Work submitted for the degree of Doctor of Creative Arts (DCA)

WOOL SPIN BURN: The role of the reader in determining a composite novel’s whole text coherence

Comprising
Exegesis
and
Creative Artefact (Wool Spin Burn)

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ABSTRACT

Although it has a long history, the composite novel (also known as the short story cycle, among other labels) has only begun to receive critical attention in the last fifty years. Maggie Dunn and Ann Morris define the composite novel as “a literary work composed of shorter texts that—though individually complete and autonomous—are interrelated in a coherent whole according to one or more organizing principles” (1995:2). A proliferation of works corresponding to this, and other variations on the definition, has elevated the composite novel to a staple of contemporary literature, including Pulitzer Prize winners Interpreter of Maladies (Lahiri 1999), Olive Kitteridge (Strout 2009) and A Visit From the Goon Squad (Egan 2010). However, the composite novel’s innovative and anomalous form has not been explored from a writer’s perspective to illustrate how the genre subverts the traditional conventions of both the novel and short story collection and pushes familiar boundaries into new and uncertain literary territory.

It is widely accepted that the composite novel requires the reader to make the connections necessary to conceive a sense of textual unity, yet limited scholarly consideration has been allocated to the act of reading as a process through which this gestalt is achieved. Wolfgang Iser asserts that as a literary text can only produce a response when it is read, it is “virtually impossible to describe this response without also analysing the reading process” (1978:ix). In the interests of expanding academic discourse on the composite novel and understanding its application to creative writing practice, this submission compiled under the candidature of a Doctor of Creative Arts (Creative Writing) uses its critical dissertation (exegesis) and creative narrative artefact (thesis) to explore three key research agendas: How does the act of reading as a phenomenological meaning-making activity interface with the composite novel’s previously identified conventions to deliver in a reader the effect of whole text cohesion? Then, analysing Tim Winton’s Australian composite novel The Turning (2004) as a representative text, I ask how such theoretical concepts might be illustrated by practical example; and finally, I explore what influence Iser’s notion of “aesthetic response” (1978:x) has on a composite novel author’s writing process through a reflection on the construction of my accompanying creative artefact, Wool Spin Burn.
DECLARATION OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP

This is to certify that this submission is all my own work, completed under the supervision of the University of the Sunshine Coast.

Kate Elizabeth Elkington: ___________________________ Date: ______________
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Le silence éternel de ces espaces infinis m’effraie
(The eternal silence of these infinite spaces frightens me.)

Pascal, B. *Pensées.*
Introduction

In recent decades, numerous Australian and international works of fiction corresponding to the composite novel’s loosely accepted definition have been published with many achieving major recognition, including Pulitzer Prize winners Interpreter of Maladies (Lahiri 1999) and A Visit From the Goon Squad (Egan 2010). Additional works that have almost elevated the genre to a staple of contemporary literature include The Beggar Maid (Munro 1979), The Joy Luck Club (Tan 1989), The Things They Carried (O’Brien 1990), The Dark Room (Seiffert 2001), Hotel World (Smith 2001), Cloud Atlas (Mitchell 2004), and The Turning (Winton 2004). While lauded by the literary industry for their innovative and anomalous form, composite novels are generally received with perplexity by both critics and readers, as they subvert the traditional conventions of both the novel and short story collection, pushing familiar boundaries into new and uncertain literary territory. Philip Hensher in his review of The Turning asked, “What is this book? Is it a novel? Is it a collection of stories with recurrent characters? Well, it might just be an example of a new literary genre” (2005:001); and Lionel Shriver’s review of Alentejo Blue (Ali 2006) is representative of the general unfamiliarity shared by many readers, critics, publishers and even writers of the composite novel’s conventions: “[It] is a frustrating novel…Many of these chapters could stand on their own as stories; strung together, they fail to form the arc that makes the form of the novel so rewarding” (2006:9).

Despite the proliferation of composite novels in contemporary literature and its long and diverse history that antedates the concept of the conventional novel, the genre has only received modest critical attention since the 1970s. Studies including Forrest L. Ingram’s Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century: Studies in Literary Genre (1971), Robert M. Luscher’s ‘The short story sequence: an open book’ (1989), Maggie Dunn and Ann Morris’s The Composite Novel: The Short Story Cycle in Transition (1995), and James Nagel’s The American Short-Story Cycle: the Ethnic Resonance of Genre (2001), have proposed an expansive range of terminology and provoked multifarious debate as to the genre’s constitution, reflecting the extent to which the composite novel resists one single, precise definition. Nagel argues, “the unifying tendency of the genre of the cycle has been the collection of a group of independent stories that contain continuing elements of character, setting, action, imagery or theme that enrich each other in intertextual context”
Dunn and Morris propose that the genre is “a literary work composed of shorter texts that—though individually complete and autonomous—are interrelated in a coherent whole according to one or more organizing principles” (1995:2). Ingram defines the genre as “a book of short stories so linked to each other by the author that the reader’s successive experience on various levels of the pattern of the whole significantly modifies his experience of each of the component parts” (1971:19); and Luscher regards the composite novel as “a volume of stories, collected and organized by their author, in which the reader successively realises underlying patterns of coherence by continual modifications of his perceptions in patterns and theme” (1989:148).

Deliberation over the genre’s formal definition has only been matched by decades of dissension over its most appropriate label, which have included: “story cycle, short story cycle, multi-faceted novel, story novel, paranovel, loose-leafed novel, short story composite, rovelle, composite, short story compound, integrated short story collection, anthology novel, modernist grotesque, hybrid novel, story chronicle, short story sequence, genre of return, short story volume, and narrative of community” (Dunn and Morris 1995:4); as well as “episodic,” “apprenticeship” or “fragmentary” novels (Garland Mann 1989:iv). Australian Frank Moorhouse elected to refer to his corresponding creative works as “discontinuous narratives” (Steger 2011:30), and René Audet uses the broad term “collection” in his analysis of the genre (2014). In this exegesis, I have elected to use the term composite novel, first proposed in this context by Dunn and Morris, in consideration of the textual whole, instead of the commonly used short story cycle or short story sequence, which emphasises the work’s individual narrative components.

The origins of the composite novel antedate the concept of the conventional novel with Giovanni Boccaccio’s The Decameron (1353) and Geoffrey Chaucer’s The Canterbury Tales (1475), the two primary precursors of the genre. Their disjunctive and cyclical frame tales introduced the fundamental criteria that continues to define the modern composite novel: “that each contributing unit of work be an independent narrative episode, and that there be some principle of unification that gives structure, movement, and thematic development to the whole” (Nagel 2001:2). The late nineteenth century witnessed an escalation in publications of the form with influential texts including Mary Russell Mitford’s Our Village (1824), Nikolai Gogol’s Evenings on a Farm Near Dikanka (1831), Nathaniel Hawthorne’s Twice-Told Tales (1837),
Ivan Turgenev’s *A Sportsman’s Sketches* (1852), George Eliot’s * Scenes of Clerical Life* (1857), Gustave Flaubert’s *Three Tales* (1877), and Sarah Orne Jewett’s *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896). In the early twentieth century, the renaissance of the short story form created opportunity for writers to further experiment with the genre. Gertrude Stein’s *Three Lives* (1909), James Joyce’s *Dubliners* (1914), Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), Jean Toomer’s *Cane* (1923) and Ernest Hemingway’s *In Our Time* (1925) were seminal works featuring independent yet inexorably linked short narratives that greatly influenced the modern evolution of the genre. These, and other composite novels, have been analysed by literary critics using a range of theoretical approaches including postcolonialism (Kuttainen 2010), cultural studies (Chiu 2003; Davis 2001), ethnicity theory (Nagel 2001), theories of regionalism (Berne 2007; Marais 2005; Kennedy 1995; Lynch 1991), identity politics (Pacht 2009), masculinity studies (Mitchell 2014), and feminist theory (Kadmos 2014). However, very few studies have employed reader-response criticism as a primary theoretical lens in the analysis of the composite novel and its representative texts.

Surprisingly, there has also been limited academic attention given to composite novels in Australian literature despite regular publication of narratives since the early twentieth century that respond to the genre’s definition. Works of Patrick White (*The Burnt Ones*, 1964), Elizabeth Jolley (*The Travelling Entertainer*, 1979), Frank Moorhouse (*Futility and other Animals*, 1981), and even Tim Winton’s *The Turning* (2004) have been generally classified as short story collections by reviewers and literary critics, and have passed into literary history largely unrecognised for their pioneering and protean properties. Despite the pervasive presence of the composite novel in historical and contemporary literature, the genre continues to present an often disorienting challenge for the reader. The effect of the composite novel’s apparent textual disunity through the destabilisation of conventional supports of narrative structure—the formal parameters that typically characterise the short story and novel—demands that the reader more actively engage in the discovery of a composite novel’s patterns and unifying strategies, as opposed to their relatively passive appropriation of a single short story or conventional novel. The tensions created by the gaps between the composite novel’s disjunctive short stories combined with the resistance of the work to traditional narrative resolution upset reader expectations of textual cohesion and closure.
Dunn and Morris’s text is just one of several critical studies of the composite novel undertaken in the last four decades that have attempted to establish generic conventions with which to regard this amorphous literary creature. The primary concern of these studies is the dual interplay of whole text coherence and disjuncture through unifying devices and patterns detected in representative composite novels of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The identification of how these strategies—or “tissue of fine connectives”—such as recurrent protagonists, setting, character and theme, work together to “weave a textual whole cloth” (Dunn and Morris 1995:13) has dominated scholarly attention, with assumptions mainly grounded in formalism and New Criticism which emphasise the primacy of the text in the creation of textual meaning. Although Nagel and Luscher’s definitions of the genre allude to the role of the reader in determining a composite novel’s textual unity, their individual studies mirror the majority of the genre’s critics by emphasising the unifying strategies employed by a composite novel’s author.

While it is widely accepted that the genre requires that the reader make the connections necessary to conceive a greater meaning behind the disparate parts of the text, limited scholarly consideration has been allocated to the act of reading the composite novel as a process through which this gestalt is achieved. Wolfgang Iser asserts that as a literary text can only produce a response when it is read, it is “virtually impossible to describe this response without also analysing the reading process” (1978:iix). One of the earliest reader-response theorists Louise Rosenblatt states, “[i]magine a physiologist explaining the workings of the human body but failing to mention the essential breathing in and out of air” (1995:xvii). The application of a reader-response theoretical approach to the analysis of the composite novel subverts the notion of the author as the autocratic figure in the text and nominates the reader as the equal maker of meaning. Against a genre that actively challenges the reader to seek and disclose potential meanings within disparate story parts, this choice of this theoretical approach seems only logical.

**Research Questions**

This exegesis diverges from the path of previous composite novel scholarship by closely examining the reader’s role and the interpretative strategies that are used to discern: “when do the many cease being merely many and congeal into one?
Conversely, when does the ‘one’ become so discrete and differentiated that it dissolves into ‘many’?” (Ingram 1971:18). In the interests of expanding discourse on genre theory, Australian literary history and creative praxis, I will seek to address three key research agendas: firstly, how does the act of reading as a phenomenological meaning-making activity interface with the composite novel’s previously identified conventions to deliver in a reader the effect of whole text cohesion? Secondly, analysing Tim Winton’s Australian composite novel *The Turning* (2004) as a representative text, I ask how such theoretical concepts might be illustrated by practical example; and finally, I explore what influence Iser’s notion of “aesthetic response” (1978:x) has on a composite novel author’s writing process through a reflection on the construction of my creative artefact, *Wool Spin Burn*.

In Section One, I will investigate the hybrid nature of the composite novel which resembles a conventional novel in its totality, yet is composed of distinct and only loosely related short stories. The reading processes employed in the reading of a modern short story and a conventional novel vary significantly, and understanding these differences is fundamental to explaining how a reader must actively exercise their pattern-making faculties within and across the boundaries of the composite novel in order to achieve a perception of “dynamic sequential unity far greater than any one story can provide” (Lohafer 1989:113). Through the lens of modern genre theory, I review the differences and commonalities of the conventions and effects of the modern short story and conventional novel. Although these two long established genres have been exhaustively dissected by literary theorists, I am interested in establishing how the separate genres evoke in a reader markedly different sets of expectations. As Carolyne Lee asserts, “there has been very little attempt to explain how a text that is written as a short story means, as opposed to what it means” (2009:4). This exegesis argues that an understanding of these significantly divergent sets of reader expectations is necessary in considering the unsettling experience of reading the composite novel as a generic amalgam. “Genre is a way of characterising a text in terms of certain formal and content properties, but is also a way of characterising how a reader or listener takes a text, whatever its actual content and its formal characteristics may be” (Bruner and Weiss, 1991:131).

Section Two examines the unifying strategies of the composite novel, as defined by various literary critics since the 1970s (Dunn and Morris 1995; Ingram1971; Luscher 1989; Nagel 2001 et. al.). These devices, which typically
include (in their most basic form) recurrent elements such as protagonist, setting, theme and narration, aim to reduce the gaps and tensions created by the separateness and interdependence of the short stories that demand a reader synthesise “the dialectic of opposing genre forces” (Creighton 1982:217). However, scant academic attention has been given to how readers actually employ these unifying strategies—or what Polish phenomenologist Roman Ingarden would call “schematized aspects” (1973:264)—nor to how a reader’s aesthetic response to these strategies leads to the actualisation of a text’s novelistic cohesion.

Therefore, Section Three is dedicated to analysing the act of reading the composite novel using a reader-response critical approach. This section specifically examines the relationship between textual interpretation and reading conventions using Iser’s concept of the phenomenological theory of art, a concept that lays full stress on the idea that, “in considering a literary work, one must take into account not only the actual text but also, and in equal measure, the actions involved in responding to this text” (1974:274). Against the composite novel’s scaffold of disparate stories and various unifying devices, I explore notions of meaning, the text’s virtual dimension, temporal flow and the reader’s acts of anticipation and retrospection, the wandering viewpoint and the process by which the reader conceives connections between correlatives and is able to “climb aboard” the text (Iser 1972:282). It is envisaged that through this application of reader-response theory to the composite novel genre, its dynamic character might be better understood by critics, readers and authors alike.

Yet these theoretical notions can only be saved from abstraction and assume any critical significance if they are applied to actual texts. In Section Four, I respond to the startling lack of critical studies of the composite novel in contemporary or historical Australian literature by examining Tim Winton’s The Turning (2004) using a reader-response approach to demonstrate how this phenomenological concept of the reading act assists in understanding the actualisation of a composite novel’s textual unity.

And finally, in Sections Five and Six, I explore the implications of this thinking to the composite novel author through a reflection on my accompanying creative artefact, Wool Spin Burn. There has always existed a great divide between literary criticism and creative practice: “…critics rejoice in the Death of the Author, scattering his bones through a network of codes, and writers mock the scarecrow
academic for lack of blood” (Wright 1996:13). Wright claims the theory of literature is more useful to the critic and the reader than to the writer, giving them the language to name what is seen in the texts. By extension, stories are not typically written because their authors have *a priori* theoretical knowledge of the principles governing their structure. Eudora Welty states that “all any of us [writers] can know about writing is what it seems like to us…The mind in writing a story is in the throes of imagination, and it is not in the calculation of analysis” (1976:161). However, the composite novel demands reader participation in the realisation of the text’s gestalt, and the author can therefore only be advantaged by knowledge of the reading process. This knowledge can help inform the creation and positioning of unifying strategies throughout the text to more effectively guide the reader’s process of correlate synthesisisation and resolution of gaps. As a critic and a writer in this research project, I am bound to explore this division through a reflection of my own creative praxis. While I have primarily written my composite novel (*Wool Spin Burn*) subjectively, guided by imagination and instinct—the creative faculty preceding the critical—I willingly exchange hats for the purposes of identifying the conscious processes I employed through the creative and editing stages to create the fissures and unifying elements within and between the independent stories in order to direct the reader toward an ultimate effect of loose textual unity. However, as Mercedes Peñalba García asserts, “It is not the same to write about the process of creation (author) as it is to understand this experience (reader). The latter strategy is of an inductive nature and stems from the interpretation process and the interpretation of the product” (2003:428), a process that can be best understood using Iser’s phenomenological model of reader response.

Through these explorations, this study aims to lay the groundwork for a complementary typology of narrative in which historical, contemporary and future composite novels can be more readily identified, interpreted, critiqued and written according to their degree of whole text cohesion achieved through the reading act.
Methodology

A literary form as slippery as the composite novel requires an elastic methodological approach that yields to and borrows from a spectrum of theoretical standpoints. The composite novel’s architecture is clearly a hybrid, “simultaneously an extension of pre-modern narrative forms, an amalgam of pre-existing genres, and an entirely new thing unto itself” (Smith 2011:4). At a glance, the composite novel is a simple enough concept: it is a volume of loosely connected short stories presented as a novel. However, despite the growing popularity of the composite novel’s form among contemporary authors and the significant critical studies of its origins, precursors and conventions, the aesthetic response evoked by the composite novel’s reading continues to be a source of confusion for readers. Readers appropriate a composite novel with the preconditioned set of expectations developed from reading the distinctly different forms of the modern short story and conventional modern novel. The collision of these sets of expectations in one form is disorienting and resists easy interpretation, and consequently, instead of the composite novel garnering acceptance as an independent literary genre, it remains trapped in a liminal space.

This exegesis bypasses the traditional opposition between the formalist or structuralist approach and a reader-response approach to a text, with its application of modern genre theory, to investigate in greater depth the tensions created by this collision of reading expectations, drawing on studies of the antithetical effect, unity and impression in the modern short story and novel to better understand how the composite novel transcends these generic boundaries. The works of contemporary short story theorists including Charles May (1976), Austin Wright (1989, 1996), Mary Louise Pratt (1981), Norman Friedman (1989), and A.L. Bader (1976) are useful in providing the vocabulary and concepts with which I nominate how the short story and the novel’s formal and ideological conventions are responsible for shaping readers’ expectations. Modern genre theory is particularly effective in the study of the composite novel as the theory promotes flexibility in the consideration of existing and emergent literary forms, creating a space for the composite novel to be considered from various perspectives:

Modern genre theory is clearly descriptive. It doesn’t limit the number of possible kinds and doesn’t prescribe rules to authors. It supposes that traditional kinds may be “mixed” and produce a new kind...It sees that genres can be built up on the basis of inclusiveness or “richness”, as well as that of purity (genre by accretion as well as by
reduction)…it is interested in finding the common denominator of a kind, its shared literary devices and literary purposes. (Wellek and Warren 1956:225)

This exegesis juxtaposes a modern genre theoretical approach with the phenomenological school of reader-response criticism to propose a new perspective for the interpretation of the composite novel. Susan S. Suleiman explains that a phenomenological approach to literature concentrates on:

…the convergence between text and reader…it seeks to describe and account for the mental processes that occur as a reader advances through a text and derives from it—or imposes on it—a pattern. The act of reading is defined as essentially a sense-making activity, consisting of the complementary activities of selection and organization, anticipation and retrospection, the formulation and modification of expectations in the course of the reading process. (1980:22-23)

With its foundations in a variety of theoretical orientations including structuralism, deconstruction, psychoanalysis and phenomenology, the reader-response school of criticism argues that creative works cannot be understood apart from their results. This approach opposes the New Critical dictum posited by Wimsatt and Beardsley in the ‘The Affective Fallacy’ that denounced the impressionistic critical approach of determining the value of a creative work from the emotional response of the reader: “[A New Critical approach] begins by trying to derive the standard of criticism from the psychological effects of a poem and ends in impressionism and relativism. The outcome…is that the poem itself, as an object of specifically critical judgment, tends to disappear” (1949:21). It is the fundamental assumption of reader-response critics that a creative work’s “effects”, psychological or otherwise, are essential to any accurate description of its meaning, since that meaning has no effective existence outside of its realisation in the mind of a reader (Tomkins 1980:ix).

