell.’

‘He does. Don’t you, boy? Black old bastard like me is no good for a boy’s morality.’

‘Too dark to be one of mine,’ Nick Cant said.

‘He isn’t that dark,’ the old man said. ‘That’s just an age thing. He’ll lighten as he gets to be more like his new dad.’

‘Like hell.’

‘Don’t be like that, Nick. Boy needs a role model with a good sense of morality and colouring.’

‘The only thing Nick could give him is plenty of dead pussy,’ Gritter said and he put the seventh half-full glass in front of the old man. The bottle it came from went back beside the other bottles and its lid went on. Though, left unscrewed.

‘Boy needs to learn about dead pussies, too, Grits. Teach him about responsibility and moralities and all the rest.’

‘Too black to learn about either of those,’ Nick Cant told the old man.

‘He isn’t that black, is he? How black are you boy?’ The old man swung around.
‘You black as your old man, boy?’

‘One sure way to tell,’ Nick Cant said, jerking his hand back and forth to demonstrate the sort of thing he was talking about. The kitten made a lovely substitute as he jerked and he was holding it by the skin at the back of its neck and its male-genitalia sibling was hanging by its skin, also, and the boy wondered what had happened to the rest of the litter. Four left stomped and bloodied in the haystack behind Nick Cant’s house? Or something more creative for them? A gumboot full of water? Full toss onto a cricket bat? Ray and Nick Cant salivating all day long over the various and creative ways for disposing of newborn kittens.

Ray brought his own hands up in front of him like he was measuring a fish.

‘Nick,’ he said.

Nick Cant scoffed.

‘Boy ain’t got that much blood in his body, Ray. Poor little bastard would go diabetic just thinking about it.’

The boy put his eyes right on Nick Cant: the smear around the mouth, the hairs that were pasted flat to the forearm with spit and lather.

‘Wouldn’t you, boy? Keel right over, boy. If you had one that size.’

‘If that’s what you say,’ without so much as a blink.

‘There he goes again, old man.’

‘He’s your boy now,’ the old man said. ‘Disciplining is up to you, Nick.’

‘Come here and get your flogging, son,’ Nick Cant laughed. ‘Being a smartarse will get you nowhere.’

The boy swallowed. Very deliberately. You swallow, he said to himself.
Nick Cant laughed some more.

‘Must be true,’ the old man said. And in one mouthful he took the entire glass of rum Gritter had served him and spat it up into the air. ‘Make a wish, Nick’s new son,’ he said when it had come back down and landed all over the bar top.

‘Christ, you’re a black bastard,’ Nick Cant said, throwing one of the kittens at the old man. The female-genitalia kitten. ‘Send him home, Gritter. Look at the mess he’s making.’

‘Go home, old man,’ Gritter said.

‘Don’t have a home, Grits. Hard old bastard like me sleeps under the stars with all the other hard old bastards and their black bastard sons.’ He sat the kitten on the stool beside him. It looked no bigger than a rat. When he let go of its body it fell off the stool and hit the floor. He laughed at that.

‘Doesn’t have a home, Nick,’ Gritter repeated, leaning over the bar to sight the mess this prohibited pussy was making on his floor now.

Nick Cant cocked his neck back and drank the head off the beer he had been given, his Adam’s apple jabbing from the underside as he swallowed in sharp little sips. The boy swallowed with him. Though, much more slowly and thoughtfully and slowly.

At ten o’clock only the old man and the boy were still sitting in the pub. The bottle of rum that had been started the night before was empty and the old man was happy to be full of its effect. Convincing Gritter to keep unscrewing the lid once Nick Cant and Ray had gone home had taken all the persistence the old man had, persistence that had become more and more passive the more successful it was, and now it was worn down
and asleep inside him and he was ready to call it in. Gritter eyed what was his final dollar or so—some coins scattered on the bar—and said that he was closing for the night. The old man drank the bottom out of the glass, pressed his smoke into the ashtray and stood up.

‘Who’s driving?’ Gritter asked him.

‘I’ll get us there. Mightn’t be able to drink much, but I can still drive a bit,’ the old man said.

‘You’re all right,’ Gritter told him. ‘Don’t worry about that. You’re a messy bastard, but you can drink, all right.’

‘Bullshit I can. I can drive a bit, though.’

‘All right.’

‘Never said I could drink.’

‘Good. Piss off.’

‘I never said it.’

‘Don’t forget to take him with you.’

The boy went along.

Outside, the ute was parked nose-first into the gutter, just how everyone parked when they pulled up at Bribberee Pub. Windows were down and handbrake was off and that was the way they left them. On a hot day all the utes there together looked like a mob of cattle nosed in for a slurp of water. Other side of the road, in front of the church, was for trucks and road trains—bulls with thick dusted hides that rolled into town and bellowed when their compression brakes slowed them to a stop. Usually they were on their way through from Young or Quandialla with a load of super, or across to Forbes, or
down to Wagga for the market sales. The truckie would slip over for a longneck to take away with him and leave the mover idling and snorting, its warm diesel breath reflecting in the pub windows. Nick Cant had left one of the kittens taped to the bullbar of the old man’s ute. The other one was at the base of a front wheel and the old man did not remove either before opening the door and climbing up into the cab.

Friday and Saturday nights blokes brought their kids and wives along to the pub. The wives sat together in the beer garden while the kids played chases on the bitumen out front and waited for the streetlights to come on so they could throw rocks at them. They were kids who knew how to rub spit on a grazed knee or a broken toenail to stop it from bleeding and their dads were blokes who knew all the back ways home at the end of the night. It was not a good place to be then, when you were still waiting out front and the others had been kicked up the arse and taken home already. The boy hopped into the cab with him.

‘At least she didn’t cut the lights,’ the boy said.

‘Don’t see how it’d affect you, anyway.’

‘No, I’m just saying. Like what you and Grits were saying earlier.’

‘Gritter can say what he wants. It’s his missus.’

The boy thought about it for a moment.

‘I know that,’ he said. ‘I was just saying.’

‘Keep your mouth shut, then.’ The old man turned the ignition and the ute jumped forward into the gutter and stalled. The bullbar kitten’s head dropped forward and its tail curled under. ‘Fucking clutch,’ the old man said. He found reverse then and they pulled off the gutter and drove away.
From the pub home was six kilometres. Closer to four if you were walking because you could follow the railway tracks up past the silos and cut through the line paddock. That brought you out at the front cattle ramp and from there it was only another five hundred metres by car or by foot. Last time the boy had walked it was when the old man had fallen asleep at the bar and Nick Cant had thrown his keys on the roof. He walked it both ways that night and his dog walked it with him and when they got back with the spare set, the old man had already woken and climbed onto the roof and found the ones Nick Cant had thrown up there and he had driven himself home. All the boy did was turn around and walk back from the direction he came, his dog padding on ahead to show how she knew the way.

At the crossing the old man ignored the road sign and slowed only enough to see there were no immediate trains. He jutted the ute over in third and the boy looked along the line in both directions. There had been an accident there once. Too long ago now for anybody to obey the sign and come to a complete stop, but not long enough you did not drop a gear at least. Somebody still put flowers at the spot where the car had ended up, and a little further along a tree was missing a piece from its trunk. As they passed the tree, the old man lifted his hand and adjusted the rear-view mirror.

‘Make sure you feed that damn thing tonight,’ he said.

The boy turned. His dog was watching carefully through the back window, ensuring the exact sequence of gear changes and mirror adjustments the way she ensured sheep from the perimeters.

‘I know.’

‘Well, you didn’t know last night,’ the old man said.
‘I fed her last night,’ the boy argued.

‘Bullshit—way the damn thing carried on.’

‘There was probably a fox or something.’

‘Not its fault, neither. Course it’s going to carry on like that if it hasn’t been fed. Dog can’t feed itself. Your responsibility. You’re supposed to be the one looking after it.’

‘I did. I gave her a leg.’

‘Carries on like that again tonight and I’ll shoot the bloody thing. Got it?’

The boy kept his mouth shut after that.

It was a slow trip home and an uncomfortable trip. Each time the Land Cruiser sharped into a bend or around a pothole the boy’s head would drop to the side, shoulders and neck falling away with it. He fought sporadically and uselessly against the potholes and against the long heavy day, told himself he needed to look annoyed and alert and ready to prove. See, a dog is an ugly thing, he would start to explain: needs to be fed every night. Then the ute would sharp again and he would quickly remember that he meant funny thing, which was truer and more awake-sounding. And anyway, he would go on after that, dogs are not like sheep: sheep can eat all day, more they eat the better. But sheep will leave their own young for dead if you get too close. Never seen a dog do that. Dog will bite your hand off if it does not trust you. cannot get a sheep to trust you. Not unless you feed it. But that is not trust.

At the top of the laneway the Land Cruiser began wandering rightward into a bend that was not there. The sound of the tyres cutting through rougher, unbroken bits of gravel made the old man jerk at the steering wheel, and the boy’s head banged hard against the side window. He sat up properly this time and tightened himself in the chest
and shoulders and pressed his chin down into his left collarbone. He held his breath like that for a few seconds and did not allow himself to yawn. A thought came into his head that his dog was no longer on the back, that she had fallen off. But he did not allow himself to turn around either. He did not know why such a stupid thought was in his head all of a sudden. Maybe it was something he had been thinking about. He was not sure. The bullbar kitten had lost some of its stick and was dangling in front of the radiator grill.

‘Another thing that needs doing,’ the old man said after a moment. The boy could not tell whether he meant the road or the ute or the dog. ‘I’ll feed her,’ the boy said, deciding it was the dog.

‘Don’t have to tell me about it. Just do it,’ the old man said. ‘And don’t go giving her any more of that meat, either. She can make do with kibble.’

‘I know.’

‘Damn thing eats better than we do half the time.’

‘I know she does,’ the boy said. ‘I’ll give her the kibble.’

Instead of turning out and reversing into the shed, the old man swung wide. He pulled the ute in front-first and let it idle. It was an old ute and he always let it idle before killing the motor. That was something he had taught the boy. For a moment the boy sat there with the old man, listening to the motor whistle and slow, thinking there was something he should say, something about the way he still remembered all the important things he had been taught. The second kitten had avoided being backed over because the old man had started the ute with the clutch only half pressed in. That was something he had warned the boy about, too. And about keeping both hands on the wheel. The boy did not say anything about any of those things, though, and when nothing else came he
pushed his door open and dropped his legs out.

The shed was just long enough to fit the ute and some shelves. It was very narrow, also, and to get back past the ute meant hugging the wall, which is why the old man would usually reverse in. The shelves were against the wall at the back and were full of dirt and shit. Bird shit, rat shit, mouse shit. The boy had found a nest of newborn mice in one of them once: hairless pink buds that he had popped between his fingers, then wiped on his pants. At such an age their eyes are embryonic and they may as well be genital-less. Above the shelves, stretched inside-out over a wire frame, were three dusty rabbit skins. They had been hanging from the post for a very long time and the boy had been told how they would have been worth something once: you would have bothered to make sure your cuts were even and to the points. But that was before everything changed. Even wool was not worth very much now. The old man stalled the motor and everything went dark and quiet and more narrow.

‘Come on,’ the boy said to his dog and he felt his way along, careful to step over the twenty-litre drum of Roundup he knew by experience and by bruising on the shins.

The dog’s kennel was located behind the shed. It was a large hollow tree trunk that had been cut and dragged and left on its side beneath a pine. The pine had been dead for a number of years, too. The inside of the kennel was smooth and splinterless and cool and smelt like rain. The boy remembered being able to crawl right up into the end. As a kid he had probably spent as much time in there as he had in his own bed. And as much as he understood the way things change, he could not convince himself now that it was he who had grown too big for the log and not the log too small for him.
Next to the dead pine tree was a dead chest freezer. It had been the meat freezer in its previous life. For years it had sat on the veranda just outside the boy’s bedroom window, faking silence, humming him to sleep. Now it was broken and full of dog biscuits, its seals were beginning to rot and its cord was severed. Fucked, not broken: you can fix something that is broken. The boy opened its lid and used the dinted saucepan inside to scoop out a bowlful of kibble. When his hand was clear he let the lid fall back down with an airtight slap so that the old man would hear him definitely feeding her like he said he would. The only response was the back door of the house slamming shut, appropriately answering that no, he was not hearing him definitely doing anything.

‘All right, you black bastard,’ the boy said. The dog came and sat in front of him. ‘Haven’t you learned how to do it yourself?’ he said to her. ‘Here, I’ll show you. Then you’ll be a specialty dog.’ He put the saucepan down on top of the freezer and bent over. With his left hand he found her collar, and with the other the chain that was lying in the dirt. She licked the hand holding the chain. ‘Get out of that, you dirty bastard.’ She tried to lick him on the hand again. He cupped her head, hard at first, with her ear in the web of his thumb and forefinger. ‘Come on,’ he said, easing his grip and giving her a scratch behind the ear at the same time. He clipped the chain on and patted her chest. She offered her chin. ‘Okay,’ he said. He scratched it with two fingers and gave her a last strong pat on the brisket with the palm of his hand. Then he left her and went to the house.

The kitchen pantry was open and a bottle of rum was on the table. He put his esky down and walked through and looked into the old man’s bedroom. There were no lights on but his eyes had adjusted and he could see clearly enough. He came back into the
kitchen and picked up the bottle and took a sip. It made his throat swell and his stomach tighten. He sat it on the table again and went into his own bedroom.
The littlest one, supposed to have been left sleeping, will instead be wandering naked between the bathroom and bedroom. She will seem frank and sexless walking so erect as this, with her shoulder blades tightened toward each other and her belly flexed roundly over her dark hipbones. At one end of the hall her crow mother will be raking the sheets looking for the twenty that damn whitie chucked onto the mattress after he finished. At the other end her sister will be squatted above the toilet with the bulk of it dribbling out her smiling, grinning pocket.

‘How come you’re sitting like that?’ There will be a small amount on the littlest one as well, from where that damn whitie tried to blunt his way in but could not. ‘Do I have to, too?’ she will ask, scratching at the dried patch with her nails.

The drips will be coming from the cashed-up older sister two-cent pieces at a time now, turning the water beneath her to clouded coppery colour. Clots forming at the backs her heels will serve to punctuate the lines they followed past her thighs and calves and Achilles tendons. She will have left prints in the carpet alighting from bedroom to bathroom like this—dim, toeless prints. The boldest showing where she stopped to examine the burn mark on one of her elbows. Eiderdown burn. And then continued on.

‘You have to tell me,’ the littlest one will pester her. ‘Mum said you have to.’

‘Piss off, Binni.’ The older sister will rock forward, planting her chin into the cleavage of her raised together knees. Her toes will tighten their grip over the rim of the toilet seat and the clots will leak into the archway of each small and tender foot, spreading and forming a seal between the seat’s plastic surface and her own pale skin. A gin girl keeps all of her paleness in the bottoms of her feet like this, and occasionally in
the palms of her hands, also.

Damn whitie cannot see from where he is, but the older sister will still be wearing the long black t-shirt he found her asleep in fifty minutes earlier. She will have it pulled around and amassed in her lap like the frilly, hitched-up nightie a more seemly girl would wear to the bathroom during the night. The neck of the shirt will have been stretched far enough that she could disembark the perch and undress through it and reveal collarbones as shiny and dented as chrome handlebars. Some dolphins on the shirt’s front will be riding through a wave and will be tucked between her chest and knees. There will be three of them in total. Damn whitie should at least know how many. Beneath the three dolphins will be some turquoise-coloured text. BOTTLENOSE MAGIC. Will the damn whitie have bothered with the text, though? Or with the reflection of the moon on the ocean’s surface? It will be a purple and unfathomable moon. No moons like that around here.

The damn whitie would take more comfort in hearing about the damn tricks, anyway. Forget the damn moon and damn dolphins for the time being. Concentrate on the damn tricks. The oldest girl will be wringing tricks for both of their invested sakes. Stakes. Mistakes. She will be squatting serious and importunately—aches and shakes and cartilage quakes—and if the damn whitie could see her he would think to himself how clever and invested these modern invested gins have become. He would wonder if any of them were still fooling around with fistfuls of dirt and pieces of torn rag? Or whether all of them had discovered flush toilets and day clinics, government subsidy cards in place of cheapest brand alcohol? Good old damn whitie like him would have to be proud of such enterprise, bragging to all his buddies back home about the improvements being made
interstate. These interstate gins, he would begin.

Before he can act too proud and fatherly the girl’s crow of a mother will need to curse at him and call him damn whitie some more. This will occur in the interstate bedroom at the interstate time of Standard Eastern minus one. She will be ordering him to get dressed and get out, damn whitie, and he will be inquiring as to whether she does not have something more original to sweeten him with, damn gin. After all, this damn whitie business of hers can become a little repetitive, and perhaps some more of the young and unbroken stuff would be better for flattering him now, anyway—since that was what flattered him so effectively in the first place.

‘You forget about them young and unbroken ones now, damn whitie. You had your chance with them. Damn whitie.’

The artifice will keep everything inside the bedroom repetitive. Repetitive and truthful. Its glass will be aged and lacklustre and when the damn whitie looks into it he will see the gin squabbling around behind him, checking the space between the mattress and the wall with her hand and saying things like, damn whitie and damn whitie and damn whitie.

It will be positioned in the corner which faces the damn whitie’s right side and he will be lying on the floor with his head butted against the foot of the bed. It will be a large freestanding artifice and pardoning its size it will be as prosaic a piece of furniture as the other fittings in the bedroom. There will be no patterns or paintwork on any side of its frame and its bolsters will be square and unturned and made from pine timber. The nails holding it together will have blistered the wood and none of the corners will sit flush. The damn whitie will not be able to decide how a damn gin squabbling around
after twenty dollars would have come upon such an artifice in the first place. Most likely it came from one of the neighbouring houses previously occupied by whities, he will think. He will try to imagine the sort of whitie woman who would have needed an artifice like this, given that the closest shopping centre was two hundred kilometres away, while the closest brothel was next door and full of gins who dressed in second-hand menswear, anyway. An unpleasant whitie woman, he will conclude, substituting the word unpleasant with the word cunt and the words whitie woman with nothing. He will also make the word artifice into mirror, which is only a dulled, unflattering, truthful reflection of artifice, anyhow.

The littlest girl will come and prop herself in the doorway of the bedroom while the damn whitie is watching the damn gin move about in the repetitive and damn artifice-come-mirror. She will lean against the architrave and lift one foot partly off the ground and the other will stay turned in flat.

‘Mum, Caitlin is on the toilet like this and she won’t let me in there.’

The gin will look across and the girl will scrunch her toes under and try standing on the balls of her feet now—to show her mother how she means. The position will put her off balance a little and she will tip forward.

‘You get back out there now, girl,’ the gin will say to her. The glass will say it twice. Girl.

‘Caitlin won’t let me. And she said piss off.’ The girl will try to demonstrate the pose again. And will again trip forward.

‘You do as you’re told, girl. You tell your sister the same, too. You tell her to do what I said. You hear me, girl? You get out there. If I have to come out of this room. You
got me, girl?’

This girl will have the air of an altar boy, balanced awkwardly between architraves. A body neither entirely convinced nor entirely convincing. When she turns and hops away it will be because her body obeys instinct and instruction equally and she will not seem at all dismayed by her mother’s rebukes. Altar boys have a god who makes them obedient and divergent and playful in the same way. The damn whitie will hear her one foot after the other then, until she disappears from the mirror’s aperture, and then he will hear nothing but will know in his mind’s eye that she is still hopping cheekily down the hall, avoiding the toeless patches inscribed into the carpet by her sister.

Several minutes will have passed since the damn whitie first lighted the cigarette which has been smoked almost to its end now. Several minutes should have been enough for a typical damn whitie like him to have self-extinguished and put his singlet and underpants and dungarees which he wears with no belt or braces back on, and to have left. Typical damn whitie should at least have hid his shame in that time. Sat up and peeled that shrunken thing of his away from the top of his leg, where it will have become stuck by its own skin and lucent collateral and by the blood which has the hairs around it looking ginger and matted. What a damn whitie should certainly not have done is stayed put like some damn priest looking for solace in the miracle of consecration. Some damn priest whispering and trying desperately to convince himself—hardly worried about the rest of the congregation—that the bit of flour and water in his hand is altogether powerful and holy and not just a repetitive, flattering suck saved up for Sundays. See, bedrooms can become cathedrals when they behave too much like comfortable, sugary Sundays—fixing men’s eyes to the ceiling and keeping the smoke low above their heads, the altar
boys forever young and unbroken and hopping from their doors.

The gin will be back rummaging through the bedcovers.

‘You want to go round to them coppers for good? You better find it or you’ll be round there for good. Locked up for good, damn whitie. I’ll tell them what you done. You’ll be in there for good, then.’

Yes, this is a terrific town for locking up whities, the damn whitie will think. Not enough room for locking up the gins. The whities, though, go in private cells with TVs and video players and queen-size beds. What a great and terrific town now that all the gins have made such good friends with the policemen—going around together locking up all the damn whities like great and terrific friends on some great and terrific lock-up spree. He will blow a sheet of smoke from his mouth and watch it sail.

‘Come on. Damn lazy. All you whities turn to jelly once you’ve gotten rid of your tadpoles. You think that’s anything special I don’t already know about? You’ll be round explaining yourself to them coppers soon enough if you don’t tell me where that money is that you gone and threw away. You can tell them coppers how old that littlest one is that you woke up like I said not to.’

‘That will be hard for me to say,’ the damn whitie will reply. He will reply directly to the mirror, as if the gin in the glass, threatening him with her police talk, were the real gin and the one behind him the fake. ‘She looked so much like any other young and unbroken gin girl. I thought all of them young and unbroken gin girls were fourteen? Fourteen is a flattering and truthful age, isn’t it, officer?’

The gin will shake out the denim pants he left beside the bed. Some other stupid whitie, he will think, putting his hand on the wallet that she is looking for. Not me gin,
not this stupid whitie. The wallet will be at his side with the cigarette pack and keys. 
Twenties all the way to the bottom. Damn whitie.

In a moment the damn whitie will take his hand off the wallet and open the pack for a second time. Watch his fingers lick a single cigarette from its inside. He will bring the cigarette to his mouth and light it with the last of the fading first one and the girl on the toilet—the still-unbroken fourteen year old whom he finished himself inside of, collapsing out her knees while she dug in with a single scrawny elbow till the end—will finish the famous contraception trick in front of her littlest, one-footed sister still wanting to know if she has to sit like that, too, and still hopping gamely from foot to foot. All of this will be beyond the mirror’s aperture but not beyond the aperture of the damn whitie’s imagination. She will have pushed out as many of them damn tadpoles as is possible and he will have seen it happen and it will be time for her other trick now. Splitting genomes. X plus Y now. Black minus white. Contraception versus conception. Now. He will not know this one. These clever modern gins and their clever reproductive systems. If the damn whitie could see her at work in there: black t-shirt with three dolphins and an unfathomable moon, some turquoise-coloured text, muscles pumping tadpoles like prayers: straight up. To God. To God. To God of Toilets and Ovaries. Thank God that God of Toilets and God of Ovaries are one and the same god. In this town the whities will have their penthouse gaol cells and their experienced imaginations; the gins will run the churches and the brothels; while the unbroken girls will bind themselves to God. There is money to be made in converting churches to brothels and brothels to churches: each congregation feels sympathetic and slightly embarrassed for the other. The gins will have figured out a way to exploit that one. These clever modern fiscal gins and their
evolving, devoted daughters. And the friendly, polite police officers. Will not forget them, please. On some great and terrific lock-up spree.

Over the month and a half to follow, the damn whitie will visit the derelict cathedral more than two dozen times. The twenty dollars he brings with him on each occasion will become an important and dependable amount for the old crow who sits at the door reminding him not to fall asleep in there, calling him damn whitie when he does and she has to enter and shake him conscious. There will be something demonstrative about the way these two old siblings treat each other, saying damn whitie and damn gin and then checking in the mirror to see for themselves how it sounds and what it means.

Before the month and a half is up, the oldest of the two girls will turn to the artifice for clarification, also. When the littlest one is asleep and the damn whitie has been evicted she will sit naked at its base, cleaning herself with a hooked finger and protesting the heartbeat she can hear inside her belly. At a month and a half it will be a one hundred beats per minute heartbeat. She will no longer trust in gravity, this oldest gin girl—not like she was taught. Nor will she trust in the indifference she was taught. Motherhood will be teaching her new things: partiality and fixation. It will be making her exceptional and clinical and destructive. Things mother could not make her.

At one and a half months a foetus will be this big. Your thumb and index finger eight to ten millimetres apart, held to your naval for comparison and illustration. At one and a half months there will be a mouth with a tongue. You can only picture that damn whitie’s tongue. Cleaning you. You would like him to clean away this damn heartbeat. You could bear that damn tongue if he would use it to clean you completely and properly,
instead of lapping at you like an apoplectic cat, lapping at your littlest sister like an apoplectic cat. Then, you do not know what apoplexy is. At one and a half months the internal organs will begin forming: kidney, lungs, brain, etcetera. The etcetera organs include intestines and pancreas. You could squash the intestines and pancreas between your fingernails and they would leave a smaller mess than the thorax of a single flying ant rubbed into fingerprint oblivion. At one and a half months there will be the beginnings of hands and feet. Oh. You are defeated now. You cannot use your finger to hook something with its own hands and feet. Something with its own hands will simply unhook itself. Something with its own feet will simply kick its way to safety. At one and a half months you will be. Defeated and apoplexy is a seizure caused by blockage of an artery to the brain but that will be neither here nor there at one and a half Months.

At one and a half months she will take full refuge in her littlest sister. It will amuse him to see the littlest one being lectured on how to lie comfortable and malleable so that he may get himself in there and be over with. Damn whitie, the oldest girl will have taken to calling him. Mother and motherhood will have taught her that together. And all of her practical advice will be demonstrated to the littlest girl as if they were the finer principles of the striptease, to be mimicked as painlessly and seductively as possible. Damn whitie likes it like this. Do it like this and it will be over quicker, Binni. Like this, and, like this, Binni. For four nights the littlest girl will remain a failure. Not a failure because she is unwilling or unparticipating, but because she is physically inept. She will be this big and he will be this big, and this big cannot go into this big. The other whities, with whom he confides the tribulations, will be facetious and impressed when he leaves the pub each night for the sanctity of the brothel and his little unbroken cherub this
big. Tonight she will open up for me, he will tell them. But the truth is, you have fallen in love with an old gin, they will laugh after him. You have been screwing that rotten old gin for six weeks now and your brain has turned as black as your cock and there is no such thing as a littlest girl this big. And then, the following morning in the shearing shed, when he tells them that it had to be the oldest one again because the littlest one this big could not get her legs far enough apart to accommodate that formidable and persuasive thing of his, they will ask him if it is true that unbroken gins this big have pots of gold between their legs and wings sprouted from their shoulder blades—or is that fairies we are thinking of, Graham? Even the apprentice rouseabout, who did not bed one of these women until the sixth night he was here and then it was a reliable and tested one whom the shearsers called Geniva after the city in Sweden which they had mistaken for city in Switzerland which was really a city in Switzerland called Geneva although Geneva and vagina did not resonate like Geniva and vagina, will be qualified to laugh at the madman who claims to have fitted something this big into something this big, the madman who claims to have found a genuine, unbroken thing this big for sale here in this town. Five weeks after losing his virginity the rouseabout will be as gallant and swaggering as the others and his appreciation for rhyme and irony will be as sharp as theirs. As will his appreciation for the fictions old men and drunk men use to inflate themselves in front of their peers. Create, then inflate. Is how old men masturbate.

On the fifth day, however, Graham will have an immaculate proof. His little fairy will have arched her back and coiled her buttocks and the sound of her hymen breaking will have rung in his ears like the sound of jewels being pressed to powder between anvil ends.
‘Look,’ he will say to the shearers who doubted him. ‘You couldn’t get an old gin to bleed like this if you cut her throat.’

The front of his singlet will be scribbled with ore. Shimmering, deep-red ore. The jeweller’s smock would appear dull, the blacksmith’s bib, pristine.

‘I’ve seen learners with more blood on them,’ one of the more sensible and cynical shearers will respond.

Graham’s thoughts will return to the littlest girl glued sticky to herself, muscle-sack and glyptic, shoulder blades rotating like broken back legs as she pulled herself along the bed like a dog with ringworm. She will have reached the edge and the older sister, bruised and welted from an evening with her mother’s flogging stick, will have stuffed the haemorrhage with his singlet top. That ought to stop it, Graham will have thought and she will have said and the mirror will have repeated. The mirror will repeat and will have repeated all of the things it has spied it has spied.

However, day-old blood will hardly excite anybody in the shearing shed. Learners with blunt needles and gaunt cotton reels will have day-old blood up to their elbows, even the more sensible, cynical shearers will be able to scratch some off the shins of their pants or the back of an unwashed plate comb. Yes, but the symmetry should make Graham’s ink blot special: symmetry like they have not seen before. If they could stare at the splotch and decipher the two sisters having sex with each other, the newborn twins locked in ferocious cartwheel, the gunman sighting himself in the mirror. A madman would interpret the scenes accurately and excitedly. Though, it is the madman’s job to interpret. While the others deride—the sensibles, that is.

‘And so it is true…?’ one will say to Graham.
'Yes it is true,' Graham will answer—the madman, of course.

‘All of it?’ the sensible will try again, as if to be more ironic than literal or cynical with his sensibleness.

‘All of it is very true,’ Graham will answer him.

‘I thought so.’ The sensible will have no option but to be ironic and purposeful about it now. And very clever in his own sensible way. Graham will think so. You like these clever questions, he will secretly tell himself. They are very sensible questions for you to answer sensibly.

Such sensible and cynical personality types will never see what Graham sees in the bloody image of his penetration, preserved on the front of his singlet like a broken golden-brown yolk. Instead, they will see the cut sheep, or the fist fight, or the nosebleed. They will see the sensible red and the sensible random patterning. He could not really have expected them to put their noses down there for a sniff—to make proof of the perverse and unbelievable claims. Could he? Where was the littlest girl this big with a pot of gold and ruptured artery between her legs? She would be proof enough for them. If she would come to the pub one night—preferably through the window sprinkling fairy dust everywhere—instead of her clipped-winged old mother crow—beaking about with her crass, black tongue and salty lips—then they would reconsider his deep-red evidence, his day-old ink blot, and see that, yes, an unbroken gin really is kaleidoscoped across the front of your singlet, Graham. You were very sensible to say so in the first instance. Perhaps you are more sensible than we first believed.

By Saturday it will be a two-day-old ink blot and they will be delirious with their belief. Graham will be starry-eyed and half drunk and the gin and her girls will be
disappeared. One of the girls in this direction, the other in this other direction. Only an abo with no shirt and wiry hair will be inside the house when Graham enters without knocking, having left the deliriums on their faithless barstools. The abo at the house will have a mangy beard covering his cheeks and neck and top lip, and the hair on his chest will be scant and full of mange as well. The way his eyes droop will make Graham think of a horse he once owned which had suffered from a paralysis tick in its foaly youth. The horse will have been a retired thing which he hated and did not ever ride and then discovered dead in the paddock at two o’clock on a Sunday afternoon. It will have died against a fence and the blowflies will have filled its eye sockets with their conjunctivitis-looking larvae. His father will have made him drag the carcass into a clearing that very afternoon, using the tractor and pull chain, telling him to build a pyre around it and set fire to it. While the horse and sticks smouldered he will have repaired the broken fence. That night his food will have tasted like horse and so will the cigarettes which he had begun smoking at nighttimes without his father knowing. He will have been fifteen. The abo with the drooping horse eyes will be reading a book when Graham enters the back bedroom.

‘You’ll give them a fright,’ the abo will say, startling up from the pages to see Graham.

The plurality of you’ll give them a fright will amuse Graham. The paradox of the abo with the book will amuse him, also—perhaps even more so than the grammar.

‘What are you reading, brother?’ Graham will say, smiling and telling himself that brother is good enough to be its own plural. One brother, two brother, three brother.

‘You want them girls. And they aren’t here,’ the abo brother will answer.
'You haven’t lodged yourself here without them knowing, have you? Is that why they aren’t here?’

‘This is my place,’ the abo will say. ‘Not that old bloody mother’s place.’

‘Yes? Whose place is it when that bloody mother’s using the bed to make money without having to do any of the work herself?’

‘Them girls have gone away,’ the abo will say again. He and Graham will look into each other’s eyes. ‘You white fellas must have chased them away,’ the abo will say, turning jokey. He will be a genuine and friendly abo now and when he smiles Graham will see that he still has all his teeth, too. The complete set of teeth will be as amusing to Graham as the book and the third-person pluralising and the singular brother talk, which will be amusing to him on account of its absurdity.

‘How come you’ve still got all your teeth like that, brother? Haven’t you heard about them ones missing all their front teeth? It’s a good look, I think.’

‘No, not me. I haven’t heard about them ones. But I seen a dog with its teeth kicked out once and I heard about some of you white fellas who got in a fight with each other and lost your teeth and then them kids went and found them and swapped them back to you for some smokes for their bloody mothers to puff on. You got any smokes, whitie? I’ll tell you where them girls are gone for one of them smokes, all right. You can tell their bloody mother that you found them by some other way. Tell her that you followed her stinky old tracks into the bushes where she’s lied up.’

Graham will glance down and appreciate the well-displayed cigarettes in his chest pocket. The two-day-old stain will be hidden beneath the shirt layer and not nearly as well-displayed.
‘What are you reading?’ Graham will return to his earlier question.

‘I’m not reading anything except about some white fellas who keep stealing cattles off a cattle farm. Them girls can’t even read that. I told that bloody mother that them girls should learn how to read and then they could read it and write it all down and then they wouldn’t have nothing to worry about except all the rest of the stuff which is not their decision, anyway.’

‘And what have you been drinking there, brother?’

‘You want a drink of this stuff?’ The abo will hold up the plastic bottle sitting at his side. It will be a two-litre Coca-Cola bottle, no label or lid, but recognisable by its black plastic base. ‘It’s just some drink I got from a different whitie who came and gave it to me when I helped him with something. He went and bought it for me and I put it in this container so that it would be easier for carrying around when that bloody mother’s got me staying out there with those other poor old black fellas like me.’

‘I will give you one of these smokes if you can drink the rest of it without taking a breath,’ Graham will proposition the abo, turning jokey himself.

‘You want to share it with me?’ the abo will ask him again.

Graham will shake his head. The abos in this town will not be known as great rum drinkers or even as mediocre bourbon drinkers. They will be kings of a poorer drink and only they will have the stomachs for such poverty. Even the damn whities who have nothing save the pants covering their bony arses will not be able to stomach the cleanskin liquor these abos carry about in label-less plastic Coca-Cola bottles and juice containers

‘I’ll give you one of these, but then you have to drink it all and tell me where that gin has gone,’ Graham will say. ‘She’s not inside somewhere, is she? You tell me where
she is and I’ll give you one of these and then you have to drink the rest of that bottle without taking a breath. That will make us both happy, brother.’

‘Them girls aren’t in here anywhere. If they were in here, then you would be able to hear that bloody mother stamping her feet about me sitting around like this, with this book which is just about some stealing and some white fellas and she can’t even read that much. I’ve been reading like this since I was still hardly eighteen. Some of them white fellas down there can’t even read that much. You know how to read?’

There has not ever been another abo like this, Graham will think: one sitting in the back room marked for business with some old book he picked up out of some white fella’s ute or else found thrown into the rubbish by the publican because it got left on one of the bedside tables after the room upstairs was vacated. The gins in this town will have long since learned that the presence of a mangy drunk abo wearing no shirt is detrimental to their overall facility for making money from mangy drunk whities wearing bloodied, didactic shirts. Graham will consider, though, that a mangy drunk abo with all of his teeth and all of his esteem is something a mangy drunk white fella would probably pay money to see, as a one-of-its-kind attraction. Graham will turn toward the mirror then which he remembers and respects as the authority on such matters as what is real and what is fiction and what is worth paying money to enjoy as an out-and-out novelty in itself, so long as it is contained within the perimeters of this room. The mirror’s jurisdiction will not extend beyond this room, and over a period of one and a half months he will have come to appreciate that fact.

‘Who are them whities stealing cattle from?’ Graham will ask his smiling, pluralising brother.
‘They’re just stealing them from other whites. That’s all. I don’t know all these words in here, but I know cattles and I know stealing and I know how them Americans call farms ranches. I worked on a farm myself and I know about sheep and horses mainly. I know about you white fellas who shear them sheep, too, and us black fellas who have to make sure to get them ready for shearing. That’s the kind of work I did. That’s the kind of work you do, isn’t it? How about one of them smokes?’

‘Don’t you black fellas remember anything?’ Graham will say to the abo, taking just the one smoke for himself and lighting it in his mouth.

The abo will swallow and try not to look deflated by the insult.

‘Nah, we don’t remember too much about any of that stuff that you white fellas know all about, like fixing cars and having punch-ups and all the rest of that stuff. Hey, we had a car out where I worked for collecting the mail at the end of the road on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays; but I never had to fix it or anything else like that. Only drive in it. They had white fellas there for fixing the cars and driving the motorbikes and working on the tractors and those sort of jobs. Even had a mower man, just for mowing the lawns.’

The abo will retract his arm and take a sip from the bottle himself. No attempt at skolling the remainder and earning himself a smoke the gambler’s way, just a tiny sip to keep him merry and talkative with his brother who he has just this minute met for the first time. He will be a friendly and genuine abo, this one, and in all the houses along this street there will not be another one sitting like he is, genuine and friendly in the back room with a book and a bottle of syrup in front of a big flattering mirror that is big and flattering and big.
‘What is that equipment you’re getting so religious on?’ Graham will ask. ‘It doesn’t look too much like the sort of stuff they drink on ranches.’

‘This is just a bit of stuff I got for doing a thing for a white fella that was around here this morning. That’s all.’

The mirror will repeat its surprises, too. Make them sound flattering and surprising like, this morning and this morning and this morning.

‘What white fella are you talking about now, brother?’ Graham will take the smoke out of his mouth and ash it onto the carpet, telling himself that those sensible friends of his are not so sensible as they sensibly portray themselves to be.

‘You white fellas like saying brother a lot.’ The abo will take another sip. ‘Why don’t you have a drink with me and then you can call me brother and I will call you brother. Maybe I will call you brother if you give me one of them smokes, too. I will call all you white fellas brother if you stop looking in that mirror. Looking in them mirrors makes me think about when I was out on that farm I was telling you about. We had this woman out on the farm who had a mirror even bigger than that and some of them fellas reckon she would like looking in it all day to see if her backside was dragging on the ground when she walked. She rang up the police one day when some of them fellas were peeking at her through that mirror. Wasn’t no black fellas, either. Us black fellas were just there for the sheep and horses mainly. And for spraying the tractors down if they were dirty. And collecting the mail. We never went near the house.’

‘Are you going to finish that drink in one mouthful? It’s a good challenge and I have faith that you can do it,’ Graham will say to the abo. He will turn away from the mirror and look directly at the abo to show him that he means no harm and that he has
faith.

‘You want some?’ the abo will offer, again extending his arm toward Graham.

‘Are all you black fellas so generous?’

‘We just want one of them smokes. That’s all. That’s not much for a drink, is it?
One of them smokes?’

For all the pluralising it will be quite a modest request. Graham should tell himself that.

‘How many sensible white fellas came around here this morning?’

‘Not too many white fellas this morning. Only one, maybe. I don’t know about any of them other mornings, though—that bloody mother has had me kicked out since you white fellas got here for the shearing time. I only got here yesterday because she told me she wanted me to watch that littlest one while she took that other one away. I reckon I could teach that littlest one to read a bit in a few days; then that bloody mother might come back and kick me out again until you white fellas have driven off for good. Wait till them white fellas get here for the wheat. White fellas come here two times a year now. When I was working on the farms they only came once and that was for the shearing which we had to get ready by moving all the sheep in from the paddocks and up to the yards. But we didn’t have no white fellas coming for the wheat back then. We did our own wheat back then and them white fellas that worked out on the farm with us drove the tractors and we drove the trucks for collecting the wheat. Drove them down to the silos. But that was back then.’

‘You are a one-off, brother,’ Graham will tell the genuine and friendly abo who he honestly thinks of as his absurd brother now. ‘I think you must be my brother, or else
we were brothers in another life. Where is that littlest one you are supposed to be looking after?’

‘She’s gone off, too. I’m telling you the truth about that. And that’s what I told that other white fella. I don’t know if he was sensible or not. That’s why I’m just here reading and having a bit to drink by myself. Have a sip if you like? That other white fella told me I could keep it and drink it if I let him know when that girl got back here. You give me one of them smokes and I will let you know while I am letting that other fella know.’

‘You are a truthful drinker, then,’ Graham will inform the literate and truthful abo.

‘I could tell you the truth about wanting one of them smokes.’

‘I think you would set fire to yourself. Then you would not be truthful or literate.’

‘I don’t know about all them words but I can say more about it than that bloody old mother you’re looking for.’

‘What about that littlest one?’ Graham will press, disbelieving, trying to picture her in the next room, waiting, with her hair freshly-cropped and her eyes open. In his mind she will be more difficult than she previously has been and she will not have her older sister there for coaching. But that will not stop anything. The soles of her feet will be pale and warm to his touch. This is no way to behave in front of your brother from another life who certainly must be your blood brother because of some nostalgia you share, Graham will tell himself when he feels the imaginary portrait of the littlest girl spreading from his head into his real-life body parts. ‘Is she in bed in one of the front rooms?’ he will readdress.
‘No, I’m telling you, she’s run off with them other two. That old bloody mother told me to get back here and look after her for just a couple of days and then she took that oldest one off to get herself fixed up and that littlest one was supposed to be staying here but she went and took off with them. And that was before I even got here.’ The abo will not be wearing any shoes. He will not be wearing a shirt and he will not be wearing shoes. Only some green-coloured shorts meant for a rugby league player. Green-coloured with two yellow stripes on each leg.

‘Where’s that littlest one taken off to, brother? Did she go off with that white fella who came around here this morning?’

‘No, he was just some fella who came here looking for her and then went off again when I told him all the truth about it like I’m telling you. She’s like her bloody old mother, that littlest one, always just going off like that. She’s probably out on the highway again, I reckon. Trying to hitch herself halfway to Brisbane with some speedy old truck driver like last time.’

‘What’s the name of that book you’re reading? Is it really about cattle stealing?’

The old abo will turn the book over in his hands and study the cover. It will be a paperback book and the author’s name and the title will be written on the front in the style of a WANTED! DEAD OR ALIVE! poster with bullet holes clipping the edges of particular letters: consonants mainly. The adorning picture, which indeed shows some rustlers rustling up a herd of cattle, will appear to be the still frame from a consequent movie. Book made into movie made back into book. The abo will point out the gun one of the rustlers has in his grip. A rifle, which the rustler holds one-handed against his shoulder while directing the reigns with his other hand.
‘There used to be this white fella out on the farm who did a heap of shooting with a gun like this one,’ he will say. ‘Heap of wild pigs on that farm that I was on.’

‘Does the book have a title, brother? Read it out to me. I enjoy titles. Especially when they are about cattle rustlers.’

‘I don’t always know too much about titles or none of that. Some of them white fellas can’t even read titles, either. I just read the pictures and the stuff about what goes on with them cattle stealers. Cattle rustlers. That’s all. I can read cattles and I can read ranch, which is what them Americans call their farms.’

‘Here. See if you can set yourself on fire.’ Graham will pass the abo a cigarette from the pack, along with his lighter. ‘You are a truthful old abo, aren’t you, brother? And a well-read one, too.’

‘Ah, thanks a million,’ the abo will reply, sitting forward and taking hold of the cigarette and the lighter. When he flicks the lighter the mirror will flick back at him. Both winking sparks at each other until the end is burning away healthily and he is sitting back satisfied. ‘There’s nothing that can stop us from being brothers now.’ And he will toss the lighter back to his amused brother who has begun to make pictures of that littlest girl again. Half drunk and starry-eyed.
Screen door ricocheting open, hitting again and catching was the first thing the boy heard. It made him open his mouth and his eyes. He listened for the bootsteps across the kitchen floor. After three they dampened into the lounge room carpet and he swung himself one foot out of bed. Before he could right himself with the other foot, the door was flung open and the light switch thumped on. Kibble and ants were chucked over him like a bucket of water.

‘What do you fucking-well call this?’ the old man said.

The boy stayed half in and half out and did not look up nor down.

‘What did I tell you last night?’ the old man said, stepping forward some more, to impose his narrow shape into the boy’s periphery. He was holding the throttled saucepan at chest height and his boots were muddy from the dew which had settled on the bulldust outside. The boy stared at the torn denim knees and told himself to keep away from the eyes. ‘What did I say?’ the old man pressed again, grey-eyed, grey-tongued and grey-kneed. ‘For fuck’s sake, boy. You answer me.’

The boy let the old man’s knees go hazy for a second and he could see the dog all wrong-footed and appreciative and stupid himself then, desperate to be let off her chain. Have you learned how to do it yourself yet, you black bastard? his imaginative self said to her. You would be a specialty dog if you could master that one. He was close enough to kick her. Then he sighted the saucepan. On top of the freezer. Left just out of the dog’s reach. You are effing kidding me, he said aloud, and he heard himself say it aloud, and it was as if he was someone else saying it. Fucking kidding me—not effing kidding me, he corrected himself. You are fucking kidding me. Aloud. The air lapping at his knees like a
dog’s tongue. You dirty bastard. He kicked at the cold damp bitch.

‘I meant to feed her kibble,’ he answered, focusing again and looking up into the old man’s eyes. Old man’s greys. The boy spoke timidly and unconvincingly to the old man and to those greys.

‘Meant to do what?’

‘I thought I fed her kibble like you said. I meant, you said, no meat. I must have left it on top.’

‘Fed it fucking kibble? Then, what’s all this, then?’ The old man threw the saucepan forward again and the boy flinched. Nothing more came out and the boy felt stupid. ‘This how you feed the fucking thing? Is it? Better off shooting it. You want to shoot the fucking thing? Is that what you want to do? Quicker than starving it. I can tell you that.’

The boy brushed an ant from his shoulder and it fell onto his stomach and bit him. His stomach muscles twitched and the ant bit him again. The biscuits had left small salt crumbs on his skin and each one of them felt like an ant biting him now.

‘You want to fucking learn,’ the old man said, and he tossed the saucepan against the bed and left the room.

The boy squashed the ant and swept the salt off his chest with the back of his hand. He leaned back onto his elbow. The other ants, the black, actual ants, still attached to the biscuits they had ridden in on, began righting themselves and shipping off in a consensual direction. It does not take long for an ant to find its bearings and get back to work, the boy explained to himself. Even the squashed one on his stomach seemed pointed toward the doorway, its legs flat and coordinated and industrious.
For a while the boy did not move. He stayed half propped on his right side and listened carefully. The sound of the screen door slamming closed for a second time. The sound of the chickens being let out at the other end of the yard. Motorbike being kick-started and ridden away in the dark with his dog barking after it as far as the cattleyards and then stopping and remembering the hunger that had her defeated in the tail and ears, and the voice. When he could no longer hear the motorbike himself the boy flicked the dead industrious ant off his belly and got up.

First he put some socks on, then the two flannelette shirts and singlet he had worn to work the day before. They pulled on in one go because that is how he had taken them off before getting into bed. Like a skin. When the singlet was straightened out underneath he kicked at a pile of clean clothes on the floor and unearthed a pair of dungarees he could wear. The legs of the dungarees were stiff and twisted, but they had not been ripped nor worn through like the old man’s; rouseabouts did not have the need to use their legs the way shearers did, holding sheep down with their knees and calves and polishing combs against their thighs until they flashed a high sheen. The boy’s untorn pair of dungarees were twisted out of shape because they had been left in the washing machine for several days and had eventually dried in there instead of over a line or the back of a chair. The machine drying had shrunk them as well and the boy struggled to get them over his arse cheeks. He did not do the fly, he only tucked himself across the tight open front and everything stayed there uncomfortable and awkward and rigid, and like that he shuffled out through the door which the old man had left open. He said something as he went, too, and he did not know himself whether he meant it mockingly or respectfully or cautiously.
Standing at the toilet bowl the boy sniffed his armpits and thought they did not stink too bad. He sniffed his left hand and thought that it smelt musky and like cancer, and he thought the cancer smell was not as offensive as it had been straight off the sheep—or not as fresh, maybe. He was unable to decide whether something should smell worse when it is strong and fresh or when it has been left to stagnate. Probably when it has been left, he considered, thinking of the way a hangover worked. He ran his tongue around the inside of his mouth then and spat a white-coloured mucus into the toilet. His teeth tasted like rum. A taste which infected his muscles and made him shudder involuntarily and piss on the lip of the toilet.

‘You want to fucking learn,’ he said, redirecting and pissing the mucus off the ceramic side and into the cloudy water.

When he was finished the boy zipped the fly on his dungarees and did the button. He wiped his hands with a towel and sprayed deodorant down his front and under his arms. The deodorant left a white powder on the inside of his shirt and along the edge of his pits. He went into the kitchen.

For breakfast the boy made toast and coffee. The toast he ate quickly and resentfully and the coffee he drank without sugar or milk. The bitterness of the coffee caused him to wince each time he took a sip and he did not recognise it for bitterness or for wincing. He made certain to have a piece of toast in his mouth each time he sipped. Coffee like this, black with no sugar, was the only thing the old man ever ingested before lunchtime. It had taken the old man more than fifty years to work his stomach into such a tight and stubborn ball as this, and the boy knew he still had a damn time ahead of him to do the same.
When the coffee was half gone and there was only the crusts left, the boy stood up and went to the back door. Outside, the sun was not yet risen, but it was half light anyway, and he could see the chickens that had already scavenged in as close as the scrap pile below the veranda. Three or four of them were pecking the ground and the boy knew there was nothing they had not turned over already, either the day before or the day before that. He thought the chickens probably knew there was nothing, also—even as stupid as they were. And they were plenty stupid. Stupider than sheep, he thought. He pulled his boots on and opened the door.

‘Chook-chook-chook. Chook-chook-chook,’ he said.

They clucked and circled the soggy mound, spreading their wings and straightening their bony necks.

‘Chook-chook-chook.’ He tossed the crusts and watched them flap and squabble over the bigger bits. A smart animal would go for the little, broken bits, he thought: leave the other, stupider ones to fight for the king crusts.

Before the boy had reached the end of the veranda the dog was acting all ridiculous and grateful again, jumping over her kennel and running around its base, yelping at him to let her off so that she could bolt across to the hayshed and take a shit and then quickly back to wherever he was next headed. No, quickly back to her empty food dish, he corrected himself. Then, no, quickly back to wherever he was next headed, he recorrected himself. Habit not hunger. Her chain became caught on one of the kennel’s sawn-off limbs and she strained desperately and gaspingly for a moment, then she was free once more and the boy was walking toward her with straight arms and a straight,
firm look in his eyes. The boy had dark brown eyes and they were straight and firm like his father’s which were grey and straight and firm.

‘Ah, you fucking idiot,’ the boy said when he was right up close to her. He leaned forward without bending his knees and tried to unclip the chain and she clambered onto his arm, spluttering and coughing hoarsely. ‘Sit,’ he said, stamping his boot down onto the chain to make her head jerk back under. ‘Stand on your fucking neck in a minute.’

She stayed submerged and against the ground then and her tail was low and flattened and against the ground, also. She waited until the boy had the clip undone and then her head buoyed a little and her tail swished once through the bulldust and her back legs cocked themselves ready.

‘Wait,’ the boy announced. The starting-pistol tone of his voice made her baulk forward. He grabbed her head and pressed it hard into the dirt. ‘I said wait, you fucking false-staring black bastard,’ he told her. And when he had kept her snout locked obediently against the earth for long enough to make sure, he let go of it and the chain at the same time, and the recognizable sound of the links dropping slack fired her into the usual mad gallop. She disappeared through the fence and into the tall, dead grass like an eel beneath a footbridge.

Once she had reached the clearing of the hayshed the dog stopped dead and curled her spine over. She sucked her ribs and held her tail stiffly behind her and her bottom jaw hollowed into almost nothing. Both of her ears flattened and fell back, too. It was a culpable expression. Behind her, beneath the roof of the hayshed, there was a fire truck which had not been started in a long time and next to the fire truck a rake with a broken hydraulic line. Beside the permanent rake was an impermanent boom spray and after that
a cement mixer. The cement mixer was of the PTO variety and was yellow with a red gear casing and red drive shaft. It was sitting on a blue palette. There was no hay in the hayshed, except for the floor covering which was loose and scattered. After she had held herself in the customary position for ten or so seconds without shitting anything at all onto the ground, the dog limbered out and returned upstream toward the boy.

Though the afternoon was considered the best time of day for all things except stupid sheep and stupid dogs, there was something about mornings, also, which the boy liked very much. It was the feeling of ownership. If you were awake early enough to recognise the feeling, then you could be quite proud of it and you could tell yourself that it was yours to keep and that no one could do anything to take it away—even though you knew this last part was a lie. All somebody else had to do was be there. A second person could often add to the feeling and make it stronger by turning it into something amplified and reflective and competitive, but after two you were just another sucker standing around waiting for the reliable afternoon and the feeling was lost. That was the tragedy of morning and the tragedy of its feeling.

The dog caught up to the boy when he was halfway across to the shed. She tried nosing him on the hand as they walked along together and he swung his hand up and out of the way.

‘Go get the shovel,’ he said to her, and she started forward, then stopped and looked back at him. ‘What kind of dog are you? A bloody useless one, no doubt.’ She tried nosing him again and he slapped her away.

The boy’s dog was named Sal. Though, she no longer answered to Sal or to any other name. Probably she identified closer to a tone in the boy’s voice than to the names
he used. She had originally been called Sal after the last dog, the old man’s dog. That Sal had been a good paddock dog and a good yard dog. She had been black and tan like this Sal and narrow across the shoulders and she had liked working sheep from the perimeter, too. That was something all kelpies liked and were good at. What never seemed strange to the boy was that both dogs had been called Sal. Even while they were alive together they were both called Sal. Bitch dogs were always called Sal, and nothing seemed so natural to the boy or to the dogs, the boy thought.

The boy’s Sal had not always ignored her name, there was a time when she was still a pup that she answered and understood which Sal the boy was talking to and it always amused the boy to call the name with a particular dog in mind and have the correct dog respond intuitively whilst the other waited respectively for her own time to come. That was a number of years ago, though, and a pup can be a funny thing and may not always go on behaving like it should or like its predecessor did. Sometimes a pup, which has been clever enough to learn the nuance of its name alongside an identical counterpart, will stop doing something and no matter how hard you work at it or flog it you will not be able to make it start back. A pup that has been rushed or trodden on in the pens, for example, might refuse to go near rams again; a pup that has fallen off the back of a ute might need heaving up by the collar and chaining on forever after; a pup that has been kicked and called Sal enough times in the one afternoon might spite itself and pay no attention to the sound of its own name from then on.

The afternoon she stopped responding to her own name was the afternoon the old man’s Sal got shot because the boy had forgot to chain her up. He had left the old man’s Sal off overnight and she had killed half a dozen lambs and two breeding ewes. Not any
of their sheep but the neighbour’s. It was not the neighbour who shot her, though. It was
the old man. He made the boy go with him. Made him hold onto her. Say, okay. A bullet
going into muscle or fat or skull does not ring out or whip-crack like a bullet which
misses everything and continues on with a clear path; a bullet that finds the thing it is
looking for hits dully and contentedly, like an axe against the thigh meat of a tree, like an
apple breaking apart on concrete. After the old man shot his own Sal for killing half a
dozens lambs and two breeding ewes he went home and kicked the boy’s almost to death.
She was still only a pup then and did not take much kicking before she had had enough.
And the boy was still only a boy and did not take much watching on before he started
feeling ashamed at the beating she was taking. Ashamed with himself, yes, but ashamed
also with her and the way she kept trying to skulk back into her kennel, the old man
having to drag her out and stand on the chain so she would not go anywhere, all the time
calling her you stupid black cunt, Sal.

At the entrance to the shed, the boy stepped over the drum of Roundup and
manoeuvred himself along the wall toward the shelves at the far end. It was quite dark
inside the shed and the boy found it difficult to make out the kitten still attached to the
bullbar until he was very close to it and then he could see the way its fur had become
damp and sweated-looking from the dewy air and he could also see the eyeballs which
looked glazed and preserved and weepy. The dog noticed the kitten, too, and she stood up
on her back legs with her front legs balanced against the bullbar and sniffed its body and
tried to lick the area where the blood had congealed into the fur, making tough, twisted
sinews of ginger and maroon and white. The boy pushed the dog away from the kitten
and told her to get out and she danced around in the narrow space between the ute and the
shelves looking for a way past him. He struck at her again and she skulked off beneath
the ute, glancing back once to make certain the corpse had not been newly decriminalised
and put on offer.

The boy squatted down in the space in front of the ute and felt around for the
shovel which he thought was probably beneath the shelves along with the fencing
equipment. He was not able to see beneath the shelves, but he moved his hand carefully
over the tools and had a clear picture of everything he touched and when he could not
find the shovel but recognised the posthole digger and felt barbed wire tangled through its
blades he was able to feed the wire back onto the spool and pull the digger free without
scratching or pricking himself. He stood up then and looked at the digger and leaned it
against the side wall of the shed and opened one of the wooden drawers just in front of
him. There was a boning knife inside the drawer and the knife had a white plastic handle
and partly-rusted blade. The blade’s edge was sharp, despite the rust, and the old man
kept it that way and used it often for cutting an old sheep’s throat and removing its legs
for dog meat. Rust on the blade was caused by blood which the old man never cleaned
away thoroughly, just wiped against the belly fleece and put handle-first into his back
pocket. The old man did not shear the belly fleece on such animals because there was no
benefit in shearing the belly fleece from an animal about to be killed. Nor was there any
benefit in shearing the hocks, and the dog would have to make her own way through the
tough woolly skin in order to get to the meat and shin bone. Usually the dog kept it half
buried until the ground had done the job of opening up the leg for her. A dog is clever
about things like rot, the boy would think.
Using the knife, the boy cut the kitten away from the bullbar. He peeled the remaining silver-coloured tape off the kitten’s body and held it by the tail. The head was flat and impressed and the ribcage and spine were crushed. When he tipped it upside down, the tail kinked back over the broken spine and revealed a small milky arsehole. All the underside was milky-coloured like its arsehole, and the tops of its paws were milky-coloured, also. The boy put the knife back in the drawer and left the shed, carrying the kitten pale side up in his left hand and the posthole digger in his right, with its heavy base slung over his shoulder. He looked impressive with it slung like that. Probably the way a rich man on safari would look impressive after snuffing out a lion or elephant or gazelle with one shot. No big deal. His modesty would be heroic and the rifle over his shoulder would be archangelic.