Reader-response criticism is not unitary in its views with theorists presenting variances in their categories of reader definition, perspective, context, and purpose of criticism. At one end of the spectrum are theorists including Georges Poulet (1969, 1972) who regard readers as passive, their responses controlled by either the text, sociological conditions or authorial intentions. At the other extreme are reader-response critics including Stanley Fish (1980) and David Bleich (1975) who elevate the reader to the role of active and primary creator of a text’s meaning, and define this “meaning” as “the experience the reader has in reading” (Staton 1987:351). Holding the middle ground are critics who regard the actualisation of meaning to be the result of a complex interplay between language, reader, text and author. Jacques Lacan (1968), Michael Riffaterre (1978) and Gerald Prince (1973) draw from structuralist
philosophies to assert that the reader detects and actualises meaning as a property of language. Yury M. Lotman claims literary texts create a dialogic interaction which “frees” the reader (1976); Wolfgang Iser holds that a reader co-creates meaning by filling in the gaps of a text (1978); and Jonathon Culler argues that readers develop a literary competence through the internalisation of conventions and sets of reading expectations (1980).

This exegesis draws from specific theories across this broad spectrum of work, particularly those with stronger foundations in phenomenology, including Culler, Fish and Iser. In the integration of my modern genre and reader-response theoretical approach to the composite novel, I find certain concepts of Culler’s useful, particularly his argument for a reader’s possession of a “literary competence”—what they must know implicitly—in order to read and interpret works in ways that serve to make literature intelligible to us (Culler in Tompkins 1980:xviii). This implicit knowledge includes an understanding of the operations of literary discourse, which, for this exegesis’s purposes, refer to the modern short story and novel. The process by which I posit that a reader develops a primary understanding of a composite novel is partly attributed to what Culler calls “the rule of significance”, developed from a pre-established set of literary conventions already possessed by both reader and author:

One can think of these conventions not simply as the implicit knowledge of the reader but also as the implicit knowledge of authors. To write a poem or a novel is immediately to engage with a literary tradition or at the very least with the certain idea of the poem or the novel. The activity is made possible by the existence of the genre, which the author can write against, certainly, whose conventions he may attempt to subvert, but which is none the less the context within which his activity takes place, as surely as the failure to keep a promise is made possible by the institution of promising. Choices between words, between sentences, between different modes of presentation, will be made on the basis of their effects; and the notion of effect presupposes modes of reading which are not random or haphazard. (Culler 1980:104)

However, Culler’s linguistic model is potentially restrictive when considering how a reader interprets meaning in a composite novel, as its concept of literary competence suggests there must be a “correct reading”. Culler’s system is not flexible to a reader’s subjective appreciation of the composite novel’s varied components, each of which typically feature independent plots, characters, settings, and themes. A composite novel, more than a conventional novel or a short story, allows for multiple interpretations that result from the varied and personal reading approaches of the individual, approaches that depend upon the reader’s ability to fill in the gaps.
In contrast to Culler’s notion of a reader being relatively passive in the act of textual interpretation, Iser and Fish emphasise the *active* role of the reader in this process. Iser proposes that readers “fill in the unwritten portions of the text, its gaps or areas of indeterminacy, in his own way,” creating a “range of interpretation” that is proof of a text’s “inexhaustibility” (Iser 1972:285). By its very structure a composite novel insists on a reader’s willing participation in the achievement of the text’s ultimate unification. Unlike the modern short story and the conventional novel, the composite novel challenges the reader to not only discern meaning within its individual and disparate components, but to identify connective cues placed by the author and interpret the implications of these meanings and connections in the sum total of the disjointed text itself. A composite novel is characterised by its ability to evoke this textual unity in a reader’s consciousness and is notable for the absence of any explicit authorial articulation of obvious connections and correlatives. The reader must *actively* work to extract textual meanings using greater effort than is required in the reading of a short story or conventional novel. For this reason, this exegesis consciously employs the theoretical approaches of Fish and Iser in the analysis of how the *act of reading* develops textual cohesion in a composite novel.

An Iserian approach recognises the equal status of both author and reader in the construction of literary meaning. Unlike other reader-response critics such as Riffaterre and Poulet, Iser argues that the reader’s activity is “only a fulfillment of what is already implicit in the structure of the work” (Tompkins 1980:xv). Literary meaning is achieved when a reader actively interprets and responds to an author’s textual cues. Iser’s theories endow this process of reading and responding to a text with value, asserting that the reader’s emergence in the text is not only instrumental to its interpretation, but the reader’s activity is “declared to be *identical with* the text and therefore becomes itself the source of all literary value. If literature *is* what happens when we read, its value depends on the value of the reading process” (Tompkins 1980:xvi; original emphasis). Central to my analysis of whole text coherence in the composite novel is Iser’s identification of the dialectical structure of reading:

The need to decipher gives us the chance to formulate our own deciphering capacity…we bring to the fore an element of our being of which we are not directly conscious. The production of meaning of literary texts…forming the “gestalt” of the text—does not merely entail the discovery of the unformulated, which can then be taken over by the active imagination of the reader; it also entails the possibility that we may formulate ourselves and so discover what had previously seemed to elude our
consciousness. These are the ways in which reading literature gives us the chance to formulate the unformulated. (Iser 1972:299)

Iser expands on the work of Polish phenomenologist Roman Ingarden to explore the heterogeneous strata of literary works in an attempt to understand the ways in which the text can be konkretisiert or realised (1973:264). Ingarden proposes that the “schematised aspects” of the text simply serve as a platform through which the subject matter of the work can be produced, while the aesthetic process of realisation is accomplished by the reader through an act of “concretization” (1973:264). Iser asserts that a literary work is virtual in character, situated somewhere between the reality of the author’s artistic text and the subjectivity of the reader’s aesthetic “concretization” (1978:21). This dynamic virtuality insists that any analysis of the reading process and subsequent meaning-making must consider the relationship between both poles. Iser therefore proposes that literary works be read against a system of strategies that structure the communication between the effects (the schematised aspects of the text) and affective response of the reader (1978:21). The concept of the reader’s affective response can be extended to consider the work of Edmund Husserl, the founder of phenomenology, who claims that “every original constructive process is inspired by pre-intentions, which construct and collect the seed of what is to come, as such, and bring it to fruition” (1990:52). This concept, and the expanded notion of “retrospection”, is also embraced by Iser and Fish:

…whatever we have read sinks into our memory and is foreshortened. It may later be evoked again and set against a different background with the result that the reader is enabled to develop hitherto unforeseeable connections. The memory evoked, however, can never reassume its original shape, for this would mean that the memory and perception were identical, which is manifestly not so. The new background brings to light new aspects of what we had committed to memory; conversely these, in turn, shed their light on the new background, thus arousing more complex anticipations. Thus, the reader, in establishing these interrelations between past, present and future, actually causes the text to reveal its potential multiplicity of connections. These connections are the product of the reader’s mind working on the raw material of the text, though they are not the text itself – for this consists just of sentences, statements, information, etc. (Iser 1972:283)

Iser characterises this act of reading as a “kaleidoscope of perspectives, pre-intentions and recollections” where every sentence serves as a “viewfinder” for what is to come, and in turn, changes the “preview” to become a viewfinder for what has been read (1972:283). Ingarden terms this reading process of anticipation and retrospection Satzdenken or sentence-thought (1973:32), and Fish refers to it as the temporal flow,
“the developing responses of the reader in relation to the words as they succeed one another in time” (1980:74). Fish employs a critical technique that chronicles “the sequence of decisions, revisions, anticipations, reversals, and recoveries that the reader performs as he negotiates the text sentence by sentence and phrase by phrase,” which consequently posits that literature “is not regarded as a fixed object of attention but as a sequence of events that unfold within the reader’s mind” (Tompkins 1980:xvii). Fish’s redefinition of literature as an experience rather than an object assigns the construction of textual meaning to the reader as they respond to this temporal flow rather than the contents of the work, and seeks to understand how readers make this meaning using a linguistic model.

This exegesis argues that the concepts of anticipation and retrospection, and the temporal flow of the reading act, are central to the study of the composite novel. In particular, it is concerned with the idea of what happens to the reading process when this temporal flow is interrupted. Ingarden claims a “blockage” in the stream of thought often occurs when a sentence has no tangible connection with the preceding sentence, resulting in the reader reacting with surprise, indignation, frustration and/or exasperation (1973:32). These blockages pervade the reading of a composite novel, with readers encountering recurrent motifs, themes, characters and patterns, while little or no sense of a conventional novel’s closure is ever achieved.

This exegesis employs a reader-response approach to illustrate the theoretical concepts proposed, and identify the unifying tropes and “conditions of actualization” (Iser 1980:107) within the short stories of Tim Winton’s Australian composite novel, The Turning. My independent examination of The Turning is not intended to be regarded as an exclusive interpretation that reduces the work to a single “hidden” meaning. Such an approach has been widely dismissed by critics of interpretation theory (Sontag 2001; Hirsch 1967), as the ontological arguments that plague the idea of the “reality of literature” are based on what literature does and not what it means.

Now if the reader and the literary text are partners in a process of communication, and if what is communicated is to be of any value, our prime concern will no longer be the meaning of that text (the hobbyhorse ridden by the critics of yore) but its effect. Herein lies the function of literature, and herein lies the justification for approaching literature from a functionalist standpoint. (Iser 1978:54)

Instead, this focus on the reader’s role problematises the epistemological question of “how is meaning produced?” specifically in the form of the composite novel. Modern genre theory and reader-response criticism thereby provide a dual methodological
framework which enables the assessment of individual realisations and interpretations of the composite novel in relation to the conditions that govern them. This framework could then be proposed as an alternative template by which composite novels are read, critiqued, categorised and created.
Section One: The influence of genre on the establishment of reader expectations

In order to more fully explore the multifarious reading effects instigated by the composite novel’s unique structure, it is necessary to turn to an examination of the modern short story and conventional novel. Culler asserts that readers of literary texts possess a “literary competence”, a knowledge encompassing an “implicit understanding of the operations of literary discourse”—including the general conventions of these two different genres—which enables them to “read and interpret works in ways which we consider acceptable” (1980:102). This concept assumes the reader is sufficiently experienced “to have internalized the properties of literary discourse, including everything from the most local of devices (figures of speech, etc) to whole genres” (Fish 1980:87). It follows then that an identification of these conventions, established in Iser’s notion of a work’s artistic pole, is essential in order to recognise the “sets of reader expectations” that are brought to, and then subverted by, the aesthetic pole—the act of reading of a composite novel. This exploration is not only useful in understanding how a reader appropriates the disjunctive aesthetic of the composite novel, but also how a writer might consciously construct their work based the notion of effect as presupposed by the conventions of different genres:

One can think of these conventions not simply as the implicit knowledge of the reader but also as the implicit knowledge of authors. To write a poem or a novel is immediately to engage with a literary tradition or at the very least with the certain idea of the poem or the novel. The activity is made possible by the existence of the genre, which the author can write against, certainly, whose conventions he may attempt to subvert, but which is none the less the context within which his activity takes place, as surely as the failure to keep a promise is made possible by the institution of promising. (Culler 1980:104)

This exegesis’s brief examination of the conventions of the modern short story and conventional novel genres employs an inductive approach. It assumes that the conventions to be identified already exist, and the task is to assign classifications or definitions that will fit. However, as Norman Friedman reminds, “we may not assume that there is only one correct way of defining something: a definition is always relative to the context and purpose of the inquiry, which in turn will determine which traits we select for…definition” (1989:13). This approach allows for the creation of pragmatic distinctions between the short story and novel genres, “so long as we remember that we can only come up with central tendencies rather than absolutes, and that there always is and must be a certain amount of overlap at the edges in such cases”
By subscribing to Mercedes Peñalba García’s concept of genres as clusters of significantly divergent intrinsic traits rather than “text-types” with “wall-like” boundaries (2003:429), this analysis adopts a less static and more flexible approach that permits consideration of the tensions—and satisfactions—created by the clash of these conventions in the composite novel’s hybrid form. Luscher argues that the composite novel should be viewed “not as failed novels, but as unique hybrids that combine two distinct reading pleasures: the patterned closure of individual stories and the discovery of larger unifying strategies that transcend the apparent gaps between stories” (1989:150). It is important to recognise the individual and amalgamous nature of the composite novel rather than attempting to assimilate it into the conventional novel or short story collection genre, as such consignment can distort readers’ expectations and force the work to be read within a limited context. Suzanne Ferguson reiterates: “The only reason for caring about whether a group of stories is a [composite novel] is the same reason for caring what genre anything is: so that the reader can bring to bear the most appropriate strategies for understanding the work, for ‘getting the most out of it’” (2003:104).

By asserting that readers are partially dependent on literary conventions to formulate sets of expectations, this specific section reduces the role of both the text and the reader, and instead, concentrates on literary discourse theory. Where does one start in attempting to analyse the differences in generic conventions of the short story and the novel? It is not necessary to undertake an exhaustive historical study of fiction in order to confidently claim that the two genres are essentially different, not only in their length, but in their aesthetic effect: “The short story seeks one set of effects in its own way, and the novel seeks a wholly distinct set of effects in a wholly distinct way” (Matthews 1976:56). To maintain relevancy to the study of the composite novel, it is important I confine the scope of this discussion to the conventions of the novel and the modern short story.

While the history of the novel is relatively brief, its invention is dated back to Samuel Richardson’s Pamela: or, Virtue Rewarded (1740)—commonly considered to be the first modern novel—the history of the short story cannot be measured. Existing for centuries as an informal oral tradition and evolving through phases of “myths and legend, fable and parable, anecdote and pictorial essay, and sketch” (Bates 1976:72), the published short story finally emerged with the invention of the magazine and periodical market in the early nineteenth century. During this period, writers including
Walter Scott with *The Two Drovers* (1827) were instrumental in launching the short story genre into the literary landscape, and the stylistic conventions of their work were characterised by their emphasis on the traditional plot. Bader describes this older form of the short story as one that:

1. derives its structure from plot based on conflict and issuing in action; 
2. whose action is sequential, progressive, that is, offers something for the reader to watch unfold and develop, usually by a means of a series of complications, thus evoking suspense; and 
3. whose action finally resolves conflict, thus giving the story “point”. (1976:108)

There was an essentially dramatic nature to short stories of this period as well as a “geometrical quality to plot structure” that directly influenced the reader’s sense of unity, having watched something develop to the point of completion, the focus on conflict, and its eventual resolution (Bader 1976:108). Warren Beck posits that the emergence of what may be regarded as the modern short story was a protest against this plot-based formula and their “deceptive sentimentalizing of reality” (1943:59).

Edgar Allan Poe progressed the development of the modern short story genre in his 1842 review of Hawthorne’s *Twice-Told Tales* by emphasising the “unity of effect”

In the whole composition there should be no word written, of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design. And by such means…a picture is at length painted which leaves in the mind of him who contemplates it with….a sense of the fullest satisfaction. (1842:298)

Poe’s philosophy insisted that everything the writer put in the story be directed toward the unified effect, a notion that was progressed in the works of Herman Melville, Nikolai Gogol, Washington Irving and Ivan Turgenev. However, the arrival of Anton Chekhov on the literary scene in the late nineteenth century announced the end of this first phase of the short story’s modern era. Arguing that life is “godless, random and absurd, that all history is the history of unintended consequences” (Boyd 2006:np), Chekhov abandoned the contrived plot-based structure that had characterised his predecessors’ works. He did not strive for a climax to his stories nor sought tidy resolution, resisted judging his characters, and consequently “made his stories appear agonisingly, almost unbearingly lifelike” (Boyd 2006:np). Most importantly, Chekhov was concerned with what was left out of the story and what impact this had on the narrative’s aesthetic effect: “Long detailed works have their own peculiar aims, which require a most careful execution regardless of total expression. But in a short story, it is better to say not enough than to say too much” (Chekhov 1974:21).
It is this stage in the development of the modern short story that I consider to be a practical departure point in attempting to nominate the various conventions that have since shaped readers’ sets of expectations in the novel and the short story. Starting with the most obvious difference of length, it is worthwhile considering Poe’s declaration that “a short story is a brief tale which can be told or read at one sitting” (1946:978). This overly simplistic definition requires that for a story to achieve a sense of totality it must be short, and it sufficiently engages a reader’s interest for the duration of the reading process. These terms are clearly relative, and James Cooper Lawrence claims the only limitation that can be unquestionably established is the reader’s ability to engage in the text for any length of time:

A man will…read just so many pages and then the spell is broken; his mind demands a change of diet, and the effect of the story is lost. Every extraneous statement, every unnecessary word, must be eliminated in order to bring the tale within the bounds of patience. And any tale which fails to meet these fundamental requirements of brevity and coherence is not a true short story. (1976:61)

The conventional novel is unable to deliver this effect of totality as cogently as the short story, as “worldly interests intervening during the pauses of perusal modify, annul, or counteract, in a greater or less degree, the impressions of the book” (Poe 1964:980). Carolyne Lee discusses this emphasis on the importance of brevity, arguing the convention evokes an effect of “brief intensity and heightened involvement…with the story acquired and retained whole in the reader’s memory” (2009:1). The novel typically demands that its reader must recall the tone, plot, characters and themes when returning after the unavoidable hiatus caused by a novel’s length. “Because the short story can be read in one sitting…it gains by its compact impact and nothing is lost…The short-story writer usually gains in control, in power, and in meaningfulness by his arts of distillation, telescoping, and understatement” (Gullason 1976:30). If, as O’Connor asserts, the form of the novel is given by the length, and the short story’s length is given by the form (1963:27), a closer inspection of the latter’s notion of “single effect” must be undertaken. While the conventional novel is broken into a series of episodes by the necessity of its length, which Alberto Moravia claims yields “a deeper, more complex, more dialectical, more polyhedric and more metaphysical representation of reality”, the short story has a charm that is “questionably purer, more essential, more lyrical, more concentrated, and more absolute” (1976:151).
The charge of plotlessness against the modern short story is one of the genre’s most defining conventions. While early practitioners of the genre concentrated on developing a plot-based structure in their works, modern short story writers have dispensed with this approach. “The twentieth-century fellow, seeing that life was not made up of neatly parcelled collections of incidents, took his rebel stand” (Overstreet 1941:4). Nadine Gordimer explains that, in the modern short story, “a discrete moment of truth is aimed at—not the moment of truth, because the short story doesn’t deal in cumulatives” (1968:459). The form of the modern short story also began to be seen as a more honest vehicle than the expanded form of the conventional novel to represent the conditions of humanity, “where contact is more like the flash of fireflies, in and out, now here, now there, in darkness” (1968:459). However, while its fragmentary and amorphous form is allegedly more accurate in reflecting human consciousness, the modern form of the genre still retains its predecessor’s traditional structure of conflict, action and resolution, albeit using significantly adapted techniques. The modern short story is typically characterised by very simple plots that limit action in time and place to usually a single moment. This limitation of subject condenses conflicts that affect human consciousness into what sometimes just constitutes minutes of a reader’s life, and those minutes “must be carefully chosen indeed and lit by an unearthly glow, one that enables us to distinguish present, past, and future as though they were all contemporaneous” (O’Connor 1976:89). The action and denouement that typified the conflict and resolution in the older form of the short story is refined in its modern form to a more subtle sense of change with a far higher degree of implication rather than didactic exposition, creating an “exercise in sensibility and inference, rather than a gift of revelation” (Lohafer 1989:110). It is these competing impulses of extension and condensation that are now regarded as primary differences between the modern short story and the conventional novel. Wright claims that the novel is instinctively developed from the requirements of extensions, where “the possibilities of a situation or method ask to be developed until exhausted”, as opposed to the impulse toward a maximum of concentration in the creation of a short story: “Minimum material, maximum import. It’s an impulse to concentration. In its extremist forms, it leads to poetry. In a more moderated form, it gives us the short story” (1996:17).