The boy took the kitten and heroic rifle to a spot in the house paddock where some pine trees were growing in front of a ruined pigsty. Wind had destroyed the pigsty years earlier and its roof was lying now amidst the base of the pines, wedged between two of the bigger trunks, and was covered in pine needles and dirt. The boy could not remember how the pigsty had looked before that windy night, but he could remember the way it looked the morning after and the way the pigs looked, two of them stuck in the ringlock fence where they had tried to push through, still squealing and kicking, and thinking he had come to cut their throats when he had only wanted to cut them free. After the boy had sat the kitten down on one of the fallen-over posts, he put the digger-rifle to the ground and turned it lightly a few times to mark a pilot circle in the dirt. He considered that a shovel would have been more practical, though he was happy with his decision to bring the digger and he had seen his father use it before to make holes for
strainer posts and he appreciated the elegance and specificity of such a device. He pushed his sleeves up and leaned over the handle and began drilling clockwise, half-circle bursts at a time. A dozen or so turns in, the sun started coming through the pines in sharp, splintery shafts. The boy stopped and rested against the digger and bit his top lip and looked at the trees and the earth. The trees glowed. He thought about them for a moment, then tried turning the handle again.

‘Why didn’t you bring the shovel?’ he said to his dog. The earth was hard and orange and unworkable. ‘The shovel would have been better.’

The dog came and stood at his feet and stared him straight up, jaw hung in a kind of salivary, half-open grin.

‘Fetch it, you bastard,’ he said to her. She nudged forward another inch, until her chin was pressed against his knee. ‘How many times do you need to be told?’ When she did not obey him he let go of the digger and set back to the shed to find the shovel he knew he should have brought with him in the first place. His dog trotted to keep up.

At ten to seven the boy was using the long-handled shovel to work a flange into the bottom of the hole. It was still quite a shallow hole and he thought it was okay that it be shallow like this so long as it was bell-shaped. Ever since he had begun chipping at the edges with the shovel he had imagined that the hole should finish perfectly bell-shaped. This image had become very important to him. Of course it was important to make strainer holes bell-shaped. He knew that. With strainers it allowed the concrete to set around the post’s base and plug it in the earth so that it would not lift once tension was applied to the wire above ground. The importance with this hole being bell-shaped, though, had something more to do with the boy’s perception of persistence, which he
considered to be shaped a lot like a bell, also. He kept chipping and smoothing away the rough overhangs and as he worked he thought that his obligation and pride were bells in the middle of his chest and he tried not to think about them as bells. Especially his pride. To him pride was a much uglier thing than this hole which was almost perfect and finished and not at all ugly or egotistical.

‘Learn to do that and you’ll be a specialty dog,’ he said, and his dog looked at him and then at the hole.

When everything looked good and just how he had imagined the boy put his hand on the back of his neck and held it there with his elbow pointed out in front of him. Both of his hands had turned rust-coloured and on each palm, just below the middle finger, the skin had been pinched into a ripe glue-coloured blister. The blister on his right hand felt smooth and firm against his nape and he liked the feel of it. His nape was bony and damp from sweating. When he tried to let go of the shovel with his other hand his fingers refused and he had to concentrate on unlocking them one at a time. They clicked open then and gave boy some amusement and when they were all open he tried closing and reopening them to see whether it would happen a second time.

At this stage the dog had become interested in something further off and she was showing her interest by pricking up all serious and erect. The boy turned and looked in the same direction but he could not see anything and he could not hear anything, either, and the dog could hear something because she kept changing the angle at which she held her ears. She kept checking with the boy, too, to see whether he was hearing this great and intriguing thing. Perhaps an elephant hunter brings a dog when he has a rogue bull to track.
‘Do not get cocky. You are no rogue elephant dog.’

Laid neatly on top of the sty post, in the full sunlight now, the kitten’s fur had become a stronger lustre of orange and its milky underside had changed to a stark white. The boy took hold of the kitten around the midsection and put it into the hole. He began kicking dirt back in on top of it. His dog lost interest in the sound coming from the paddock and she trotted over to look at what was going on with the hole and the kitten.

‘Get your nose out of that,’ the boy said to her, and she sat back obediently, watching him work.

When he had kicked enough dirt back into the bell hole, and the kitten was no longer visible, the boy began stomping on the mound, flattening it with his boot. He stomped down hard and envisaged that he was not crushing the kitten with each blow but compacting earth tightly around it, setting it like a bronze clapper. It was almost seven o’clock now and he could hear the under-gearing note of the motorbike himself and knew that he needed to hurry.

‘Let’s go, you black bastard,’ he said, looking off at the trail of dust coming from beyond the cattle yards.

The dog barked to reinforce the good and important discovery she had made in being first to spot the old man elephant, and she led the boy quickly back to the house, stopping every five or six metres to check on the progress of the motorbike some more. The shovel and the elephant gun stayed lying in the dirt beside the filled-in bell hole where the kitten had been placed like a bronze clapper.
Fanning’s was the biggest shed of the run: eight and a half thousand ewes, plus rams and progeny on top of that. The shearing took more than a month every year and then there were two weeks in February for crutching and a day in January for polling. Polling was the worst. The smell of pheromone along the board was sickening. It could make a dog go mad and start licking at itself like it was injured. You left a dog chained up at home if you knew you were going to be polling. And even then, the dog would be able to smell it on you that night as strongly as if she had been there all day rolling around in the wool herself. She would circle about, frustrated and sniffing at the stains on your pants, licking at your forearms and nervously pissing everywhere. And you would have to calm her by kneading the loose skin on the back of her neck with your fingers. That was something that made her eyes close into perfect contented slits.

Fanning’s was a merino stud, owned and run by a woman called Gail Loy. She was the widow of Morrie Fanning and had been Doctor Gail Loy before he died. Most people in the district thought she probably should have stayed Doctor Gail Loy; farmer Gail Loy was something of a joke to them. Nobody disliked Gail, they just did not understand her or take her very seriously. She was too rich and too unlike them to be taken seriously.

Standing in the yards when the boy and old man arrived at seven-fifteen, the length of polypipe in her hand, not hitting any of the animals, just uselessly waving it around behind them, she looked like someone trying to conduct an orchestra, not someone trying to pen sheep.

‘There’s a joke,’ the boy said. He had wondered what it would sound like when one of them finally spoke. The whole trip had been silent. And the boy had taken the
silence to be a condemnation of his own stupidity and forgetfulness, which by contrast had filled the car with a very loud clanging sound.

The old man kept his hand on the gearstick. His other hand stayed on the steering wheel. He had not said anything about the noise or the silence, and he had not mentioned the missing kitten or even noticed its absence, it seemed.

‘The bitch shouldn’t be doing it in the first place,’ he answered.

Yes, there it was. Boy, it will sound like this. This is how it will sound, boy. You can promise yourself that. Get over there and do your damn job. The boy did as he was told. He let the dog off the back and marched after it, ignoring the thistles that fanged him through the denim and on the shins as he went. And the stupid old bitch should not have been doing his job in the first place.

When the boy climbed the fence into the yards Gail turned and waved to him. She was a friendly old, stupid old bitch, the boy thought to himself.

‘They’re being real pains this morning,’ she said.

The boy did not answer. Do not answer, boy. It was good not to answer, it showed you were not impressed by anyone’s money or name or by the way they spoke, always pronouncing things like this and like this, with their hands on their hips and their collar pulled up beneath their dark-grey ponytail, looking like a stupid and likely bitch.

‘It’s a lucky thing you came along,’ she went on. The boy was closer now. ‘Poor old Rusty. I think he’s almost ready for retirement.’

Rusty was the name of her dog, a kelpie-collie cross with white markings on its face, chest and one of its front legs—markings that betrayed it for a thoroughly useless mongrel. No dog of substance would have tolerated markings like that, the boy advised
himself. And he checked with his own dog for confirmation. She was black and tan and well-marked and seemed in agreement.

Gail pointed at the sheep then. They were milling in front of the gate and refusing to go through.

‘This is the end of the mob.’

‘I know,’ the boy said.

‘Do you think there will be enough here to last the men through until lunchtime?’

The boy did not nod or say yes. He only put his bottom lip inside his mouth and whistled loudly and told himself that this woman was a stupid and ignorant woman who did not know the first thing about what could or could not be done by lunch and that her acting at head farmer was as lousy as her dog’s acting at being head sheep dog of some clapped out old merino stud.

‘Get in there, you fucking bastard,’ the boy yelled. Fucking was a good word. Not one for play acting, he told himself. Not a play farmer’s word, fucking.

His dog did as she was told. Straight away. She broke the edge of the mob and rushed the fucking bulk of the sheep through the gateway in one dumbfounded clump. Rusty stood behind her and barked two or three times: harmless, innocuous fucking barks: stupid fucking barks, the boy told himself.

‘Good Rusty,’ Gail said to her dog.

‘Fucking get back,’ the boy shouted at his. He said fucking very loudly and emphatically this time, appreciating its assonance and its cadence.

His dog moved back responsively, head sunken, ears brittle and cautious. She studied the few sheep that had been left behind the way all animals of prey study dumber,
weaker creatures: with excitement and patience and superiority. The sheep noticed it, too. They became panicky and even dumber, throwing themselves against the fence and against each other, trying to find a way through.

‘Easy,’ the boy said.

His dog raised her head a little. The three sheep recognised the open gateway then and they broke toward it. One of them got stupid at the last second, though, and stuck its head through the railings in the fence.

‘Oh, the darn thing,’ Gail said. ‘They get themselves in there like that all the time.’

‘Fucking thing,’ the boy said. You are quite good with this play acting, he informed himself. Though, maybe bitch is more your word? Or fuck-lip cunt? That is a good one for you.

‘The darn things just won’t learn,’ Gail said. ‘They get their heads in there, then they don’t know how to pull them out again. They end up getting stuck even worse.’ She leaned forward and put her hand on Rusty’s head and Rusty took this for encouragement and dared himself to grab hold of a wrinkle of wool. ‘If you pull her from this side and I’ll try to free her up from around here,’ Gail said to the boy.

The boy started on his end before Gail was ready. He pulled impatiently and felt the blood tighten and compress beneath his fingernails. His fingertips throbbed and stung and he knew as soon as he let go of the wool the stinging would increase sharply and then fall back almost immediately and disappear and he would be left hating the cold morning and the cold dewy fleeces.

‘See if you can just let her down for a minute,’ Gail said. ‘I might be able to turn
her head sideways.’

‘I got her,’ the boy said, and he pulled harder, making his grip tighter and more expensive.

‘I think she just needs a little—’ Gail said.

The boy twisted the sheep sideways, still without loosening.

Gail tried to take hold of the sheep’s head again and ply it through the fence.

‘I got it,’ the boy said, jerking the sheep back the other way.

‘They’re quite stubborn,’ Gail smiled. ‘Perhaps if you roll her over completely?’

The boy relented and let go and felt it come, and it seemed more unpleasant than it was because it came privately: into his fingertips, into his knuckles, crescendoing like a colour wheel. It spun darker, darker, dark-er, and then the heat went out of his neck and face and he was able to grab the animal’s two back legs and tip it onto its arse. The sheep croaked a poor-sounding baa and sat with its head awkward and upways and still wedged between the rails. Mnaghh, it baaed again.

‘See if we can just—’ Gail pushed down on the sheep’s nose with her pale, wrinkled fingers. ‘There we go,’ she said. And it was free.

The boy sniffed. He rubbed his cheek with the back of his hand. Hard. Then he put his boot on the sheep’s belly and rocked it until it bucked itself rightways and onto its feet. It ran through the open gate and joined with the rest of the mob, which were bunched at the bottom of the ramp.

‘There we go,’ Gail said.

The boy did not say anything and he did not think anything.

Gail smiled at him and she looked friendly and apologetic.
‘Rusty! Where are you now, Rusty?’ Her dog appeared at the top of the ramp.
‘Rusty, come down here! You can’t be up there, you silly thing.’

The boy’s dog waited for Rusty to come down and through the mob. Waited, the boy imagined, to show that she knew dogs were not meant to be up there while the sheep were still down here, or maybe because she knew there was no point trying to push sheep up a ramp while there was a stupider and poorer-marked dog blocking the end. For a moment, the boy imagined his dog to be as smart and embarrassed and annoyed as he was. He understood the way she barked louder when there was a second dog around and the way she was more aggressive when she was being instructed, and the way she was just as effective—though, passive and calculated—when she was given the chance to work autonomously. The boy found himself thinking that she was the type of dog he would be if he had to be a dog. Then he told himself that this was a stupid way of thinking. He whistled and called her to push up.

‘She’s well-trained,’ Gail said.

The boy nodded and reminded himself that it was a stupid way of thinking. Be a dog somewhere else, he said to himself. Be a dog in another life. Dogs do not have second lives. Dogs do not and neither should you, he thought.

‘Rusty doesn’t enjoy yard-work very much,’ Gail went on. ‘He’s too old for yard-work. I really must stop bringing him over.’ She looked at the brown and white dog which had forgotten about the sheep completely and had come and sat in front of her. ‘You’re not a cow dog and you’re not a yard dog, are you?’ He put his paw on her knee. ‘You’re too old for all that, aren’t you?’ She scratched him lightly on the nose with her fingernails. He tossed her hand up, the way dogs do, trying to throw it behind his ears for
a good scratch. ‘Trusty Rusty,’ she said, resisting and teasing him on the nose some more.

Rusty and Gail stayed down below while the boy and his dog pushed the sheep up the ramp and through into the shed. They ran better than the boy expected, filling the pens from the front and taking all the work out of it. The boy did not ever turn to see if Gail was still behind him while he worked, but he shouted at his dog more often than usual and expected that she was. When it was all done, he called the dog off and closed the gate.

‘I guess we’ll leave you two with it, then,’ Gail said.

The boy rattled the gate to check its sureness. He had done the job well and was not disappointed to know that Gail had seen him work. For a moment longer she watched him, and then she left him there with his dog at his heel and a bell-shape in his chest, one he did not fully trust.

The old man was holding his handpiece at eyelevel to make certain the cutter was going to throw evenly. Too far back it would drag, forward and it would not ride. It was an experienced hand to get right and the old man had the experience in both hands and had used it to adjust the tension so that the cutter was singing now as he scissored it across the metal comb plate checking its balance, and it was singing both evenly and sharply.

Not so far away the boy was standing in one of the wool bins. He was pushing against the side for resistance and using his legs to stomp the fleece into a more even mound. It was the belly fleece, which came off the sheep matted and tough and heavy, and it was difficult for him to pack it any tighter than what it naturally packed itself.
Occasionally the boy mis-trod or lost his footing and had to rely on his hands to hold him and stop him sliding off and collapsing the pile. The pile was like a sandbank, which is compact but temperamental at its edges.

Nick Cant was nearby, also, and his handpiece was already loaded and calibrated. It was lying on the floor and the downtube was unlocked and spinning around inside the ferule and the torque was making the floorboards hum.

‘Show us what you looked like when he caught you, old man.’ Nick Cant had worked the old man into a specific line of questioning that was satisfying him and amusing him and was suitable enough that the original question was no longer important or relevant or even identifiable. ‘You weren’t on the vinegar stroke, were you?’

Smoke slipped from the sides of the old man’s mouth and up past his eyes and made him squint a little. He seemed satisfied with the digression, also.

‘I caught my old man once,’ Nick Cant went on. ‘And he said if I ever interrupted him again he’d make me finish off for him as punishment. You didn’t make the boy finish off for you, did you, old man?’

Half smiling, the old man turned his handpiece over and used the experience of his to tighten the screws on its back side. He tightened them with deliberation and precision. Then he retightened them. After retightening them the old man took the pot of oil from the shelf.

‘You don’t need to feel guilty if you did, old man,’ Nick Cant continued. ‘Or maybe you just got him to hold up the magazine while you finished it yourself? Boy’s nice-little, soft-little hands probably wouldn’t do the job, anyway.’
The old man put three squeezes of oil into the end of the ferule, then covered the cogs, the fork, the yolks and the chicken feet. When they were all coated he ran a line across the cutter and comb face. The oil that had gone into the ferule was dripping out onto the floor now and he turned the ferule up again and put another spurt into its end. He held it facing up for a moment so that the oil would pool in the bottom and lubricate the spindle inside. Nick Cant was smiling expectantly and Ray was doing likewise.

‘He doesn’t need no magazines,’ Ray said to Nick Cant when the old man had not answered after some seconds. ‘He just has to look at the teeth marks on his knob and that reminds him of those old gins from up north, anyway.’

Teeth marks on the knob was originally one of Nick Cant’s jokes, although Ray sometimes used it now, too. Ray would inject it into the proceedings like it was his own and he would do so because it would usually open a new avenue of assault which was very popular with all of the old man’s antagonists and was well-mapped and rich with witticisms and clever insults. An image came into the boy’s head of teeth marks on the knob and it was the same image that always came into his head when someone implied it. It was not an image of teeth marks on his own thing, but a bleeding image of his father’s thing and what he guessed it would look like if it had really been gnawed on by some old gin.

‘Not those dirty old ginnies,’ Nick Cant said after Ray. ‘Tell me it wasn’t those dirty old ginnies, old man. Tell me you’ve got better things to think about than them.’

The boy’s stomach tightened and his testicles lifted involuntarily. They dropped back down and he breathed.
‘No, Nick. None of that,’ the old man assured his ridiculers. He put his hand on his shoulder then and pulled his singlet forward.

‘Thank Christ,’ Nick Cant said. ‘Miss Picture Homegirl, I hope? Tell me you had the boy holding up Miss Picture Homegirl. Turning the pages so as to put some variety into your sex life.’

‘Miss Picture Homegirl always, Nick.’

‘Miss Picture Homegirl or Ray’s sister?’ Nick Cant asked.

This was no new avenue, either.

‘No, it was Miss Picture Homegirl, Nick.’

‘Ray’s sister’s got a C-section,’ Nick Cant said.

‘Stuff you,’ Ray objected.

‘Stuff her more like it, Ray. Stuff her in the C-section.’

‘Your sister’s got a C-section,’ Ray said to Nick Cant.

‘Mine? Yours has got a C-section a V-section and an A-section, Ray. And she likes being stuffed in them all, too. I can tell you that. Actually, she wanted me to give you something from her V-section. She said to give you a smell and ask you whether it smelt the same as your mum’s V-section.’ Nick Cant spat onto his fingers and tried wiping them under Ray’s nose. ‘You should smell her A-section, if you think this V-section is bad.’

‘Piss off, Nick.’ Ray forced Nick Cant’s hand away from his face. ‘Piss off, I said.’

Ray was wearing a faded green jumper on this morning. Beneath the jumper he was wearing a blue, red and white flannelette shirt. The collar of the shirt was tucked
inside the jumper’s neck hole, and the neck hole was round and unstretched and not as faded as the sleeves or body of the jumper. Ray’s hair was combed neatly and his eyebrows looked smooth and wet and combed, also. The bruise on his forehead was yellow-rimmed and shiny and his neck was red and whisker-pocked and blotchy. His neck could turn blotchy and red like this in a very short time, and Nick Cant was a master of making it do so.

‘Do you think your sister will be at the quickshear this weekend, Ray?’ Nick Cant kept on with the deep colourising. Ray tried to ignore him. ‘If she is there, I think I would like to measure the size of that baby’s head. How big is that baby’s head? It must have your head, does it, Ray?’

It was seven-thirty now and the old man had gone into the pens to make his first catch. He was out on the board and shearing the belly wool off and Nick Cant had not even pinned open his pen door. At the other end of the shed the boy had climbed down from the pile of wool and had taken his dog out through the front entrance. The boy had told himself that the image of his father was real and awkward and good and forgiving and familiar and unwelcome and obscene and it was all those things because Nick Cant and Ray had made it all those things and Nick Cant and Ray could have all the obscenity to themselves. The boy’s was the rest of it, the familiar and unwelcome.

‘Do us a favour, would you, old man?’ Nick Cant said, dragging his first sheep onto the board and tucking its front left leg through his own legs and up under his arse.

‘Nick, don’t you ever talk about anything else?’ the old man said.

‘I didn’t even tell you what I was going to say, old man.’

‘Okay, Nick. Was it something important?’
The boy had jumped the fence outside and was running up the paddock to catch Gail and Rusty, who were dawdling back to the main house, stopping every couple of steps to play some game that involved Rusty trying to get hold of the mystery object Gail kept hidden under the sole of her boot and in her pocket. He sniffed around the heel and barked at it and then Gail would feign at picking it up and putting it back in her pocket. Sometimes she would mock throw the object and Rusty would chase after it, knowing its suspected landing spot only by having judged the flight course of his master’s hand. It was a good game for a stupid dog and the boy did not think that as he ran toward them with his own dog following nobly and intelligently just behind him.

‘Hello again,’ Gail said.

The boy did not speak but held his breath in and tried to make his heart slow. For him, there was something childish about being out of breath and he knew it was a controllable thing.

‘Did I forget something?’ Gail asked.

The boy pointed at his dog.

‘Do you have any dog biscuits that I could borrow?’ he said, all of his breath rushing out before he had finished the word biscuits.

Gail did not immediately understand, and the boy had to fill his lungs again to re-ask her. This time he spoke more carefully and he concentrated on releasing his breath evenly and slowly.

‘Oh, yes. Rusty has a great big drum of them,’ Gail said.

The boy nodded in thanks.
‘In fact you would be doing Rusty a favour,’ she said. ‘He only likes eating kitchen scraps now, anyway. Don’t you, Rusty? Lamb chops and vanilla pudding. Don’t you?’

The boy went with Gail and his dog skulked along at the rear as if she sensed she were the cause of the humbling and embarrassing matter. Rusty ignored the boy and his dog and persisted in trying to restart his game.

Nick Cant had begun shearing now, too. Four blows from the brisket to the udder, then he was past the first leg, around the crutch, and breaking open the second leg—wool foaming onto the board like sea froth. At the topknot Nick Cant straightened and stepped forward into the neck, burying his handpiece among the folds. He pushed upward and the handpiece broke free under the jowl and hummed and rolled over once in his hand. Behind him the old man sheared slowly and brokenly.

The old man always sheared brokenly. Sometimes he was fast and broken, but mostly he was slow and broken. He worked hard to be slow and broken. Nick Cant worked effortlessly and was fast and fluent. But that was an inborn thing. The old man had that with his drinking.

Nick Cant had sheared the sheep out to its last hock in under a minute and a half and the old man was jabbing at the brisket and Ray was making a butt for the A-pieces. It was cold and dim along the board, with that peppercorn tree scaffolding the whole eastern wall of the shed. Neither shearer was saying anything about the temperature, though, and both were wearing only singlets to cover their top halves. They were wearing them untucked so that the long tails hung over their arses, halfway between their knees.
and the tops of their legs. The old man even sweated a little as he ignored the temperature
the most convincingly and avoided jokes about broken condoms.

Nick Cant pushed the first shorn sheep down the chute and into the count-out pen.

‘Wool away,’ he called, when he had come back out with the second sheep and
the fleece had not yet been removed. ‘Wool,’ he called again.

Ray raced across from where he was and picked up the fleece and threw it onto
the skirting table.

‘Too slow, Ray,’ Nick Cant said. ‘That’s one beer you owe me.’

‘I don’t owe you no beers,’ Ray argued. ‘It isn’t my job. Where’s the bloody
rouseabout. He’s the one that owes you a beer.’

The boy had been given the biscuits from the drum and was carrying them back
toward the shed in the front of his shirt. It was the same makeshift technique the old man
used for carrying eggs from the chookyard to the house when he did not have a bucket
with him. The dog walked beside the boy with her head tilted up, studying the shape.

‘Where is he, old man?’ Nick Cant said.

The old man shrugged.

‘Probably pulling himself in the toilet with one of them ancient Miss Picture
Homegirl magazines.’

‘Please don’t you ever talk about anything else, Nick?’ the old man said.

‘All faded and full of big bushes,’ Nick Cant kept going. Then he stopped,
seeming struck by the old man’s comment amidst his own. He smiled and looked back
over his shoulder. ‘I learned it from you, old man. Just trying to be like my hero. Them
old ginnies must have had big wild bushes, did they, old man?’ Both he and Ray laughed.
‘Too heroic and old to remember any of that, Nick,’ the old man answered him.

‘Can’t be too heroic and too old.’

‘Been too heroic and too old for a long time, Nick.’

‘You weren’t too heroic and too old this morning when the boy walked in on you.’

‘Boy didn’t really walk in on me, Nick.’

Outside, the boy knelt down beside the peppercorn tree and he tipped the biscuits from the front of his shirt to make a small pile on the ground.

‘You must have walked in on him, then, did you? That why he won’t look at you? Why he’s off hiding in the toilet with one of them old beaver magazines left there from twenty years ago?’

‘I thought we were talking about C-sections and Ray’s sister, Nick?’ the old man said. ‘Or are we back to talking about your other favourite topic?’

‘Ray’s sister hasn’t got any bush, old man. She’s shaved like Ray’s mum. Stops them from getting lousy.’

The boy’s dog was ingesting more biscuits than she could chew and she coughed dry hunks back out onto the ground.

‘Slow down, you stupid bastard,’ the boy told her. He pulled her away by the collar and kept her at a distance until she had understood what he meant and then he let her back at them.

Ray was still trying to ignore Nick Cant’s taunts. He walked across to the window and acted deaf to everything that was being said about his mum who had a shaved V-section and about his sister who had a shaved V-section and newly acquired C-section
and probably a worn-out A-section if Nick Cant’s bragging continued in its regular direction. The old man was tidying the last hind leg, rolling his wrist to take the hamstring at a safe angle.

‘That’s where the bloody rouseabout is,’ Ray announced suddenly, turning around and pointing back through the window. He had done well to ignore Nick Cant and find a suitable deflection in the boy.

‘Jesus, give him some privacy in there, Ray.’

‘He ain’t in the toilet, Nick, you idiot. He’s outside playing with his stupid dog. That’s where he is. Probably out there all along.’

‘Tell him to come inside so that Nick can measure his head,’ the old man said to Ray. ‘Nick is very interested in head sizes and overgrown pubic hair. Tell the boy that.’

‘You tell him,’ Ray replied. ‘You’re his old man. You should be the one telling him what to do.’

‘Tell him your sister’s got a C-section, Ray.’

‘Stuff you, Nick.’

‘Doesn’t he ever talk about anything other than stuffing?’ Nick Cant said to the old man.

‘Sometimes he talks about twelve-gauges,’ the old man said.

The old man pulled his handpiece out of gear then. He bent forward to lever the sheep down the chute and it bunted him in the chin and he stuck his thumb in its eye socket and gouged it. The sheep kicked and twisted its neck and he jammed its head against its arse and pushed it down backward. The sheep baaed and tried to escape up the chute. The chute was steep and slippery and it kept sliding back to the bottom.
‘Where is he?’ the old man said, dragging his feet as he walked.

‘Right there,’ Ray pointed.

The old man looked through the window and saw that the boy was kneeling beside his dog, still, and his dog was stuffing herself with the kibble, pushing it around greedily as she tried to force more down than she could properly handle.

The old man paced over to the front door and opened it. A rectangle of light blew into the shed and silhouetted him onto the floorboards. A long, thin, shoulderless silhouette. A perverted shape. He stepped down onto the top step and the silhouette shortened itself accordingly. The boy looked up.

‘Gail said I could take them,’ he immediately began to explain. ‘I asked her and she said it—’

The old man stepped down onto the next step and the boy stopped speaking. He watched his father’s knees come down onto the next, and then the next, and then the next. At the bottom the boy got out of the old man’s way and the old man walked straight past. He walked until he was at the peppercorn tree. The dog looked up as he got close and she tried to coil back, but the old man’s foot was quicker and it found her under the jaw and turnstiled her through the dust. She came back onto her feet again and skulked off with a light sideways gait. The old man kicked the biscuits into a scatter across the ground.

‘Next time, you fucking stupid black bastard,’ he said when he crossed the boy again at the bottom of the steps.
Glorious Saturday. Your old crow mother will have poked you awake with the end of her flogging stick. Hey, she will have said. Hey, girl. Hey, you listening to me, girl? You will have rubbed your eyes and tried sitting up. You stay in bed, girl. If that damn whitie comes around while we are gone you make sure you get that money off him first. Two of them red ones. You hear me, girl? Make sure it is two of them red ones. You keep them hid from your damn father, too. Away from his greedy eyeballs and his greedy hands. You hear me? You will have nodded your sleepy head and your old crow mother will have gone on. Do not tell that damn whitie anything about your sister, either. You tell him if he asks that she has gone off with me and that she has got all aches and pains from putting up with his roughing her for so long. You tell him if he starts that roughing with you he will have to go around to them coppers for good. Them coppers are the only thing them damn whities are afraid of once they start their roughing. You understand me, girl? Good. Now, you say goodbye to your sister and stay put. I will send that father of yours back here. You will have nodded a second time and told your sister goodbye and your sister will not have said anything, just slunk down the hallway and through the front door with her arms folded awkwardly across her breasts. Barefooted and barely a minute later your father will not yet have arrived and you will have risen and flittered through the front door as well. Your sister all heels and one direction, you tiptoes and the other. Fork in the timelimb. Damn whitie pursuing the both of you and making the radian expand.

Your crow mother will have jabbed you awake with the stick’s end. Careful not to stir your littlest sister. On the most humid nights you and your littlest sister will not have
ceased from sleeping together like this, entwined and tussling over what narrow space was left between you, one of you moving and the other advancing her grip, one giving up an inch of oxygen and the other swallowing it whole. If you were not snakes you were sun-blackened wrestlers, adolescent and male and strong, with your calf muscles locked playfully around each other’s neck and your dark tresses lapping at the corner of one another’s mouth. In sleep you will have been elegant and artful and your littlest sister will have been your elegant, artful counterpoint. Only your mother with her flogging stick or that whitie with his own healthy damn caduceus will have been capable of levering some breathing room where your limbs and torsos and airways meshed. Once you had dressed into your pants and t-shirt the old crow will have awakened your littlest sister with the stick and told her to say goodbye. The littlest one will have said goodbye all sleepy-eyed and you will not have said anything, just folded your arms across those two slightly swollen breasts of yours and departed. You going this way, a minute later the littlest one this other way. Willows and abortion versus highways and extortion. Damn whitie the catalyst for both.

Evening will come and the occasional truck roaring past will not budge you. Neither will he at first pass. You will be sitting rubbing your feet back and forth on the still-warm bitumen, curling your toes over any loose stones and tossing them off into the growth. His brake globes will light on the distant circumference like dual metaphors for blood loss. Blood loss and life versus blood loss and not-life. At this point yours could be either. After a second he will begin to reverse his vehicle back toward you and you will not look up until he is very close. Your heart will be counting him in double-time: ba-
boom-ba-boom, ba-boom-ba-boom. You are lucky it was me and not some speedy old truck driver, girly. You will shift onto the balls of your feet and shield your face with your forearms and he will reach across and push open the passenger-side door. Some speedy old truck driver could have had you halfway to Brisbane by now. Halfway and more, girly.

You will be trudging along with your arms like this, as if those two slightly swollen breasts of yours need cradling and carrying. Your crow mother will be marching one step ahead and will be using her stick to prod the trunk of every willow she passes, to interrogate and find out what each one remembers. They will be young and forgetful, these willows, and will not remember much. Your mother will have caught you playing with those breasts in the mirror two afternoons ago, using your palms to even them and flatten them across your chest. What are you up to there, you girl? Just as quickly as you let go they will have puffed back into their newer, fuller, child-readier shape. Nothing. She will not have asked you any more questions, just flogged you and flogged you. Flogged you all over the body. Bruised your armpits and the soles of your feet, put welts on the backs of your knees and the insides of your thighs, put special attention into your stomach globe. Three hours of flogging with a stick and that damn whitie will have arrived knocking on the walls and expecting to be let in so that he could make you even sorer, with his callused knuckles and his sharp face stubble and his twenty dollars and his whitie demeanour. You piss off tonight, you damn whitie, your crow mother will have cursed at him through the wall. And, that is no way to talk to your brother who wants to see you and tell you how much he has missed your company, old gin. Twenty-four hours
is a long time between siblings. Once he had pushed his way into the room the damn whitie will have found himself enjoying the good and thoroughly dedicated flogging show she and you were putting on more than anything he could have envisioned, and he will have offered your mother two of them red ones for the privilege of becoming involved with that acute and well-stylised flogging stick of hers. Forty, and your mother will finally have won something back from him and you will have won something, also. Your littlest sister will have won the most, however. When you were too bruised and welted to go on your mother will have made your littlest sister finish and you will have lied there going, like this, Binni, and, like this, Binni. Damn whitie wedging himself between those protractor legs of hers, mashing her hymen to dog’s brains.

Halfway to Brisbane and more will be a stopover city. Las Vegas of rural Queensland. You will have visited the place two nights ago for the first time, girly. Your mother will have carted your sister through the streets in a tank filled with seawater, letting the fetishists pet and ride around on her back while she whipped and made her perform. Neon letters above her tank reading YOUNG AND UNBROKEN, shining down and reflecting on her wet welted skin like unfathomable moons. And when your sister was exhausted and half-drowned your old crow mother will have ordered you to execute that final pleasant trick. You this big expected to house him this big. Barking-barking like a baby seal. Him barring like an eel. Four-parts adorable, one-part vile. Like this, Binni, and, like this, Binni: your sister laid up on the side, bruised and welted and showing you how to keep your neck arched and your nostrils above water. That grey-eyed addict, who emptied the vital contents of his wallet, will have pulled you thrashing-thrashing into the
tank with him. Like this, Binni. While the old crow scrounged red ones from the pavement. And when it was over that damn whitie will have shot off with red ones of his own, shimmering down the front of his singlet and an inkblot forecast for his whitie friends at the pub.

Old crow will have come this way herself when she was young and unbroken. Most of your secondary sisters will have been here, also, leaving their babes born and un, alive and de, swathing them with sand and soil, then staggering back to someplace secure. Spill, kill, fill. Birth, death, earth. Labour, murder, inter. Cleave, leave, grieve. The worst kind will grieve into madness, milking their own tits for months after, until they are infected and producing a constant flow of septic froth. Biological grief. Lacternal exoneration. When she has found the right willow, one with no epitaph engraved on its trunk, your mother will stop dead. She will motion you to lay yourself down. At the same instant that damn whitie, lucky not to be some speedy old truck driver, will be telling your littlest sister to get into the vehicle and to close the door.

You will obey him and climb in and shut the door—just as your older sister will obey your mother and lay herself at the base of that marble-trunked willow tree. Damn whitie will ask you to remind him of your age then, not because he has forgotten but because he enjoys hearing the way you gins subtract everything by two. Just as you tell him twelve, your older sister will lie and tell your mother it is a three day old heartbeat. Damn whitie will add two in his head, incredulous and amused and accurate. He will ask you aloud then to part your thighs a little if you are really a dozen like you say, so that you might
prove your digits to him. You gins have taught your brains how to add and subtract and tell fibs, but you have not been able to educate your cunts in the same adorable way, girly. Using his hand he will show you what he means. You will tell him it has to be two of them red ones and he will tell you not to behave so much like your old crow mother.

First with her hands, the old crow. She will work that ingenuous, dry, already-discussed space between your legs, her index finger and thumb parting an aperture this big. Enough for the crook end of her stick. Half a centimetre. One. One point five. How many days now, girl? spitting onto the area to lubricate it some, to anesthetise it some. You will be all apologetic and pleading and splayed-kneed and counting upward from one week. She will insert the stick right in, pushing it past seven days, eight days, nine days… None of the floggings you received two nights ago will compare to this one. Same goes for your fiscal-fourteen littlest sister.

So that I do not get in trouble from my old mother, you will explain to him. Damn whitie will tell you that you sound more like your abo father than your crow mother now. Perhaps you are a perfect mixture of both, girly. The damn whitie will owe a lot to your old abo father at this point. He will have been a friendly and naïve and jokey old abo father, waiting inside the house for you to return earlier this evening. The damn whitie will have showed up instead and the two of them will have gotten along famously, talking of cattle rustlers and farm ranches and drinking bottles of four-parts water one-part turpentine no thank you brother but here have one of these and smoke it right down to its end because there are no more to go around after that one and can you tell me what was
the name of the other white fella who came here this morning looking for that littlest one brother, no brother he was just some other white fella and brother you sure say brother a lot. When they had finished sharing stories and compliments and cigarettes the two brother-brothers will have discussed your whereabouts, girly. That naïve and jokey and friendly old abo father of yours will have told that damn whitie just what you were like—what, with all your attempting to run off to Brisbane in the back of some speedy old truck driver’s sleeper cab and so forth, and the damn whitie will have listened and decided to go and see for himself. After two or so hours of driving he will have spotted you floating along the highway circumference, motionless the way a satellite is motionless. After some superficial talk he will have put his hand in between your legs to prove it to himself and you will have told him it had to be two red ones or else you would have to tell them coppers and he will have laughed and offered to drive you there himself. You are more like me than your mother or your father, girly. He will get his thumb and index finger like this then and have you greased and pivoted and wincing just like your sister on the end of a stick. You gins should worry less about wetting your own hands and more about wetting somebody else’s for a change. He will bring his hand up and tell you to spit into it. Come on, girly, working his thumb between your lips. Half a centimetre. One. One point five. You will dribble out a slow pea-sized globule. You can be more generous than that, I am sure, forcing his fingers in past your throat, prising toward your trachea. You gagging a little, him thrusting at the top of your oesophagus. Making you taste yourself. Mother’s stick and his middle finger almost meeting. You will begin heaving involuntarily then and when the rush reaches your mouth he will remove his hand and use it to jerk himself. Before he can finish jerking, though, you will spit that yellow callused
cancer-rum taste from your mouth and lunge forward and bite into his shoulder. Your sister’s fingernails will bite into the willow just as belligerently.

Willow roots either side of your head, girl. Handle-grip roots. Old crow abortionist sister gin mother forcing the crook as deep as it will go. Your eyes opening into two horrendous mouths. Soundless, excruciating mouths. Pupils tightened like tonsils. With every twist of the crook you clawing in and twisting back. Neck, legs, bony hips. Fingernails. The adjective adjective adjective gin continuing to verb you until that noun of her has locked onto something living. Carefully removing the gilded young instrument then. Object still attached and beating. Mouths finally closing, elbows and knees dropping like a four-legged animal reduced to splints, some exotic animal with a gunshot wound in the side of its neck: a gazelle. Hardly. More like a jettisoned young steer too puny to compete at any of the popular local arenas, suited only to the small outer-arrondissement semi-stadiums where cheap ticket prices and overdramatised performances win tourist favour and foreign currency. Where human death is rare and inevitable and seems heroic and never ever comical or warranted. Your mother holding the stick up for you to see now. Overdramatised in the same way. Red-caped, babe-shaped, newly-scraped. A figurine extracted from the belly of a snow globe. Wet and glistening and beating. Your haemorrhaging proper will start. Now. Your littlest sister’s, too.

Jesus, cunt. That damn whitie’s hand coming up off that thing of his and knee-jerking you across the face. Like that. Hard as a. Jesus. Cunt. Another one. Bitumen feeling the
sting of the headlights. Halogen on tar. Warm: black. Cold: white. You biting in deeper. A shoulder such a meatless appendage. Teeth no bigger than milk teeth. And then, more directly and deliberately, one to the crown of your head. Closed fist this time. You falling off after that crown blow, dizzying back into the seat with your muzzle bloodied and fringe hanging in your eyes, knees splayed like an castrated young bull. Out of breath. Almost out of consciousness. Having got him, though. Nine or ten no bigger than milk teeth scything through the shirt’s fabric and into his fabric, making him cunt-jerk you with his frantic hand: once, twice, then closed-fisted three times to the head. Him straight out of the vehicle after that as if you were a wild animal unintentionally loosened from the glove compartment. A snake set out of a bag. Barely a second later the poison entering his anger stream, him reaching back in and grabbing hold of you by the ankle. You twisting and clawing and trying to escape out the passenger’s door. No, no, no, girly. Whitie’s grip as secure as mother’s. Headlights settling into the tar ahead like plasma settling into sand and soil, forming an adhesive, turning the road into something convex and amalgamative. That fish-sized hand back down your throat, fisting at your stomach like a bore pump. Bite on these if you are so keen to bite on something, girly. You like some naughty little doggie then, coughing up her worming tablets despite their being hidden in an enticing knuckle of minced beef. Four-parts meat, one-part pyrantel pamoate. At the end of it, you being left beaten and heeling and inoculated.

Will you tell your midwife crow mother that damn whitie has taken back the twenty she hustled out of him two nights ago? Tell her that damn whitie has left your littlest sister haemorrhaging through the skull and onto the brain. Your littlest sister who flittered out
of bed this morning like a raindrop down a cracked windscreen. Tell your mother to look at her now, please: trotting toward the police station like a new calf, bashing her heels against the bitumen as she goes, bellowing and tripping up at every incline. That damn whitie will have left her as flat-footed and maladroit as you and you will be haemorrhaging quite wonderfully yourself, girl. The willow will be taking everything you can give it, strengthening its branches through its roots, hardly noticing the scratchmark epitaph you left on its skin: nine or ten finger lines where you became irresistible to the stick’s throwback. All the things these willows truly remember will be indiscriminately rotted into the soil around them and not aggressively scratched into their trunks.

He will put you in with the rest of the gins, all of them drunk and foulmouthed and sitting cross-legged on the floor. Just a single sober gin will be on her feet still and she will be sad and crazy and foulmouthed and wandering amongst the rest with her tits hanging out and her eyes full of ants. After he has closed the door he will tell this lone crazy one to put those tits of hers back in unless she would like to receive another eyeful. Pisser copper, she will howl at him, refusing to obey, clutching onto the swollen lactating ends like an Agatha. You would not like to give your little sister any bad ideas, the damn pisser copper man will insist, showing the gin the bottle of formula already burning up both retinas. She will shrink back into the corner of the cell then, tucking those two weepy bladders away as instructed. These spray bottles of cleaning spirits will be one of several unorthodox initiatives the law has adopted since taking its posting in this town. You could have been halfway to Brisbane by now if some speedy old truck had stopped instead of some damn whitie.
Quickly consider this, girl. The future and past are each their own hemisphere of a circle. The circumferential timelimb has no option but to flow through both continuously and perpetually, crossing from one to the other at exact rival-present degrees: zero and one hundred and eighty, ninety and two hundred and seventy, fourteen and one hundred and ninety-four... These opposite points which separate yesterdays from tomorrows, lives from not-lives, young boys from old men are in fact mirror siblings, perfect reflections, neat red presents. Now examine the reflection points in between presents, gradient tenses which pass neither straight through the hub nor return directly to their sources, but instead deflect forward and backward at concurrent angles: ten and three hundred and fifty, eighty and two hundred and eighty, one hundred and forty-two and two hundred and eighteen… Compare the bite mark your sister left on that damn whitie’s shoulder alongside the scratch marks you left on this willow alongside the stab marks on another whitie’s forehead alongside the skinny one with no tits’ bed fee alongside the babe blob still beating at your breast alongside the excavated stomped-in kitten alongside the bullet-holed skull alongside your own bullet-holed cunt and you will convince yourself that past and future are always reflecting one another, throwing radial cords and amalgamating themselves into infinities of relative presents—scabs formed across the corporeal timelimb where tooth and nail has mashed against bone and flesh, action against inaction, highbeam against highway, extortion against abortion. The timelimb is mapped like a genome, girl, like the wheel of a bicycle: spoked and round, ten-degree intervals, future and past holding hands between every ninth and tenth step. Only a human being driven to madness by memory or forethought, a human being still blubbering over the uselessness
of her lactating tits or the destiny of his unfired bullet, would try to convince themselves that the timelimb was linear, that a circle was nothing more than a straight line with fused together ends, capable of being broken apart and ironed out flat again: future this direction, past this other direction. Girl, a circle is born a circle and dies a circle and gives birth to other circles and ten times nine equal ninety, and ninety times two equals one hundred and eighty, and one hundred and eighty times two equals simultaneous mirror-opposite narratives lives tenses. You just lie there now and listen to the blot still beating. Nine seconds, ten seconds… It will not last much longer and you will be insignificant when it goes. Fitting, surely.

The station will be a smallish starkly-lit building. The pisser copper will be sitting at one end and you at the other. In between will be the satirical head mounted on a hat stand. There will be a plaque attached to the body of the hatstand reading “Sergeant Rilke”—quotation marks emphasising the head’s satire. The taxidermist will have fixed the head’s ears in full furore to make them look ignorant and malevolent as a bat’s wings. The head will have polished tusks and a hard knot of purple tongue meat. Visitors who come to the station for maps and permits will not be able to resist fingering the inside of its terrible and satirical mouth. The ones hoping to trophy a satirical head of their own will want to know the cal with which this one was brought down. They will be wearing camouflaged jackets and will have box-jawed dogs waiting in cages on the backs of their four-wheel drive vehicles. The pisser will proudly tell them it was a meagre cal. He will tell them about the lack of natural light and the impossibility of the scrubland, also. If they are doubtful he will come out from behind his desk and direct their hands to the back where
they may feel for themselves the implausibly small hole through which the meagre-caled bullet entered and struck brain. Not before the bastard gored two of his best dogs, though. And he will shake his dimple-chinned face then, to acknowledge the bravery and sacrifice of those two fictitious dogs. The pisser copper will not ever reveal to anybody that his marksmanship is more aligned to running satirical pigs over in his car than shooting at them from low-lighted, tick-scrubbed vantage points. Girly, you will be watching that head now the way a good and well-behaved boy watches a statue of the crucifix whilst kneeling beside his mother in church: scared to death of it and certain he will catch it moving when it thinks nobody else is looking. Oh, and bleeding the crown of thorns stigmata through his own fractured skull and onto his brain, making him seizure and fall out of consciousness, the bawling wailing crazy congregation certain they are witnessing a great and terrifying miracle.

Ok, girl. A piece of that damn whitie pulled crookways from its mother’s womb will only beat for so long. Seconds at the most. Perhaps a stylistic convenience it has lasted this long. Perhaps a plot convenience it even existed in the first place. Imagine a goldfish inside a leaky plastic bag. First the goldfish. Then the bag. You will be empty soon enough, girl. Just lie there and try not to drip over your mother. She will not be able to stop the flow. Even three dolphins and an unfathomable moon could not stop this flow.

Bawlers, wailers and crazies. Absconders, too, some of them. The pisser copper will have arrested the absconders at the loading silos earlier today. It will make these absconder gins sound like negroes to talk about them vagabonding out of town aboard half-empty
freight trains. But this is how some of them will travel: frockless and rhythmic, with hangovers for blues and burnt down cigarettes for harps and broad noses for stereotypes. Hurry, damn pisser. The lactating one he pulled off the tracks trying to kill herself must be seeing in you what a cot-death mother sees in a snow globe nativity scene. Chance for resurrection and salvation. She will froth and foam and refuse to leave your side until that pisser has come into the cell and blasted her in the mouths again. Four-parts bleach, one-part methylated. Your haemorrhaging will be heavy now, girly, bruising the whites of your eyes, making your scalp sweat and your teeth clench and unclench. The pisser could have no reason to doubt the story you told him when you arrived, about some damn whitie clouting you over the back of the head, about some damn whitie roughing your sister so badly your mother had to take her off until she was fixed, about some damn whitie not believing how old you were and then doing this to you regardless and worst of all doing it and not even giving you a single red one when your mother had insisted on two. The pisser who by now must certainly be a believer of some kind will radio an ambulance. He will herd the rest of the gins out onto the street and away from the starkly-lit station. The crazy one, weeping acid from her tits and her eyeholes, will stick pressed against the window glass. For her there will be no way out of the circle. Around and around, she goes, hoping for a solder join to bust open.

This blood leaking into your brain will soon drown you, girly. You this way and bursting at the plastic seams. Your sister this other way and vacuum drained. It will take the doctors with their pressure-release drill-bits to keep you from not-life now, girly. Too bad for your sister. Ah, end glorious Saturday.
Sequential Sunday. Often the pisser will have to wash blood from the walls and floor of the holding cell. The gins will smear it into the concrete during the night, along with their shit and vomit and urine. The pisser will not usually discriminate against the blood with the hose’s nozzle but will wash it into the drain in the centre and it will pool like a brown sludge and then seep away with the other waste. This morning he will scrub the blood with a brush. After paying special attention to the fairy-dust heel prints, the pisser will drive to the watermarked house in the laneway behind the pub. He will enter the house and expound a bunch of information to the friendly jokey naïve old abo who is just sitting and reading one of them books about cattle rustlers and so-forthers. This old abo will listen and will have a collapsed sort of laugh. When the pisser police officer sir has finished expounding he will put his prim little pocket book back into his prim little pocket and take out his prim little handcuffs. Show me your wrists, please, sir. Sir? Collapsed in the way that his cheeks and brow and forehead lines all seem drawn into those two oversized eye cavities. A friendly and jokey and collapsed old abo. And a cooperative one, too.

The old crow will arrive home shortly after the abo has been taken away and the house will be vacant. Damn girl, where are you? Useless damn father. Damn whitie. Where are you, damn girl? Where did you hide that damn money? she will say.
The old man did not sign on to compete. Only to drink. Said impressively enough throughout the morning that he was waiting for the barflies and overs section. Asked the shearers coming in and out, buying rounds for their mates in the beer garden, what time barflies and overs was starting. Wanted them to let him know. He would be inside practising, he told them. Warming up. And every time he finished another practice round he explained to Gritter that it was like a boxer toughening his fists against the wall of the dressing shed. Got to be tough to fight. Got to have sore knuckles before you can make somebody else sore. Knuckles have to know what they are in for. Gritter liked how that sounded and refilled the glass with a tea towel over his shoulder and a hand on the takings. A sound manager.

Gritter was some miserable bastard, the shearers who had booked rooms upstairs were now saying. They were the ones who had arrived for the quickshear the night before and were complaining today that they wished they had found someplace else to stay. No noise after eleven sounded like a bullshit rule to anyone staying in a pub. Forty dollars a night sounded like a bullshit rate. Nick Cant explained that Gritter may have been a true bastard of a landlord, but he was a true bastard of a landlord with a complex cunt of a wife and that was another thing altogether, a thing that deserved some compassion. The shearers he spoke to shook their heads to show how they appreciated the situation—or felt satisfied with it, at least. Nick Cant could be a hell of a compassionate bastard sometimes.

Nick Cant was patron saint of Bribbaree quickshear. Champion for fourteen years running, he had martyred himself after every victory by getting religious and finding
some other religious bastard with whom he could debate the existence of God. The fight at the end of the night was as annual as the competition and a black eye was better than a cheque for five hundred dollars. A black eye was the only thing more loyal than a hangover and there was nothing loyal about a cheque for five hundred dollars. A cheque for five hundred dollars would sign itself over to a publican without any remorse or nostalgia.

At two o’clock in the afternoon the competition began. Learner shearers were asked to come forward and draw numbers. Drawing number one meant competing first, and so forth. When the hat was passed to him, the boy selected number four and was happy. There were only five learners competing and number four was a good position to have. A position was good if it allowed you to watch others make the mistakes you were likely to make. Hopefully somebody before you would hamstring one of the lambs and then you would have nothing to fear. After a cut hamstring there was nothing you could fear. And you could not cut one if you had watched somebody else do it, either. If you had seen it happen before your turn, you would have made yourself promise to think of those hamstrings like they were a piece of your own body. Think of them like you think of the humiliating little hamstring dangling between your legs, you would have told yourself. They would have shrivelled back up into themselves then, to the point where you could not have pictured them taut and erect beneath a sore blonde with fairy floss tits.

The competition stage was recessed into an opening in the wall of the beer garden. A little to the stage’s left was a table, and to the left of the table a microphone and amplifier speaker. The event was being sponsored by a particular brand of handpiece
and there were posters for the handpiece either side of the microphone and stage. The advert handpiece did not look like the handpieces loaded and calibrated and lined up on the table beside the stage. Those looked brown and dirty like worn-down beetles. The one in the posters looked elegant and lithe as a stick insect.

The lambs to be sheared were penned together behind the wall of the beer garden, out of general view. Not until you had been called to compete were you able to gauge whether you had chosen a good one. The lamb with the number four raddled on its back was slightly smaller than most of the other lambs and the boy hoped this meant it was a good one. The man in charge of opening the gate said the smaller ones were good if you could hold onto them. That sounded honest and the boy thought he had once heard Nick Cant say a similar thing.

Nick Cant was the boy’s principal shearing instructor. During lunch hours and at the end of runs he would allow the boy to shear belly fleeces and practise making blows up the neck and down the last side. He would supervise and tell the boy to lighten his hand. You know how to play with a girl’s pussy, right, boy? Everything Nick Cant had to say about shearing could be aligned to this one apt metaphor. Move those comb teeth like fingers, boy—like you were fondling a little virgin. Apart from his own little virgin the boy had not fondled any little virgins. He fondled his own with a tight, almost spastic grip, and that is how he sheared. His father sheared heavy and spastic and tight. Such mentorship as Nick Cant’s was not uncommon in the shearing sheds, and it was seldom as altruistic as it appeared. The boy thought it was probably more connected to tallies than to goodwill and he listened to the things Nick Cant said and could not understand why his hand would stay heavy even when he drilled it over and over to lighten.
The three learners who had gone before the boy had all sheared their lambs well and within the time limit. A well-sheared lamb was one with no cuts or scratches and no wool left on it. A poorly-sheared lamb was one that could not stand up because it had had its hamstring severed with a blunt-coloured handpiece. The time limit was one minute twenty. The boy told himself not to think about hamstrings. Think about pussies, he told himself. He forced the lamb into position, lamb number four, telling himself that the front right leg had to be tight behind his arse and that the head had to be still and calm and that the hind legs had to be straight and that the belly had to be stretched open and that the teats had to be covered and that the knees had to be and the fingers and that all the while the hamstring and your hamstring and make it so the hamstring thing is and stop thinking about the hamstring thing, think about what it would be like with everybody watching, and ready, sonny? Say when, sonny.

‘No, not yet,’ the boy said.

‘Just say when, sonny,’ the gentleman holding the microphone repeated himself.

‘A second,’ the boy answered.

The boy slowed his breathing and tried to imagine the handpiece as an extension of his arm. He looked at it and told himself that this was an experienced, worn-in set of fingers, a set to be used as perversely and pleasingly as possible, a set which had never even seen a hamstring, a set which had spent all its time fondling pussies, a set for pleasuring. His father’s set.

The old man was blowing half-hearted smoke rings toward the ceiling. He had said yes to loaning the boy the handpiece because it was an old handpiece which he no longer used. The backjoint cover was missing and the cogs were arthritic and locked
together. It had taken the boy twenty minutes to free all of its static parts, and when he had finished oiling and working the pieces, it remained dry and claw-like and almost unusable.

He was drinking very well now, the old man: as a heavyweight should drink. The muscles in his neck seemed tense and ready and his heart was beating in time with the ceiling fan. It was noticeably hot for this time of year, twenty-one degrees. The time was two thirty-seven. Outside, the heat was making the lambs sweat, and their fleeces had opened up and they were shearing superbly and marvellously.

‘Hey, old man. Quick.’

The old man snapped his head forward. A partly formed ring sailed up into the blades of the fan.

‘Quick what, Nick?’

Nick Cant pointed back through the doorway.

‘Boy’s going,’ he said.

‘Marvellous,’ the old man said. Marvellous sounded exceptional and unconvincing without the microphone and amplifier backing it up. Through the amplifier speaker it sounded gentlemanly and trustworthy.

‘Come and watch.’

‘When he’s in the barflies and overs I’ll go and watch him, Nick. I’ll go and watch how marvellous and superb he is in the barflies and overs. What time does the barflies and overs start? It is twenty-minutes to three now, Nick.’

The gentleman at the microphone who was using words like marvellous and superb and sonny to describe the action of the competitors was a famous gentleman in the
shearing industry. Famous because he had broken a lot of records a long time ago. He had come to Bribbaree primarily to be famous and to sell handpieces which looked like shiny stick insects and not at all like actual familiar tools built as practically as possible for the purpose of making money—one eighty-four times two for every cancery, flyblown hogget you could drag—not for making fame or breaking records. People knew the gentleman’s name without having to be told. They knew one eighty-four times two equalled three sixty-eight without having to think.

‘Barflies and overs is already finished, old man. You came first, second and third,’ Nick Cant said to the old man.

‘Marvellous,’ the old man said to Nick Cant. ‘When do I get my marvellous prize?’

Nick Cant was wearing a red singlet which had white hemming around the neck-scoop and armholes. The bottom was white-hemmed as well and it hung just below his waistline at the front and fell into a tail at the back. The back of the singlet said KICK-ASS and on the front there was a picture of one ass kicking another ass. The old man was wearing a black polo shirt which had a logo for Bribbaree Hotel on its pocket. It was a marvellous looking shirt.

‘Stop being such a funny bastard,’ Nick Cant said to the old man.

‘What’s so funny about wanting to get drunk in peace, Nick?’

‘All right, then. Be a funny bastard,’ Nick Cant said.

‘Okay, Nick. Can I be a funny peaceful marvellous bastard?’

‘You can be a funny peaceful marvellous homosexual bastard if you like.’

‘I wouldn’t want to steal your act, Nick.’
On stage the shearing machine gripped into gear and the boy began his campaign. He ran his first blow slowly and thoroughly and the gentleman commentated along, telling him, good job, sonny. The next four blows were also run nicely and the belly was shorn then. The boy shifted his weight and ran one along the lamb’s hind leg. Stroke the inside of their thigh with your left hand and they will open right up for you, boy. Not too gentle, they do not want to feel as if they are being fucked by their sister. When he had steered the handpiece through the crutch and out the second leg, he turned it back to face the hip. He broke the hip open by rotating his wrist counter-wise and then he made five short blows over the tail. The famous gentleman said he was shearing like he had been shearing all his life. Superb and marvellous, the boy told himself. Shut up and think about your bleeding hamstring, another voice in him chastised.

‘Better be quick, old man.’ Nick Cant was turned toward the boy now and was speaking to the old man as if he were a child, easily panicked into action and obedience.

‘Is he shearing superbly?’ the old man asked, proving heavyweight champion of tantrums and nonchalance and disobedience as well as drinking.

‘Why don’t you have a quick look?’ Gritter suggested. He had already encouraged the old man to go and have a look much earlier, before the competition had even started, and the old man had encouraged him to go fuck his wife and he had encouraged the old man to go fuck her himself and the old man had encouraged him to shut his god damned mouth in that case and to go fuck somebody else’s wife—somebody whose wife did not have a rabbit trap between her legs.

‘Why don’t you go have a look, Gritter?’ he encouraged him this time.

‘If he was my boy I would.’
‘Gritter, if he was your boy he wouldn’t be out there. He’d be in here learning his trade behind the bar. And if he was your boy I’d be happy to watch him learn his trade behind the bar. I would even help him learn his trade behind the bar. And if he was my boy he would be in here learning his trade on this side of the bar while your boy learned his trade on that side of the bar. And Nick could leave us alone in peace, too. And wouldn’t that be marvellous and superb and marvellous?’