As a consequence of this principle of extension and condensation, the treatment of characters in the two genres is also significantly divergent. In a novel,
characters can be developed from an early age, the plot moving them forward in time and place as they grow and encounter conflict and resolutions, and this character development and temporal progression allows for a more comprehensive exploration of life, “reflecting and describing…the impact, entanglement, fruition, destruction or fulfilment of human emotions and desires” (Bader 1976:115). But the principle of condensation in a short story traditionally dictates that the characters need not move or age, as typically the passage of narrative time is strictly limited. Readers are granted only tangential glimpses of characters as required by the short story’s action that is limited in setting and temporality.

…[Novel characters] have a long, ample and tortuous development that unites biographical with ideological data, and they move in a time and space that are both real and abstract, immanent and transcendent. Characters in short stories are the product of lyrical intuitions; those in novels are symbols. Obviously a character from a novel could never be compressed within the narrow confines of a short story, just as a character from a short story could never be drawn out to the dimensions of a novel without an alteration in his nature. (Moravia 1976:150)

Frank O’Connor extends this concept of character treatment in The Lonely Voice suggesting that at least one character in a novel typically represent the reader’s own conception of themself, whether it be as “the Wild Boy, the Rebel, the Dreamer, the Misunderstood Idealist”, and asserts this process of identification invariably leads to some concept of relationship with society as a whole (1976:86). In contrast, the short story is typically distinguished by its lack of a hero, and instead draws its characters from a “submerged population group” that provides the reader with “an intense awareness of human loneliness” (O’Connor 1976:87). Archetypes of such characters dream of escape, “outlawed figures wandering about the fringes of society, superimposed sometimes on symbolic figures whom they caricature and echo—Christ, Socrates, Moses” (O’Connor 1976:87). This use of character might be seen as a loose difference in the two genres by way of ideology rather than formal properties: “Modern man’s realisation that he can depend only on the present moment is precisely what makes him lonely, and his sense of loneliness is best manifested in a form that focuses only on the present moment” (May 1976:11).

The modern short story, due to the brevity of form if one is to take an inductive approach, places far greater emphasis on indirection through implication than does the conventional novel. It is not meant to be suggested that the novel does not feature moments of concentration throughout the text where greater meaning of action is implicitly suggested; it obviously executes this function through techniques
of embedding, such as framing devices of stories within stories, personal subtexts
directing individual character actions, episodes that are seemingly self-contained and
only loosely related to a greater plot. However, the novel’s length dictates that the
reader is more easily able to make the necessary inferences, as the subjects, plot and
characters are developed more fully in a larger context, the principle of extension
insisting the embedding “be carried out to its natural extreme” (Wright 1996:13). The
modern short story, in its resistance to the ‘artificiality’ of the novel’s structured
representation of reality, is more inclined to be less explicit in the revelation of an
action’s significance to a greater meaning. Bader explains that the suggestions and
implications made in a short story “must be nicely calculated to reveal neither too
little or too much, and the reader must be alert to seize upon what is given and
construct from it the desired pattern of meaning” (1976:112). Through its principles
of concentration, the short story’s embedded elements remain invisible and
unpacked—“Its action is small; its meanings are large” (Gullason 1976:29).

L.A.G Strong expands on this method:

   The modern short story writer is content if, allowing the reader to glance at his
characters as through a window, he shows them making a gesture which is typical:
that is to say, a gesture which enables the reader’s imagination to fill in all that is left
unsaid. Instead of giving us a finished action to admire, or pricking a bubble of some
problem, he may give us only the key-piece of a mosaic, around which, if sufficiently
perceptive, we can see in shadowy outline the completed pattern. (1934:281)

The indirection caused by the missing plot components or explicit action creates a
momentarily disorienting effect, however the modern short story has conditioned
the expectation sets of readers to detect the subtle hints and consider their significance
in a greater pattern. This tangible, though unstated presence, of meaning is the
hallmark of many short stories in the modern short story canon, including
Hemingway’s ‘Hills Like White Elephants’ (1927), Raymond Carver’s ‘Cathedral’
(1983), William Faulkner’s ‘A Rose for Emily’ (1930), Alice Munro’s ‘Royal
Beatings’ (1977), among many others. Shifting the onus to the reader to be a more
active participant in the process of meaning-making through this highly subjective
and subtle narrative technique, the modern short story is considered to more
accurately reflect the discontinuous and unstable nature of reality. The convention of
inference in a short story has been termed “the device of conspicuous silence” by
Joseph Flora (1982:29), “deferred cognitive closure” (Lohaf er 1989:113), and
“recalcitrance” (Wright 1989:115). It is regarded as a convention of the genre, which
requires the reader actively fills in the gaps by supplying “the temporal, causal, and overt thematic links formerly supplied by the author” (Wright 1989:119). Wright claims that, rather than the short story genre being formless, it is “recalcitrant in its rejection of conventional beginnings and ends, resolved by subtler notions of form” (1989:119).

This resistance—or recalcitrance—that the short story presents to a reader’s need to create textual unity can be specifically applied to understanding the differences in the two genres’ approach to endings. Many literary critics have concentrated on Poe’s second principle of composition that if, in a short story, everything is so constructed to answer to the end, then the end controls the beginning and the middle (1946:984). This notion that the imminence of a short story’s ending—its relative closeness to the beginning—directly impacts the experience of the reader as they appropriate the text has been explored by literary critics, including John Gerlach (1985), Norman Friedman (1989), Susan Lohafer (1985), and Marianna Torgovnik (1981), and declared a significantly distinguishing convention of the two genres. Friedman argues:

Because we can complete it at one sitting, the experience of closure in a story relates differently to our other life rhythms than reading a novel or poem. It creates a rhythm of its own which is definite enough to displace our life rhythm until it is over. We can enter, move through, and leave story without interruption, and thus we build the story world as we read, apart from other claims on our attention. So a [short] story binds us more closely to the sentence than a novel…Since the end is pushed closer to the beginning, each sentence carries a special urgency and calls for a higher level of attention. (1989: 26-27)

Lohafer claims that modern readers are significantly more end-conscious with a short story than a novel: “Perhaps the reason is that the end is generally not given before they have had time to be curious about it, nor is it then withheld for very long” (1985:94). By embracing the notion that the modern short story does not resolve with the same sense of finality as a conventional novel, closural studies help define a clear distinction between the aesthetics of the genres. A short story’s foregrounded ending revolves around the concept that, unlike the novel, its effect is not reliant on plot resolution. “Nearly all novels are feeble at the end. This is because the plot requires to be wound up” (Forster 1949:60). Gerlach identifies five closure signals in short stories: the old-fashioned resolution of a central problem; natural termination (such as the end of a visit, a day, or a life); completion of antithesis, including a cyclical return to beginning; manifestation of a moral or emergence of theme; and encapsulation
Torgovnik assesses the various types of endings with similar attention to the structural functions, including circular, parallel, incomplete, tangential, and linking (1981:13). Regardless of which ending signal is used in the modern short story, the reader typically encounters in the text what Lohafer terms “forces of anticlosure” whereby the reader is “experiencing an impetus toward closure, blocked by various kinds of interference which are in one way or another removed, surmounted, absorbed” (1985:42). David H. Richter argues that the novel’s treatment of closure is differentiated from the modern short story by its necessity of completeness, shaping of form, and larger dependence on narrative resolution (1974:4). Robert Louis Stevenson explained the conditioning effect of an ending on the whole text in an 1896 letter to Sidney Colvin:

Make another end to it? Ah, yes, but that’s not the way I write; the whole tale is implied; I never use an effect when I can help it, unless it prepares the effects that are to follow; that’s what a story consists in. To make another end, that is to make the beginning all wrong. The denouement of a long story is nothing, it is just a “full close”, which you may approach and accompany as you please—it is a code, not an essential member in the rhythm; but the body and end of a short-story is the bone of the bone and blood of the blood of the beginning. (Colvin 1896:147)

Through this section’s brief and by no means exhaustive identification of the primary differences between the modern short story and the novel, it is evident that the two genres create significantly different sets of reader expectations that influence their experience and appropriation of the texts. Eudora Welty contends that “[we see the short story] as a little world in space, just as we can isolate one star in the sky by a concentrated vision” (1976:163). To extend this analogy, the composite novel may be seen, then, as a constellation of these stars. But as Iser states, while the “‘stars’ in a literary text are fixed, the lines that join them are variable” (1972:287). It is therefore relevant to now turn attention to these “joining lines” or unifying devices in the composite novel and ascertain how readers transcend the expectations met within the “concentrated vision” of each individual short story to perceive the larger narrative pattern and unity of effect.
Section Two: Defining the conventions of a composite novel

As with any literary form, the composite novel’s generic conventions are a determining factor in its categorisation. And, like the short story and the novel, the composite novel cannot be reduced to a formulaic notion of subject, narrative style or theme. However, a study of the static and dynamic features of the composite novel is useful in understanding the “toolbox and playground at the writer’s disposal” (Audet 2014:40) and how they amalgamate the conventions of the short story and novel genres to create a protean and polysemous text that challenges the reader with its indeterminacy. This exegesis emphasises the value of continuum against which different examples of the genre may be regarded in terms of their degree of textual cohesion. Luscher proposes that a collection of miscellaneous short stories about diverse and unrelated subjects and character types sits at one end of this continuum, while the cohesive conventional novel effectively marks the other end of the spectrum (1989:163). The degree to which an individual composite novel is explicitly unified determines toward which end of the continuum it is located and the extent to which its indeterminacy will challenge the reader. Composite novels featuring stories only loosely related with similar treatment of subject or theme, “even if they compose but a ragged fabric” can still achieve an effect of marginal unity, albeit in a static fashion through “an aggregate or composite portrait rather than a more complex sequence” (Luscher 1989:163). A composite novel that employs unifying devices within the individual stories, a compositional principle to their sequencing, generic signals and a more explicit thematic strand—or any combination of these devices—crosses the work into the middle of the continuum, but it must still adopt a dynamic stance in order to assume a greater potential for dynamic sequential unity. “In other words, the reader must perceive that thematic similarities and patterns of coherence ultimately forward the development of some larger theme, not just bind the work mechanically” (Luscher 1989:163).

The success with which a composite novel presents a unified effect can often be partly attributed to the conditions by which the composite novel was conceived, created and compiled. Ingram’s classification system for composite novels includes the “composed variety”: those that were conceived as a whole from the time the author wrote the first story; and he asserts that this type of work traditionally results in the strongest textual unification: “As story follows story in the series, the author
allows himself to be governed by the demands of the master plan, or at least by a unifying directional impulse” (1971:17). An “arranged” composite novel is one that comprises a collection of stories which “an author or editor-author has brought together to illuminate or comment upon one another by juxtaposition or association”, and “completed” composite novels are “neither strictly composed nor merely arranged” but ones which were completed when their author recognised the links within a group of stories (1971:17). For the purpose of critical study, this method of categorisation by way of authorial conception is useful in understanding where a particular composite novel might initially be located on the text-unity continuum.

Ingram defines the static property of a composite novel as “a series of self-contained fiction prose-units bound into a single volume at the author’s discretion” (1971:19). This static structure may be identified by extratextual intervention such as framing devices, incremental increases to story length as the work progresses, and story titles or section numbers in the contents page. Other such devices can include prologues and epilogues, vignettes or interchapters, the composite novel’s title, and other generic signals that underscore a major form of unity in the book. Garland Mann asserts that a reader’s expectation is often directly influenced by the choice of the work’s title, which is used as a preliminary signifier that differentiates the composite novel from a miscellany or “mere” collection (1989:14). The generic implication of the composite novel’s title is typically the first step toward the suggestion of the work’s unified aesthetic. Dunn and Morris argue that works that include terms such as “stories”, “tales”, “chronicles”, or “and other stories” in their primary title or as subtitles generally make no claim to be anything other than a miscellaneous collection (1995:12), although this does not preclude the possibility of a reader occasionally interpreting them as delivering a coherently unified effect. Christina Stead’s *The Salzburg Tales* (1934), John Updike’s *Olinger Stories* (1964), and Ursula LeGuin’s *Searoad: Chronicles of Klatsand* (1991) are such examples of works that are loosely unified to deliver an integrated whole, yet present ambiguity over their generic status by choice of title. In many instances, a composite novel’s title is an explicit unifying strategy in itself, referring to the work’s underpinning theme, such as Flannery O’Connor’s *Everything that Rises Must Converge* (1965), Jennifer Egan’s *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010), John Barth’s *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968), Ernest Hemingway’s *In Our Time* (1925), as well as Australian composite novels including Tim Winton’s *The Turning* (2004) and Patrick White’s *The Burnt Ones* (1964).
Garland Mann relates that William Faulkner was enraged when Random House changed the title of *Go Down, Moses* (1942) to *Go Down, Moses and Other Stories*, indicating Faulkner’s recognition of the work’s title as a means of communicating generic expectations (1989:14). There are other obvious static signals used in a composite novel that help establish reader expectations, including a dust jacket editorial, preface or foreword that makes reference to the connected nature of the individual stories. Meanwhile, the typical inclusion of the separately titled stories in the composite novel’s table of contents is an obvious signifier of their initial autonomous quality.

The importance of story sequence within a composite novel cannot be underestimated in an analysis of this larger conceptual whole. As each story contains its own internal tensions, plots, characters and theme, these stories are deliberately ordered and juxtaposed within the larger framework to create a rhythm and contrasting impact. Pacht asserts that “moving any of the pieces of the text would therefore disrupt the invisible links that tie them together” (2009:3). Henry Seidel Canby refers to the single story as a “bubble on the stream,…part of yet distinguished from the main current” (1974:41). This is an analogy Luscher extends to the composite novel:

[In arranging these “bubbles”] in some spatial order within a volume, the writer allows not only to sound the depths beneath each bubble but also to feel the thematic current that flows through his “world of fact and fancy”. While each short story probes a select and seemingly isolated episode in some depth from a particular standpoint, it may still be part of some larger conceptual whole, one indication of a wider truth or thematic current that a single short story cannot chart completely. (1989:152)

Through the reading act, underlying strategies of coherence are successively realised by the continual modification of these subtle patterns. Luscher argues that while Ingram’s classification of composite novels as either “composed”, “arranged” or “completed” speaks to the composition process and where each example may fall on the continuum of text cohesion, all composite novels partake to some extent of all three impulses. “Although the [composite novel] may not be built according to a blueprint, there usually exists some unifying compositional principle, whether it precedes the stories themselves,…develops during composition,…or is formulated later to unite a number of similar stories” (Luscher 1989:162). This static element of structure is where the collision of the short story genre and conventional novel is most
evident. Hortense Calisher asserts that the short story “is an apocalypse, served in a very small cup. Still, it wants to be considered in its company only. The presence of neighbours changes it. Worlds meant to be compact only to themselves, bump. Their very sequence can do them violence. Even when all the stories…are by the same hand” (1975:ix). The composite novel exploits this metaphoric concept of violence by deliberately sequencing its story parts so that their apparent autonomy is disrupted as they implicitly “bump” against each other and become loosely bound by recurrent patterns. Pacht argues that the effect of this binding can only be appreciated with a composite novel’s multiple readings. She states that “each story’s significance within larger framework of the cycle shifts with each subsequent story, therefore one must read the text through to its end then start over at the beginning in order to fully understand its meaning” (2009:2).

Typically, a composite novel’s opening story serves to introduce the overarching themes and motifs of the work, although their significance is not usually detected until later in the pattern action of the work. As composite novels do not conclude with a conventional novel’s typical climax and denouement, the final story often conducts a “rounding off process”, drawing together the themes, motifs, symbols and/or characters which have been developed throughout (Ingram 1971:22). The effect is a substitute for the conventional novel’s single multi-stranded action that tapers off through climax and denouement, yet still portrays the notion of temporal flexibility, “the way time expands, contracts, and shifts in relation to one’s perspective” (Smith 2011:116). However, not all examples of the genre provide a relatively seamless transition through successive continuity of pattern. Composite novels that fall at the lower end of the text-cohesion continuum are often distinguished by their inclusion of one or more disruptive stories that resist easy synthesisation into the larger work. Rolf Lundén, in his study The United States of America: Studies in the Short Story Composite (1999), states that readers concerned with identifying the coherence associated with a conventional novel tend to overlook such stories that do not demonstrate conformation to a greater pattern through use of recurrent devices or consistent theme. While these rebellious “fringe” stories resist the frames of interpretation a reader moulds as they appropriate the text, they help define the genre as a “tension of rending and mending forces” (Lundén 1999:125). Wright’s examination of recalcitrance in the short story genre can be transferred to understanding how these rebellious stories function in a composite novel:
If a form comes into view too easily and ceases to evolve as we reflect on it, we find it banal; if the process is stalled and our quest for a form is too stubbornly frustrated, we find the work chaotic. The life of a form—its power to interest us actively, to give us that immediacy and involvement which belong to all fiction we enjoy—depends upon our encounter with the resistance of the materials, the recalcitrance that seems constantly to be yielding to the shaping form. (1989:117)

Such “fringe” stories further disrupt the composite novel reader’s temporal flow of meaning-making, demanding with more insistence than does the short story on the reader’s willingness and ability to identify and supply the work’s “temporal, causal, and overt thematic links” (Wright 1989:119). The additional level of tension that the inclusion of these stories brings to the text further challenges the reader to reject a passive reading approach and accept that the composite novel will not easily proffer the conventional novel’s experience of resolution and unity. While not all composite novels feature “fringe” stories, the phenomenon of recalcitrance is a distinguishing characteristic of the composite novel. Where the modern short story may incorporate resistant features such as anti-closure, static plots and metafictional devices, the reader need only consider the overall aesthetic effect of the one single work. However, the composite novel magnifies this recalcitrance through the loose yet deliberate sequencing of numerous short stories, each typically adhering to Chekhov’s notion of incompleteness (1974:21). The composite novel reader must not only negotiate the gaps and tensions within the individual stories, but then consider the fissures created by the interstices between the stories and what they represent in the conception of a text’s gestalt. These gaps, Pacht argues, are as crucial to understanding the larger meaning of the text as the individual stories themselves (2009:2).

Lohafer’s concept of “forces of anticlosure” is also pertinent to this argument. While the individual short stories resist the impetus toward the conventional novel’s necessary conclusion, the reader seeks this cohesion and a sense of aesthetic finality in the composite novel’s overarching form. Gaps created by the stories’ individual recalcitrance and complex network of loose and disjunctive relationships are dissolved throughout the reading process as connections are made and inferences drawn—as the “various kinds of interference…are in one way or another removed, surmounted, absorbed” (Lohafer 1985:50). The nature of these gaps may also be considered in the light of Greg Hollingshead’s theories on the centripetal and centrifugal forces that define the modern short story and conventional novel. He claims that the short story, with its traditional focus on a single event, operates with a
centripetal force of concentration, its meaning “more tightly and ineffably embodied in the formal details of the text” although characterised by an open-endedness. Whereas a scene in a novel emits a centrifugal energy, “looking not only backward and forward in a text but also sideways, outside the text, towards the material world, to that set of common assumptions considered ordinary life” (1999:878). While a composite novel’s independent stories maintain a centripetal energy that permits them to stand alone as separate narrative entities outside of the larger text, its greater form assumes a centrifugal force where the possible meanings of the individual pieces open out, the concentric circles of reference expanding and interacting to create the perception of a “dynamic sequential unity” (Luscher 1989:164). Ingram’s analysis of the dynamic patterns of recurrence and development also alludes to this centrifugal force:

Recurrence and development usually operate concurrently like the motion of a wheel. The rim of the wheel represents recurrent elements in a cycle which rotates around a thematic center. As these elements…recur, the whole wheel moves forward. The motion of a wheel is a single process. In a single process, too, the thematic core of a cycle expands and deepens as the elements of the cycle repeat themselves in varied contexts. (1971:19-20)

This conflict of centripetal and centrifugal energies takes its form most explicitly in the composite novel’s gaps: the interstices within and between the stories that carry the promise of a novel’s “long-distance haul of meaning” (Hollingshead 1999:878). The composite novel, more so than the modern short story and conventional novel, relies on spatiality to underpin its narrative organisation, forcing the reader to approach the text in terms of depth as well as surface. The genre’s emphasis on elliptical and metaphoric plots supports the composite novel’s form as spatially rather than temporally organised. Many examples of the genre preclude linear development, although their stories may still cover a loose temporal span, while others follow a strict chronological progression. Despite the diachronic element of the text being always present and relevant within the individual stories, the composite novel insists on a reader’s negotiation of the story sequences and the detection of their synchronic or associative relationships that are “juxtaposed in space, not unrolling in time” (Smitten 1981:19).