Nick Cant started banging his hand against the door at that moment, just as a football crowd bangs on the car horns when their team has scored a try: bursts of three: honk-honk-honk, honk-honk-honk. The crowd outside were like the fans seated at field level, calling players by name, saying, good job, Simmo, and, nice pass, Hubsy. It was customary for the shearers to be clapped home in this fashion, when they were only four or so blows away from finishing.

‘Boy’s in here every night learning his trade on that side of the bar,’ Gritter argued with the old man, ignoring the home crowd.

‘He isn’t learning it too well, then, Gritter.’ The old man was ignoring it, also, and he was ignoring it slightly better than Gritter, since he did not feign to raise his voice even slightly.

‘He’s learning it all right, old man.’ Gritter lowered his own voice some more. The conversation was taking place at a whale’s decibel now.

‘You reckon he’s learning it well enough to take me?’

‘He’ll take you, old man.’

‘You sure, Gritter? I take some taking.’

‘You are one of the best I’ve seen,’ Gritter whispered back.
At the final whipping blow the lamb began to wriggle away from the boy. It freed itself just slightly and the famous gentleman at the microphone began calling instructions—quick-quick instructions which the boy did not understand or could not interpret fast enough.

‘Get your foot under its hind leg, sonny,’ the man said. ‘Pull its head back up.’

The lamb kicked the boy along the knuckles and the boy jammed his thumb into its eye socket. He did not think, he just jammed. He gouged at its eye, too, and the man said something else and it was not marvellous or superb, and Nick Cant forgot about the old man and banged against the door more loudly, and the crowd—mostly shearers yet to compete themselves—went like this with their hands on their knees, and then the lamb kicked again. Only this time it threw its leg into the mouth of the handpiece. The handpiece cut through the hamstring like a thin cord of rubber, like an interceptor through a backline, like a stick through an umbilical.

The famous gentleman, who was famous for breaking a lot of records and was now using that fame to sell shiny grasshopper-coloured handpieces, put the microphone down and pulled the boy out of gear. The lamb had pissed itself all over the stage and was jerking back and forth now as it tried to stand on its ruined hind leg. An unshorn tuft of wool remained, covering its nubby tail. The fifth and final learner stood up and fearlessly approached the stage. The boy moved aside. A lot of people laughed and drank from their glasses.

Last competitor of the day was Nick Cant. That was an honour extended to all defending champions and patron saints. Learners. Intermediates. Opens. Patron saints. Last stroke of
the day. And when it was finished he was champion of virgins and their privates for a fifth year. Thirty seconds was a good time for him to have won with. The next best had been thirty-three, which had looked unbeatable for a large part of the afternoon. In the learner division the best time had been one minute and one second and that had belonged to the fearless fifth competitor. After the presentations were completed Nick Cant took his cheque for five hundred dollars and turned it over to Gritter. It became loud-mouthed cash, black eye money, money he could betray himself with. The beer garden became a place for women only.

The old man was no longer just gone. Nor marvellous. Nor peaceful. He had been drinking since ten o’clock and was now steeped in appropriateness. God-fearing, idol-mongering, self-sacrificing appropriateness. He had made promises in the order of being the last surviving barfly and over left on the earth—definitely the last one still shearing—and being so, he would challenge anyone for a take at the title. Gritter had told him that no one would ever come close—not even the boy—and he had even gone so far as to make a public summons for anybody who thought they could take the title from the old bastard to come forward. No one thought they could. Some of them bought double quantity drinks for the prize fighter, trying to knock him out on the sly, but none of them would challenge him openly and in full show.

At six o’clock Nick Cant was a little gone, also. Nine beers gone. Nothing too dramatic. His appropriateness was less assured and less ridiculous than the old man’s and was directed not so much toward himself but more toward the two women sitting at a table nearby. They were the only two women sitting inside the pub and they were not any uglier than the ones who were relegated by their boyfriends and husbands to the beer
garden outside. The two women were both sipping their drinks through a straw and one of them was skinny and sipping a bourbon and coke and the other was fatter and sipping a soda water with nothing so detrimental as alcohol or sugar in it. This fatter one was eating original-flavoured chips from a torn-open bag, also, and she was eating them at a painfully slow pace, completely sucking the salt from each one as she held onto its edge with an ant’s grip.

The skinny woman was called Mel. Nick Cant had screwed her a couple of times already. She lived in a house behind the primary school. She did not have a car or a licence. The fat friend had a car and a licence. And she had very big ones, this fat one. Even for her size they were very big. When she laughed inwardly and soundlessly, facing front-on to Nick Cant, they did not move or jiggle about, just pressed together and looked bigger. Mel’s were flat and useless looking. Mel’s shoes were flat, too, and looked unpolished, and her hair was pulled tight. The fat one wore her hair out and it was shoulder-length and thin.

‘You have big tits,’ Nick Cant said to her when he could take it no longer.

‘And you have a small dick,’ Mel spat back at him. The fat one did not spit anything, just sucked more salt.

‘Wasn’t talking to you, princess,’ Nick Cant said.

‘Good. Don’t talk to either of us, pindick.’

That was that. Nick Cant returned to where he had been sitting and the fat one giggled and pressed her big ones together some more and did not make any sound.

Two beers later Nick Cant decided to broach the topic again.

‘You two lesbians or something?’ he said.
The fat one did not look at him and waited for Mel, the skinny one, to answer. It was very loud inside the pub at this point. Some shearers who had taken their singlets off were singing irregular couplets from *Advance Australia Fair*.

‘You would turn anyone to a lesbian, Nick.’

‘What’s the matter with your girlfriend? Doesn’t she know how to speak?’

‘She doesn’t speak to pindicks.’

‘Does she speak to lesbian no-tits? Tell her that her tits are too big to waste on a skinny little no-tits like you, Mel. Tell her if she is a lesbian and wants to see some pussy getting screwed, then she can watch me screw yours and then I will screw hers as well. That should get her off.’

The fat one spoke up for herself then, saying she did not want to see some of anything getting anythinged and she would appreciate it if Nick Cant would get lost. It was by no means a forceful recommendation and Nick Cant was by no means forcefully recommended.

‘Are you frigid, or just self-righteous?’ he asked her. ‘Because you can fix self-righteousness.’ The boy had heard Nick Cant discuss the finer points of self-righteousness and frigidness before and after listening to him the boy had considered that the two traits were very much the same thing, only one was more determined than the other. And where was the boy now?

The fat one became a little less timid then and asked Nick Cant whether he was really as big a pindick as her skinny friend said he was, or whether he was just too stupid to know where to put it. Both her and her skinny no-licence friend chuckled and Nick Cant pulled the instrument in question out through his unzipped fly and swung it around
in front of them, accentuating its size by means of centrifuge. Both of them stopped laughing and looked disgusted.

‘Those big tits of yours are very self-righteous when they are not being pushed together,’ Nick Cant said, to mark the moment.

The skinny one threw her bourbon and coke over his skipping rope appendage and told him to find someone else to lick it clean. Nick Cant used the fat one’s soda water to wash the bourbon and coke off. He left the two of them without anything to sip on and the shirtless men sang, in history’s page and every page and advance Australia fair!

The old man had been drinking since six five four three two one twelve eleven ten o’clock and was very appropriately drunk and was sitting at his spot at the bar. Marvellous and superb were out the window now; it was all pissing and technical and knockout talk.

‘Pissing yourself is a technical knockout, Nick,’ he said when Nick Cant approached him and sat beside him, wet crotch and fly still unzipped. To the other side of the old man a guy with thick sideburns punched another guy with sideburns in the ribs and they both started laughing. The puncher had a tattoo of a snake on his upper arm. The punchee had a tattoo of a snake on his upper opposite arm. Both snakes were brothers, by the looks.

‘I thought pissing yourself was first step in becoming champion, old man?’ Nick Cant replied.

‘Pissing yourself is only first step in becoming champion of shitting yourself,’ the old man told him.

‘Are you the champion of that, too, old man?’
The group of men standing to Nick Cant’s side had noticed his wet patch and were joking amongst themselves and trying to tip beer over each other. Gritter was taking orders for every spilt beer and some of the beers were being repoured into the same glass and the people drinking them did not seem to care or even notice. Eventually one of them broke through and managed to wet his brother’s crotch with a full schooner of beer. The others thought this made him Nick Cant’s brother and they tapped Nick Cant on the back saying, look here, you and him must be brothers. It was becoming quite rowdy and there was a lot of this brotherising going on. Perhaps brotherising is a trait for all damn whities to employ proudly and drunkenly. You must not think of that, though. Damn whities are a thing of the future, been and gone. Just think of it as plain, healthy brotherising for now.

‘I am champion of lots of things, Nick. I was once champion of screwing gins, you know?’ You damn old man.

The old man had a habit of discussing his greatest achievements when he was at his most appropriate and most modest. He would boast of the type of depravity that could not have been exaggerated and the boy would listen to him from his seat by the window and tell himself that one day he would have to bury this old man and there would be no gravestone big enough to write a suitable epitaph and then smash down and leave in broken fragments all over the ground as he would wish. A smashed up gravestone was the image the boy most often envisaged when he tried to visualise his father’s perspective and personality and all the other intangible qualities: corner pieces which fitted nicely into the palm of his hand and had sharp stony edges, himself throwing the pieces at other, still-standing headstones, knocking them down with one good hit. All of it very symbolic and pointless, he was sure.
After cutting the lamb’s hamstring the boy had run home. It had taken him half an hour to run home. He had run lightly along the railway tracks, his feet rarely touching on those blue-coloured rocks which were laid unevenly between sleepers. Half an hour. And how long was it taking him to walk back in the other direction? Ask him. How long were you gone for, boy? You chained that dog up while you were there? Fed her? You would not have forgotten to do that, would you, boy? What else were you up to? Why are you so heavy-footed and eager to get back? Nearly there. Your father has been drinking since ten o’clock and is very drunk and is acting champion of barflies and gins and you may take some consolation in the victories he is having. You have had some victories of your own, surely. Your obedient stomach is your night’s best victory.

‘The skinny one with no tits doesn’t have any tits,’ Nick Cant repeated himself, more insistently this time.

‘Does she have a hole between her legs, Nick?’

‘She has two holes between her legs, old man. No tits on her chest, though, old man.’

The boy came in the side entrance. The side entrance of the pub was reserved for people who liked using side entrances. The boy told himself he was the kind who liked using side entrances. Nobody seemed to notice him. He slammed the door loudly and still they did not notice. Only a gentleman with a soft drink in his hand noticed. Fuck the gentleman with the soft drink in his hand. Gentlemen with soft drinks in their hands were not the kind. Nick Cant was the kind who liked using side entrances. Nick Cant is over there, the boy told himself. I know he is, the boy told himself. He slugged his way past the teetotaller who was not the kind. Some piss-ant with gravy on his chin went, ouch,
and grabbed hold of his hamstring and laughed and the boy ignored him. The piss-ant’s mate went, ouch, also. Ha, ha, ha. The boy ignored him. Another guy went, watch out for them hamstrings, young fella, and put his hand on the boy’s shoulder. The boy ignored them all.

‘Nick.’ The boy called out. That will shut them up, he told himself, opening his stride some. Nobody got out of his path and some of the ones he bumped into did not seem to notice they had been bumped into until their friends standing beside them pointed out that it was that abo kid who had hamstrung the lamb and then run off looking like he was going to burst into tears. ‘Hey. Nick.’

Nick Cant and the old man both peered around. The boy grinned back at them. Damn idiot. He chided himself for grinning back at them. For not being as he had planned to be. Ugly and full of sarcasm. Sitting by himself at the bar ordering drinks without even speaking just motioning the pile of coins laid out in front of him. Probably some spew on his chin from where he could not have been bothered. And a guy with big muscles and snake tattoos telling his friend in the background that that kid over there should give up on shearing and take up on fulltime drinking, look at the bastard go.

‘Featherweight champion of hamstrings,’ the old man said. That is the sort of sarcasm, boy. ‘You look like you’ve had your dick stuck in a pot of honey, featherweight champion of hamstrings. Why are you so fucking impressed and happy for, featherweight champion of hamstrings? Where have you been?’

‘He is happy because he is featherweight champion of hamstrings and he has been impressing himself into a pot of honey,’ Nick Cant said. ‘He is champion of pots of honey now, too. What comes after pots of honey, old man?’
‘Arseholes and jam,’ the old man answered. He and Nick Cant laughed.

The boy did not answer anything. Do not ruin it, he told himself. He could not help from ruining it. The taste inside him was making him ruin all his big plans. It had ruined his big say nothing just sit there with a scowl and pile of money plan. It had ruined his first wait here until it is finished and then walk in with it tucked empty under your arm and sit scowling plan. It had turned both these plans into a new and combined leave it here at the edge of the tracks carefully so that it does not tip over and spill everywhere and that way you can finish it on your way home after you have grinned your way in and out of the pub plan.

‘Are you champions of arseholes and jam, too, boy?’ Nick Cant said. ‘Or just champion of impressing yourself into pots of honey?’

Talk about impressing yourself was pretty common. So was talk about impressing arseholes and honey. The old man no longer bothered with impressing arseholes and honey—not even the ones you paid to impress. Mel, the skinny no-tits was not really one of these sorts, but she had no car and no licence and her fat friend was not always at hand and sometimes when she was out of money she would allow herself to be impressed by somebody’s generosity and when they had finished impressing her and themself she would ask them for a lift to Young so that she could visit her sometimes boyfriend who could not come to Bribbaree because of the apprehended violence order she had taken out on him. The boyfriend was an unimpressive bastard who worked at the abattoir. Fists and meat were the only things that impressed the unimpressive boyfriend. Nick Cant and he had tried impressive-swapping at last year’s quickshear.

‘At least I am not champion of impressing gins,’ the boy said to his father.
Nick Cant went, slurp-slurp-slurp.

The first time the boy impressed himself it was listening to the too-old old man with one of those proper paid-for types. It was several years ago against his bedroom wall and it was ugly because he did not know what he was doing. The old man was not too old for impressing anything then and the boy was just old enough. He did not do it right this first time, though, and it hurt as much as it felt good. To begin with it hurt much more than it felt good, then it hurt and felt good the same, then the goodness was the only thing, and then he did not know whether it had really ever felt that good, or even whether it had hurt to begin with. It was a yellow-coloured memory and a difficult one of which to be certain.

‘I am too old to be champion of impressing anybody now,’ the old man responded to the boy’s comment.

The old man had been drinking devoutly since early this morning. Since ten o’clock. He was very drunk and the boy could see this and felt that he was brothers with the old man because of it. The boy had run home and walked back by himself and the old man had not left his seat—even for a piss—and the boy thought that this sort of dedication made them both brothers many times over. It was a long way to walk. Have you walked it, brother? I stayed here and paced round and round this glass, brother. Okay, brother. Does that make us brothers, brother? Our stomachs make us brothers, brother—not our legs. Good, then: we are brothers, brother. How do you know I have not left my seat, brother?

‘But seeing as though you are the new champion of everything, my boy, you might like to be champion of not acting like a smartarse abo cunt,’ the old man continued,
after having taken a skol-length sip. ‘Why don’t you try your hand at being champion of
fucking off before I stand up off my chair and make you champion of swallowing your
own tongue in front of everyone?’

The old man spoke quietly and emphatically and the boy did not feel they were
brothers at all now. Very quickly he felt that his only brother was the dog he had kicked
in the head for refusing to drink. You have not forgotten to chain that thing up, have you?

‘You can be champion of making me swallow my tongue,’ the boy answered
back. Nick Cant went, slurp-slurp-suck. It was the stuff in the boy’s stomach that was his
brother now, and his brother was commanding him to laugh at the threat in spite of
himself and it was telling him that this laughing was the great self-condemner’s trick.
You have it now, he told himself, enjoying the grin on his face which was not cordial and
friendly as he had first despairsed, but absolutely spiteful and ugly and perfect. ‘Can you
also be champion of teaching me how to screw gins and end up raising their bastard
sons?’ And the bottle left sitting carefully at the side of the tracks was much more than
half-finished and the lamb with the cut hamstring was much more than just fucked and
Nick Cant was more than just slurping spit off his top lip and the littlest gin sent to
hospital by the pisser copper was much more than just bleeding onto the brain—she was
pregnant, also.

‘Yes, I will teach you how,’ the old man said. He took his wallet from his back
pocket and produced a single twenty-dollar from its leather gills. ‘Take this with you and
tell that no-tits friend of Nick’s over there that you would like to beat the hell out of
yourself and would she mind in letting you do it with her. Tell her twenty dollars is much
more than any poor old gin gets for touching her toes.’
‘I’ve got my own money for that,’ the boy said. He put his hand into his back pocket and took out a bundle of money. Maybe a thousand dollars. At least nine hundred. He had collected and counted it from the sock drawer where all of his cheques and cash wages went. Both men laughed and the old man put his miserly twenty dollars on the bar. Gritter soon poured him another and the pub was very full. Someone screamed, fuck off! and that was followed by a lot of cheers.

The boy had learned to distinguish the proper types from these ones like Mel a long time ago. The proper sort did not care what the old man said or how drunk he was when they arrived, and they always made certain the bedroom door was closed and the car doors were locked. Often the boy felt the desire to slip into the backseat of a paid for’s vehicle and jerk himself while his father had her glistening over the headboard of his bed. When he found the car was locked he would retreat back to the house and pivot himself against the wall where he first began his brilliant career. These proper sorts were never as loud with the old man as the ones like Mel—who were forced to take some enjoyment from the act in order to compensate for the small tender they had secured. Though, the old man was always louder when he was with them. The boy thought loudness had something to do with money. He appreciated, also, that the old man had the same contempt for one lot as he did for the other now, and it was the sort somebody will have for a thing they know they do not need.

‘I hope you get the fat one with big tits for that as well,’ Nick Cant said to the boy. ‘Tell her she has big tits and you may get her for free. She likes watching pussy getting screwed, I think. That is too much money even for the both of them. Put some of it away, boy.’
Nick Cant was narrow champion of proper types. Narrow over Ray. Ray was not here. He was at his nephew’s christening. His nephew had a head this big. Nick Cant laughed. There was a proper who visited town twice a month from Wagga and she was Nick Cant’s favourite. She was Ray’s favourite, too. She had an ad in the classified section of the paper and in the ad she was called Abby blonde and trim and she would come to your house or meet you somewhere discreet for romance and fantasy with three Xs and a mobile phone number which was easy to remember because it contained only fours and zeros and ones. How many times had the boy thought of calling that number? Nick Cant said Abby’s real name was Fiona and Ray said it was Rachel. The two of them were always going on about what her real name was and who had been the first to nail her and who would be nailing her next and nailing her so hard she would have triple orgasms and have to take a week off just to get over it. You needed a big one to make these proper sorts have triple orgasms, and Nick Cant could make her have them every time. So could Ray. The boy thought her real name was probably not Fiona or Rachel. He imagined it to be something like Debbie. A secret she would only reveal after someone had managed to give her quadruple orgasms.

‘He shouldn’t be in here if he’s been on the piss,’ Gritter interrupted. It was very noisy and Gritter was very busy and all three of them stopped looking at the skinny one with no tits and the fat one with big tits and looked at Gritter. ‘I’ll lose my licence,’ Gritter said, finishing off a beer for someone.

‘This here is the champion of propositioning women,’ Nick Cant said to the publican. ‘You could not kick him out after that.’ He slapped his hand down on the boy’s shoulder.
‘You keep an eye on him. You, old man. You hear me?’

‘I am too old to stop him,’ the old man said to Gritter.

‘You knew he would take you,’ Gritter replied.

‘I knew he would take me and you knew it, too, Grits. Did you know it, boy?’

The boy grinned and did not know it.

Before the proper ones with three Xs and the not-proper ones with no Xs, there was Trisha. She was a not-at-all one. In five years the old man did not ever hit or treat Trisha poorly. If they fought he would restrain himself and allow her to call him all sorts of names. He would only sit there and laugh and drink, and when she came out with a good one he would clap and say good one, whore. The day she decided to leave, though, packing her clothes into a garbage bag and her makeup supplies into a red plastic bucket with no handle, the old man could not restrain himself from grabbing her by the whore hair and pulling her whore head down against the kitchen table. He put the end of the rifle up to her whore temple and she screamed and cocked her whore legs and tried to back-kick him like an ostrich. The old man told her she should stop carrying on like a woman who wanted to have the end of a rifle pointed at her face if she did not want to have the end of a rifle pointed at her face. That blubbering mascaraed whore eye, with the barrel end almost touching it, which looked like a horse’s because of how big and unblinking and panicked it was, was something the boy still remembered perfectly and without ever meaning to.

The champion of propositioning women approached the table.
‘What do you want, pindick? Did your pindick boyfriend send you over here to show us your pindick?’ The skinny one with no tits leaned over and stuck her middle finger up. Nick Cant laughed and waved back.

‘No,’ the boy answered.

‘No,’ the skinny one with no tits meekly impersonated. She began crunching ice from the bottom of her glass. ‘Do you need a babysitter, then?’ Both her and the fatty with big ones laughed and the boy could hear Nick Cant and his father laughing, also. He put his hand on the turd of cash in the back of his pants, the steaming brick of twenty-dollar notes. More than nine hundred dollars in cash. Hamstring money. He pulled a single twenty out and sat it on the table.

‘Tell your faggot father I would not let him fuck me if he had a gold dick,’ the skinny one retaliated, raising her finger again. She brushed the twenty off and onto the floor and the fat one pursed her lips and sucked through her straw.

‘You are making us look bad, champion of propositioning women,’ the old man called.

The boy turned and then turned back. He put his hand into his pocket again and retrieved the entirety of the money. He laid it on the table and it stood bright and clean and tall, as a wad of cash should stand, a red throbbing pillar between Sampson and Zeus. The skinny one with no tits and no licence, who was skinny and teethey and yellow-fingered, put her hand on it like a card player. The boy felt himself go erect and she laughed.
Like a school camping trip when he was eleven. Five other boys in the tent, all of them bragging about movies they had found in their brothers’ and fathers’ sock drawers, pulling the folded video jackets from the bottoms of their bags for proof, violating them with torches and greasy thumbs. And then, when they were sure he was the first asleep, the torches were switched off and there was creeping and laughing and pouring same-sock-drawer aftershave on his face and erect crotch. He could hear the laughing, but he was dreaming now. In his dream it was rain: they were laughing storm clouds over him. The deluge was hot and it was cold. It ran past his eyes and into his ears, down his arse crack. It made him say things. Sad things. Vivid things. Violent things. They became worried and one of them shook him awake. He sat straight up, still talking dangerously, then stopped and looked around. They knew that meant he was okay and they quickly remembered how funny it was. The one who had done the shaking got his nerve back and focused a light into the eyes, interrogating him with questions about snakebites and lightning strikes. All of them seemed privy to the joke. He rolled over and tried to pretend he was asleep. He knew what was coming. He tried to breathe it all in. A minute later it did come: first to him, then to everyone else. Too much for one set of lungs. The sour waft of semen through the polyester sleeping bag, sickening the scent of the aftershave. It filled the tent. The laughter became revolting. A teacher opened the flap and took him to the cabin where the girls were sleeping and called his father. It was the middle of the night and he was teary when the old man arrived. They had made him remove his pants and he had a towel around his waist.

The whore with no tits, whose friend had big tits and a soundless laughter and did not drink anything other than soda water or eat anything other than chips which she
sucked back to saltless greaseless transparent slithers of plain vegetable, told the boy to hold it upways and be careful then. She told him if he spilt any out of the end he would owe her money for cleaning. The boy took it off carefully and carried it to the toilet bowl. He dropped it in and it stuck to the side like an animal’s tongue: a camel’s, he thought, yellow and thirsty. He decided to take a piss while he was standing there. Naturally he aimed his thing at the tongue and the stream of urine quickly peeled it away and emptied it into the water. After pissing he crawled into the bathtub and fell asleep. Outside the bedroom his father was waiting to fuck this part-time whore the remaining degrees’ worth.
‘You fuck-damn whitie.’ The gin will snatch the glass out of the fuck-damn whitie’s hand and splash the remainder of its contents onto the floor at his feet. ‘You listen to me, you fuck-damn whitie,’ she will say. Some of the other fuck-damn whities will look on from across the room and will grin and call out. Perhaps they will be sitting too far away to hear anything the gin is saying. They will keep grinning and calling, nonetheless: assured with their own ideas of what is being exchanged between brother and sister this late Sunday afternoon.

The fuck-damn whitie brother will take his fuck-damn glass away from his gin sister and place it down on the bar and will grin along, also.

‘You are becoming whiter every day,’ he will congratulate her.

‘What did you do to that littlest one, you fuck-damn whitie?’ she will swear back at him.

He will smile all the way through. The greys of his eyes will become silver and spoon-bottomed.

‘When you talk like that it makes me think I would like to rub the back of my hand against your face—just to make sure that you are not made of porcelain,’ he will tell her.

At that the gin will spit directly into his lap, propelling the shot at him with her stomach muscles, with her back muscles and calf muscles and thigh muscles, with the balls of her feet.

‘You fuck-damn cunt,’ she will say. It will sit in his lap, organic as a hailstone or an algae. It will shine up at him like an endangered spore.
He will pick up the empty glass again and use it to scrape away and preserve the shining specimen. When he has it captured he will turn the glass vertical and hold it to the light and the spit will run down the side and melt into the thin film of liquid remained in the bottom. He will lower the glass then and swirl it beneath his nose like it contained a fine brandy or a port or some other protected species of liquor.

‘That damn father is arrested,’ the gin will hiss at him.

The spit will have freckles of black through it. Signs of its vintage, perhaps. Or of its maker. He will swirl it again and try to determine which.

‘You listening to me, you cunt-damn cunt?’

‘Was it for cattle rustling?’ the cunt-damn cunt will ask without raising his head or his voice and without acknowledging her sudden metamorphosis—as if language were as physically determining as, say, colour.

‘Don’t you talk stupid to me.’ The cunt-damn gin will lift and tighten and draw from her gut and he will sense it coming this time. He will look up with those silver eyes and she will shrink back into her bare and plain-damn heels. ‘That littlest one is all the way in Brisbane in hospital, you goddamn,’ she will say, taming herself a little. ‘And that goddamn copper who was just around asking me about it says it was from getting slogged over the head by that damn father of hers and that damn father hasn’t got enough brains in his head to slog no one over the head and I know it as well as you know it, you fuck-damn, you. You fuck-damn. And I will tell them, too. I know it wasn’t that lazy father.’

The fuck-damn goddamn and so on will put his hand on her backside and squeeze the cheeks together sexily and draw her in close to him.
‘You are a sexy little sister when you are mad and threatening like this,’ he will whisper to her. ‘I did not ever think that I would have such a sexy sister talking all sexy to me. It makes me feel like I am in love again. Is this what love feels like? Touch this and tell me if you think this is what love feels like.’

The gin will slap at his hand, all sexy and mad and sexy. He will keep gripping on sexily, grinding his knee into her crotch as he does.

‘You let go, you damn whitie.’ He will squeeze harder and more sexily on his hand. She will use her fingernails to try and cut his grip open. The skin will be too tough for her short nail-ends. ‘Let go or I will tell them coppers the truth, all right. That damn father they’ve got arrested has already told them the truth about you and how you come looking for that littlest one while I was away, and they asked me if I knew anything, all right. Next time I will tell them the lot. You can believe that. If you don’t give me some more right now, then I will tell them for sure. Two hundred dollars or you will end up in gaol with the rest of them abusers and rapers and you let go of me or—’

‘Okay,’ the abuser-raper-rapist will chuckle. He will let go of his sister’s arse and she will start away like a dog which has been held onto and kicked relentlessly and finally released. ‘One hundred for that littlest one,’ he will say; he will lick five twenty-dollar notes from his wallet and hold them out for gin to collect. She will be hesitant. She will need to sniff them first. She need to will circle closer and then carefully put her hand out so that he can count them in. ‘Twenty, forty, sixty, eighty, one hundred,’ he will count them. When he is finished the first five he will dip his fingers back inside the wallet. ‘Now for her older sister.’ This time he will pull out a single twenty. The gin will make a grab at the money and he will catch her hand and keep it in a charitable lock. ‘I
do no think that oldest one will be needing the money so much anymore. Do you?

He will let go and she will glare through into his chest, into his heart which beats as crudely as a fuel pump. Her throat will inflate until it is half its length and twice its width. When the air releases it will force a croaking sound from behind her tonsils. The fuck-damn whitie will laugh loudly and some of the other whities who perhaps cannot hear will laugh, also, and the fuck-damner will put the final twenty into the gin’s hand and let her walk out of the bar. Some negotiator, he will say to himself. Some twelve year old, one of the other fuck-dammers will say to him.

The next day he will collect his things and leave town. All aboard the fast-flowing slick of Queensland bitumen. Watch it gargle its way into New South Wales, dog and all. Out of the belly and through the arsehole. The fingermarks he leaves on his way out will be deep enough to draw blood.

The harvester whities who cluster in October will be a very different kettle to the shearer whities. The gin will have transformed herself easily for the shearer whities. Overnight she will have become everything they desired: a heaving platitude of hormones and cunt, a rapegoat for every one she could procure, every one who wished to laugh himself off inside her, wished to have his final twenty fifteen ten dollars spent before leaving town. It will have been a profitable time for the gin. Her popularity unequalled during the last week of April. The seize-use-and-tease business will have belonged to her. All this will have resulted from Graham’s confession. It is true, he will have told his peers after she walked out of the pub clutching onto his one hundred and twenty: I have fallen in love with the rotten old gin. Littlest girl this big never even existed. I hope you were not
planning to marry her, Graham? Not any longer, he will have answered.

Unlike the shearers, though, the harvester whities will have neither comeuppance nor mockery fuelling them toward her mythological cunthole: only boredom and whim and bad weather. At night she will stalk the town with her fingers and toes curled to three-quarter fists. She will loiter outside the pub like a gargoyle clinging to the steep lip of a cathedral, impatiently awaiting some tourist to leave so that she might swoop down and take hold of him by his tiny head and fly him off into the outer arrondissements to devour wholly. The few she does manage to catch and return home with will inevitably turn the attack and staple into her like she were a wet mattress. They will countershank themselves into ejaculation and then stand up and sidle along the hall to the bathroom where they can piss lethargically and half-erect into the toilet. The toilet will be missing its seat and will not have been flushed in months. Beside the toilet will be a bathtub lined with dust. Someone will have used their finger to inscribe the words, I was here first. Instead of perching over the bowl or bathtub herself, practising the contraception tricks she once tried teaching her daughters, the gin will stay lying on the floor of the bedroom like the same said mattress which may be eternally spurted into without ever needing to be wrung dry. The semen she keeps tucked up inside will make her bloat and fart and cuss.

Between lays, when the gin is not out on the prowl, she will loll about semi-naked, scratching and farting and talking to herself aloud. You hurry up, you damn girl, she will curse at the intervals of silence and almost-sleep which come over her. She will have faced the mirror away from the bed and one of her elbows will be infected and weeping. She will have an itchy heat rash all over her left palm—her money-grabbing
hand—and a yeast infection between her legs. Often when she is in the bathroom tending
the infections she will catch a glimpse of the words in the bottom of the tub and she will
say, damn lazy father. Presumably she will not know who etched them or what they say.
Perhaps she will suspect that littlest girl put them there. That damn lazy father was
always going on about what a good reader he was and how he was going to make a good
reader out of that littlest one, also. If the old gin were to look through his book of cattle
rustlers, still sitting on the floor just inside the bedroom where he was handcuffed and
taken away by that damn police copper, then she would come across the word ranch
underlined at every appearance. Ranches being what them Americans call farms.

It will be during this harvest period that the tall, bun-haired lady from the hospital
will begin making her visits. She will speak to the crow as if she were speaking to the
mother of a truant schoolchild. Who are you going to believe? the crow will argue back
with her. Damn girl probably has brain damage from getting slogged over the head by
that damn father of hers. I already told that damn police copper what happened. You tell
her. The police copper will stand alongside the bun-haired lady and will not verify or
refute anything the crow says. He will have learned a lot since taking his posting in this
town. Sometimes he will make notes in his prim little pocket book, and then scribble
them back out. He will have learned a lot since taking his posting in this town.

The bun will begin to make her visits more and more frequently as the due date
draws nearer. Sometimes she will arrive alone, without the police officer. She will bring
ultrasound images for the gin to view, as well as drawings the littlest one has made from
her hospital bed. She will read the text at the bottom of each drawing. This is me and my
sister Caitlin. She has longer hair than me and her t-shirt has dolphins on it. This is us
playing with our pushbike. The gin will not bother sitting up to view the pictures and she
will not care that the bun can see her bare industrious slot with its big-business grin and
gummy infection, nor that she can smell the clammy rations of cash she clutches onto
dishonestly. Never was no damn sister called Caitlin, she will mantra, adjusting herself to
more repelling positions for her visitor’s benefit: spread arseholes and crustacean-gill
genital lips. That girl has got brain damage. You doctors should be fixing that, not
coming to see me every five seconds. And never mind the damn colouring-ins, how about
bringing some smokes with you? No? Piss off, then. Damn whitie woman. The damn
whitie woman will become desperate. The gin will be relentless, though. Eventually the
damn whitie woman who is not a doctor will relinquish her efforts. She will leave the
ultrasound images and drawings in a pile just inside the bedroom door, on top of that
damn father’s book about cattle rustlers.

By late January the boy on top of the pile will be at the end of his gestation. His
mother’s favourite things about hospital life will be, um, colouring in with textas,
watching video cassettes—especially funny ones, and having baths. The hospital tubs
will be the size of par-five sand bunkers. Doctors will be expecting her to carry through
till the very end of the month. They would not be surprised if she went a little longer,
even. A first pregnancy like this, there is no telling. They will be engaged in serious
discussions with their welfare counterparts, these doctors, carefully prefacing all of their
judgements and forecasts with, at this stage…in my professional opinion…well,
medically speaking… For their part the welfare trotters will be recommending likewise:
for the sake of mother and child…if it were a question of morality…in this case, the
law… In the end all decisions will be diluted and reported back to the boy’s mother,
whose least favourite things will be, um, cubes of fruit set in orange-coloured jelly, adults
coughing too much at nighttimes, and still not being allowed to see her sister.

While the gin is refusing to corroborate with the bun-haired trotter and the littlest
girl who was not ever taught to read so much as the word ranch by her damn father is
instead being taught to read the alphabet and to breastfeed by those damn nurses with
their damn dummy dolls and the damn father who was too lazy for bashing anyone over
the head or teaching them anything is being taught to correct his ways by those damn
prison authorities, Graham will be lying dormant in Bribbaree. His littlest-littlest will
visit him almost nightly. She will come from her hospital bed all petite and sexy and
brain-damaged—just as he left her, her froglike calf muscles and greyhound’s sphincter
providing him with something to mull and jerk over because he is too stubborn to pay for
anything realer or more local. Too in love maybe. Did you consider that? Surely there are
plenty of part-time types who could teach him about love? Not this kind of love. Just
imagine the littlest lying up all sexy in some soft white hospital bed, yourself. Imagine
climbing in, punching her into spasms of respiratory rhythm and brain-clot ecstasy, the
breathing machines beeping with excitement, the intravenous drip going, glug-glug-glug.
Yes, why not imagine it two or three times a day—until you are chafed and cramped
from all the exercise? Now, do you call that a part-time love? And, if gripping onto that
obstinate thing of yours, you had the periphery to see her as not even her mother has seen
her yet—practice doll snuggled into her bosom, nurse telling her nice and close, ankles
swollen to the size of knee joints—then you would be forgiven for turning the end on
yourself in absolute despair. You would pull it away from the toilet bowl or shower drain
and aim it against your temple, with the intent of firing treachery and memory into
splinters of magnetic light, dandelion pins, phosphorus addition-subtraction codes.

That practice doll that would have driven you to such heights will be called Caitlin. At least that is what Belinda will call it. Binni-Belinda. She will put her lips to its shallow and plastic ear canal and tell it she loves it. Love in all its nuances now. You would have seen it all. The doll will listen and will not say a thing—only open its eyes for a moment and then go back to sleep. It will be a fulltime resident of the hospital, this doll, a frequent participant in antenatal classes where first-time dads worried about injuring their own babes learn the correct way to burp and bathe and put to bed. It will be a smooth and hairless thing, with pale skin and pert cheeks and eyelids that open and close depending on the angle at which it is held. A horizontal babe is an eyes-closed babe. All too easy, dad.

‘Caitlin is a pretty name for a baby girl,’ a duty nurse will say to Belinda.

Belinda will study the doll’s blue attire, as if colour, like language, were something which permitted interpretation. You would study it along with her and be willing to go with whatever she decides.

‘Caitlin can be a boy’s name or a girl’s name,’ she will explain to the nurse. Yes, yes, you would agree, nodding that thing of yours back and forth in your hand, like it had a mouth for speaking and singing, aye. Caitlin is perfect and perfection and perfected, you would have it lip-sync.

‘Oh, I did not know that,’ the nurse will say. Belinda will stroke the doll’s chin and look pleased. The nurse will step forward a little. You would feel the swell beginning in the bottom of your prostate. You would shake that thing and make it scream like a kitten. ‘Just a little higher,’ the nurse will go on. You would feel yourself becoming bowy

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in the spine, elastic in the marrow. You would ask yourself if it was ecstasy or cancer setting in. You would not care. The nurse will position her own hand under the crown of the doll’s head, raising it into Belinda’s swollen chest. ‘Like this. When your real baby comes it will need you to hold its head a little higher. To support it.’

‘Caitlin can be a cat’s name as well as a boy’s name,’ Belinda will add. Goddamn you, girl.

‘That’s it,’ the nurse will say, ignoring the statement and allowing the doll to rest in the girl’s arms alone. You would not be able to help yourself after that. You would be in there, too. You would have your thumb in the thing’s eye socket, gripping from the inside of its plastic skull. It would blink mechanically and you would wrap the remainder of your claw over the top of its cranium the way an eagle wraps its claw over an ostrich’s egg; you would be the skeletal jaws of a rocking chair, back and forth and back.

‘Because once I had a dream that I had a cat called Caitlin, and I tied a piece of string around its neck so that it would not get lost,’ the girl will go on excitedly.

‘Oh, my.’ The nurse will look shocked and amused and protective.

‘But a real baby can’t get lost because it can’t walk yet,’ the girl will comfort her. The nurse will put her hand on the girl’s stomach and smile. You would let go of the doll’s head and bite onto that nurse’s terrible childless tit if you could. You would draw blood, reader. You would give her nine or ten teeth marks, all of them in a row. Each bite-hole would have its own name and birth date.

‘Is it confusing for you to know so many Caitlins?’

Shut up you cunt-damn nurse.

The girl will shake her shiny sugar-ant of a head.
‘No, because I already have one sister and one cat and one baby called Caitlin and it is not confusing at all.’

Nurse: ‘I thought the cat was just a dream?’
Girl: ‘The cat was just a dream.’
Nurse: ‘I think maybe you should decide on some boys’ names, just in case.’
The girl will pull the blanket up over herself and her baby doll called Caitlin.
‘I do not think that my real baby will be a boy,’ she will respond.
‘Why not?’
‘Because,’ she will answer just so-ly. And at this moment you would mash down upon the babe-doll’s tiny fabric body. In here the girl will be called Belinda and she will already have one babe and one sister and one cat called Caitlin and instinct is a goddamned liar and you would be Graham’s brother in orgasm.

And anyway, instinct is for women and dogs. Your orgasm brother will tell himself this while he is lying in his bed in Bribbaree. Both of you trying to get to sleep now. That sheepdog he allows inside the house each night, so that it may sleep with its head rested on the cool bricks surrounding the fireplace will be a bitch dog riddled with instinct. He will tell himself this, also. She will be the offspring of another instinct bitch. And another before that. She will be a black and tan creature like her predecessors, with one permanently alert ear and one page-marker. The alert ear will not miss a thing. She will be using it to patrol the house this moment. A possum in the roof will have her turning on the spot directly beneath; the compressor motor switching over on the meat freezer will position her front-pawed against the screen door. Finally she will not be able to resist the instinct any longer. She will ignore her master and start up with the barking
again. That is enough. Graham will get out of bed and dribble her out onto the veranda with the end of his foot. You were already half defeated before you started, he will console himself. And you.

Spoiling a dog can ruin it. Graham will return to his bed, naked and emaciated and sipping rum from the bottle in the hope of putting himself into a quick slumber. Spoiling anything can ruin it. The room will be hot—end of January hot. A woman can be ruined easiest of all. A dog has some breeding to keep it straight. Sweat beads like soldier ants hot. A woman does not have any breeding, despite what she may believe. When instinct is the force telling the dog to bark and carry on, breeding is the force warning it not to. What force does that make your foot? Spoiling a dog is not giving it a fireplace to rest its head night after night, or a clean bowl to eat and drink from, but allowing it to practise instinct in place of breeding. Every time you allow a dog to get away with acting up, instinct wins some back. Alcohol turned to fumes inside the bottle hot. He will sip and splutter and sip again. The dog will bark. In this regard, men are no different to dogs, he will tell himself. Men ruin themselves when they listen to the fairies in their pants rather than the patriarchs in their head. Now, tell yourself, goodnight.

For the next hour he will lie listening to the patriarch in his head, listening to it tell him goodnight and goodnight and goodnight. Outside the dog will continue its disobedience. Between goodnights the patriarch will advise himself to stop wasting his time listening to disobedient dogs and to fall asleep. The hot air will have greased the crevasses of his neck and caused his face to itch. He will begin to wonder then if the dog is barking at anything more than the plain and goddamned heat, anyway. And who could blame her if she is? His arse cheeks will perspire and make him think he needs to shit.
Falling asleep will seem as impossible as morning or ice.

Thirty minutes on, still sipping and spluttering and sweating, he will revert to his old man tricks for falling asleep. The alcohol by itself will not have been effective enough. What is wrong with you, old man? he will ask himself. Have you never slept in the heat before? With a dog howling and whining at fairies on the veranda, while you howl and whine at the fairies in your pants? Are you a goddamned Eskimo, old man? He will give himself a slap on the cheek.

‘Go on,’ he will half-shout, stinging himself a second time. The dog will silence for a moment. She will stand prick-eared at the screen door. Perhaps at moments like these, dogs ask themselves, is that the sound of my master taking a beating for me? ‘Go on and slap yourself stupid and maybe the heat will feel sorry for you and let you sleep, old man.’ Graham will place a sarcastic handgrip on that thermometer of his and shake it alive. ‘Wake up, you goddamned lazy bastard. The heat is here. And so am I. If I cannot sleep, then neither can you.’ The handprint on his cheek will be four-fingered and glowing in the dark. His thermometer will be four-fingered and glowing in the dark. ‘We have all night to get ourselves to sleep,’ he will tell it. ‘You and me and the goddamned heat.’

After three minutes of futile combat, of steering himself like a ship, of arm-wrestling his way across the high seas, he will throw the game away. You are too drunk for any of that sailor business, he will tell himself. The sweat beads on his knuckles will look like globules of petroleum jelly. Once a day is good enough for an old man like you, he will try solacing himself. Twice if you are lucky. The thermometer will fall limp and rejoiced. Maybe no times a day would suit you better. Do you think you are a young
sailor again? He will take another go at the battered joystick, dropping it after only a few pumps, and sipping again from the bottle. The bottle will be empty.

‘We could have ridden the storm out together.’

After a moment he will open his mouth and address the dog outside.

‘You have too much breeding in you, old dog,’ he will shout. ‘Too much for your own decency. That was a good trick for getting to sleep when you were a young dog, but what will you do now, old dog?’

This old man fool dog will continue to speak and argue with himself and his dog like this and he will not answer any of his own questions or resolve anything and eventually he will fool his mouth into believing he is asleep and then he will fool his head into believing he is asleep and finally he will fool the heat into believing he is asleep and then he will be asleep.

Women do not need breeding because they have instinct and cunt muscles. The old man will be sleeping soundly. Dogs need some breeding if they wish to sleep indoors, or even on the veranda. Men need all the breeding they can get. If his body and his tongue had not been so easily fooled and the rum had not been so ruthless and the heat had not been so debilitating, maybe he would have gone on to explain to you where breeding comes from. It starts with the car grill. Look at it, shining its shiny reflection. Then your father. Look at your father, watching and directing and smiling proudly. And the gin girl, of course. Do not forget to take her in: courteously and nonchalantly squeezing your juice out onto the ground, the insides of her thighs glistening like slugs’ flesh, the bulldust catching each drop and swallowing it under. If you and he were still awake he would remind you of the childish feeling. Childishness above all the other
feelings. How dare the bitch squat there in front of you: this is how you would justify it at the time. Stop her, stop her, stop her. That would have been his instinct screaming the oath of procreation into your ear. Out, out, out. In the other ear her instinct will have counter-screamed the oath of decontamination. At your feet a thousand tadpoles suffocating beneath the powdery crust, all of them thirsty and hungry and heroic. For a man, instinct is never so rife as the first time he dominates a woman like this. He tries to penetrate her with every part of himself. He sees his fibre and his story in each drop of semen. His preservation. He wants to fill her with it. At this moment he is an animal, a snake sleeping in the bathtub, a snarling dog with a kitten in its mouth and a gun at its head—defiant until death or gratification, whatever comes around first. This is instinct talking. When the gin girl squats down to siphon it back out with her well-formed valve muscles and her mother rubbing from behind, instinct tells him to rush forward and bash the bitch down further. Bash her down stupid, it says. Graham would tell you all about this childish and irrational feeling. He would explain to you how your father disapproves and how he puts his hand on your shoulder to keep you back. Only in your dreams would you be wild enough to ignore him completely. Instinct is the guardian of dreams and semen. Breeding is the guardian of everything else. Instinct, a matriarch. Breeding, your patriarch.

Ah, what fancy bullrot such philosophising makes for while Graham is asleep and unable to defend himself. As the first sunlight comes into the room and the clock shows the time to be thirteen minutes past six, Graham will rouse. He will tell himself that instinct is for dogs and women and boys. He will put his hand to his jaw. It will be tender. He will put it to his instinct-measuring stick. It will be rigid. Men have as much need for
dreaming as they have for ovaries, he will tell himself. His will stretch his elbows toward
the ceiling. The sour taste in his mouth will remind him of one of the more veritable
dreams he did have during the night. You have been dreaming of ovaries again. He will
try running his fingers through his hair and the wispy bits at the back of his neck will be
cked and knotted with verity. Now, you remember. But you can believe these dreams
which leave a clammy seal in the nook of your armpit and your hair smelling foul as a
clogged drain, he will permit himself. On the bedside table the bottle will catch the
sunlight and make a sailboat of it.

When he has finished cupping water over the dried spew at the back of his neck
and shoulder and right ear canal, Graham will sit down to some breakfast. Through the
closed screen door the dog will watch him eat. She will be lethargic and worn down from
barking at the heat all night long. Finally the heat will have beaten her. It will have beaten
him while he was sleeping. You were there, watching it beat him into philosophic
nightmare; it was beating you, too.

By ten o’clock the instinct will be so pure Graham’s nose will start to bleed out of
nowhere. He will return to the sink where he washed the spew from his neck and chest
and ear canal and he will let the claret run freely. When he raises his head to look in the
mirror the flow will try bridging between his nostrils and his lips. It will have intentions
of running off his chin. He will dip his head again and force it to run from the point of his
nose directly into the drainhole instead. What now, old dog? he will ask himself.

In the afternoon Graham will begin packing. He will have shoved tissue into each
nostril to stop the surge. He will begin by fastening his bedroll to the tray of the ute using
a length of chain. Looking at the bundle of eiderdown and canvas he will realise that he
has not laundered or even unfurled it since returning to Bribbaree in November. It will make him laugh aloud to remember the time he did not unfurl the mattress for three months and then found his missing wallet inside once he did. He will remember searching under the car seats, accusing the dog of eating it, like it were a piece of petrified steak. Excitement was for dogs and wallets back in those days. It still is, he will lecture himself quite sternly. Once he has secured the bedroll he will go to fetch the esky and his toolbox. While he is gone his dog will stand guard on top of the bedroll. It is some vantage for a dog to be standing on top of its master’s bedroll, looking about proudly.

‘Get down, you excited bastard,’ Graham will say when he returns from the shed with the esky in one hand and the toolbox in the other. The dog will jump down obediently.

While all this excited-unexcited packing is taking place, Graham’s littlest bride will be breathing and dilating and squeezing on the head of her plastic Caitlin doll. For her, right now, the instinct is stronger than it will ever be. It will be a long, heroic labour. You have time, Graham.

His last night in Bribbaree Graham will fall to sleep peacefully. He will dream of tomorrow. In the dream his littlest pet will come to him on bruised elbows and knees. She will rub against his legs and roll over so that he may stroke her between the brisket and arsehole. He will stroke her and she will purr. Admitting to yourself that you are in love must be better than the hundred cold showers a day? his dream-self will ask his dream-self. Must be better than pissing through an eye so tight-slit it stings like battery acid? The girl will go away then and he will wake and tell himself to go back to it and to lay off
the shower talk. You have an early start, he will tell himself. The sheepdog on patrol in
the other room. He will fall asleep again, and his littlest will return almost immediately.
She will be carrying fairy floss in her hand this time and her cheeks will have rosy paint
on them. When she gets closer to him she will reach over the fence which separates them
and scratch him behind the ear. She will climb onto the fence, then across onto his back,
and make him trot around the yard in neat little circles. In the dream the flies which try
constantly to land on his pupils, along with the mixture of tobacco and flesh which fills
his gigantic nostrils, along with the girl’s mother whipping him from the centre of his
turning circle, will begin to work him into a frenzy. Finally his dream-self will not be
able to help itself from rearing up on both back legs and trampling its rider to death. The
attack will have the girl’s body haemorrhaging red electric ones over the bulldust, all of
them very brittle and very sharp, like icicle volts inside a furnace, like match-sparks in
the middle of a snowstorm, like hoof blades in the scramble of a bushfire. In the lounge
room the sheepdog will bark at a possum and he will awaken. There will be very little
All of that. Like dogs’ brains on a hospital-grade bed sheet. Forty degrees and narrowing.
Or one hundred and forty and widening.
Can you feel it coming, sister? He was still very drunk. His eyeballs moved slowly and seemed disengaged from each other. After a few seconds they calibrated and he stared damply through them, trying his hardest to focus on a cracked wall tile just above the rim of the bathtub. The enamel beneath his cheek smelt like dry soap. It was a green-coloured bathtub: the tint one associates with oxidisation and quarantine hospitals. The boy listened with his ear and cheek pressed to its bottom. He listened for the precise moment when his father would tell her that it was really coming. He did not ask himself how he knew it was his father. He only listened. Patients listening for the sound of footsteps and keys, maybe. Submarines for the sound of battleships. Echoes dense enough to make whales beach themselves and hysterics smear shit on their own pillowcases.

In the bedroom the patriarch whipped at the metaphor like it was a Draught horse. He pulled back on that skinny woman with no tits’ hair, keeping her straight-hipped, splint-lipped and sightless. When she brayed and snorted and said that she could feel it coming he reigned back harder and told her to squeeze it out. She pushed and squeezed and tightened her flanks. The boy leaned forward and did the same.

Dilation came to the boy first. Surfacing from his intestines like an octopus. His throat burned. His pancreas burned. The acidic taste made his ears hum. It forced through again, throwing tentacles like pieces of spleen. Using his index finger and middle finger he cleared the blockages and pieces away from the plughole and heaved a third time. The showerhead dripping over his skull was truncheoning. His testicles hanging between his flanks were jowly and plum-coloured. His other bit looked widowed and cruel and breathless and happy. Twice more he went. Then nothing. Maybe you are empty, he told
himself. He could feel the mollusc working around in his gut, however, and knew this was a hopeful lie.

When he was finally convinced it had settled into a more permanent reprieve, the boy put a hand on each of the tap handles and pushed himself into a squatting position in the middle of the tub. He breathed heavily and rested his head between his knees. The woman on the bed breathed heavily. The old man driving her breathed heavily. The young girl giving birth will breathe heavily. Water leaked from the loosened tap end. The boy cupped some into his mouth to rinse the taste and retightened the handle. He was still very drunk. His movements played adjacent to his thoughts. The old man was still very drunk, too, and his movements were adjacent and vicious and enquiring. The woman was not very drunk and was swearing that she could feel it coming. The boy spat the water and counted to four. Tell me you can feel it now, sister.

It had been coming without ever actually arriving for more than twenty-five minutes for the old man. He was still very drunk. Oh, God, yes, the skinny woman with no tits promised him. Begged him. She was skinny and was not very drunk and did not have any tits save the nipples on her chest which sat out to mark the spot where tits should have been. The boy had bitten one during intercourse and she had driven a knuckle into his temple. She drove the same knuckle into the face of a stuffed animal now and shouted to convince the old man it was coming without his even knowing it. The bed was covered in stuffed animals. Perhaps she had visions of the old man believing her and pushing forward in a climax of bent notes, pitch problems and vibrating hamstrings. A climax of sweat and plush. For her the whole narrative of sex was a game of solicitations and severances and everything in between was a trick. Each new act of
perversion she invented was an attempt to shorten the lapse between beginning and end, between capital letter and full stop, penetration and climax. The squealing and bucking and promising were all directed at camouflaging the inevitable, making him desire it in whole new ways, convincing him that there was novelty in climax, and pleasure beyond. Repetition disguised as momentum: a whore’s favourite device. She moaned and twisted and treated her body like it was guilty of sainthood. She used all of the best tricks and conjured up some very old ones. The old man became shallower and shallower and his hamstrings indeed tightened. He began to sense it. She sensed it, also. It became a battle then, to see who could sense it without sensing it. The old man tried to un-sense it. He was a chainsaw mating with a stump. A mosquito inside a waterlily. She reached around and inserted two fingers into his arsehole. She was an old whores’ trick. Finding the spot with her fingernails. A shucking knife prising open an oyster shell. From there the old man could not un-sense anything. He became adjacent to himself. She had beaten him and his own pale prostate muscle had beaten him with her. Goddamn, the mollusc family was working hard against the Johnston family tonight.

It was all finished then and the old man was still very drunk. He entered the bathroom and stumbled forward over the toilet bowl. Piss scalded and hissed like steam against the ceramic cistern. The smell was just as alliterative and onomatopoeic. He tripped again and his stream shot sideways and blistered across the boy’s bare bottom half. The boy took it like a galley slave and did not lift his head or attempt to mutiny. He did not trot away to find a spot alongside the fence where no nettles were growing and he did not tell himself that he ought to have known about being a good one, either. He was still very drunk and remained crouched over in the middle of the bathtub. From there he
had sensed the defeat as strongly as the old man had sensed it. The thing between his legs had listened and had sensed it, too, and had shrivelled back into itself like a starving ringworm. The old man’s was a tomcat with both eyes scratched out, hissing and pissing over the seat and tiles.

When the old man finished relieving himself he addressed the boy, telling him to stand. The boy was still very drunk and did not stand. The boy considered himself one-part old man now, and perhaps his father considered him one-part old man, too, he thought. One-part old man, four-parts drunk brother. He breathed heavily. The old man breathed heavily. The old man was still very drunk and he bent forward and grabbed hold of his four-part drunk brother at the back of the neck. The boy struggled against him, like a whale being pushed back to sea or an hysteric being restrained and medicated. The old man staggered and held onto the shower curtain to keep his balance. He tried lifting the boy onto his feet and against his will, and the boy became a deadweight whale, a stubborn hysteric, a no-parts brother. The old man breathed heavily and gripped tighter and jerked the boy up and at the same time the young girl will scream out for the sister and will clutch the head of the plastic practice doll which will go by the same name as her sister, anyway. The old man who was still very drunk found this last part, about there being both a practice doll and a real doll, too much and he laughed and kept the boy pinned at the back of the neck and propped against the tiled wall and breathing heavily.

‘You would be champion of fucking your own father up the arse, if you were any more gallant,’ he told the boy. With his spare hand he grabbed hold of the boy’s cruel widowed breathless, and he stretched it out. The boy resisted and tried to free it. The
whore hid her payment in the belly of a stuffed animal and left the house. It was her house. It was the boy’s cruel widowed breathless. The old man was still very drunk.

‘Show me how gallant you can be, boy.’ The old man let go then and it shrank away. ‘You cannot be champion of screwing your own father up the arse if you are not prepared to be gallant all the way through. Are you prepared to be gallant all the way through, boy? You can do all of my screwing for me from now on, boy. Since you are so goddamned gallant. Look how gallant you are.’ The old man made another grab and the boy protected himself by lifting his right knee.

‘I can be gallant and do all of my own screwing,’ the boy said.

The old man laughed and released the boy altogether. Knocking a shampoo bottle off the shower rack he took up the razor which had caught his eye instead. He ran his thumb down over the blades to get an appreciation for its tang. He laughed again. He was still very drunk and the whore with no tits had left the house for the pub and the razor was plastic and pink and full-tanged.

‘You have not learned all the tricks yet,’ he said to the boy. The boy tensed his stomach muscles and did not lower his knee and expected to be hit. The old man laughed and both of them were still very drunk. The old man did not hit him. The old man was still very drunk and breathing heavily. The young girly will continue to breathe heavily while nurses tell her to push.

‘I do not need to know them all,’ the boy said. ‘I know the important ones and that is enough.’

‘Which ones are the important ones, then?’
‘The important ones are the unimportant ones, and the unimportant ones are the important ones.’ The boy was feeling two-parts old man now. Three, maybe. He coaxed himself into laughing aloud and lowering his knee to show his parts; he imagined the weight of an entire novel behind him. He had already put his foot on it once tonight. He put his foot down on it again. Do you want to be a dog all of your life? Or do you want to be an old man some day? He had taken it by the snout and tried to fill its mouth directly from the bottle. It had resisted and he had laughed and called it a goddamned unimportant black bastard. Drink up or I will shoot you, you unimportant black bastard, he had said to it. It had jerked around like a perverted bildungsroman and refused to drink. Eventually he had left it and returned to the pub via the railway line. It had twisted itself into a knot of chain and desire and hunger, until eventually the chain part had let go and allowed it to slip its collar and give over to the plot parts in full.

‘Do you think these whores with no tits are the important ones?’ the old man asked him. The razor was twin-bladed and full-tanged and the old man gripped it like a skinning pen.

‘I think they are the most unimportant important ones,’ the boy answered bravely. The boy was being very brave now. He was still very drunk.

‘You talk like an old man, boy. But I still think you do not know all the tricks. As long as you think you can screw the value out of them all.’

The seam between the two blades was narrow and the boy could see straight through. Instinct was never so rife or pleasurable as the moment between two razor blades. Like two hipbones smooth as cork. Or the opening between two black and shiny
thigh bones. Capital letter and full stop, you unimportant black bastard. He felt it buckling beneath his foot.

‘There is no need to screw the value out of them all,’ the boy suggested. ‘One is enough. When you have screwed the value out of one, you have screwed the value out of them all.’ He was still very drunk, and was being very clever and self-reflexive, and did sound very much like an old man.

The old man did sound very much like an old man, too.

‘Boy, it is no less difficult to screw the value out of one of them then it is to screw the value out of all of them. The trick is in screwing the value out of yourself.’