To make these abstractions more concrete in view of the writing process, a closer examination is required of the narrative elements within the dynamic pattern of recurrent development. In many composite novels, a recurrent character or characters
are used as devices to structure a network of references. Works that have less textual unity tend toward a sporadic use of recurrent protagonists, such as Nick Adams in *In Our Time* (Hemingway 1925) and Vic Lang in *The Turning* (Winton 2004), leaving large gaps between their reappearances in the sequence and prompting the reader to be more active in the interpretation of these characters’ roles in the larger concept of thematic unity. Composite novels that rely more obviously on the use of a recurrent protagonist typically achieve a more tightly bound aesthetic effect between the individual stories. Some composite novels are adaptations of the bildungsroman in which a recurrent protagonist experiences a rite of passage that is influenced by the seemingly unconnected events and characters that feature in the other stories.

Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) is a commonly cited composite novel that uses the protagonist as a predominant unifying device: “As George [Willard] appears and reappears in story after story, he develops sporadically toward emotional and artistic maturity” (Dunn and Morris 1995:53). Garland Mann says the composite novel genre is especially well suited to describe the maturation process, “since it allows the writer to focus only on those people and incidents that are essential to character development” (1989:10). Recurrent protagonists become realised by the reader through repetition and association and do not necessarily develop with the same continuity that typifies their presence in a conventional novel. Protagonists are often relegated to minor roles in specific stories or made absent altogether as the focus shifts to subordinate characters who may appear only once then disappear with no context provided as to their relevance in the work’s overall schema. Gerlach explains:

> In a [composite novel]...character begins to dissolve into theme; people are not as important as the forces which move them. Time begins to become cyclical, not linear, no longer under the sway of the strong force of sequential plot and individual character, aspects that are so important to our sense of a novel. The novel would seem to stem from the Romantic and post-Romantic conception of the individual, while the [composite novel] harks back to those older conceptions of man as actor in a cosmic drama. (1992:58)

Ingram claims this strategy allows for a protagonist to be compared with and contrasted to other characters in the work, “some of whom may actively influence their growth or present condition, others of whom merely serve to deepen the reader’s insight by juxtaposition” (1971:21). Dunn and Morris claim that recurrent protagonists can contribute to a dynamic interlocking effect as they develop in some way “a fuller understanding of self by learning to honour the selves of others”
While recurrent protagonists can often be easily identified as a unifying strategy in composite novels, many more examples of the genre employ a variation on this device with the use of a collective protagonist. Dunn and Morris define the collective protagonist as:

either a group that functions as a central character (a couple, an extended family, a special-interest group) or an implied central character who functions as a metaphor (an aggregate figure who, cumulatively, may be ‘typical’ or ‘archetypal’ or ‘the essence of’ or ‘the developing presence of’ or ‘the soul of’—and so on). (1995:59)

Other critics have referred to this concept as “central protagonist”, “composite personality”, “composite protagonist”, “co-protagonists”, “narrative of community” and “chosen kinship” (Garland Mann 1989; Ingram 1971; Smith 2011; Zagarell 1988 et. al.), all of which refer to the gathering of characters into an idea of a single community which constitutes the central character of the work. The collective protagonist can be literal, whereby a collection of characters featured throughout the stories is explicitly united by a common sense of community and culture, such as in The Joy Luck Club (Tan 1989); or figurative, where the characters are unrelated and “whose only connection is that they share and are shaped by a particular place and lifestyle” (Dunn and Morris 1995:62). This latter group is often generational or bound by location or kinship, with the narratives of the individual characters representing “a coherent response to the social, economic, cultural, and demographic changes caused by industrialization, urbanization, and the spread of capitalism” (Zagarell 1988:499).

Single or collective protagonists as organizing principles are closely connected to the use of setting or locality as another connective tissue. Using a specific location (for example, Winesburg, Ohio, The Country of the Pointed Firs and Dubliners) or a more general setting (beach, desert, battlefield etc.) as a common or recurring backdrop to the individual stories, a composite novel can create an important referential field for the reader. Stories’ settings, including their architecture, climate, history and landscape, often assume symbolic significance and endless possibilities for suggesting a recurrent theme that connects the pieces. There have been several major studies on the concept of regionalism and ethnicity in the composite novel (Nagel 2001; Pacht 2009; Berne 2007; Chiu 2003; Davis 2001; Kennedy 1995; Kuttainen 2010; Lynch 1991). The struggles of small communities as a unifying device among some composite novels permits the examination of the social concerns...
of the pressures applied by metropolitanism and modernity, using a narrative form that highlights the tension between “the one and the many” (Ingram 1971:19).

The discontinuity that characterises a composite novel is often exacerbated by the modulation of narrative perspectives. Point of view in the composite novel’s individual short stories is predominantly limited to the use of first-person narrators or a third-person narrator “deriving information and impressions from a changing series of central characters in each episode” (Nagel 2001:17). Typically, the narration highlights the representation of the character’s inner experience, which is a common feature of the modern short story genre, or what Ferguson identifies as the “impressionist” short story, where “imitation of how things ‘feel’ or ‘seem’ to the characters became the preferred subject of fiction rather than the imitation of ‘how things are’ in the ‘real’ world” (1982:15). The regular use of first person narration or the Jamesian method of “central intelligence” that submerges the narrator as a character, helps the subjectivity of reality to take precedence over an insistence on objective representation and is often mirrored in stories’ themes of isolation, solipsism, the nature of identity and sense of belonging. When the individual short stories with their multitude of typically contrasting perspectives are sequentially united in a composite novel, the resulting polyphony forces the reader to acknowledge the cumulative power of their subjective truths. Mikhail Bakhtin refers to this polyphonic effect in Dostoevsky’s novels as when a “plurality of consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with its own world, combine but are not merged in the unity of the events he depicts” (1984:6). While Bakhtin’s theory of polyphony is predicated more upon the use of multiple voices within a conventional novel, his work can be transferred to the study of the composite novel and serves to explain the tensions that are formed as the reader negotiates the various angles of vision and perceives a sense of the work’s unified worldview.

One of the major differences between the composite novel and its conventional novel counterpart is the treatment of plot. Where the latter genre typically emphasises “the continuous, multiple action” (Ingram 1971:131) that is continued throughout the chapters until its inevitable climax and resolution, the composite novel rejects the use of this narrative formula. The compilation of autonomous short stories, each of which is generally characterised by their own limitation of subject and emphasis on indirection, results in a “loose, invertebrate structure” (Bader 1976:108) that demands the reader supply the missing parts of the
plot within the individual stories, and acknowledges the significance of the stories’ subtle actions to the composite novel’s greater principle of unity. Stroud argues that the plot is a pejorative term in modern literature, with prestige instead reserved for works that develop resonating themes, “preferably discernible as a system of symbols and not as an explicit moral” (1976:117). The composite novel genre generally subscribes to this impressionist fiction philosophy, attaching less importance to the relevance of the multiple causal actions within the work and placing emphasis instead on enriching a reader’s moral perceptiveness (Stroud 1976:128). The genre extends the modern short story’s preoccupation with epistemological themes to a new level, demanding that the reader sees beyond the composite novel’s fragmentary structure and apparent plotlessness to realise that “adjustments of thought or feeling [are] the true ‘events’ of the plot” (Ferguson 1982:16).

Isolation, indeterminacy, identity and leaving or returning home have been pervasive themes of composite novels throughout the evolution of the genre. The disjunctive structure and narrative ellipses of the composite novel present a characteristic form against which many writers are predominantly compelled to express a characteristic theme—some variation on the fragmentary nature of modern life. Silverman explores this notion in his analysis of Winesburg, Ohio: “In story after story, the theme of loneliness, the motif of walls between people, the lack of communication, all demand a structure which will intensify the feeling of the tremendous gulf between people. Thus as one story ends, it stays ended” (1970:229). The extent to which a composite novel achieves textual unity is largely dependent on the clarity and interrelationship of the story’s themes. Luscher argues that the reader must be able to “perceive that thematic similarities and patterns of coherence ultimately forward the development of some larger theme, not just bind the work mechanically” (1989:164).

Recurrent development, typically through the repetition of motifs, characters, phrases or actions, is the most persuasive device employed to convey this dynamic relationship between the composite novel’s story parts and push the work towards a realisation of this larger theme. Motifs—for example, the use of hands in Winesburg, Ohio, sacramental objects in Dubliners, characters’ identical birthmarks in Cloud Atlas, and time’s portrayal in A Visit from the Goon Squad—are often repeated and amplified in a composite novel’s successive stories until they assume a symbolic significance, adding thematic weight to the subtly woven network of references.
Regardless of which strategies are employed by composite novel authors, the primary element of interrelationship among all examples of the genre is pattern. The use of metonymic and metaphoric patterning through plot, action, character, imagery, and motifs create a dynamic aesthetic that effects for readers the achievement of the work’s whole text coherence. Susan Stanford Friedman asserts that readers who can recognise this patterning and emphasis on spatiality are “better able to construct a ‘story’ of the fluidly interactive relationship between the surface and palimpsestic depths” (1993:20). Garland Mann concurs that the composite novel affords a unique reading experience: “I do not think the case is overstated if I say that readers enjoy revelling in the necessarily restricted form of a single story and then discovering that they can, as they continue to read, transcend these boundaries” (1989:19). However, while an understanding of these generic conventions that characterise the composite novel is undeniably important, one cannot fully consider the act of writing such a work without also analysing the phenomenon of the reading act and how this transcendence of boundaries or gaps occurs.
Section Three: Exploring the act of reading a composite novel

This exegesis argues that during the composition process, the composite novel author must consider the primacy of the reader’s role more than in the writing of other prose forms. While every literary short story or conventional novel relies on the reader to interpret ‘blockages’—“if only for the fact that no tale can ever be told in its entirety” (Iser 1972:285)—the composite novel achieves its dynamic unity of effect through the use of multiple blockages or gaps that disrupt the reader’s temporal flow. The author delivers an explicit challenge to the reader to recognise the gestalt of the text through the significance of these gaps, as well as the identification, connection and interpretation of the underlying patterns discussed in the previous section. A composite novel that is not written with these due considerations may be unlikely to enable a reader to achieve any sense of textual unity. Therefore, an understanding of how a reader undertakes this reading and interpretation process is not only of importance to the scholarship of the composite novel genre, but is arguably useful from a writer’s perspective. However, the notion of a simple collaboration between the critical and creative is arguably idealistic. As Peñalba García claims, literary creation normally precedes critical analysis, with stories not written because authors have a priori theoretical knowledge of the principles governing their structure. “It is not the same to write about the process of creation (author) as it is to understand this experience (reader). The latter strategy is of an inductive nature and stems from the interpretation of the process and the interpretation of the product” (2003:428). Yet this investigation into the act of reading a composite novel still presents significant considerations for the writer, particularly during the revision process where attention is focussed on the work’s dynamic patterns that prompt reader participation in order to perceive the “things that bond and things that pull apart” (Davis 2001:215), and ultimately achieve a sense of whole text coherence.

This investigation into form as function—how the composite novel means, rather than what it means—is foregrounded by an acknowledgement of the equality of interpretation in the reading act. Reader response theorists respect the individual reader’s subjective responses and allow for multiple variations in interpretation, rather than the critical imposition of one absolute meaning:

As meaning arises out of the process of actualisation, the interpreter should perhaps pay more attention to the process than to the product. His object should therefore be, not to explain a work, but to reveal the conditions that bring about its possible effects.
If he clarifies the potential of a text, he will no longer fall into the fatal trap of trying to impose one meaning on his reader, as if that were the right, or at least the best, interpretation... Far more instructive will be an analysis of what actually happens when one is reading a text, for that is when the text begins to unfold its potential; it is in the reader that the text comes to life. (Iser 1978:18-19)

Reading as an act of meaning-making adheres to the same processes regardless of the form or subject matter. Whether reading poetry, a short story or a novel, the reader engages in a quest for meaning based on a need for consistency in pattern. However, the deliberately disjunctive form of the composite novel demands that the reader exercise their pattern-making faculties in a significantly more dynamic way than is required when approaching these other forms of narrative due to the genre’s emphasis on the gaps or blockages in the consistency-building schema. In the short story and novel, this gap is often found in the fragmentation of plot segments that interrupts narrative flow and creates conscious moments of incompleteness, coercing the reader to formulate individual meaning. Iser claims these gaps “trigger off and simultaneously control the reader’s activity” (1980:112), indicating that different segments and patterns of the text are to be connected despite no such explicit direction to do so. “Consequently, when the schemata and perspectives have been linked together, the gaps ‘disappear’” (Iser 1980:112). The indeterminacy effected by the gaps in the short story and novel forms is typically less disorientating to the reader, as the connective cues provided by plot, dialogue and symbolic motifs are integrated in one individual work and guide the reader toward a goal of narrative closure. Susan Steinfurst first argues that the short story and novel reader typically makes the implicit connections and drawing of inferences in a largely unconscious endeavour (1986:115).

However, the composite novel reader is jolted from this familiar pattern-making process through the significant emphasis on these “shifting gaps”, which create a sequence of colliding images that condition each other in the timeflow of reading (Iser 1980:119), as well as the form’s refusal to assemble and resolve the connective tissues in a traditional climax or plot closure. The composite novel explicitly challenges the reader to consciously work to recognise textual cohesion in the more subtle unifying strategies scattered throughout the disparate parts. In this section of the exegesis, the dynamic process of recreation in the composite novel is explored: how readers are especially challenged by the indeterminacies that define the composite novel, how these numerous narrative gaps function within the text, and
how the form’s unifying strategies contribute to an effective consistency-building schema.

The dynamic process of recreation in the composite novel is dependent on Iser’s notion of the reader’s *wandering viewpoint*, which travels *inside* the text, between the myriad of perspectives, plots and characters that feature in the individual stories. Iser posits that the perspectives in a narrative text outline the author’s view and provide access to what the reader is meant to visualise, and typically include the perspectives of the narrator, the characters, the plot, and the fictitious reader. “Although these may differ in order of importance, none of them on its own is identical to the meaning of the text, which is to be brought about by their constant intertwining through the reader in the reading process” (1980:113). The subdivision of each textual perspective within and across the composite novel’s individual stories increases the number of gaps or blanks, which operate as an empty space between segments, enabling them “to be joined together, thus constituting a field of vision for the wandering viewpoint” (1980:113).

Iser states this referential field is formed when “there are at least two positions related to and influencing one another” (1980:114), and considers it to be the minimal organisational unit in all processes of comprehension and the basic organisation unit of the wandering viewpoint. This referential field is central to the notion of the composite novel’s text-unity continuum, as the degree to which a work is explicitly unified is dependent upon the strength with which the “positions” or recurrent patterns in the various stories are connected. The virtual dimension of the composite novel—its positioning between the reality of the author’s text and the subjectivity of the reader’s aesthetic “concretization” (Iser 1978:21)—is created by the continually moving perspective of the reader within and between the stories, and is reliant upon the process of anticipation and retrospection which “transforms the text into an experience for the reader” (Iser 1972:286). The composite novel author’s sequencing of stories and heterogeneous strata of unifying elements are responsible for directing the temporal flow of this reading process. It is beyond the scope of this exegesis to explore the psycholinguistic nature of individual intentional sentence correlatives and how they contribute to the literary aesthetic object. However, the concept can be expanded on a broader level to the composite novel’s use of recurrent patterning to provide an understanding of how the reader appropriates the fragmented nature of the
text and its numerous gaps within and between the individual stories, then internalises and transforms them to create the aesthetic object.

As a composite novel should be read sequentially and in its entirety, the reader engages in a continual interplay of modified anticipations and retrospections, commencing with the opening story of the work, which traditionally hints at the underpinning themes and includes one or more of the unifying devices (such as character, motif or setting). This opening story creates individual expectations in the reader—what Husserl terms “protensions” (1990:52)—and sets in motion the process of interplay between the composite novel’s text and the reader’s synthesising faculties. From the moment the first line of the opening story has been read, the wandering viewpoint takes effect, as “the reader’s position in the text is at the point of intersection between retension and protension” (Iser 1978:111). The reader “prefigures” a particular horizon for the individual scene, story and overall work, based on expectations of story plot and theme assumed from this initial sentence. However, as Iser explains, the succeeding sentences and scenes that reveal new action, dialogue, characters and motifs, immediately transform this original expectation or ‘horizon’ into indeterminacy as “each new correlate [answers] expectations (either positively or negatively) and…arouse new expectations” (1978:111). The reader must integrate the previous correlates through a synthesising action that sees what has been read “shrink in the memory to a foreshortened background” (Iser 1978:111), then re-evoked and modified within the context of each new correlate. “That which is remembered becomes open to new connections, and these in turn influence the expectations aroused by the individual correlates in the sequence of sentences” (Iser 1978:111).

In critical texts, the succeeding correlates typically serve to confirm the expectations evoked by their predecessors, thus reducing the range of possible meanings or “semantic horizons” and delivering determinacy through their declarative statements (Iser 1978:111). However, in a literary text—and one with a structure as complex as the composite novel—the sequence of sentences, scenes and stories is deliberately variegated, and the narrative’s empirical objects are “depragmatized” from their original context to suggest significances existing outside of their original frames of reference. Consequently, the succeeding correlates in literary fiction serve to “modify and even frustrate the expectations they have aroused” (Iser 1978:111). These blockages to the temporal flow of the reading act create the gaps or narrative
ellipses that can only be resolved by the reader’s ongoing switching between textual perspectives. These gaps are more overt and disorientating in a composite novel, as the use of unifying strategies such as character, motif and action often resist easy synthesis. While the conventional modern short story is characterised by its “recalcitrance” (Wright 1989:115) and emphasis on indirection through inference, it is a defining feature of the genre that “every extraneous statement, every unnecessary word, must be eliminated…[and] any tale which fails to meet these fundamental requirements of brevity and coherence is not a true short story” (Cooper Lawrence 1976:61). It follows that the reader of the conventional short story brings to the reading act this pre-established generic expectation that every statement, character, motif and action bears significance to the overall ‘meaning’ of the story, and consequently, the transference, modification and translation of each correlate throughout the synthesising activity is shaped by the form’s ‘limitation of horizon’ and these generic expectations. While the gaps still exist within the modern short story form, they are generally resolved without significant difficulty by the reader’s dialectic of protension and retention, as their wandering viewpoint merges the accumulated perspectives to ultimately grasp the short story as a whole.

However, the short story that exists within the composite novel does not permit itself to be synthesised as easily. While it still must adhere to the conventional short story’s generic features of brevity, single effect, and coherence, the composite novel’s short stories depend upon the use of extraneous statements or elements for their connective properties. These may assume the form of a minor character, motif, phrase or setting reference that bear little apparent significance to that individual story’s plot. These gaps or blanks present an interruption to the reader’s temporal flow and often, “vivid surprise or vexation is associated with the resulting hiatus” (Ingarden 1973:34). This particular type of gap is integral to the structural and aesthetic properties of the composite novel, and the writer must be aware of its potential in order to construct an effective pattern that guides the reader’s constitutive activity throughout the greater work. While the inclusion of unifying strategies may often interrupt the reading flow and provoke the reader to configure their meaning more actively, other ‘connective tissues’ can be synthesised effortlessly if they obviously conform to the individual story’s plot. It is only when the reader continues onto subsequent stories in the composite novel that the opportunity is presented to resolve these particular blockages, when the unifying devices reappear and assume
new significance through the process of modification and configuration. As each new story introduces a recurrent unifying element through a new perspective, it “sends out stimuli into the memory, and what is recalled can activate the perspectives in such a way that they continually modify and so individualize one another” (Iser 1978:115). The composite novel reader’s wandering viewpoint becomes engaged in a complex interplay that continually reconfigures the perspectives evoked in previous stories to qualify the work’s past, present and future meanings and expectations.