‘I will screw the value out of myself,’ the boy answered quickly. ‘Should I screw the value out of you, too?’ he asked. Yes, the boy was all-parts old man now. He told himself he did not fear anything. He was still very drunk and he told himself he was capable of performing all the old man tricks. He told himself he was older and drunker than the old man, even. Both of them were still very drunk.

‘I will teach you a thing about value and about old men, boy. You do not know them all yet.’

The boy laughed. The old man did not laugh. The old man took hold of himself. The old man began to slice crossways with the razor. He punctuated the length with parallel incisions, thin as paper cuts. He showed the boy what it was to have length. He carved cross-thatches into the head and base. ‘You cannot play old man in halves,’ he said, hacking through as much loose skin as he could, making the thing in his hand look old and contemptuous and spiteful and disgusted with its own failure to die or circumcise. Blood dripped onto the floor like sap. The boy stood frightened and defeated in the
middle of the bathtub. ‘Not all of the tricks are as pleasurable as getting drunk and sticking your wallet up some whore’s cunt, boy. Try some of the more difficult ones before you call yourself old man.’ And when the old man had finished this old man exhibition he let go of the razor and propped himself dripping and amused over the top of the toilet bowl. Some old man exhibition.

The old man was still very drunk and was asleep on the toilet when the boy left the bathroom. The boy was still very drunk, too. He had not attempted the old man way of falsely ringbarking himself, and, before falling asleep, his father had taunted him and told him the only way to really screw the value out of yourself was to cut it right off and shove it up your own arse, anyway. You would be the old man of old men if you could master that one, he had advised. The boy had convinced himself that there were probably other ways and he could not think of any and in his failure to do so the old man had proven there were still some tricks for the boy to learn.

In the bedroom the boy dressed into his father’s dungarees and did not worry about underpants or socks or belt, but pulled his boots on over his bare feet and hitched his forefingers through the front belt loops to keep the pants from sliding down. He was careful not to wake the old man. Like that he ran out of the house and toward the pub. The compass needle in his pants bounced up and down as he ran and tried pointing him in the direction of his home, onto the railway tracks and past the silos, through the line paddock and up the drive. He ignored it and listened to the keys which bounced and jingled in the back pocket. He breathed heavily.
At the entrance to the pub the boy stopped and fished the keys from his pocket and threw them onto the roof. Forget your goddamned old man games, he chided himself. He was still very drunk and the instinct was rife and doubted he could ever match his father and did not want to, anyway. He told himself he did not want to. You do not want to be like that goddamned old man and that is why you never will be, he reassured to himself. Be like some other old man. Nick Cant does not need to go about hacking at his own pieces to prove anything. Be like Nick Cant. Nick Cant could give them triple orgasms. Some kids who were standing around beneath a street light followed the boy’s lead, throwing a cluster of like-sized rocks and glass pieces onto the pub’s tin roof. One of them tossed the bottle of rum he had found at the causeway beneath the railway tracks. It hurtled through the air like a malfunctioning firecracker. When it hit the roof it slid off and landed on the medium strip and did not break. A firecracker without a bang. The boy barged through the side entrance of the pub.

Nick Cant was already laughing and lurching and lathering over himself when the boy entered the bar. The skinny woman with no tits, who had returned to the pub to be with her fat friend, was laughing, also. The fat friend who had massive ones and who, an hour earlier, had been laughing inwardly and soundlessly, laughed outwardly and titteringly now. This fat friend had allowed Nick Cant to put his hand in the space between her thighs. Nick Cant had his hand going back and forth over that fat fucking clitoris and the boy understood just what old man games were all about. They were not about screwing the value out of anything—they were about outscrewing everyone around you. Triple orgasms. Quadruple orgasms. Quintuple orgasms. Decoy orgasms. The boy rushed in and punched Nick Cant in the side of the face, and Nick Cant’s clitoris hand,
which was also his shearing hand and his toast-making hand—‘Here’s to the champion of hamstrings and breastfeeding!’—let go of the schooner glass and became his fist hand. He knocked the boy down onto the floor. Choose some other old man, boy. Two men taking shots at the bar turned around and poured tequila over the boy and toasted his success. The boy got up and ran out of the pub and the fat friend with big ones let Nick Cant make another anatomical toast concerning her specifically and the scene was merry and rife with old men of all ages and varieties.

From the pub home was six kilometres. Closer to four if you were walking because you could run and hold your pants up and make it feel like two and be there in one. The boy ran and could hear the younger kids outside the pub shouting behind him and he did not stop to listen to what they were saying or to show them his bloodied old man pub-fighter’s nose or to show them that other thing tucked inside his father’s pants as worthless and heroic and gallant and modest and undersized as an empty bottle of rum which refused to smash. The boy was still very drunk and the top part of his body seemed to be orbiting in an opposite direction to the bottom part and both parts seemed to be diametric to the middle part and every three hundred and sixty degrees both parts came swooping toward one another, passed, and continued on their breathless repetitive counter-ways, while the middle part never went anywhere except for in and out like a heartbeat and that girly will have it going in and out like a combustion engine heartbeat. The faster the boy ran the more frantic the revolutions became and by the time he had reached the driveway his forehead was beginning to show and he did not know what kind of old man he wanted to be and the damn nurses will be telling the girl to push with every contraction and the razored peppercorn trunk had stopped dripping into the toilet and was
healing over faster and thicker than previously before and the metonymic hand was trying its hardest to work the value out of that fat fucking clitoris, and the skinny mouth was introducing itself to other cashed-up old men mouths.

The boy footed it across the house paddock. His lungs felt as if they were giving birth to his stomach. The blood had turned his face to a spider web of red and purple and newborn. He did not think of his dog. She had slipped her collar much earlier. He thought of the gun. The gun was the type of old man he would prove himself to be. The gun was a plot device, established in the opening pages. Fifteen years from now. The boy did not think about plot devices. He was thinking only of climaxes. Climax, he said to himself. Pull the trigger on that climax and show them a real old man climax, he climaxed to himself. Fifteen years from now he shot her dead. She was a plot device, too. The boy did not think of the dog, or of his father shooting her dead. He thought of his father sitting on the toilet with that thing of his hanging falsely ringbarked between his legs, demonstrating the kind of old man he was, the kind of old man tricks he played. Dog and gun and old man. I will show you how to play old man games, the boy thought. You, too, Nick. Then he yelled it:

‘You, too, Nick.’

The silos yelled back at him. Their voices were metallic and booming. It was the inside of a drum. It was a firing chamber. In the distance the dog stood prick-eared and responded to each reverberation by barking. In the distance the dog watched as he took the gun away from his head and held it against her head. Fifteen years into the distance and he used it to shoot her dead. Killed her, fifteen years into the distance. The dog had slipped her collar and stood prick-eared, waiting. You did not play old man games by
doing things in halves. You, too, Nick. Stop believing in quadruple orgasms and old man
tricks. Old man tricks are as bad as whore tricks. As bad as whore tricks. As bad as whore
tricks.

As he approached the house the boy felt the momentum building, continuing to
push him toward an opening. He could hear her breathing: sharp and short, holding her
breath for periods of two and three seconds at a time, creating rhythm—a whores’
favourite device, remember. Push, girly. Nurses will be paging doctors from their lunch
breaks. The boy told himself it was the sort of old man he would be. The old man put the
gun against his forehead and believed he was telling the truth. The dog watched on. The
only old man is a committed old man, old man.

The boy ran past the dog’s kennel and did not notice her slipped collar. Perhaps
he was still very drunk. He did not feel very drunk. Drunkenness was like fire, which
required oxygen. Perhaps the drunkenness was smouldering in his belly, waiting to
reignite as soon as he stopped running and caught his breath. You could not be drunk
while you were out of breath. At the front door of the house the boy did stop running. His
dog had positioned herself there. Slipped collar. She had made herself a plot device.
Betwixt him and that other plot device. In her jaws was the body of that dead kitten. That
dead kitten was a plot device. And a thematic device. And a narrative device.

‘Get out of the way, you goddamned plot device,’ he said. Then he noticed the
kitten. ‘Goddammed black bastard. Black thematic device of a plot of a bastard, you are,’
he said.

The dog did not move and did not release the kitten. He kicked her. The boy did
not want to kill this dog. He wanted to kill himself. He did not think it was right that this
dog had positioned herself there in this build up to his climax. Fifteen years from now he was an old man and he held the gun against his forehead and was not able to pull the trigger. Already killed her once. Now, though, now he did not want to be the kind of old man who killed dogs; he wanted to be the kind of old man who killed old men. He wanted to be an old man old man. He told the old crow to leave it knotted. I will kill you if you look inside, he warned her. The dog growled when he tried to pull the kitten out of her mouth. Her saliva made its head glisten like a seal’s.

‘Let go, you bastard,’ the boy yelled.

He stepped over the dog and went into the house. This black bastard could be as stubborn as she wanted. The boy was going to be an old man. Old man did not play games with dogs.

‘He has just opened the pantry,’ one of the nurses, coaching the girl, will say. The boy ignored her and reached for the gun. ‘You are doing it, Belinda. You are almost there. We can see his head and shoulders and he is reaching for the gun.’ A different nurse will sponge the girl’s cheeks.

The boy took the rifle, along with the coffee tin containing a faded box of eight slugs, and he sat down at the kitchen table. Caitlin did not seem such a stupid name for a boy; the nurse will agree. The boy pulled the bolt back on the gun and he placed a bullet into the firing chamber. At that instant both shoulders will slip through the opening and the girl will let out a shriek. Maybe the same bullet has been in the chamber a thousand times already. Maybe that old man was as heroic with guns as he was with shaving razors. The boy put the butt of the gun on the ground and his head over the top of it. The dog sat watching through the screen door. She had slipped her collar and had given
herself over to instinct, digging up the body of that kitten. The boy looked into the barrel of the rifle and remembered that horse’s eye, panicked and unblinking. It made him laugh.

‘Look away, you goddamned black bastard,’ he said. The dog did not move away from the door, but stayed peering in, the body of that exhumed kitten hanging limply in her mouth. The nurse with the sponge will take hold of the kitten by the head while the second nurse tries prising it from her jaws. Almost over, Belinda. Just one more push.

Belinda might as well be dying and climaxing and giving birth and squeezing tadpoles all at once. Her cunt muscles will bite down more determinedly and the boy forgot about his own old man trick for a moment and opened the door and tried to pull it out of her cunt of a mouth of a cunt. He incited her and called her by her name and she did not seem to recognise it—since she had been kicked and called Sal almost to death once before and now she will answer only to Belinda which is her birth name, anyway, while damn whities made jokes and threw ashtrays at the ceiling and sent tadpoles into outer space on abortion missions and sang irregular couplets from Advance Australia Fair, Advance-Australia-Fair!

The kitten began to break apart in the boy's hand. First a leg came off and then the pelt of fur ripped open. It will seem to have a belly button in the middle of its exposed gut. It seemed to be missing half of its tentacles. It will seem to have a head this big. It seemed only one push away and still the dog would not give it up. The boy understood why it was difficult to go any deeper with the razor. He understood the small percentage of instinct which may never be erased. He understood the illusion of complete self-spite. Being an old man was one-part spite, four-parts illusion. A dog was not like a sheep.
which would leave its own young for dead if you get too close; a dog would bite your bloody hand off if it did not trust you. The boy jerked manically to free the kitten and threatened his dog and the pants he had kept hitched for six four two one kilometres were now dropped as low as his knees and those damn nurses will say, one more push, Belinda—he is a boy, and Belinda’s cunt muscles will refuse to give up an inch and the boy jammed the barrel of the rifle into her mouth to lever them apart, to extricate that last piece of leg still in her grip and did not think it right for her to be drawing attention away from his final old man trick, and the black bitch of a bastard will not give any and the boy squeezed the goddamn trigger, and the thousandth-time-lucky bullet felt itself moving up through the barrel and away from the prostate chamber and it could not be un-sensed now that it had been sensed and it passes through the birth canal and beyond the earth’s pull and into the nurse’s arms like prayers to the God of Ovaries and Toilets and I cannot see the boy’s lungs reinflating from this desk where I write, nor the dog dropping limp the mangled carcass from its mouth, nor the old man stirring on the toilet with his bloodied but uncastrated piece, nor Nick Cant working his finger back and forth over the fat fucking clitoris—convincing himself of another orgasm—of that fat fucking friend while skinny bats her eyes at more cashed-up young fools, because all of my attention is focussed on that newborn baby boy. It is this big and smells of gunpowder and climax and there is nothing so predictable as the gradient of a circle and both narratives continue on their counter-ways.

The old man arrived at the house early the next morning. He had travelled through the night in order to reach his littlest-littlest before any of the other shearers. His dog had
slept on the floor of the vehicle the entire way. The boy will sleep on the seat beside her, nursing the gun. At various intervals the dog had woken to lick the old man’s hand and he had told her to go back to her damn dreaming. Now she was awake and sitting with her chin against the passenger’s seat and he was not saying anything. His rifle was cased and rested behind the seat and his bedroll and toolbox were chained on the back. The radio was off and the air vents played morning heat at soft, inoffensive levels. He waited for the diesel engine to slow before turning the key and pulling up on the doorhandle. He was being very sensible about the whole procedure.

More than nine months had passed since their last rendezvous. The old man expected benevolence and felt proud for the moderation and dedication he had shown throughout the interlude. Calling himself old man and waiting patiently for the engine to slow seemed barely a fraction of the recognition he deserved for his stamina. Only the sensation of her little pink tongue lapping at your face can compliment such unwavering principle, he grinned. He pictured his littlest-littlest wearing nothing: she purred like a kitten one minute, then gnawed on his finger like a puppy.

At the front door to the house the old man paused and knocked sensibly. The boy will not stir. There was no need to be senseless about anything now. Be sensible, old man. It was still very early and the boy will be very drunk and asleep still and nobody answered the knock. The heavy breathing will have subdued. The old man knocked again and listened for more reverberations of the past-tense future coming from inside. The dog will be unmoved from where it was shot. The boy will be unmoved from where he was not shot. The house was the third house along and its fibro walls were watermarked almost as high as its windows. All the other houses in the laneway had been built on stilts
and this one was the oldest of them all. Some drunk abos were asleep beneath the next house over. The old man paid no attention to them. They will not be full-blooded abos, anyway. The old man’s sheepdog waited in the car with her nose pressed to the glass. She sensed the importance of the moment. It seemed important to both the story and the plot.

‘Open the door, gin,’ the old man said. He thought he would give that old crow gin any amount of money she wanted, only to have her open the door that second. She did not open it. He went around to the side of the house and pushed in through a window. His thing will be uncastrated and tucked safely inside the too-small pants.

The interior of the house did not look so different to the last time he had seen it. Of course it was still very early and therefore difficult to tell in such light. He moved down the hall toward the bedroom. The old crow gin was lying on the mattress and was not asleep and the old man smiled at her and immediately forgot about the limitless cash offer he had promised while waiting at the front door.

‘Get up out of bed, gin,’ he said. ‘I have twenty dollars here and if you can bring me her medical certificates I will make it twenty-five.’ He laughed. It had been nine months; he had put her in hospital nine months ago. He will be very drunk still. The boy will be very drunk and asleep.

The gin had the medical certificates, all right. They were piled together with the drawings and the ultrasound images. The gin took the twenty-five dollars from the old man and did not open her legs. The boy will not stir as the old man levers the gun away and returns it to the pantry.

‘You will be an old man when you can learn to stop shooting dogs in place of yourself,’ he will say. ‘In the meantime we are brothers enough.’
The boy will not stir.

Binni was lying in the room by herself when the old man entered. She was awake and nursing her Caitlin doll and her real doll was in a crib beside the bed. The old man did not notice the doppelganger and he unwittingly moved in to take the plastic version away from its mother. She beared and snarled like a dog with a kitten in its mouth. The old man ignored the weak comparison and took a hold of the doll around the torso. She bit him on the hand and he put his thumb in her eye.

‘No,’ she bellowed. The doll’s plastic skin shone and reflected her saliva.

The old man found this too much and began laughing. He leaned over the crib and picked up the second doll and put it inside a pillowcase he had brought tucked in the front of his pants. The girl named Belinda did not attempt to stop him from taking it. She only clutched tightly and maternally to her first and primary child and the old man left the hospital with his first and primary child.

When the old man arrived back at the house the gin was waiting for him. She had agreed to do the burying provided that he did the killing. He had already done the killing. The pillowcase was soaked through from all the killing he had done. It had been one bullet’s worth of killing. A full-tanged castration. Behind the seat, the rifle was singing like a soprano with the killing it had helped him do. He will put the bullets back in the coffee tin and wake the boy. Wake up, boy. He will shake him. The old man dropped the pillowcase onto the floor of the hallway and told the gin that he would kill her if she looked inside. Its top was tied in a thick knot and there were bloodied handprints around
the knot. The old man gave his gin sister all the money he had in his wallet and she told him he was like all damn whities. He left Queensland then and drove all through the night to reach Bribbaree before morning. Of course, there was no black bastard of a dog to wake and lick him on the hand at irregular intervals or to go back to its damn dreaming. And the old man had to give himself credit for that much, at least.
THE NEUROTIC IN NANA:
A STUDY OF TEXTUAL SEXUAL DYNAMICS

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

MASTER OF CREATIVE ARTS—RESEARCH

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Introduction

Sigmund Freud’s theories on the sexualities of man and woman have been appropriated by countless theorists across a broad range of disciplines throughout the greater part of the twentieth century. In this thesis I will be engaging Freudian psychoanalysis through the feminist theory of Luce Irigaray and the literary theory of Roland Barthes in order to present a new way of looking at the sexual dynamics of the reader/text relationship. I propose, contrary to Freud’s views, we might come to understand man as the catalyst for sexual neurosis.

In the first section of this thesis I will contextualise my argument by examining the heritage and perceptions of a post-feminist psychoanalytical theory. The primary source of my research will be Freud’s texts *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905) and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), and Luce Irigaray’s work *This Sex Which is Not One* (1977). Following this, I will endeavour to re-conceptualise ideas of gender play through an analysis of Roland Barthes’s key textual models, the readerly and the writerly (1970, pp.4-5). In the final two stages of this thesis I will apply my findings to a close reading of Emile Zola’s novel *Nana* (1880). The aim of these last sections will, once again, be to emphasise the belief that man, whether residing in the agency of text or the reader, restricts woman’s potential for polymorphism with the neurotic intent of liberating his own: neurosis signalling the desire for an ultimate impossibility.

Of course, when discussing gender in relation to hypothetical or conceptual constructs, there is always the problem of semantic misinterpretations. In the footnotes to *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905) Freud acknowledges the ambiguity of a sexual vocabulary, conceding that the expressions masculine and feminine are sometimes
used to mean activity and passivity, while at other times they infer biological and sociological differences (p.85); Juliet Mitchell expresses a similar concern when she writes that feminist theorists often confuse actual, anatomical distinctions with mere ‘ideas…within the general culture…of human society…’, and that “‘patriarchy’ is a vague term…(1974, p.xvi). In an attempt to elucidate my argument, I will use italics to distinguish between conceptual man and woman and actual man and woman. It is not my intention to conflate these archetypes, but rather to examine the way in which certain sexual relationships manifest themselves and how they might affect our readings and writings of texts. My definitions of man and woman will be borrowed primarily from Irigaray’s text This Sex Which is Not One (1977); however, I will not be contextualising the two sexes within a colonial framework, as Irigaray does. While I acknowledge the validity of such interpretations, I think there is also value in suggesting that man’s feminisation of woman is actually conceived of his own desire for polymorphous sexuality, rather than his want to dominate: that is, his desire to be both masculine and feminine at once.

Sigmund Freud and Luce Irigaray

In Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality, Freud says that ‘libido is invariably and necessarily of a masculine nature, whether it occurs in men or in women and irrespectively of whether its object is a man or a woman’ (1905, p.85). Luce Irigaray, in This Sex Which is Not One, protests that female sexuality has always been defined in terms of its opposition and inferiority to male sexuality (1977, pp.23, 34-6). As I have stated, I am aware of the implications of employing such terminology as masculine and feminine,
and furthermore the problems of linking these terminologies to concepts of actual *man* and *woman*; however, as Mitchell also states in the introduction to her work *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (1974), I advise these perfunctory associations be viewed as evaluations of a patriarchal society, rather than recommendations for one (p.xv). With this in mind, I offer my assessment using the terms *masculine* and *feminine* to henceforth mean *active* and *passive*, respectively.

It is difficult to deny that within the Western schema, at least, female sexuality has a long-standing passive tradition (Klages 2006, p.92). It occurs to me that the discrepancies between theorists like Sigmund Freud—who admits and relies upon the connection, terming it ‘normal’ (1905, p.15)—and theorists like Luce Irigaray—who rejects the validity of the association and judges it a biased ‘standardisation’ (1977, pp.63, 222)—are mostly related to the perceived inherencies of this observation. It is the question of whether the “traditional” behaviour of each sex is biologically ingrained or whether it is socially impressed that Freud and Irigaray seem most divided upon (Klages 2006, p.91). Freud tells us that the sexuality of little girls is wholly of a masculine character (1905, p.85) and that in the phallic stage of development each little girl is ‘overcome by envy for the penis—an envy culminating in the wish...to be [a] boy [herself]’ (1905, p.61). He claims it is only when the little girl realises that her clitoris organ is no match for the male penis that she abandons her masculine behaviour and opts for a lifestyle of passive, masochistic, vaginal sexuality. Since ‘the normal sexual aim is regarded as being the union of the [heterosexual exogamous masculine and feminine] organs in the act known as copulation’ (1905, p.15), Freud considers this transmutation quite natural. Given the complexity of the process, though—which also includes the need
to discover for herself a new object of desire—it is thought highly probable that the little
girl will, as a side effect, incur some form of neurosis along the way also: most likely
hysteria. Freud says that women are far more prone to the disorder than are men (1905,
p.87).

Irigaray, like Freud, acknowledges the tendency for Western woman to practise a
wholly passive sexuality. However, she regards this practice forced and unnatural, and
concludes that it is alien to woman’s biology to display either wholly feminine or wholly
masculine sexuality. She says that woman’s autoeroticism is very different from man’s,
that

in order to touch himself man needs an instrument: his hand, a woman’s body,
language…And this self-caressing requires at least a minimum of activity. As for
woman, she touches herself in and of herself without any need for mediation, and
before there is any way to distinguish activity from passivity…Thus, within
herself, she is already two—but not divisible into one(s)—that caress each other.
This autoeroticism is [only] disrupted by a violent break-in: the brutal separation
of the two lips by a violating penis… (1977, p.24).

Irigaray’s forebear, Hélène Cixous, describes this break-in as an act of colonisation. She
infers that man feminises woman in order to subjugate her and that woman accepts this
takeover only because she must if she is to remain discursive and participatory within the
Western phallogocentric environment (Cixous 1975, p.888); from this, Irigaray
extrapolates that woman’s true desire has been ‘submerged by the logic that has
dominated the West since the time of the Greeks’ (1977, p.25). On the basis of this
supposition, I think it reasonable to suggest that neurosis is in fact an archetypically male
trait, since its appearance in woman corresponds with man’s interference of female
sexuality. Man impresses neurosis upon woman just as he impresses homomorphic femininity—simultaneously, in fact.

Accepting that wholly feminine behaviour is actually counterintuitive to woman’s natural plurality, and that woman’s standardised femininity is largely determined by man, I now return to Freud with the aim of explaining man’s actions. I suggest that man is motivated by a similar inherent desire for plurality, rather than an urge to “colonise”. Freud states that behind all masculine sexual activity is the instinct for mastery (1905, p.54). This early belief, put forward in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, is conducive to the much later argument he formulates in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, where a child at play becomes the focal point of his postulations. At that juncture Freud tells of being witness to a game invented by an eighteen month old boy, in which the objective is a repeated staging of the separation process as a way of mastering the boy’s own maternal separation anxieties. The boy throws his wooden reel over its edge, making the toy disappear from sight; he then draws it back out of the cot by the piece of string attached and exclaims, “da” (there). There is little doubt to Freud the game functions as a cathartic replay in which the boy is able to exorcise his own anxieties of being left behind by his mother (1920, pp.11-3). His willingness to repeatedly undergo the painful separation part of the game in order to reach the happy reunion part of the game forms the basis of Freud’s Reality Principle (postponement as forepleasure; mastery as reprisal, etc.) (1920, p.6).

What I wish to extrapolate from Freud’s case study is an interpretation of the boy as a neurotic sexual being. Consider the boy’s predicament. In the first instance he is entirely passive and at the mercy of his mother. After a period his libidinal drive (or what
Freud would explain as his instinct for mastery) takes over. He seizes his wooden reel and throws it into the cot. He is now playing a version of his mother whilst his own passive role is ascribed to the toy. If, as Freud suggests, the game itself serves as a transference, a site where the boy may fulfil his libidinal desires by metamorphosing into the active figure, then how strange it is to learn that the boy is not content with merely dismissing the reel once and thus exercising his active impulse by becoming master of the situation, but rather, that he continues to draw the reel back toward himself—and, in fact, finds the greatest satisfaction in this part of the game (Freud 1920, p.11). As a solution to this anomaly, I propose that in his achieving masculinity the boy also loses something. He creates the game in the first place to balance, not override, his passivity with an equal amount of activity. In doing so, he unavoidably tips the scales too far the other direction. For the boy, absolute pleasure would be activity and passivity at once: hence the repetitive re-stagings. Each time the boy throws the reel he is convinced he will manage the feat of reuniting with his infantile passivity, though without losing his activity. Freud talks about the compulsion to repeat occurrences of the infantile life and says that repetition itself generates pleasure (1920, p.33). Ironically though, the more intently the boy pursues his passivity, the more effectively it eludes him, since his pursuit, no matter its aim, is inertly fuelled by activity (Freud 1905, p.85). As he continues to grow more and more masculine, and more and more neurotic, so must the object of desire become more and more feminine, and in turn more and more neurotic.

If we extend this reading of Freud’s case study to gender interaction, perhaps a different argument begins to emerge. *Man* is not just feminising *woman*, he is attempting to feminise himself. I suggest that *man* treats *woman* as he remembers himself being
treated: with the neurotic aim of rediscovering that long lost memory of his passive self. Under the heading of ‘Sexual Aberrations’ Freud tells us that masochism is often nothing more than an ‘extension of sadism turned around upon the subject’s own self’ (sadism being quite normal to the sexual instinct) (1905, p.24). Perhaps the opposite may also be true: sadism being nothing more than inverted masochism. The forfeit of woman’s clitoris might thus be seen as an inverted masochistic imposition put into place by man: it is as close as he can get to auto-castration. Man insists woman be as feminine as he is masculine, that in fact she be a manifestation of his femininity. Copulation for him as a kind of polymorphic transference, a site where he may remember his passivity and in doing so vicariously demonstrate his plural sexuality. He is not so much copulating with a woman as he is copulating with the memory of his own passive self, since he is the benefactor of woman’s passivity in the first place. That she must give up her clitoris and “choose” to become wholly passive is, I propose, inconsequential to man. His only stipulation is that she reciprocate his activity with an equal amount of passivity, that she be as passive as he remembers himself being. Copulation becomes the product of, and production of, neurosis.

In the next section of this thesis I will attempt to contextualise this philosophy within a literary framework by examining Roland Barthes’s understanding of text types. I will show that Barthes interprets the text as conceptual man and the reader as woman, and that in reading them as such, Barthes supports, and is supported by, the theory of neurosis I have laid down thus far.

Roland Barthes and the Writerly Text
I have discussed some of the restrictions and motivations pertinent to the sexual development of man and woman, and have presented a theory that builds on, and deviates, from those put forward by Sigmund Freud and Luce Irigaray. Drawing upon Roland Barthes’s texts *S/Z* (1970) and *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973), I intend to further validate this hypothesis by continuing to insert the view that woman’s neurosis is in fact fuelled by man’s own neurotic search for passivity. Central to this gendered reading is Barthes’s identification of two text types: the readerly, and the writerly. Peter Brooks summarises the writerly as a site ‘where the reader must engage the very medium and communicative situation of narrative, where [upon entering] he cannot fail to discover that he is himself in play in the game, and himself at issue’ (1994, pp.100-1): that is, himself masculine. Barthes tells us that the writerly consists not only of an active reader, but of an active text also. He says the text ‘must prove to me [the reader] that it desires me’ (1973, p.5); consequently, what both text and reader ultimately desire is, in fact, ‘le désirant dans l’autre’ (“the desirer in the other”) (Lacan, quoted in Brooks 1994, p.70): or, the masculine in the other. The bilateral masculinity of the writerly does seem to contradict the parameters of ‘normal’ sexuality to which I have prescribed, and in doing so might seem to cancel some of the deductions I have made thus far; in any event, it is not my intention to prove an absolute compatibility between Barthes’s understanding of the male/female sexual dynamic and my own, but rather to extrapolate certain similarities which manifest themselves and, in doing so, demonstrate the potential for re-evaluating some of Barthes’s conclusions. That said, Barthes also presents a variant model which might be considered more uniform with the ‘normal’ sexual aim. Like the writerly, the readerly also comprises of an active text; only, unlike the writerly, its reader is said to be
passive (Barthes 1970, pp.4-5). Barthes refers to the readerly as that which ‘can be read, but not written’, and adds that ‘we call any readerly text a classic [my italics] text’ (1970, p.4). We might very well view the term ‘classic’ synonymously with Freud’s application of the term ‘normal’: given the “heterosexual” parameters of the readerly liaison, there does seem to me to be an inherent link. I will discuss the applicability of the readerly text in a later part of this thesis. Now my primary focus will be on understanding the sexual dynamics of the writerly text.

Barthes’s writerly model may seem incongruent to my theory of “phallo-driven” sexuality. I have put forth the idea that man feminises woman with the intent of vicariously rediscovering his own femininity. Here though, in the writerly, is the insinuation that man engages woman with the intent of masculinising her. As a solution, I suggest that where I have previously explained woman’s “vaginisation” as an effect of man’s effort to vicariously reunite with his own femininity, the “clitorisation” of woman be viewed similarly: as an effect of man’s wayward and futile attempt to achieve self-femininity. If sadism is a masculine quantity, and its opposite, masochism, a feminine quantity (Freud 1905, pp.23-6), then perhaps man’s attempts to discover the desirer in the other (the masculine in the other) are at the same time attempts to be treated sadistically himself. To apply the literary-equivalent terms: it is possible that the masculine text insists its polymorphous reader become solely masculine, in the hope that the reader might then treat the text femininely, as we might expect of any classic/normal man. Of course, the impossibility and irony of the situation is that in creating a masculine reader, the text effectively creates a duplicate of itself, an equal agent with identical aims: foremost, that of rediscovering self-femininity. Despite the inverted manner through
which the text seeks self-femininity, I think this interpretation of Barthes’s writerly model demonstrates similar neurotic motivations behind *man*’s actions, and shows him to be concerned with one thing only: the neurotic rediscovery of his passivity.

Another interpretation of Barthes’s writerly text leads me to Freud’s analysis of the ‘sexual object of inverts’ (1905, pp.10-1). Freud writes that often ‘an inverted man…is like a woman in being subject to the charm that proceeds from masculine attributes both physical and mental: he feels he is a woman in search of a man’ (1905, p.10). At other times, the inverted man, according to Freud, retains the masculine mental qualities and continues to look for femininity in his sexual objects. Freud goes on to cite the tradition of homosexuality among ancient Greeks as proof of this, stating that ‘what excited a man’s love was not the *masculine* character of a boy, but his physical resemblance to a woman as well as his feminine mental qualities: his shyness, his modesty and his need for instruction and assistance’ (1905, p.10). In both cases, Freud manages to explain inversion as a wayward manifestation of the ‘normal’ sexual aim. If we apply these explanations directly to the textual model presented by Barthes, then the discrepancy of a masculine reader and a masculine text seems to disappear. We are able to see through the inversion and extract the traits common to the ‘normal’ sexual aim, which in turn compliments the hypothesis put forward in the previous section of this thesis: if the masculine text does indeed seek a masculine reader, then perhaps this is only because it sees feminine qualities in this reader, and wishes to possess them as its own: *man* is always functioning with the aim of pluralising himself, whether vicariously or masochistically.
These differing interpretations of Barthes’s writerly text do hopefully emphasise the notion of neurosis as caused by restricted sexuality, and foremost propagated by *man*, for whom such restrictions are biologically engrained (Irigaray 1977, p.24). I have also endeavoured to affirm the common motivations behind *man*’s behaviour, to prove that *man* imposes such restrictions with the intent of rediscovering his lost femininity, and that all side effects are subservient to this primary aim. That *woman* must become wholly feminine or wholly masculine for him to achieve this feat is, in all likelihood, inconsequential to *man*. Perhaps a direct application of this theory to Zola’s text *Nana* will prove useful in illustrating its potential for further textual analyses.

**The Neurotic in Nana**

To conceptualise the reader and text as functioning sexual beings requires the capacity for metaphor. While we accept that neither party is literally determined by the physiological presence of sexual organs, we are capable of comparing other, less-tangible attributes, such as the way in which they interact. The benefit of applying such slippery philosophical theory to a work like Zola’s *Nana*, however, is that the sexual relationship between reader and text is mirrored in the lucid world of the text’s characters and their literal sexual exploits. Nana and her suitors behave as ‘normal’ sexual beings, Nana herself continually functioning as a product of man’s restrictive, passive-seeking sexual impositions. So, before venturing to dissect the trickier sexual play which transpires between reader and text, I will first apply the logic to the text’s characters. Hopefully this exercise will illuminate the discussion to follow.
In the opening pages of *Nana* we are informed that our female protagonist is actually the creation of a man: ‘Nana is something invented by Bordenave,’ says Fauchery to his inquiring cousin, ‘I don’t need to say any more than that’ (Zola 1880, p.20). While we know Nana did exist before Bordenave, having come across her in Zola’s earlier novel *L’Assommoir*, we allow ourselves to be taken in by this quasi-introduction, suspending our prior knowledge and eagerly anticipating a first encounter with the girl. As we wait, we find ourselves beginning to formulate new expectations. Forgetting all we know, we anticipate the girl will possess such talents as a ‘delightful voice’ and that she will be ‘an excellent actress’ (Zola 1880, p.22), since these traits seem prerequisite to any courtesan’s allure. Bordenave scoffs at such pretentious ideas and promises that Nana will ‘only have to appear and the whole audience will be hanging out their tongues’ (Zola 1880, p.22). The assurance seems genuine. We believe Nana will be everything we desire because we accept she has been created specifically for our desire. If, as Barthes notes, writing itself is proof of the text’s desire for its reader (1973, p.6), then similarly, Nana being “written” into Bordenave’s play should be enough to verify the fact that she has been invented in order to fulfil the passivity lacking in all men—since passivity, as I have shown, is what man ultimately desires. We learn that Bordenave ‘had got to know Nana and decided to put her on stage…[as] he preferred to let the public have the benefit of her straight away (Zola 1880, pp.22-3); from this we deduce that Bordenave has measured the combined weight of man’s masculinity and imposed an equal amount of femininity upon Nana—the magnitude of her femininity being directly proportional to the magnitude of all those lecherous eyes filling the Théâtre des Variétés on opening night. While Zola’s introductory description of Nana puts her status as
“object of desire” in doubt—‘Never had anybody heard a more tuneless voice…what is more…she thrust her arms out in front, swaying her whole body in a manner which struck the audience as vulgar and ungraceful’ (Zola 1880, p.32)—it is only a matter of time before such “vulgarities” are guised by the impositions of her masculine viewers: in effect, she becomes “beautiful” because this is what her audience, and the reader, expects her to be. In less than a page Zola changes Nana’s ‘trombone’ voice to one that ‘tickled the audience so deftly in the right place that it sent a slight shiver through them now and again’ (p.33); he explains that ‘she still swayed back and forth…[but that] the audience no longer considered this ugly; on the contrary, the men pointed their opera glasses at her’ (Zola 1880, p.33). Evidently, Nana’s appeal, her femininity, is nothing more than an illusion imposed upon her by those men in watching. She does not become that perfect vessel of femininity until she is first viewed by all those perfect vessels of masculinity wanting to vicariously manifest their own feminine urges. In his preliminary outline, Zola confirms this suspicion, calling the novel ‘the poem of male desires’ and declaring its philosophical subject as being ‘a whole society hurling itself at the cunt, a pack of hounds after a bitch who is not even on heat…[who] is nothing but flesh’ (Zola in Holden 1880, pp.11-3).

Perhaps it is Georges’s pursuit of Nana which first captures our attention, as it is he who realigns our perception of Nana to begin with. At a time when all others are scoffing at Nana’s absurdity, Georges, ‘with his magnificent eyes wide open, and his fair complexion flushed at the sight of Nana’, calls out: ‘Jolly good!’ (Zola 1880, p.33). This moment serves as the turning point in Nana’s functionality: from here on she reciprocates men’s desires with an equal and opposite amount of femininity and seems to them
everything they desire. Yet, we, as readers, cannot truly believe that behind this charade of enchantment, Nana is not still thumping around on stage and singing like a trombone. We must acknowledge that Nana’s charm is a mask: the mask of Venus, in fact. What first strikes us as odd about the instigation of Nana’s reformation is that the character of Georges appears to be anything but the picture of masculinity we might expect as our catalyst. At the close of the opening scene, after viewing Nana for the first time, Georges is seen disappearing into the crowd with ‘tears of impotent desire’ streaming from his eyes (Zola 1880, p.48). And when he and Nana do finally meet face-to-face, Nana mocks him, calling him ‘baby’ and asking if he would like her to blow his nose for him—to which he responds ‘yes…in a low supplicating voice’ (Zola 1880, p.70). This peculiar exhibition continues right through to their rendezvous in the countryside, at which time Georges allows Nana to dress him up and treat him like her own baby girl: “Oh, the darling! Doesn’t he look sweet dressed like a woman!” (Zola 1880, p.182). At this juncture I feel I must re-enforce the very specific objective I have defined as typical of man’s behaviour. I have said that man’s feminising of woman is an attempt to reunite with his own lost passivity, and that he makes no stipulations on woman other than insisting her femininity be in equal proportion to his own masculinity: that is, his own lack of passivity. So, if woman’s femininity were to outweigh man’s masculinity—as in the case of Georges and Nana, where Nana’s femininity has already been calibrated by an entire audience, nay city, of men—then, it follows that man would be equally prone to curtail woman’s femininity. Remember, man desires only an equal and opposite quantity of femininity: the amount he feels lacking in himself. Proof of this is evident in Georges’s immediate reaction to Nana’s pampering: as soon as she has regained some of her
masculinity, thus weakening her femininity, Georges seizes up her hands and begins to kiss them with ‘all the eagerness peculiar to his time of life’ (Zola 1880, pp.70-1). He becomes the dominant, active man again; he senses his equal and opposite in Nana and pursues with zest. Again, I stress that man does not endeavour to restrict woman’s plural sexuality, as Irigaray suggests; rather, his aim is to realise his own neurotic polymorphic desires. That woman is forced, more often than not within the parameters of Western tradition, to become wholly passive is perhaps a triviality, or inconsequentiality, to man. Nana, as an invention of Bordenave, created to absorb all of Paris’s masculinity, is simply too much for the juvenile Georges—as she is perhaps too much for any one man/man.

Take the unveiling of Nana as prime example of the courtesan’s immense femininity and its manly source. Peter Brooks, in his chapter ‘Nana at Last Unveil’d? Problems of the Modern Nude’ (Body Work 1993), considers Nana a frank discussion of male desire, a novel conceived to unfold the social meaning and narrative force of the female body. He says that a major preoccupation of the work is the physical stripping away of its heroine, the revelation of her nakedness (pp.123-4). Expecting that Nana’s nude body might be an accurate personification of her femininity in all its enormity, it should come as no surprise to us that the novel flounders with its willingness to completely expose Nana. Throughout, she is presented in varying stages of undress, though often in front of a large audience, which has the effect of weakening the impact. The first such instance occurs on opening night of La Blonde Vénus, where Nana’s body, obviously in view of an entire congregation, is contained beneath a ‘flimsy tunic [but] so that her breasts were shown to good advantage’ (Zola 1880, p.33); the next display is in
front of the threesome of Zoé, Comte Muffat and the Marquis de Chouard, at which point Nana ‘lean[s] forward with a quick movement, and her open dressing-gown reveal[s] her neck, while the bent position of her knees emphasize[s] the rounded contour of her thighs under the thin material’ (Zola 1880, p.67). This kind of “teasing” continues right up until Chapter Seven when her devastating body is finally delivered without veil and without multiple viewers to absorb its impact. The problem of thoroughly revealing Nana up to this point is that her femininity threatens to outweigh any one man’s masculinity (as we observed in the case of Georges); to expose her would doubtless create an imbalance. Brooks tells us that ‘a woman’s…denuding is part of a scenario that brings fear and uncertainty’ (1993, 159). Unsurprising then that in Chapter Seven, when at last Nana does strip bare, the Comte is only privy to a view from behind and the diluted glimpses afforded through the mirror’s fragmented reflection (Zola 1880, p.222-3): to expose Nana completely, even at this late juncture, would be to completely override the Comte’s masculinity and defeat his objective. Even the view he does take, fragmented as it may be, sends him into a maddening display of pseudo-masculinity and frustration; he throws Nana on the ground in a last-ditch attempt to have his way with her and vicariously take his share of femininity from her. Of course, it is a futile enterprise and the Comte is finally ejected from Nana’s apartment in search of his wife, whom we consider to be more reciprocal of his masculinity; Zola closes the scene by writing: ‘Muffat [got] to his feet, swaying like a felled ox…then, in a final rush, finding himself near the door, he dashed out’ (1880, pp.228-9). Simply, Muffat is not masculine enough to receive Nana. This is the paradox of Nana’s existence: while she has been created specifically for man, she remains too much for any one man: to all intents and purposes, she is too effective a
‘machine’ (Brooks 1993, p.149). Nana herself seems aware of this paradox. Reflecting in the latter stages of the novel she exclaims:

   By God, it isn’t fair! Society’s all wrong. They come down on the women, when it’s the men who insist on you doing things…Listen—I can tell you this now: when I used to go with them [men], well…I didn’t enjoy it one little bit. It was a bore, honest it was…If it hadn’t been for them and what they made of me, I’d be in a convent now… (Zola 1880, pp.451-2).

Despite her awareness and consequent resentment, however, Nana remains incapable of change. She continues on as the object of man’s desires because man, proprietor of all the ‘colonised peoples of yesterday [woman included]’ (Cixous 1975, p.888), insists so. Similarly, Brooks writes: ‘that Nana’s and in general the woman’s, sex is unknowable…is, after all, a story told by male narrators’ (1993, p.155). Enforcing the idea that Nana is a creation at the disposal of man, Zola informs us that she has always been ‘afraid of the Law, that unknown power, that instrument of male vengeance which could wipe her out without anybody in the world lifting a finger to help her’ (1880, p.274). Her fear, as Cixous implies, is a fear of being obliterated from society, of being stripped of her language and discursiveness. And I would claim that it is this fear, instilled by man, which helps to qualify her sexuality.

For a final and conclusive example of the origin of Nana’s sexuality, we need look no further than the passage of the novel where Nana takes up with another woman, the street whore, Satin. It is during this fleeting period that Nana tries to “unlearn” all of man’s rules and become a polymorphous sexual being again, and in doing so, illustrates the neurotic influence man has over her. We are told that Nana spends her days lolling about in Satin’s apartment and treating herself to drinks of absinthe, ‘to help [herself]
forget’, as she puts it (Zola 1880, p.254). When the two are not pouring their hearts out over ‘the beastliness of men’ (Zola 1880, p.254), Nana and Satin bustle about town ‘with the disdainful expression of housewives for whom men [have] ceased to exist [altogether]’ (Zola 1880, p.252). Deborah B. Beyer, in her essay ‘Gender blending in Emile Zola’s Nana’ (1999), attests that Zola’s presentation of Nana and Satin’s lesbian affair contributes to ‘an added source of power’ (1999) for nineteenth-century woman. Beyer claims that the novel works to empower and expose woman’s bi-gendered sexuality. She says that Nana’s position on centre stage (both literally and figuratively) categorizes woman as powerful and dominant, and grants her the capability ‘of shattering gender stereotypes’ (1999). I feel, however, that Beyer fails to acknowledge the source of Nana’s “stage-presence”. Despite the apparent influence Nana has over all men, we must not forget that she is a prior and ongoing production of man. Her stage prowess is in fact the workings of Bordenave, as we have already learned, just as her relationship with Satin is effectively governed by the beastly Fontan: it is ‘the pleasure of relating Fontan’s blows…that [brings] Nana back to Satin’s every day’ (Zola 1880, p.255). Important to note also are the contradictions of this so-called ‘source of power’. In my understanding of the text, Nana is hardly emblematic of freedom and empowerment, considering that she is forced to play out her polymorphous desires in secret and in keeping with her oppressor’s rules. For example, it is only because ‘Fontan never [comes] home before six o’clock, [that Nana’s] afternoons [are] free’ (Zola 1880, p.269) in the first place; and even when the two women are given time to be together, Fontan’s imposing presence is still felt: ‘They became inseparable. However, Satin never went to Nana’s, Fontan having announced that he would have no sluts in his house’ (Zola 1880, p.255). That Fontan
allows Nana to spend her afternoons fraternising and indulging in masculine role-play is only acceptable under the condition that she be passive and available to him whenever and wherever he so desires. Again, take the incident which follows Nana’s return from a night at Laure’s brasserie, a night she has broken curfew. Fontan, having opened one of Nana’s love letters from Georges while waiting, insists they should reply ‘to the kid straight away’ (Zola 1880, p.261). Not wanting a beating, Nana abides. Strangely though, it is Fontan himself who dictates the response, Nana merely playing the scribe. In fact, we discover at this point that it is Fontan who ghost-writes all of Nana’s love letters to Georges, and that ‘he used to be delighted too when Nana, full of enthusiasm after hearing him read aloud his latest letter, would kiss him and swear that nobody but he could think up such things’ (Zola 1880, p.261). Fontan is using Nana (or at least her signature) as a vicarious manifestation of his own passive whims; he is quite literally forcing her to materialise his femininity, as is man’s prevailing intention: to manifest his feminine desires through woman. So, while Beyer cites Nana and Satin’s homosexual liaison as one of the novel’s great patriarchal subversions (1999), I cannot convince myself that their union functions as anything more than another proof of man’s neurotic impact upon woman’s sexuality and the conditions of this imposition, something I believe functions routinely and institutionally within Western literary tradition. A second brief example of this kind of faux-sedition may be found in the well known myth of Leda and the swan. The relationship, which appears to be subversion of the ‘normal’ patriarchal union between man and woman, is completely undermined when we learn that the swan is in fact Zeus, the definitive patriarch. Just so, Satin is little more than an “allowance” made by Fontan, a kind of “swan”, and hardly the subversive mechanism Beyer considers
her. I will now complement this reading of *Nana* with a study of the relationship between reader and text, in which I expect to find a similar gendered play occurring between *man* and *woman*, further suggesting the idea that *man* is the primary catalyst for sexual neurosis.

**The Neurotic in *Nana***

I have discussed the novel’s characters and the ways in which their dalliances and exploits compliment my own theory of neurotic sexuality. I move on now to the more difficult task of interpreting the relationship between text and reader. In this section I propose two contradictory theories: one which aligns with Barthes’s interpretation of the textual union, and a second which re-evaluates our understanding of male/female functionality in the reader/text relationship. Perhaps the juxtaposition of these two disparate analyses will seem to weaken my argument; my hope though, is that in examining their commonalities, rather than their differences, the central assertion of this thesis will again prevail: that in any given interpretation, *man* continually presents as the most feasible catalyst for his own, and for *woman*’s, sexual neurosis. Whether the text functions as *man* and the reader as *woman*, as Barthes seems to suggest, or indeed the complete opposite, as I will suggest, this primary argument seems unshakable.

To begin with, I take the roles of text and reader to be akin to those of conceptual *man* and *woman* respectively, as identified in my study of Barthes. In justifying this decision, I must return to Irigaray who insists female sexuality is plural, and that ‘the pleasure of the vaginal caress does not have to be substituted for that of the clitoral caress…that woman has [masculine and feminine] sex organs more or less everywhere’
Irigaray insists this plurality is natural to woman and only disrupted by man’s singularly masculine phallus (1977, p.24). By this token, I understand Barthes’s reader, who at varying times fulfils both active and passive roles (1970, pp.4-5), to be representative of polymorphous woman. The reader may perform either masculinely, as in the case of the writerly, or femininely, as in the case of the classic readerly, but never both—the text ensures this. Given that Barthes himself refers to the novels of Zola as ‘the most classical [sorts of] narrative’ (1973, p.10), I think it most useful to suggest that any reader of Nana is at the same time a wholly feminine reader.

Barthes relies upon the metaphor of the striptease to explain the interaction between the reader of a readerly text and the text itself. He infers that a novel like Nana bears within it a sort of diluted tmesis…and that in order to get more quickly to the warmer parts of the anecdote…we [the reader] boldly skip…descriptions, explanations, analyses, conversations; doing so, we resemble a spectator in a nightclub who climbs onto the stage and speeds up the dancer’s striptease, tearing off her clothing, but in the same order, that is: on the one hand respecting and on the other hastening the episodes of the ritual (1973, pp.10-1).

This striptease metaphor does seem to relate to our reading of Nana and complement the theory of “phallo-imposed” sexuality. Firstly, the novel’s placement within the Rougon-Macquart cycle, a saga ‘planned as a study of the effects of heredity and environment on the members of a single family’ (Holden 1972, p.5), imposes a sense of inevitability upon its outcome: much like the outcome of the striptease. There does not feel to be any opportunity for the reader to subvert the path this narrative must take—speed up or slow down, sure, but never redirect. Nicholas White, in his essay ‘Family histories and family
plots’ (2007), agrees, stating that ultimately the Rougon-Macquart cycle calls to attention ‘the narrative desire for closure in “classic well-made” fiction versus the biological demand for unending perpetuation’; speaking of the final novel in the saga, Le Docteur Pascal, White concludes that the problem of an unalterable narrative ‘is resolved in the particular pattern of genealogy towards the end of [the] novel. In one sense Pascal’s desire to write the history of his family is robbed of suspense, given that the preceding nineteen novels of the series have done precisely this already’ (2007, p.36). Like Pascal, Nana’s, fate and “story” seem genetically predestined and bound up in the genealogy of the other nineteen novels which make up the Rougon-Macquart cycle. In which case, we might deduce that the reader has no role to play other than to help create the necessary site for the text to inevitably unfold, or “undress”, itself. Or, to apply Irigaray’s discourse: the reader, like the vagina, is only ‘valued for the “lodging” it offers the male organ [the text]’, it is like ‘a hole envelope that serves to sheathe and massage the penis in intercourse’ (1977, p.23). In any event, the reader remains passive in equal accord with the text’s activity.

The question of what prompts the text to address the reader in such a manner, insisting the reader function wholly passively, is perhaps best explained in Barthes’s assertion that ‘the text is a fetish object, and this fetish desires me [the reader]. The text chooses me, by a whole disposition of invisible screens, selective baffles: vocabulary, references, readability, etc.; and, lost in the midst of the text (not behind it…) there is always the other, the author’ (1973, p.27). I believe there is an echo here, recalling Freud’s (1920) case study of the young child at play. The classic, or ‘normal’, text treats its reader in the same way it remembers being treated by its author, just as the young
child treats his wooden reel the same way he remembers being treated by his mother. I
equate the author with the mother figure, the text with the boy, and the reader with the
wooden reel, and suggest that the text may very well be motivated by a neurotic desire
for sexual plurality, just like the boy.

Consider *Nana’s* most prevalent motif: its protagonist’s unveiling. I have
discussed the problems involved with unveiling Nana and related them to my theory of
“phallo-imposed” sexuality within a narratological context; just as valuable though, is a
discussion of the motif in a structural sense. Barthes tells us that ‘repetition itself creates
bliss…to repeat excessively is to enter into loss, into the zero of the signified’ (1973,
p.41); Brooks proclaims that repetitions serve ‘to bind the energy of the text so as to
make its final discharge more effective…in fictional plots, these [repetitions confound] the
movement forward to the end with a movement back to origins, reversing meaning
within the forward-moving time…’ (1992, p.108). With our understanding of Freud’s
case study, we might interpret such repetitions as symptoms of neurotic activity. I
propose that the text’s continual return to the motif of Nana’s nudity is not so unlike the
boy’s continual dismissal of his reel. Just as the boy’s attempt to rediscover his passivity
without losing his newly-acquired activity proves an impossible feat, so the resolution of
the nudity motif proves impossibly “frustrating”. The reader is constantly dragged into
the text with the promise of elucidation, only to be “tossed back into the cot” at the last
minute on every occasion. Take Nana’s first sexual liaison with Georges: we are told that
‘she sank like a virgin into the child’s arms’; though, at the same time, we must settle
ourselves with the fact that ‘nobody could see her; the room behind them was in
darkness, while the countryside stretched out before them in still and silent solitude’
(Zola 1880, p.185). The reader is at all times “kept in the dark”: that is, kept passive by the text. Such an interpretation propagates the theory of man’s neurosis and shows him to be concerned with rediscovering his polymorphic sexuality through whichever means necessary. I move on now to a complete re-evaluation of the textual relationship, with the hope of drawing a like conclusion.

In this very final section I will be suggesting the possibility of interpreting the text as woman and the reader as man. As I inferred in the introduction to this section of the thesis, it is not my intention to prove the validity of one interpretation over the other, but rather, to enforce the notion that within all paradigms, man, whichever role he may occupy, is driven by the same neurotic desire for polymorphous sexuality, and that he imposes this neurosis upon woman quite incidentally (considering his intentions).

To offer some justification of this converse reading, I once again draw upon Irigaray’s set of criterions. Irigaray says that the female organ/s is capable of autonomous pleasure, while the male organ is dependant upon external stimulation (1977, p.24). I have already paid credence to Barthes’s insistence that a reader may engage and perform passively or actively with a text, thus classifying the reader as polymorphous; I suggest now, however, that perhaps even more fundamental is the condition that a reader may not perform at all without a text—be it actively or passively. Under this proviso, the reader might be associated with conceptual man, since man is defined by his need for external, textual stimulation; Irigaray identifies man (or more accurately, “penis”) as that sex incapable of autonomous eroticism (1977, p.24). A reader without a text is stagnant, is like a penis without a hand or a vagina or language (Irigaray 1977, p.24). The text’s
womanliness is perhaps validated in a like analysis of sexual functionality. Consider Barthes’s writerly text: Barthes says ‘the writerly text is ours elves writing’ (1970, p.4): ours elves the reader, that is. I propose that in the act of “writing” the text, the reader inherently breaks into its endless system of signifiers and implants finite signifieds. Even the most broad-minded reading imposes restrictions upon the text’s potential. The act of reading, then—or “writing”, as Barthes insists—is quite literally the act of feminising, of imposing restrictions.

To narrow the scope of my hypothesis in this final section, I will focus specifically on the text’s ending, and demonstrate how, like all parts of the narrative, the end is ultimately shaped by an imposing masculine reader. In Reading for the Plot (1992), Peter Brooks tells us that ‘the most effective or, at least, the most challenging texts may be those that are the most delayed, most highly bound, most painful’; he says that ‘desire is the wish for an end, for fulfilment, but fulfilment must be delayed so that we can understand it in relation to origin and to desire itself’: postponement in the discharge of energy ensures the ultimate pleasurable discharge will be more complete (pp.101-11). The pleasurable discharge Brooks is talking about is, of course, a reader’s discharge. It relates to that moment of man’s ejaculation, when he is at the peak of his masculinity, when he has pursued his own femininity through to the point of no return. While I disagree with Brooks in part—in as much as I believe that the end of the text ironically signals the reader at the farthest point from fulfilment (since his goal is at all times reunion with his passivity), rather than the height of his fulfilment—I do agree with his evaluation of readerly contrivance. The most effective texts, then, those which promote and are produced by the greatest amount of reader activity, are consequently the
most passive and malleable also. They allow the reader to play out his own masochistic desires as sadistic inversions; hence, the text’s end does not signify the nadir of its femininity, but instead the absolute peak of its reader’s masculinity: and inversely, the peak of its reader’s feminine desire. A text does not end because it “runs out of passivity” or because it becomes finite and can no longer accommodate its reader and his impositions, but because its reader “runs out of activity”. Frank Kermode agrees, decreeing that endings, like all parts of narrative structure that impose metaphor on the metonymic sequence, are faked (1978, p.147): that is, are contrivances of the reader rather than organic expirations. Kermode goes on to ask the question of ‘whether the story ends or merely stops’ (1978, p.153).

The above example demonstrates the way in which a reader, with the potential for masculine behaviour only, affects and restricts the narrative structure of a polymorphous text. To consolidate this theory, I apply the formula to *Nana*. *Nana*’s penultimate image is that of a decaying corpse. Not until this final, post-ejaculatory scene does Zola reveal the whore, the object of our desire, for what she truly is: ‘it was as if the poison she had picked up in the gutters, from the carcasses left there by the roadside, that ferment with which she had poisoned a whole people, had now risen to her face and rotted it…Venus was decomposing’ (Zola 1880, p.470). This elucidating moment is symptomatic of the reader’s disengagement with the text, not of the text’s expiration. Like Nana’s suitors, the reader has insisted the text wear the guise of Venus from the outset—Venus, of course, being the quintessential image of femininity. It is only in this final moment, after fruitlessly exerting all of his activity, that the reader allows the mask to fall away and his relationship with the text to end. The narrative artifice, the guise of Venus, breaks down
and begins to rot away. For Zola to synchronise the severance of the reader/text relationship with the severance of Nana and Venus, is for him to vindicate the imposing nature of man’s relationship to woman. It is only when the reader finally lets up, having reached his masculine peak, that Nana is able to shrug off the restrictive mask of femininity and show her true self. The pursuit of Venus is over for the time being and the text is allowed to “end”. Indeed, ‘Nana was left alone, her face upturned in the light from the candle. What lay on the pillow was a charnel-house, a heap of pus and blood, a shovelful of putrid flesh’ (Zola 1880, p.470).

Conclusion
Through a study of Freud’s and Irigaray’s theories on sexuality, I have suggested a new method for understanding the sexual dynamics of the reader/text relationship, and indeed the masculine/feminine relationship, and have proposed that we might come to understand man as the primary catalyst for sexual neurosis. Throughout, I have been wary of conflating concepts of sexuality with their concrete archetypes, and have, as a way around this problem, often presented varying and contradictory interpretations in my textual readings. The aim of my study has been to suggest a neurotic commonality in man’s behaviour, man being a conceptual device inherently linked to homomorphous sexuality. My examination of Barthes’s readerly and writerly models has, in particular, shown the slipperiness of such sexual terms and the opacity of existing definitions. In presenting this thesis, I do not endeavour to entirely realign perceptions of sexuality, but rather to suggest the possibility for further study into the field. As long as the terms man
and *woman* continue to arouse debate, I believe there will be endless avenues through which we may, as literary theorists, pursue an ultimate truth.
References