As explained in Section Two, while the composite novel must be read sequentially, many examples of the genre preclude linear development. The reader is challenged by the spatiality of the composite novel’s form, and the wandering viewpoint must continually retrieve elements in earlier stories as ‘remembered backgrounds’, even though their dramatic action may be set after the ‘present story’: “the fact itself is present, the past context and synthesis are present, and at the same time the potential for reassessment is also present” (Iser 1978:117). The perspectives already invoked must undergo configuration through the reader’s synthesising faculties to provide a new anticipation or protension pertaining to the recurrent element’s relationship to the particular story being read, as well as the composite novel as a narrative whole. The sequence with which the composite novel’s stories are ordered exercises considerable influence on the reading act and the resultant meanings derived. As the reader negotiates the text, their wandering viewpoint continually modifying the contexts by which previous stories are originally configured, it is imperative that the stories are distributed so as to activate the author’s intended range of interpretative possibilities. This notion of sequence is particularly relevant to the composite novel’s text-unity continuum, as stories that feature unifying properties but are ordered without consideration of the reader’s synthesising and configurative responsibilities may result in weak connectives and unintentional or lost reader interpretations. As in the short story and conventional novel genres, the order of events that unfold through a composite novel’s individual, sequenced stories should “divide the text up into interacting structures [that] give rise to a grouping activity that is fundamental to the grasping of a text” (Iser 1978:119).

This process is further complicated by the composite novel reader’s pre-existing generic expectations of the conventional novel. As the reader gradually detects the network of connections and patterns of recurrent development within and between the composite novel’s stories, an expectation can develop of the conventional
novel’s impulse toward extension, where “the possibilities of a situation or method ask to be developed until exhausted” (Wright 1996:17). However, the composite novel resists this impulse, insisting that the reader take responsibility for teasing out the multiple possibilities solely through their synthesising operations and without the support of the traditional narrative arc. As Ingram claims, the concluding story in a composite novel acts to draw together the unifying strategies scattered throughout the work (1971:22), and this replaces the conventional novel’s more expository climax and denouement. The composite novel reader is therefore required to not only engage in a reciprocal transformation of textual segments to deliver a single, cohesive and independent aesthetic object (a determinate meaning) for each individual short story, but must then continually adjust their wandering viewpoint to transform each short story into reciprocal projections in order to extract an overall textual interpretation or aesthetic object that is greater than the sum of its parts.

“Fringe” stories that display little apparent adherence to a composite novel’s recurrent patterning present a particular challenge to the reader’s consistency-building scheme, and have significant impact on the work’s location on the text-unity continuum. By the inclusion of one or more stories that bear few or none of the work’s unifying strategies, the composite novel effectively suspends the smooth process of connectability in the text. The indeterminacies contained in the fringe story resist resolution by an easy process of configuration against the retensions carried from the previous sequenced stories. The absence or very covert employment of recurrent patterns, unifying devices or theme in such a fringe story denies the expectations aroused by its predecessors and consequently widens the range of interpretive horizons that had previously been narrowed through the configurative act. The frustration evoked by such interruption “necessitates new orientation for our activity, if we are to escape the cul de sac” (Ritchie 1965:230). This interruption to the synthesising process also serves to create a distance between the ‘remembered backgrounds’ of the previous stories and radically modifies the prefigured horizons of stories to come. The fringe story’s nonconformity of narrative style or content to the preceding pieces provokes the creation of entirely new horizons that must be synthesised against the correlates of following stories while continually transforming the past: “[T]he present retention of a past perspective qualifies both past and present. It also qualifies the future, because whatever modifications it has brought about will immediately affect the nature of our expectations” (Iser 1978:115). The gaps
presented by a fringe story significantly condition the reader’s expectations of a new theme, and retroactively modifies their view of previous stories’ themes. However, if the perspectives in the composite novel’s succeeding stories are not easily transformed against such a fringe story through the use of unifying strategies, the reader cannot meaningfully transform the perspectives in a process of reciprocal modification, and the aesthetic sense of whole-text coherence is weakened.

While fringe stories may be held accountable for a composite novel’s looseness of unity, their presence highlights the postmodern nature of the genre’s form. The principles of unity in the short story and the novel emphasise the concreteness of relationship, regardless of the works’ ideologies: “each incident contributes to the perception of that relationship, there is an ordered arrangement of the parts, and no one incident can be omitted without destroying the unity and hence the meaning of the whole” (Bader 1976:112). However, the use of fringe stories in a composite novel consciously demands that the reader more actively engages with the form’s discontinuity, instability and subjectivity to subsequently recognise the tenuous nature of reality and meaning. Often, the object of rebellious pieces is not to weaken the composite novel’s position on the text-unity continuum, so much as to “make us aware of the nature of our own capacity for providing links” (Iser 1972:285), and become aware of new possibilities suggested by the author.

The composite novel author is responsible for strategically creating and sequencing the textual cues and correlatives that give rise to the network of connections within the composite novel. However, the degree to which a reader is able to “climb aboard the text” (Iser 1972:282) is also a factor in the perception of a work’s textual unity. Iser argues that subjective factors such as “memory, interest, attention, and mental capacity all affect the extent to which past contexts become present” (1978:118). This factor is closely linked to the issue of the composite novel’s inexhaustibility of meaning. As Iser argues, every text is potentially capable of several different realisations, “and no one reading can ever exhaust the full potential, for each individual reader will fill the gaps in his own way, thereby excluding the various other possibilities” (1972:285). However, due to the composite novel’s structure that presents an array of independent short stories interacting to evoke a conventional novel’s effect of unity, the potential for vastly different interpretations is greatly increased, and this has become a pervasive subject for new critics of the genre.
Rosenblatt asserts that the forces of a reader’s social conditioning, life and linguistic experience are instrumental in the process of interpretation:

The special meanings and, more particularly, the submerged associations that these words and images have for the individual reader will largely determine what the work communicates to him. The reader brings to the work personality traits, memories of past events, present needs and preoccupations, a particular mood of the moment, and a particular physical condition. These and many other elements in a never-to-be-duplicated combination determine his interfusion with the peculiar contribution of the text. (Rosenblatt 1995:30)

Iser continues this argument: “…two people gazing at the night sky may be both looking at the same collection of stars, but one will see the image of a plough, and the other will make out a dipper. The ‘stars’ in a literary text are fixed; the lines that join them are variable” (1972: 287).

While the composite novel form resists the possibility of a single and absolute interpretation of the whole text, it can still be open to literary criticism by this examination of how the reader identifies and makes meaning of the network of associations to justify their individual response. And these individual reader interpretations are also inexhaustible in themselves, although are relatively confined by the limits imposed by the written text. The gestalt of the composite novel ultimately does not rest entirely on the conclusions reached at the end of the work’s final story. Subsequent readings of a composite novel will also always yield different interpretations for an individual, as the reading act is automatically modified to employ advance retrospection that synthesises the multiple correlatives within a new pattern, and “familiar occurrences now tend to appear in a new light and seem to be at times correct, at times enriched” (Iser 1972:285). As Viktor Shklovskij argues: “In art, the process of perception is an end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a device for experiencing the process of becoming; that which has already become is of no importance for art” (1991:14).
Section Four: Examining the reading act in Tim Winton’s composite novel *The Turning*.

The publication of *The Turning* by Tim Winton in 2004 was greeted with commercial and critical acclaim, winning the 2004 Colin Roderick Award, 2005 Queensland Premier’s Literary Award, and the 2005 New South Wales Premier’s Literary Award. However, despite its commercial success (which led to a 2013 film adaptation), the work has received scant academic attention. This critical disregard may be attributed to the pervasive ambivalence that surrounds the composite novel genre in the literary industry, with reviewers and critics hesitant on how to appraise its innovative form. Andrew Reimer’s 2004 review of *The Turning* in *The Sydney Morning Herald* is representative of this critical misinterpretation:

> Collections of linked short stories can be hit-and-miss affairs. At times they read like novels that didn’t quite get there, at other times like attempts at giving some semblance of unity to miscellaneous material by using the same names, the same settings. (2004:10)

While composite novels published in the United States, Europe and Asia are gradually receiving increased recognition as distinctly unique and independent genres by readers and critics, Australian examples of the form such as *The Turning* are yet to enjoy the same degree of critical and commercial consideration. Although there have been other Australian publications that subscribe to the genre’s conventions, including Frank Moorhouse’s *Futility and Other Animals* (1981), Tony Birch’s *Shadowboxing* (2006), Patrick Cullen’s *What Came Between* (2009), Steven Amsterdam’s *Things We Didn’t See Coming* (2009), Anna Solding’s *The Hum of Concrete* (2012) and Toni Jordan’s *Nine Days* (2013), there has been negligible critical analysis of their contribution to the nation’s literary history.

For this reason, I have chosen *The Turning* as a representative text to explicate how a composite novel author constructs the complex network of unifying strategies that permits the reader to “climb aboard the text” (Iser 1972:282) and extract a sense of textual cohesion. The scope of this exegesis prevents a comprehensive examination of more than one composite novel, although undertaking such an endeavour would not be expected to affect the research outcomes. This exegesis explores how a text that is written as a composite means, as opposed to what it means. The act of reading a composite novel, regardless of its subject, is essentially consistent in its phenomenology.
The Turning particularly lends itself to extended analysis as it falls towards the higher end of the text-unity continuum due to its complex infrastructure of recurrent patterns and motifs that bind its seventeen self-sufficient short stories. A representative text that is more explicitly unified permits a closer examination of the composition process that serves to advance both practice-based and critical understanding of the form. In its rejection of a New Critical approach, this analysis of The Turning focuses on the transactional process of the reading act, which “permits emphasis on the to-and-fro, spiraling, nonlinear, continuously reciprocal influence of reader and text in the making of meaning” (Rosenblatt 1995:xvi). While identifying the unifying strategies and gaps employed by Winton throughout The Turning, this analysis also explicates the way a reader appropriates these strategies and resolves the indeterminacies to ultimately construct an aesthetic gestalt that resembles the textual cohesion of a conventional novel.

Any reader-response analysis of a literary work must first address the question of ‘who is the reader?’ The definition of the ‘reader’ has been extensively argued for decades, with critics including Fish (1980), Culler (1980), Gibson (1980), and Riffaterre (1978) among others, divided by classifications based on whether a work is appraised according to the history of reader responses it invokes, or the inexhaustibility of the work’s potential effect. Iser proposes the concept of the implied reader, a fictional, textual construct that “incorporates both the prestructuring of the potential meaning by the text, and the reader’s actualisation of this potential through the reading process” (1974:xii). The employment of this implied reader construct enables this analysis of The Turning to project interpretations based on a network of response-inviting structures, which trigger the process of re-creative dialects in the reading act. The Turning, like most composite novels published in the last two decades, guides reader expectations with generic signifiers extraneous to the text. The dust jacket of The Turning reveals the work contains “seventeen overlapping stories of second thoughts and mid-life regrets” (2004). The book’s title is also expounded in the dust jacket editorial to establish the work’s pervading themes: “Here are turnings of all kinds—changes of heart, nasty surprises, slow awakenings, sudden detours—where people struggle against the terrible weight of the past and challenge the lives they’ve made for themselves” (2004). The Turning’s epigraph, a quotation from T.S. Eliot’s poem ‘Ash Wednesday’ sets the first referential field for the reader’s
wandering viewpoint while also providing an integral unifying device that thematically underpins the greater work:

And I pray that I may forget
These matters that with myself I too much discuss
Too much explain
Because I do not hope to turn again
Let these words answer
For what is done, not to be done again. (2004:np)

For the reader bringing to the text a sociocultural experience or knowledge of the Christian sacramental ritual of Ash Wednesday where the congregation is marked on the forehead with a cross of ashes and the phrase, “Remember, that thou art dust, and unto dust thou shalt return,” the epigraph presents explicit thematic implications of faith, suffering, repentance, mortality and reincarnation. The reader with prior knowledge of Eliot’s poem may also extend this thematic expectation to the poet’s exploration of the theological complexities that encompass the concept of no simple “turning” to God. In ‘Ash Wednesday’, Eliot presents the vagaries of Christian faith as a paradox: the experiential dimensions of suffering and joy uniting the soul in its process of pilgrimage, which is continually tested by a series of “turns”. These theological connotations create for the reader an anticipation of possible thematic intention that automatically sharpens their receptivity to the inclusion of implicit or explicit religious symbols or references in the stories to follow. For readers without this pre-established understanding of the various significances of ‘Ash Wednesday’, the epigraph is still effective in forming a referential field from which the process of anticipation and retrospection can commence. The refrain, “Because I do not hope to turn again” suggests the idea of a character or characters set to undergo—or have already undergone—a process of change, while “For what is done, not to be done again” overlays this expectation of transformation with a tone of despair. The Turning’s inclusion of a table of contents, listing seventeen short stories, presents another important signifier as to the work’s generic conventions. This extratextual device immediately contradicts the idea of a conventional novel’s narrative unity suggested by The Turning title, and repositions the reader’s expectations to approach each listed story as an individual and autonomous piece.

‘Big World’ launches The Turning, its title throwing open the reader’s referential field and extending the horizon of the wandering viewpoint with its suggestion of geographic expanse and the individual’s place in a larger global scheme.
The story’s opening lines ratify this expectation, and the first person narration and present tense engages the reader on an immediate and personal level with accordant acknowledgement: “Biggie and me, we’re feverish with anticipation; we steel ourselves for a season of pandemonium” (1). However, this anticipation is short lived for both the reader and the narrator: “But after the initial celebrations, nothing really happens, not even summer itself” (1). The big world the reader expects to be exposed to is immediately withdrawn, as the narrator and his friend Biggie take on full-time jobs at the meatworks after being disappointed with high school graduation celebrations and poor final grades. The duo’s despondency is juxtaposed with references to Cheryl Button who gets accepted to study medicine, and:

Vic Lang, the copper’s kid, is dux of the school and doesn’t even stay for graduation. And suddenly there we are, Biggie and me, heading to work every morning in a frigid wind in the January of our new lives, still in jeans and boots and flannel shirts, with beanies on our heads and the horizon around our ears. (2)

The inclusion of these classmates, particularly Vic Lang’s status as “the copper’s kid”, transfers the wandering viewpoint to the first liminal space between protension and retension, as an expectation is formed as to the potential relevance of Vic’s, or his father’s, role in the greater plot.

The reader is induced to find their bearings in the opening pages, which provide little guidance by way of setting and timeframe. The big world becomes ironic as the narrator explains, “I dream of escaping, of pissing off north to find some blue sky. Unlike him I’m not really from here. It’s not hosing blood that shits me off—it’s Angelus itself; I’m going nuts here” (2). A vacancy or gap is created for the reader as there is little exposition as to what drives the narrator’s frustrations. The first specific locational reference functions as a secondary trigger of the spiritual undertones of the work. As with the Ash Wednesday symbolism of Eliot’s poem, readers familiar with Christian rituals will recognise Angelus as the series of prayers performed to commemorate the Incarnation, a theological belief fundamentally based on notions of intense transformation. As the narrator eventually convinces Biggie to escape with him to “wide open spaces” and “trails of adventure” (2), the story’s temporal and locational fields of reference are gradually sharpened. The friends embark on their escape in a “1967 Kombi” (3) and see Perth’s “dun plain shimmering with heat” (4), and the claustrophobic sense of enclosure suggested in the opening pages is relieved: “The longer we drive the more the sky and the bush open up” (4); “We’ve
reached a world where…nobody knows us and nobody cares” (5). The journey signifies a turn for the narrator-protagonist, and its significance is explicitly and repeatedly conveyed as he reflects his parents’ “mutual misery” (7) upon their arrival to Angelus, his father’s subsequent desertion of his family, his crush on Briony Nevis, and his unhappy school years where Tony Macoli bullied him until he was rescued by Biggie: “I felt like somebody ransomed and set free. Until that moment I was disappearing” (8).

The two friends continue north and the ‘big world’ starts to take literal shape, but the term also assumes a figurative meaning as the narrator’s thoughts ascend to existential themes: “Some mornings out in the misty ranges the world looks like it means something, some simple thing just out of my reach, but there anyway” (9). This sense of indefinability is reinforced by the narrator’s later confession that “I know I’m stuck in something that I can’t figure my way out of” (10). The intimate connection for the reader, established by the use of homodiegetic narration and present tense, is enhanced by this concept of ‘finding the way’. As the reader negotiates the thematic implications of the narrator’s journey to self-discovery, they are drawn into the quest to create their own meaning and unity within the story’s generic conventions. This motif recurs after the friends have picked up the hitchhiker, Meg, and their van catches fire against a “maze of salt lakes that blaze silver and pearly in the sun and stretch to the horizon in every direction” (13).

The narration continually adjusts the reader’s wandering viewpoint with a telescopic effect, zooming in to reminiscences of “the bonfire at Massacre Point” where the narrator watches the burning kite flutter down into the sea but “didn’t see it as an omen” (12). This philosophical analepsis triggers a new reader anticipation of possible future misfortune for the narrator, anticipations that are not satisfied by the later plot. The perspective then expands again to the shimmering saltpans where “the horizon fades. Everything looks impossibly far off” (14). However, the lens is turned again with an abrupt proleptic epiphany:

In two hours, I’ll hear Biggie and Meg in his sleeping bag and she’ll cry out like a bird and become so beautiful, so desirable in the total dark that I’ll begin to cry. In a week Biggie and Meg will blow me off in Broome and I’ll be on the bus south for a second chance at the exams. In a year Biggie will be dead in a mining accident in the Pilbarra…I’ll grow up and have a family of my own and see Briony Nevis, tired and lined in a supermarket queue, and wonder what all the fuss was about. (14)
The effect is disorienting as the reader is pulled out of the “big world” and back into the suffocating streets of Angelus, rejecting any formed thematic expectations of freedom and fulfillment, foreshadowing a recurrent use of setting, as well as themes of futility, loss and isolation for the stories to follow. But despite its bleak projection, ‘Big World’ concludes by returning the reader to the stillness of the present moment, achieving structural closure and consolidating the story’s underlying theme that transcendence is always just beyond our grasp: “Right now…I don’t care what happens beyond this moment. In the hot northern dusk, the world suddenly gets big around us, so big we just give in and watch” (15).

The journey motif is continued into The Turning’s second story, ‘Abbreviation’, as the extended Lang family travels in convoy to White Point. While processing the change in this story’s perspective to an omniscient heterodiegetic narration, the reader’s apperceptive faculties are activated by the immediate reference to Vic Lang, the “copper’s kid” mentioned briefly in ‘Big World,’ who lived in Angelus. A synthesisation process is instigated as this previously irrelevant character is evoked in a new context, and the memory of him leaving suddenly for university in the previous story creates a new temporal frame with which to regard this second story. Through this process, it becomes apparent that ‘Abbreviation’ disrupts any expectation of a conventional linear chronology in the work’s stories. When Vic’s grandmother admonishes him for squirming in his seat, and he later laments that he wished for “someone to see 1973 in with” (20), the reader must modify their viewpoint to an adjusted perspective of Vic as a child, as a new gap is created in the diegesis of him at twelve and the existing knowledge that he made a sudden and unexplained departure from Angelus upon graduation. The story quickly and economically introduces the other holidaying members of the Lang family through a retrospective account of the journey, including the tempestuous dynamic of “gingy banty-rooster” Uncle Ernie (18) and Auntie Cleo who “had the looks of an old-timey movie star gone to fat” (18), the freckly “wobbegong” girl cousins with “needle teeth and big nostrils” (18), Vic’s screaming baby sister, his parents, and Nanna, who favoured her son Ernie over Vic’s unnamed father.

As the family approach the sand dunes of White Point which are “banked up light a snowfield in the moonlight” (18), the narration becomes more intimately connected with Vic’s perspective: “Not that Vic had ever seen snow; it’s just how he imagined it going on white forever” (18). This reference to an endless horizon directs
the wandering viewpoint back to ‘Big World’ where the narrator expressed similar sentiments at the salt lakes: “I begin to have the panicky feeling that the land and this very afternoon might go on forever” (13), and then repeated again in ‘Abbreviation’ with the sandhills forming which Vic likened to “fluted ripples that went on forever” (30). The explicit recurrence of the eternity motif effects a connection of the correlates from the present and previous stories, and prompts the reader to transform the literal value of the three observations into a thematic suggestion about adolescent awakening and subsequently establishes expectations of thematic implication in future references to the natural landscape. As the family sets up camp, “[T]he sun was low on the rolling dunes and [Vic] felt tired and strangely old” (20). This juxtaposition of the metaphoric dunes and Vic’s awareness of mortality implicitly alludes to the anachronistic structure of the stories and themes of mortality, prefiguring new horizons for Vic that, at this point, are dominated by indeterminacies. Vic’s father is also partially synthesised in the reading process, as the reference to his position as the town cop in ‘Big World’ is evoked in ‘Abbreviation’: “She read out the orders by the light of the policeman’s torch” (21). As the tension in Ernie and Vic’s father’s relationship is revealed through Vic’s recollection of past events, the characters assume a more concrete form: “Ernie, Vic realized, was a live wire, an adventurer. That was his role in the family. Vic’s father, on the other hand, was the one who tidied up after the excitement. You could see they’d been doing it all their lives” (22). The revelation prompts a new anticipation for the reader as the narrative presents the possibility of this dynamic continuing, or an event that forces this tension to the surface. Again, the story’s plot resists a simplistic fulfilment of this anticipation, opening up new horizons for the dynamic to possibly be extrapolated in later stories.

Vic’s sexual awakening with Melanie on the dunes is laden with significant correlates that guide the reader to an awareness of subtextual meaning. Melanie insists, “You won’t forget your first real kiss” (26), preconfiguring the reader’s specific horizon to anticipate its significance to Vic in years to come, and their exchange about her amputated finger, her “abbreviation” (27), presents explicit cues for the reader to extend their expectations regarding the work’s underpinning themes: “But, you know, all the big things hurt, the things you remember. If it doesn’t hurt, it’s not important” (26). When Vic senses Melanie “was in some kind of pain, something important that was out of his reach, the way everything is when you’re just a stupid kid and all the talk is over your head” (33), his frustrations at the limits of his emotional maturity
correlate explicitly with sentiments of the ‘Big World’ narrator who “is stuck in something that I can’t figure my way out of” (10). Vic’s later crayfishing injury works to reconcile the memory of Melanie’s painless stump with his own transcendence of physical pain: “He was thinking of her. He was immune; nothing could touch him” (35), and a new horizon is subsequently opened to perceive Vic’s progression toward emotional and psychological maturation. In addition to the pervasive notion of suffering, the natural elements of fire and water are reemployed in ‘Abbreviation’ as unifying motifs to support the inferences of fate’s indeterminacy, connecting the correlates to those in ‘Big World’. Both of the first two stories close with the narrator and protagonist surveying the landscape in a contemplation of existential meaning. But while the ‘Big World’ narrator is awestruck by the grandeur, Vic searches the ocean for guidance: “He looked across the sea for the first sign of cloud, for any signal of a change in the weather, but the sea and the sky were as pale and blue and blank as sleep, as empty as he felt standing there on the lapping shore” (36). This polyphonic contrast generates a recognition of the text’s use of contrasting perspectives, thus broadening the reader’s referential fields for the interpretation of subsequent stories.

‘Aquifer’ opens in the present day with the narrator “stirred from a stupor at the sound of a familiar street name” (37). In this direct allusion to The Turning’s use of unifying devices, the reader’s wandering viewpoint is quickly repositioned to anticipate Angelus or White Point as the primary setting for the story. Where ‘Abbreviation’ closed with Vic searching the horizon for “change”, the opening sequence in ‘Aquifer’ features the narrator watching news footage of a police forensic team retrieving human bones from a swamp. The subtle continuity presented by these sequential scenes effects a synthesis in the reading act that modifies the thematic significance of the first two stories. The macabre discovery prompts the narrator to return to his childhood town Angelus, and throughout the subsequent analepsis to his childhood years, myriad labyrinthian references evoke the reader’s memory of similar motifs in ‘Big World’, and covertly prompt a recognition of The Turning’s extratextual temporal and spatial characteristics that serve to guide the reading process: “My mind was elsewhere, travelling in loops and ellipses” (38); “The bush rolled and twisted like an unmade bed” (38); “Down at the turnaround where the lupins and wild oats took over” (41); “We slipped through the bush together where
there were no straight lines” (41); “time wasn’t straight” (43); and, “every hollow in
the landscape led to the hissing maze down there” (43).

The “familiar” Angelus is easily identifiable as a recurrent unifying element,
and the ‘Aquifer’ narrator establishes the main story’s temporal frame as when the
town was developing with “suburban lots scoured from bushland” (38), and the
homes were “as fresh as we imagined the country itself to be” (38). The motif of time
continues the previous stories’ implications of the liminality of adolescence, with the
narrator’s child self habitually dialing the authoritative BBC voice: “It was a delicious
thing to know, that at any moment of the day, when adults weren’t about, you could
dial yourself something worth knowing, something irrefutable, and not need to pay”
(40). More explicitly, the landscape assumes a controlling presence in the events and,
with the reader now alert to the detection of unifying strategies, the fire and the sea
assume new significances. When the narrator recalls visiting a great blowhole near the
South Australian border, he “thought of things sucked in, all that surging, sucking
water beneath the crust of the wide brown land” (47). This image evokes from the
reader’s foreshortened background the description of Vic at White Point when “the
sea sucked at him” (29), and the synthesisation of this repetition modifies the
interpretation of both events. “[G]reat bonfires of fallen trees” (40) and the “hidden
perils” which the parents warned plagued the swamp are additional continuing motifs,
but the story most explicitly develops a thematic pattern through the narrator’s
existential perceptions of the natural landscape: “The brown land, I figured, wasn’t
just wide but deep too” (49). A significant correlation with the closing scene in
‘Abbreviation’ occurs when the twelve-year-old ‘Aquifer’ narrator witnesses his
nemesis’s silent drowning in the swamp, then “went home and said nothing” (46).
“After the water settled back and shook itself smooth again like hung washing, there
wasn’t a movement. No sign” (46). While Vic had searched the smooth ocean surface
in White Point for meaning, this tangential character of similar age meanwhile
embarked on an understanding of the metaphoric depths of guilt in neighbouring
Angelus.

Further extending this unifying process for the reader, the narrator becomes
acutely aware of Alan Mannering’s body decomposing in the swamp. Years pass in
the artesian town, and neighbours squabble, “new streets appear even while the bush
burned” (47), and the narrator, consumed by persistent guilt over his possible
responsibility for Alan’s death, imagines the boy liquefied, “raining silently down

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upon the lawns. I thought of him in lettuce and tomatoes, on our roses. Like blood and bone” (48). The conceptualisation is extended as, “I imagined...[a]ll those living creatures living and dying, born to be reclaimed, all sinking back into the earth to rise again and again: evaporated, precipitated, percolated” (49); and “all that dust on the surface, the powder of ash and bones, bark and skin” (50) evokes a synthesis with Eliot’s ‘Ash Wednesday’ epilogue that connotes the Christian proclamation of “Ashes to ashes; dust to dust.” Further recurrences of the time motif in ‘Aquifer’ adjust the reader’s wandering viewpoint to consider the power of memory over the ability to move on:

I was right to doubt the 1194 man on the telephone. Time doesn’t click on and on at the stroke. It comes and goes in waves and folds like water; it flutters and sifts like dust, rises, billows, falls back on itself. When a wave breaks, the water is not moving. The swell has travelled great distances but only the energy is moving, not the water. Perhaps time moves through us and not us through it…Things are never over. (52-53)

‘Damaged Goods’ functions to effectively synthesise several unresolved correlates in the reading act. The reappearance of Vic, through his wife, Gail’s, retrospective homodiegetic narration, provides a confirmation of the reader’s pattern-making activities established in the previous three stories. ‘Damaged Goods’ relocates the temporal frame back into the future, yet creates an immediate indeterminacy: “My husband had this thing about a girl with a birthmark. It began when he was almost fourteen and went on all through high school like a fever that wouldn’t break” (55). As the reader grapples to adjust their wandering viewpoint to this chronological shift, anticipations are aroused as to the potential significance this new character presents to Vic’s emotional development. Gail’s confessed frustrations mirror the reader’s own textual meaning-making experience: “I’m like some biographer sniffing around in vain for one final, telling detail that will complete the psychological puzzle at the centre of Vic’s life” (55-56). Her acknowledgment that Angelus “was the place that formed him” (56) solidifies the reader’s expectation of the town’s greater textual significance, and opens the referential field to an anticipation of the effect of impending events on his later life. As Gail recounts the development of Vic’s adolescent obsession with Strawberry Alison, whose “mark was all colour” (57), the perspective narrows and the reader is drawn into experiencing intimate access to these formative incidents. Strawberry Alison is deemed “damaged goods” (58) by the town, and when Gail reminds the reader of the younger Vic’s fascination with Melanie’s finger in ‘Abbreviation’, the psychological pattern serves to resolve a gap evoked by
the indeterminate events of the earlier story as well as establishing an expectation of symbolic correlation. Strawberry Alison’s description also opens new horizons for the reader as Gail interprets the root of Vic’s obsession in his desire to “instinctively seek out a victim to defend” (58). Her revelation that her husband is now a labour lawyer draws the wandering viewpoint back to the present, evoking a new frustration at the reader’s lack of access to the narrative’s missing years.

Gail recounts that Vic was secretive of his feelings for Alison and defensive of the girl’s imagined chastity, his dismissing any notion of her being like the “legendary Slack Jackie” (61), whose character is not further extrapolated in ‘Damaged Goods’. The correlation of Vic as a ‘defender’ is solidified with the reappearance of his parents, Bob and Carol, who are now more concretely realised through Gail’s perspective. Bob’s tendency to see “menace at every turn” (59) instigates a restructuring of past syntheses, as the reader reconciles their knowledge of his position as a policeman with the new revelation that “his attempts to protect Vic from accident and injury transmitted fear” (59). Bob’s anxiety provokes in the reader a recollection of Nanna searching the water for “unseen perils” in ‘Abbreviation,’ and is correlated with Gail’s present reflection on the effects of her fundamentalist Christian upbringing: “[F]or although God Himself was supposed to have made it and sustained it, and thought it seemed so beautiful, the world around us was eternally dangerous. The price of spiritual freedom, we learnt, was eternal vigilance. Such a high price for so long” (60). This notion of ‘cost’ prompts a retroactive reading action that modifies the interpretation of the ‘Aquifer’ narrator finding consolation in discovering “something worth knowing, something irrefutable, and not need[ing] to pay” (40).

Recalling major events in the Lang family life with economy, Gail’s narration creates a succession of tangible gaps for the reader who must adjust their expectations to accommodate a future understanding of what Carol implied happened in Angelus that “crushed” Bob, turning him from “the proverbial straight shooter [into] a local joke” (59), as well as the revelation of Vic’s infant sister’s death by meningitis when he was fifteen. The fact Vic “never mentioned a sister, never once said a word” (59) to Gail works to expand the reader’s horizons in anticipation of a disclosure of the tragedy’s subsequent psychological impact on the family and Vic’s marriage. The reader attempts to connect the correlates of the infant death and Bob’s earlier descent into alcoholism, and is prompted to retrieve the ‘Big World’ detail of Vic’s abrupt departure from Angelus upon graduation. These temporal cues instigate a modified
expectation of Vic’s adolescent years now being a ‘turning’ period in his emotional life, and the reader anticipates the possibility of a future synthesisation through more correlating details in later stories.

Gail acts as a guide for the reader with her own personal perspectives giving rise to new gaps in the meaning-making process: “Some Fridays I’m tempted to quit him altogether. These past few weekend’s I’ve come close” (63). As her narration intersperses a second-hand account of Vic’s adolescence with her own frustrations, the reader must continually adjust their wandering viewpoint to account for the variances in perspective and subjectivity of her narration. The brief account of Vic’s parents’ deaths compounds this disjunctive effect and gives rise to a multiplicity of gaps and tensions:

His mother died of cancer. His father was there for it. Out of the blue, after twenty-something years. Two days of family and then the old man went back out bush and fell down a disused mineshaft. I only met him once at poor Carol’s bedside. He was so thin and proud. And sober. Like a man from another era. His dying wife was incandescent. Rage, love, forgiveness. The feeling between them was so strong I could barely stay in the room. (63)

With Gail’s succeeding revelation that Vic spent his final year of school looking after his mother, the reader’s synthesising faculties are activated to merge their protensions and retensions relating to the Lang family’s timeline. This interplay results in an acknowledgment of Bob’s abandonment of his wife and son that year and the subsequent psychological damage this inflicted on them. The reference to Bob’s own death immediately after his wife’s, as well as Carol’s disposition at their reunion, arouses new questions, which the reader determines to resolve within their newly adjusted wandering viewpoint. ‘Damaged Goods’ marks an explicit activation of the reader’s correlating faculties with an additional unifying strategy being several direct references to turning. As Gail’s reflects on Vic’s defensiveness of Strawberry Alison, she considers his empathy “endearing until you think of it turned your way” (60), and this extension of the term’s significance prompts a modification in the reader’s anticipation of the book title’s thematic implications.

The motif of fire is firmly established as a predominant unifying strategy in ‘Damaged Goods’, strengthening the thematic resonance created by correlates in earlier stories. Vic notes that Strawberry Alison’s birthmark “was obviously congenital yet he still thought of conflagration, as though she’d survived a fire whose heat had never left her face” (57), and as he watched her on the netball court “he
sware he felt the heat off her” (61). Gail suggests his fascination with her mark may also be explained by the sociopolitical events of the time: “Vietnam in shrieking flames on TV every night” (58), a reference that also serves to anchor the story’s temporality in the greater chronological scheme. The fire motif assumes even greater effect as a unifying device when Alison published a poem about “two girls in flames” (62), and Vic attends the bonfire at Massacre Point on completion of high school. This bonfire presents an explicit synthesising signal to the reader, intertwining ‘Damaged Goods’ with the ‘Big World’ narrator’s attendance at the same event, which until this point lacked any significant correlation with other stories. As Alison is “incinerated” in a car crash on her way home from the bonfire, the reader recalls Alan Mannering’s decomposition in ‘Aquifer’, and the significance of the Ash Wednesday epigraph and is re-evoked and reified. In the wake of the accident, adolescent Vic “thought of the crimson splash of flame Alison had sent forth and wondered if she had foreseen her own death” (65), while Gail is haunted in the present by the girl’s enduring effect on her husband. Gail’s actions in the story’s closing lines parallel those of ‘Big World’ and ‘Abbreviation’, creating a new synthesising process for the reader that elevates the recurrent “searching” image to greater significance in the work’s gestalt: “I go out to the cliffs with binoculars to see whales find their way in from the southern mist and I walk here in this paddock, stubbornly, wondering at the heat each of us leaves in our wake” (65).

With the reader’s pattern-making faculties firmly attuned to the expectation of recurrent characters, events, locations and motifs that will continue to develop the work’s gestalt, the fifth story ‘Small Mercies’ presents an abrupt block in the temporal flow, frustrating expectations and creating a tangible gap in the reading process. ‘Small Mercies’ challenges the reader to again reposition themselves in the work’s kaleidoscope of temporal and perspective frames with its opening sentence, “Peter Dyson came home one day to find his wife dead in the garage” (67). While the repetition of the death and decay motif immediately recognisable in Peter’s frank explanation of live sheep exportation to his young son Ricky, there are otherwise few overt markers to reconcile this story’s connection with the earlier pieces. Without the continuation of the now familiar Lang characters to help construct an anticipated gestalt, Vic, Gail, Bob and Carol shrink in the reader’s memory to a foreshortened background, and a new horizon is opened to accommodate the events shaping the Dyson and Keenan families. Peter’s return to his childhood hometown of Angelus
provides a temporal marker with reference to the town’s whaling station, “now a museum” (92), and serves as correlating base from which the reader’s wandering viewpoint is directed to the story’s greater emphasis on unification through metaphoric devices. The repetition of certain imagery functions to restructure the reader’s past synthesis of its previous representations, modifying its interpretations and significances. The “soupy” water of the pool (70) recalls the beach air in ‘Big World’ (13), and as Peter completes his laps, he regards the water around him as “all Band-Aids, floating scabs and hanks of hair. He was roiling through the sweat and spit and other people’s piss and when he hoisted himself out, the air was just as brothy” (71). This explicit correlation with the “concentrated urinal stench of thousands of merinos being stacked in a floating high-rise” (68) also retroactively transforms the reader’s memory of the swamp’s “black cake-mix of sediment” in ‘Aquifer’. The depiction of “soupy” water throughout the earlier stories is instrumental in modifying the reader’s interpretations, connecting the consistent use of its imagery with the separate narrative events to evoke underpinning thematic suggestions of sin, guilt and shame.

The turning motif is more recurrent throughout ‘Small Mercies’, functioning with similar synthesising effect to ‘Damaged Goods’. Peter acknowledges, “that things were wrong, that he had to make a change” (83); ex-girlfriend Fay Keenan pervades his formative memories: “she was there at every turn” (83); and Marjorie Keenan muses that “life doesn’t turn out how you plan it” (79). Fire also returns to trigger the reader’s new modification of its metaphoric significance: “[the fire] sucked the air from the room and danced before him like a thought just out of reach” (89). Yet, the most explicit correlate employed as a unifying device in ‘Small Mercies’ is the expansion on ‘damage’ to self and others as both a literal and figurative concept: “[Peter] couldn’t bear to think what damage the past year had done [Ricky]” (72); “They didn’t see them destroying each other” (81); “Dyson could only see the damage they’d done to each other” (82); “We did damage” (97). As the reader appropriates ‘Small Mercies’ as another independent and cohesive unit within the book, these recurrent allusions instigate an active interplay between modified expectations of plot and transformed memories of physical and emotional damage in the previous stories. Compounding this correlating activity is the presence of religion as a significant element within the story. The Keenans’ Catholicism, Fay’s controversial abortion, and the story’s title assume greater significance as the reader evokes the symbolic
religious correlates particularly overt in ‘Damaged Goods’ and ‘Aquifer’. While the reader is actively engaged in processing and modifying these recurrent motifs, the minor characters populating ‘Small Mercies’, including the brief reference to locally renowned footballer, Leaper, are registered as additional correlates that prefigure a new horizon for the wandering viewpoint. However, the possibilities aroused by the expectations of this adjusted horizon are again frustrated, as the expansive cast of primary and secondary characters is succeeded by only Vic and Carol Lang in ‘On Her Knees’. This interruption to expected future connections creates a new gap in the reading process that is partially alleviated by the return of the familiar Langs to the disjunctive diegesis.

‘On Her Knees’ resolves numerous gaps created by the indeterminacies in ‘Big World’, ‘Abbreviation’ and ‘Damaged Goods,’ and the reader identifies the story’s sequential placement through a retroactive recall of references in these earlier stories. The story opens with: “I was sixteen when the old man shot through” (101), and the homodiegetic narration modifies the correlates from these stories with the new revelation that Vic moved to the city with his mother and attended university while Carol supported them by cleaning houses. While the story’s action is centred around the mother and son’s conflicting approaches to Carol’s accusation of theft by a university lecturer client, a new indeterminacy is created as Vic’s retrospective narration discloses: “In twenty years she was only ever sacked the once” (102). This extension to the temporality of Vic’s referential field arouses anticipations of new correlates that can resolve the existing gaps of Bob’s sobriety, Carol’s dying grace, Bob’s enigmatic death, and Vic’s emotional detachment from his wife and hometown, all of which have been evoked by the previous piecemeal plots. However, the narrative resists such resolution, employing recurrent metaphoric tropes to assist the story’s synthesisation, rather than delivering specific expository events and detail.

Bob’s desertion from Angelus receives no elaboration, except for Vic’s revelation that, “Since my old man’s disappearance, we’d never raised our voices at each other. It was as though we kept the peace at all costs for fear of driving each other away” (102). Instead, religious symbolism recurs throughout the story, including the duality of the story’s title, Vic’s references to “an act of mercy”, “admission of guilt”, Carol’s forgiveness, and her transcendental presence in the open doorway: “It seemed that the very light of day was pouring out through her limbs” (112). This latter reference is a key correlate that arouses a recall of Gail’s description in ‘Damaged Goods’ of her
mother-in-law on her deathbed as “incandescent” (63), provoking a synthesising action that contributes to the reader’s interpretation of Carol’s spiritual development, and the epiphanic effect that her morality has on her son.

Other pertinent markers include the juxtaposition of the river’s “constant, brothy presence” (105) and Vic’s reflections on personal and societal guilt, which herald a synthesisation process with similar metaphoric strategies in ‘Aquifer’ and ‘Small Mercies’. In addition, Vic’s discovery of a student paper being marked by his mother’s client titled *Throwing Off the Shackles: consciousness-raising and the delivery of change* (108) works to consolidate in the reader’s meaning-making activities the significance of the book’s title, and progress the synthesisation of underpinning themes compounded in earlier story correlates.

‘Cockleshell’ makes another shift away from the Lang family narrative, and disrupts the sequential flow of the reading act through the non-linear return to Angelus. The main plot of ‘Cockleshell’ is set when “the meatworks and the whaling station [were] still operating…there were kids everywhere and they ran in a loose mob, roaming the bush and estuarine flats in search of entertainment” (115). Evoking the whaling station references in ‘Small Mercies’ and the descriptions of the relatively undeveloped suburbs in ‘Big World’, ‘Abbreviation’, ‘Aquifer’, and ‘Damaged Goods’, the reader is able to easily reposition their wandering viewpoint to conceive this story in the town’s now-familiar early years of the 1970s. Brakey’s sudden and unexpected obsession with “bog-ordinary…Agnes bloody Larwood” (114) prompts a recall of Vic’s similar fascination with Strawberry Alison in ‘Damaged Goods’ and the ‘Big World’ narrator’s attraction to Briony Nevis. Where Alison was perceived as a “damaged specimen” (58) and “full of longing” (59), Agnes Larwood—represented through the heterodiegetic narration and free indirect style—is also perceived as psychologically scarred by her father, Eric’s, past alcoholism and abuse. Her desire to escape from Angelus and the claustrophobic effects of his subsequent sobriety correlates with similar sentiments evoked by the adolescent protagonists of ‘Big World’, ‘Abbreviation’, ‘Damaged Goods’ and ‘Small Mercies’.

Like the Keenans in ‘Small Mercies’, the Larwoods are Christian and seek solace from their troubles in faith. And just as Fay Keenan abandoned her daughter and Bob Lang left his family in ‘Damaged Goods’, Brakey’s father also deserted him and his mother three years earlier, and the father of Brakey’s school friend plunges from a bridge, prompting the reader to recall Sophie Dyson’s suicide. With all these
correlates being recalled, modified and synthesised, the attitude of Brakey’s mother assumes a more expansive significance to the construction of the text’s gestalt: “To her, the world is a treacherous place. Nothing lasts. People cheat. They leave. They just up and go. Sooner or later they all bolt and you’re left on your own” (116). As in all the previous stories, death, suffering and hidden danger dominate the plot of ‘Cockleshell’, with the recurrence of the water motif provoking the reader to connect the stories’ correlative values. The image of Nanna surveying the ocean for “unseen perils” (29) in ‘Abbreviation’ is evoked and synthesised as Brakey spears catfish with Agnes in the dark: “he watches while she pulls the poisonous spines off them with pliers, he wonders how many more they’re walking past without seeing at all” (121). Further recurrent references endorse this synthesising action: “blowfish and jellies glisten in death” (119), and “the water smells soupy” (125). However, it is the powerful return of the fire motif that prompts a significant consolidation of the Ash Wednesday themes. When the Larwood’s house suspiciously burns down with Eric Larwood inside, “they dragged the charred shell of him out on a vinyl sheet” (131). The fire also assumes a transformative power as the reader recognises Agnes’s actions essentially free her from oppression and present the possibility of a new life.

Using a similar structural pattern to ‘Big World’, the narrative of ‘Cockleshell’ then uses prolepsis to abruptly shift to the future. From the city, an adult Brakey provides an expeditious recount of his mother’s death, the supplanting of Cockleshell by the new Spinnaker Waters estate, and Agnes’s current occupation as a city surgeon where she saves and transforms human lives. The final revelation of Brakey’s own psychological oscitancy during these years, effected by Agnes slapping him when he tried to kiss her, actively evokes in the reader a correlation with the image of Vic Lang as an emotionally isolated adult in ‘Damaged Goods’, and modifies a new horizon of expectation for their wandering viewpoint:

Brakey never gets to be much good with women. For the rest of his life he’s awkward around them, aware of his propensity to blurt out the wrong things at just the right moment, never quite certain of the point at which he’s allowed to make contact. He has learnt not to declare himself. Never again does he reach out uninvited to touch someone lovely. (131)

The proleptic shift in the temporal frame of ‘Cockleshell’ realigns the narrative with the perspectives of Gail in ‘Damaged Goods’ and the adult narrator of ‘Big World’, creating a synthesising effect that allows the reader to consider the cumulative
developments of the individual stories as a loose collective through a retrospective lens.

The eponymous title of the eighth story in the sequence, ‘The Turning’, explicitly signals its extratextual significance in the work’s cohesive pattern. Positioned at almost the mid-point of the book, the story’s title creates an expectation of possible plot or theme-based developments that may contribute to the stories’ sense of unification. However, an immediate satisfaction of this expectation is denied as ‘The Turning’ introduces yet a new cast of characters against whom the reader must adjust their wandering viewpoint. Vic and Carol Lang are pushed further into the reader’s memory, as the narrative instead explores the oppressed Raelene Leaper and her volatile relationship with abusive husband, Max. While the story establishes its setting in a residential van park through the heterodiegetic narration, the reader is provided with early correlates that help synthesise the story’s present day temporality and relativity. When Raelene meets Sherry at the washing line, she observes, “There was something squeaky clean about Sherry. She was all wrong for White Point and wrong for Raelene but you couldn’t help but like her, love her even” (135). White Point arouses the recall of ‘Abbreviation’ where a young Vic experienced sexual awakening on the sand dunes and transcendence of pain after a crayfishing injury, and opens the reader’s horizons to the possibility of further event or theme-based connections. The recurrence of Max’s footballer brother, Frank, idolised by Ricky in ‘Small Mercies’, also synchronises ‘The Turning’ with the present day dramatic action of the Dysons in Angelus, and opens up a new referential field from which the reader anticipates an extrapolation of the Leaper sibling dynamic:

[Y]ou’d think he’d be proud but he wasn’t. Just the sight of Frank loping onto the ground made him scowl and the slightest fumble turned Max into a maniac. At first people thought it was funny to hear him call his brother a fairy, a retard, a waste of skin, but Frank was a star, a local, and White Pointers loved him. (137)

However, beyond this disclosure Frank does not recur in ‘The Turning’, creating a tangible frustration through this unresolved gap in the reading act. Instead, the plot follows Raelene’s quest for spiritual and emotional fulfillment through her friendship with Sherry and her attempt to attain personal independence in her marriage.

Raelene’s frustrations with her life are expressed with similar metafictional techniques used in ‘Aquifer’: “She was sick of conversations with people passing through. Nothing you said to each other mattered a damn because you’d never see
them again” (134); which subsequently effects a subtle detachment of the reader from the text and reminds them of the work’s deliberate disjunction. Vic Lang’s compulsion to “defend” the weak, developed in ‘Damaged Goods’ and ‘On Her Knees’, in ‘The Turning’ is re-evoked and correlated with Raelene’s acknowledgements that “[t]he only way she’d leave Max was in the protection of another man. She needed a rescuer” (146). The subtle continuance of the absent father motif in ‘The Turning’ further bolsters the reader’s apperception of familial loss and damage: “But still at the core of it, that high sweet voice, her father’s, faceless forever in the dark” (150). As her husband’s abuse escalates and Raelene struggles to understand the absolutism of Sherry and Dan’s faith, ‘The Turning’ reinforces concepts of existential isolation, previously suggested in ‘Abbreviation’, ‘Damaged Goods’ and ‘Cockleshell’:

…[A] patch of stars opened up low in the sky ahead of her and stopped her in her tracks…[S]he felt woozy for a moment as if she was in the clouds herself and looking down through a gap to see the fires of a thousand desert camps. There were lights impossible to count and around them, in her mind’s eye, people huddled, all of them searching like herself, afraid, looking into their fires, with the sky a blank over them. (150)

The reader is also cued to recognise in this second canopy-of-stars motif (see ‘Big World’) the emergence of a recurrent pattern suggesting the momentary glimpse of visionary grandeur that may be experienced amidst the turmoil of contemporary life.

The significance of the book’s ‘turning’ motif is made explicit as Raelene seeks a release from her physical and spiritual claustrophobia, metaphorically conveyed through her new religious snowdome. In her perception of its “trapped” Christ figure, “his hair flying in the wind, the robe pulled back from his chest. He was all man” (152), the reader synthesises Raelene’s earlier recollection of her husband’s masculinity (137) to recognise that she has subconsciously found her “rescuer”. Raelene’s own attempt at turning is indicated to the reader by her new religious curiosity: “The born-again business, asked Raelene. What’s it like?…The moment you suddenly got it, when it clicked, said Rae. You know, the change. When you turned, or whatever you call it” (153). As the overt connotations of Raelene’s inquiries are synthesised with the previous stories’ thematic correlates of stasis, transition and transformation, the reader’s wandering viewpoint is directed to gradual formation of the text’s gestalt. ‘The Turning’ elevates the employment of intertextual Christian references to further prompt the reader’s connection of the suffering and
divine release themes: “As she curled between them, calming them, reciting the details of Jonah’s deliverance” (158); and, “She looked like Joan of Arc” (158), demonstrates Raelene’s burgeoning independence with the recurrence of the fire motif: “Walking back she felt bruised and weary but fierce now and invulnerable. Like she’d climbed from some flaming wreckage an unlikely survivor” (159). This analogy triggers a retroactive recall of Strawberry Alison’s death in ‘Damaged Goods’ and recontextualises the reader’s interpretation of Raelene’s fortitude. However, a new anticipation of the possibility of her “deliverance” is frustrated when ‘The Turning’ violently reintroduces the epiphany trope, previously established in ‘Big World’ and ‘Aquifer’, and Raelene only achieves a sense of transcendence during her horrific rape:

She knew she was safe from him now, not safe from tonight but gone from him altogether. He smelt of death already, of burning, of bile and acid…Everything was new. In her dome it snowed birds as the van rocked, birds like stars. The moment Max speared into her and tore open her insides, she was full of hot and certain feeling. She was free. She had already outlived him. (161)

Prior expectations of redemption and salvation as being central to The Turning’s gestalt are subsequently modified, and a new reading horizon is opened up to anticipate the centrality of the work in thematic patterns of futility and suffering.

With its opening line, ‘Sand’ provides a clear transition for the reader’s correlative activities: “Frank and his older brother Max walked behind the men along the white beach at sunset” (163). The sentence serves to reposition the wandering viewpoint in the temporal framework with the shift in focus to their childhood, while creating additional new gaps: “He didn’t miss their mother. Frank knew he should shut up about her; it was only two weeks” (164). The ambiguity of the reference prompts a correlation with the absent fathers of previous stories, and modifies the context by which Max’s adult personae in ‘The Turning’ is retroactively understood. A subsequent anticipation is also formed of a resolution to the temporal gap created by the reference to Frank’s professional footballer status in ‘Small Mercies’ and the sibling tension summarily mentioned in ‘The Turning’. This expectation is gratified by the acknowledgement that, “Frank knew how much Max hated him for being faster. He could really duck and dart. At school lunchtimes the big boys always picked him for their footy team and they didn’t care what Max said” (166). Through Frank’s heterodiegetic narration, ‘Sand’ provides the reader with a new perspective of Max that, combined with Raelene’s previous disclosures, is synthesised by the reader to
construct a more concrete perception of this ‘damaged’ character. As Max’s resentment and Frank’s subordination is made manifest by the cruel prank in White Point’s sand dunes (168), an expanded horizon opens by which the reader anticipates future narrative exposition of the Leaper brothers’ relationship and its connection to the work’s developing thematic concepts.

While each of the prior stories adheres to the short story’s generic conventions of autonomy and unity of impression, the tenth piece in The Turning begins to blur these boundaries with those of the conventional novel through its continuation of the Leaper family’s narrative sequence. As ‘Family’ skips the temporal field forward to the present day, Frank resumes a heterodiegetic narration that returns the reader to the familiar setting of White Point where the town’s water tower assumes a metafictional significance that mirrors the omniscient path of the reader’s wandering viewpoint: “its faded red tank was a bloodshot eye that never closed” (174). ‘Family’ is prefaced with an epigraph by Chinese philosopher Chuang Tzu that provides a thematic referential field for the reader and an explicit correlation with the sibling tension in the preceding story: “He thinks more of winning than of shooting—and the need to win drains him of power” (171). Meanwhile, as the Leapers’ personal narratives dominate three successive stories, Vic Lang and his family are pushed further into the reader’s memory. Immediate gaps are created in ‘Family’ with the opening phrase, “After the shit finally died down” (171), provoking the reader to anticipate the events that prompt Frank to flee pursuing media at dawn. As details of Frank’s inexplicable and controversial desertion of his team amid a recent football game are eventually revealed to alleviate this reading tension, the reader is also able to synthesise previously formed gaps including the absence of his mother at their childhood fishing trip in ‘Sand’: “As a boy of eight, he really did think that their mother was only going on holiday when she brought them her e to the old man one summer, never to return” (177). Meanwhile, new vacancies are created in the reader’s construction of the family’s timeline: “He hadn’t missed Max. He stayed away from the old man’s funeral…he’d had excuses enough for not being there, but he didn’t offer them” (179).

The ocean returns as a unifying motif of symbolic significance with Frank wanting to be regenerated and liberated from the constraints of his past and present demons: “he knew a surf would do him good” (172). His surveying of the water’s surface from high on the point is an explicit repetition of the actions of the ‘Big World’ narrator, Vic Lang (‘Abbreviation’), the ‘Aquifer’ narrator, Gail Lang
Through a recognition of this recurrent strategy, Frank’s simple actions as he watches a lone surfer “carve lines across the smooth face” (173) are recontextualised by the reader to overlay the narrative with thematic implications of isolation, change and “unseen perils” (29). Frank’s reminiscences of his burgeoning sporting talent through childhood function to rationalise the conflict of ‘Sand’ and further ratify expectations aroused by Max’s characterisation: “[Frank] was a natural. He had no idea that he was a freak. He only knew that Max hated it and he was late to the party on that front too” (174). The revelation of Frank and Max’s extended estrangement over the years draws Raelene—“a sister-in-law he’d never met” (172)—back into the narrative, and the reader is subsequently able to intertwine the disparate threads of perspective to sense the culminating panoramic range that traditionally characterises a conventional novel.

As Frank’s disclosure of the reasons for his failure—“It was about showing Max he didn’t care. That was what poisoned him; it got into everything, this business of showing them” (183)—is correlated with the story’s epigraph, a glimpse of Max’s own vulnerability is revealed. The “strange note of urgency…a kind of pleading” (184) in his voice as he discourages Frank from meeting Raelene provides the reader with an adjusted viewpoint to anticipate the likelihood of his having recently inflicted on his wife another brutal beating. The story’s climactic shark attack—the “unseen peril”—subsequently provides the impetus by which the text satisfies the reader’s anticipated resolution of tensions and gaps evoked in ‘Sand’:

The water was thick as sand. Out past Max’s head the tower showed through the spray of breaking waves. Swells overtook them. The tank was bleary, unblinking, above the dune.

   It was you, said Leaper.
   Max said nothing.
   You, he thought. When the grass went suddenly hard underfoot, and the ball forever out of reach, it was you lurking at the back of my mind. That’s what fucked it, that’s why I started to care. There you were, bro. Just the thought of you was a weight in my legs, and the more I cared the worse it was. (187)

Frank’s struggle to bring his injured brother to shore, holding on “for longer than he should have” (187), triggers another synthesising activity whereby the reader retroactively identifies a recurrent pattern of forgiveness and hope throughout the work. Although continually “crushed” by Max, Frank perseveres with their relationship, just as Gail Lang, Raelene Leaper, Sherry, Carol Lang, and Don and
Marjorie Keenan continue to endure the cycles of physical or emotional damage inflicted by their loved ones.

The title of ‘Long, Clear View’ holds the promise of a reconciliatory stage in the reader’s pattern-making activities, and, with the story’s use of second-person narration, the reader is finally given intimate access to Vic’s interiority. Immediately repositioning the chronological sequence to the Lang’s arrival in Angelus, the story prompts the reader to evoke memories of the pieces of Vic’s adolescence disclosed by Gail in ‘Damaged Goods’ in preparation of new synthesising actions. As Vic senses “nothing’s going right” (189), he guides the reader on a personal path whereby they seek to assimilate prior retensions of the “invisible boundaries” (189) that divide the town. As he is increasingly troubled by the tension that pervades his family and the town, Vic assumes a heightened state of vigilance. The range of unifying strategies used in the early scenes of ‘Long, Clear View’ create a frenetic synthesisation of previous stories: Vic’s disposal of a pornography magazine beneath the planks of the whaler’s jetty (192) evokes Peter and Ricky’s private game in ‘Small Mercies’, his baby sister’s colic (191), his obsession with Strawberry Alison (193), the simmering tension between Bob and Carol (189), and the suggestion of widespread police corruption (197) are all correlated with Gail’s earlier disclosures in the future setting of ‘Damaged Goods’. Recalling the ‘Big World’ narrator’s sense he was “stuck in something that I can’t figure my way out of” (10), the reader recognises a familiarity in Vic’s frustration that meaning is just beyond his grasp: “[Y]ou can’t see trouble coming. You don’t know what to look for” (192). As Vic internalises the bits and pieces he observes of a town falling apart, he synchronises the reader’s meaning-making journey with his own: “You go back to lying awake at night, wondering what you do know” (195).

With the introduction of “the dishevelled boy in the sheepskin jacket” (194), the reader’s wandering viewpoint is redirected to create an anticipation of this new character’s role in Bob Lang’s demise. As hysteria sweeps the town, the “wild boy, the one they call the bomber” (195) and Bob are brought sharply into focus for the reader through Vic’s observations:

[T]hings you aren’t meant to hear, stuff you shouldn’t be listening to. Adulteries, bashings, robberies, a trawler fire, the boy hit by the school bus, and that kid’s name over and over again, the one you still see now and then in his sheepskin coat and his Holden van. Not him. It’s always him. The old man whispers it in the kitchen. Not him, I know it. I just feel it. (196)
As Vic observes the increasing distance between his father and his colleagues—“it’s obvious he’s not one of them” (197)—the reader synthesises the physical toll this isolation is taking on Bob with the existing knowledge of his future descent into alcoholism:

At the end of every shift, after pulling into the drive, the old man sits in the car a while. You watch him chew antacids and flip his keychain. He’s never home on time. Your mother doesn’t mention it. You wish you knew what he was thinking, that someone’d say something. (198)

Through the pattern-making activities applied to the numerous unifying correlates in ‘Long, Clear View’, the reader now transcends Vic’s personal—and limited—narration to assume the omniscient gaze of White Point’s water tank, and the story title takes on a modified significance.

When Vic experiences “a chill of recognition” (197) on witnessing a dark car with four passengers at the wharf, and learns of the “wild boy” being found on the beach with both legs broken, the reader creates new protensions about the connections of the events and its relevance to his father. Bob’s subsequent exile to a distant posting leaves Vic and his mother and sister alone for extended periods under the menacing and omnipresent gaze of corrupt police. This plot development is integral to the reader’s meaning-making process, as a new correlation is formed of the anxious and vigilant adolescent Vic and his adult counterpart in ‘Damaged Goods’. As a young, and only partially enlightened Vic commences a daily vigilance from his parents’ upstairs bedroom window, his father’s rifle cocked in readiness for trouble, the reader’s lens is also narrowed to reach a synthesised understanding of how Vic later evolves to “instinctively seek out a victim to defend” (58): “You can’t leave the window. You’re not sure what to look for but you know you have to be ready. From here you have a long, clear view. Responsibility is on you now, formless and implacable as gravity” (204).

With the reading process having already established significant connections in the first eleven stories of The Turning regarding familial networks, recurrent events, unifying settings and potential themes, the final six stories pose less apperceptive challenges as the reader begins to identify the cohesive aesthetic of a conventional novel. The gaps and indeterminacies that challenged the interpretation of the previous narratives become less pronounced as the reader is qualified to more efficiently recognise new patterns and synthesise them with correlates in the earlier stories.
Reviving her homodiegetic narration of ‘Damaged Goods’, Gail returns in ‘Reunion’ to pull the reader from their image of a young Vic with a gun at his bedroom window and back into the present. In the early acknowledgment of Carol Lang’s presence on Christmas Day, the reader mentally rearranges the story’s chronological sequence to position it some years before ‘Damaged Goods’, in which Gail had detailed her mother-in-law’s death. Synthesising this earlier story’s disclosures of the tension in Gail and Vic’s marriage, the reader’s wandering viewpoint in subsequently adjusted so as to perceive their relationship in ‘Reunion’ with significantly revised protensions.

The reappearance of Ernie and Cleo in the story forces the reader to retrieve these characters from their now-distant memory of ‘Abbreviation’. Gail’s revelations, including her own failure to produce children “after five years” (207) and that, “[i]n the decades since Carol’s husband had disappeared, his family had shunned her” (206), function to concrete the story’s temporality, as well as evoking a recall of the tensions and personal differences between the brothers that were revealed during the family’s 1972 holiday in White Point: “Bob was everything Ernie wasn’t, said Carol. But you could never tell their mother this” (214). Gail’s description of Carol works to signal a new correlation between her previously described dignity as a cleaner (‘On Her Knees’) and “incandescent” deathbed demeanour (‘Damaged Goods’), and Vic’s own pervasive isolation: “[T]here was something impenetrable about her. She resisted intimacy. Beneath the mildness there was a hard-won pride, a kind of dignity that was intimidating” (206). Metafictional strategies reemerge in ‘Reunion’—“Through a suburb of roundabouts and artful dead-ends” (207)—to remind readers of the work’s deliberately labyrinthian and cyclical nature. This effect is pronounced with the story’s numerous intratextual references to earlier stories, including: ‘On Her Knees’—“Imagine cleaning it, said Carol” (208); ‘Damaged Goods’—“Here’s to not being struck off, he said” (211); and, ‘Abbreviation’—“My cousins all looked like carpet sharks” (214). As Vic, Gail and Carol inadvertently break into the wrong house, the reader synthesises Vic’s response with previously correlated interpretations of his “vigilant” personality: “Hell, said Vic, sensing trouble” (209). However, the incident instigates a bonding process for Gail and Carol, with their personal confessions about their own troubled childhoods evoking the reader’s retension of family crises that also shaped the young characters of previous narratives, and leading to a modified anticipation of continued thematic resonance: “Family, said Vic. It’s not a word, it’s a sentence” (215).
In ‘Commission’, the temporal frame is moved forward and Vic reassumes narrative control, relaying in first-person the circumstances by which he is reunited with Bob: “almost twenty-seven years…since I’d seen my father” (217). Having just been granted an intimate insight into Carol’s restrained grace and the significance of family in ‘Reunion’, the reader then interprets her post-diagnosis instructions with a modified viewpoint: “She’d lain awake all night thinking and she told me she just wanted to see him again before she died” (217). Vic’s journey to locate his father at a pub in the eastern goldfields yields a new correlate by which the reader resynthesises the indeterminate events of ‘Long, Clear View’: “the radio spewed scandal from the police royal commission” (218). For readers who bring to the text a regional knowledge of West Australian sociopolitical history, this reference not only provides a correlation in Bob’s narrative but anchors the story’s dramatic action to the state’s Kennedy Royal Commission in 2002. Later references to the Gulf War—“The Yanks have taken Baghdad” (228)—further consolidate this chronological marker, giving the reader a stable platform from which to revise their sequencing of past and future stories in the work.

Vic and Bob’s reunion functions to resolve numerous indeterminacies created by earlier narratives and subsequently opens new gaps. Despite Vic being “angry at how sick with love I was at the very sight of him” (222), the reunion evokes a sense of personal closure for the men, while instigating a frenetic interplay of protensions and retensions in the reading process. In his remote bush shack, Vic is surprised at his father’s “unexpected dignity” (222) and fifteen years of sobriety, and overwhelmed by “the scent of a lost time, how my father smelled before the funk of antacids and the peppermints that never quite hid the stink of booze” (223). As they become reacquainted, the name of Vic’s deceased sibling is finally revealed: “And Kerry? I ask despite myself. The old man pointed back to the doorway where, above the lintel, a faded shot of my dead sister hung like an icon” (223). The revelation of Bob’s continued devotion to his family works to significantly modify the reader’s previous expectations of this alcoholic, deserting father who caused Vic to experience “such disappointment and creeping shame…boyhood bewilderment…a decade of fury…[and] a closed-down resignation, the adult making-do” (225).

In the men’s discussion of the events that dominated ‘Long, Clear View’, the reader recognises familiar event-based correlates and retroactively modifies their original interpretations: “There was this kid I remember. Smalltime petty crim. Had
his legs broken out on Thunder Beach...People said he got into a car with detectives...Felt like, whatever was going on I was the only bloke not in on it” (230). Metaphoric tropes imbue the reunion with correlative significance for the reader; in the kettle steam, Bob “looked like a figure from another time, a woodcutter from a fairytale, a stranger without a face, an idea as much as a man” (231). Through the recurrence of the “canopy of stars” motif, the reader also synthesises the images from ‘The Turning’ and ‘Big World’ to consider the story’s existential undertones and its significance within the greater work: “We went outside and stood at the edge of the verandah to see the hugeness of the sky and the blizzard of stars upon us” (231). Vic’s reflection on Gail’s “capacity to forgive” (226), and his mother’s own cunning to “[bring] the two of us face to face” (229), prompts the reader to recognise a subtle turn in the narrative’s pattern of current meaning. Bob’s shame of his “fall from grace” signals a correlating activity that reconsiders the previous stories’ religious allusions and presents for the reader a new anticipation of redemption, forgiveness and renewal. This anticipation moves toward a partial confirmation with Bob’s epiphany that marked his abrupt decision to become sober:

Woke up one morning, it was winter, and the sun was on this fallen tree, this dead grey tree, and there was steam rising off the dead wood. And I felt...new. Had this feeling that the world was inviting me in...like, luring me towards something. Life, I dunno. (232)

However, ‘Commission’ resists such idealistic closure, as the notion of “cost” returns to stir the reader’s memory of similar correlates in ‘Aquifer’ and ‘Damaged Goods’. As Vic reflects on his childhood experience of watching his father’s “long and puzzling decline” (225), he recalls the sacrifices his mother made: “She turned herself inside out to protect him and then me. And at such cost. All for nothing” (225). Compounding the notes of futility and despair are references in ‘Commission’ to the “disused trenches” (226) near the shack, and Bob’s own confession that he considered “work[ing] up the nerve to kill meself. Lots of shafts out here” (232), which create a synthesising action that recalls Gail’s disclosure in ‘Damaged Goods’: “[Vic’s] mother died of cancer. His father was there for it. Out of the blue, after twenty-something years. Two days of family and then the old man went back out bush and fell down a disused mineshaft” (63). This correlation not only functions to radically modify the reader’s interpretation of Gail’s description of the deathbed reunion: “The
feeling between them was so strong I could barely stay in the room” (63), but also subtly evokes the Ash Wednesday incantation.

When Vic’s revelation of his childlessness (229) is synthesised with Gail’s similar acknowledgment in ‘Reunion’ (207), the reader’s wandering viewpoint is directed toward a new expectation. Correlating the impact of their dysfunctional families, revealed throughout the previous narratives, the reader is prompted to consider the possibility of Gail and Vic deliberately choosing to remain childless rather than continue the cycle of damage through new generations.

‘Fog’ presents a shift in the reader’s wandering viewpoint to afford a new perspective on the character of Bob Lang. As earlier stories unfolded to portray Vic’s father as overprotective, anxious, professionally ethical and uncommunicative, ‘Fog’ functions to balance this representation with the heterodiegetic psychonarration of Bob’s experience searching for a lost hiker in the thick bluff of The Dial near Angelus. Again, the story subverts a narrative linear progression, forcing the reader to retrieve their knowledge of Bob formed through Vic, Carol and Gail’s previous perspectives, and subsequently modify their perception through this insight into his mindset just ten months after his posting to Angelus. When the story opens with ‘Lang’ pulling the police van over for a break while delivering a court summons—“work for a junior” (235)—the reader recognises the signs of what they know will later become his destructive alcoholism caused by his anxiety over the town’s judicial corruption: “He eased the little flat bottle from between the seat springs…This was, he told himself, just a temporary thing” (236). The recursive ‘fog’ and ‘soupy air’ motif of earlier stories assume a new significance for the reader as Lang hopes to “put a few more bits of the puzzle together” (236), while trying to make sense of the unscrupulous forces at work. The peaks are “headless in the mist” (238) and “the sky seemed to lower itself even further” (239), and as Lang becomes lost in the “tangled mass of stems and branches” (241) with a young reporter, Marie, the reader synthesises his future emotional withdrawal with the foreshadowing exchange:

She noticed the resignation in his voice. She even seemed to bristle a little.
You sound like you’re used to it, she said.
You never get used to it. (246)

While Lang successfully rescues the hiker, the story’s coda gives rise to a new reader understanding of the point at which he recognises the futility of virtue and truth:

“She’d have her victim, her ordeal, her stoic hero. It’d be a great story, a triumph, and
none of it would be true” (249). The internal focalisation of Bob Lang in ‘Fog’ forces the reader to adjust their comprehension and interpretation of the entire Lang family, as portrayed sequentially in the previous three stories, prompting a reconsideration of the perennial damage that a single event can inflict on subsequent generations.

‘Boner McPharlin’s Moll’ continues this pattern of consolidation and synthesis in the reading act, maintaining the temporality of ‘Fog’ in the 1970s when the whaling station still operated, and reintroducing a cast of characters that assumed merely peripheral roles in previous stories. Jackie’s homodiegetic narrative effects a correlation with ‘Damaged Goods’ to jolt the reader from a passive acceptance of prior perspectives. The retroactive recall of Vic’s earlier disdain—“Not every girl at the drives was like the legendary Slack Jackie”—is transfigured with the revelation that Jackie’s relationship with Boner McPharlin, “the wild-looking kid in the sheepskin jacket” from ‘Long, Clear View’ and ‘Commission’ was only ever platonic: “The slander hurt but I bore it as the price of love” (263). This radical shift in perspective serves to undermine the reader’s previously established understanding of these characters while simultaneously resolving the indeterminacies created by their earlier references. The disclosure of Boner’s relative innocence in the corruption scandal evokes a correlation with Bob Lang’s initial suspicions (196), and the wandering viewpoint is redirected to anticipate further clarification of Boner’s attack on Thunder Beach. ‘Boner McPharlin’s Moll’ is the longest story in the collection and contains numerous references that trigger a recognition of pattern. Just like the ‘Big World’ narrator, Vic in ‘Long, Clear View’, and Brakey in ‘Cockleshell’, Jackie and Boner are caught at the turning point of childhood and adulthood: “Sophistication was out of reach yet we could no longer pretend how to be children” (252). Similarly, Jackie’s “sense of having been rescued” (258) by Boner is correlated with Raelene in ‘The Turning’ who “needed a rescuer” (147), and the recursive suggestion of parental influence in ‘Cockleshell’, ‘The Turning’, ‘Sand’, ‘Family’, ‘Long, Clear View’, and ‘Commission’ is readily apparent in Jackie’s acknowledgement: “Part of me enjoyed the status, the bitter satisfaction of being solitary but notable. I was, in this regard, my father’s daughter” (263).

Religious allusions are also continued as a unifying strategy, solidifying the reader’s ongoing apperception of an underpinning spiritual dimension to the work’s theme: “I sensed a sermon in the wings, a parable about application to schoolwork” (267); but it is the motif of turning that is most explicitly employed in ‘Boner
McPharlin’s Moll’. While Jackie and Boner are on the cusp of adulthood, the narrative extends to encompass themes only partially suggested in the previous fourteen stories. Like Agnes Larwood and Raelene Leaper, Jackie dreams of fleeing the constraints of childhood: “In the new school year I more or less reinvented myself” (268), and, “I imagined an entire life beyond being Boner McPharlin’s moll” (269); yet Boner’s attack by corrupt cops takes their relationship to a new level. As the reader is cued to recognise Bob Lang who is still seeking to “put a few more bits of the puzzle together”, Jackie’s narration helps the reader resolve the gaps created in ‘Fog’ by filling in the blanks of his rapid decline extradiegetically.

I recognized him. He was the nervous-looking constable from the hospital, the one who’d started hanging around after the others left. I’d seen him that winter in the local rag. He was a hero for a while, brought down an injured climber off the peak in the ranges. But he looked ill. His eyes were bloodshot, his skin was blotchy. (273)

Boner’s bonfire at Massacre Point represents a seminal correlating event in the reading act, instigating an interplay of retensions about the event from ‘Big World’ and ‘Damaged Goods’: “Shadows of classmates spilt from the fire to wobble madly across the sodden sand”, and “kids burnt kites above us” (281). Jackie’s intertextual references also prompt a configuration of the scene’s disparate significances to the tangential characters in the greater narrative: “It was the beach at Ithaca, it was Gatsby’s place, Golding’s island” (282). On the beach, the recurrent fire motif assumes a regenerative power: “He looked beautiful in the firelight, as glossy and sculpted as the steel carving he’d given me” (282). However, this symbolism is subverted after Boner’s subsequent deterioration into insanity when Jackie visited him only sporadically and is consumed by regret at his funeral: “I thought of Boner’s fire, his twisted bones, his terrible silence. I got hold of myself but during the committal, as the coffin sank, the sigh I let out was almost a moan. The sound of recognition, the sound of too late” (291). Against the backdrop of the radio’s update on the Royal Commission on corruption, Jackie’s reflections trigger a broadening of the reader’s wandering viewpoint, extending the correlative significance of her epiphany to the previous narratives:

I’d looked on and seen nothing. I was no different to my parents. Yet I always believed I’d come so far, surpassed so much. At fifteen I would have annihilated myself for love, but over the years something had happened, something I hadn’t bothered to notice, as though in all that leaving, in the rush to outgrow the small-town girl I was, I’d left more of myself behind than the journey required. (292)
The Turning’s polyphonic composition is continued in ‘Immunity’, as the unnamed homodiegetic narrator provokes a configuration of Vic Lang’s childhood in ‘Abbreviation’ and adolescence in ‘Long, Clear View’. Encountering a fifteen-year-old Vic on the train, who is revealed to be an army cadet while completing high school, the narrator recalls once seeing him at the upstairs window of his house: “He had a broom in his hand or maybe a hockey stick. He was looking but not seeing” (297). Through a new correlating process, the reader recognises the collective impact of Vic’s recent brush with death at the rifle range and his previously disclosed despair at the ruptured fabric of Angelus in ‘Long, Clear View’: “It was kind of like a sign. It made me feel weird. Kind of immune. Death right there beside me and I’m immune” (297). The repetition evokes a recall of his similar sentiments in ‘Abbreviation’ (35), and creates a revised interpretation of how Vic developed to become an emotionally isolated adult, as portrayed by Gail in ‘Damaged Goods’. Compounding this adjustment of the reader’s interpretation is the story’s abrupt coda that intertwines yet another correlate: “When we came into the station there was a cop car there with its lights going…I knew who his father was…It was his little sister in hospital with meningitis. I heard all about it later. She died” (298).

Vic’s transition to middle age is seamlessly effected with traditional anachronistic effect in the work’s final story ‘Defender’. Advancing the narrative’s temporal sequence to a year after Vic and Bob’s reunion in ‘Commission’, ‘Defender’ expands the reader’s wandering viewpoint to synthesise the cumulative effects of the previous, fragmented stories and induce the reader to recognise the work’s textual unity. Now stricken with debilitating shingles, Vic is “preoccupied with memories” (299) as he travels with Gail to spend the weekend with friends in the country. As he recounts his days of playing against “these Aboriginal kids from St Joe’s” (300), the reader retroactively recalls Vic’s younger self in ‘Long, Clear View’ who “would play against blackfellas who whip you and then get you to walk them home to the hostel because they’re afraid of the dark” (192). This juxtaposition of the broken, emotionally paralysed adult and his anxiety-ridden adolescent version magnifies the relevance of events in other narratives, and contributes to the reader’s construction of a gestalt of Vic’s life. The continuation of religious allusions in ‘Defender’ also serves to connect the seventeen stories’ recursive patterns of sin, redemption, forgiveness and salvation. As Vic torments himself with memories, Gail decries his propensity for melancholy: “Vic, you are the fucking Book of Lamentations” (313).
Later, as Vic experiences an epiphany that signals to the reader his figurative rebirth, “the smell of roasting lamb wafted across the grass” (317).

Myriad correlations enable the reader to connect the couple’s reminiscences with earlier stories: Gail’s confessed affair in Angelus is synthesised as occurring when she “trudged its streets and beaches like a researcher imagining herself into [Vic’s] world” (307) in ‘Damaged Goods’; Vic’s reflections of his army training is correlated with ‘Immunity’; and his transcendence to seeing himself, “the boy behind the curtain, cradling death in his arms” (309) evokes retensions of ‘Long, Clear View’.

The heterodiegetic narration oscillates between Gail and Vic’s perspectives in a synthesisation of the reader’s own appropriating processes. Unlike the work’s previous stories which limits the perspective to one character, ‘Defender’ opens up the horizons for the reader to simultaneously experience the impact of the preceding years on both Vic and Gail, and this panoramic effect is transferred to the consolidation of the preceding stories as a textual whole. The story serves as a final piece in the “puzzle” as Vic’s “past seems to assail him” (307), and Gail increasingly senses that she has become “just part of some long, faded epilogue to [his] real life” (302). In the car, the couple reaches a **turning** point—“the uneasy crossing of a boundary” (302)—as Gail states, “Do you realize that every vivid experience in your life comes from your adolescence? You should hear yourself talk…You’re trapped in it” (302). Her accusation is an explicit cue for the reader to reconsider the recurrent pattern of the various stories, to acknowledge each character is united in suffering borne from their childhood and adolescent years, and unable or unwilling to escape the cycle of emotional destruction.

This concept is substantiated by Vic’s identification with Port Arthur Massacre’s Martin Bryant: “The chill of recognition he felt seeing the poor dumb kid’s face on TV. The dull eyes, the shoulder-length hair, the total confusion. It might have been him at fourteen or fifteen, gun-happy and afraid” (314). The extratextual reference to the 1996 Tasmanian mass murder creates a new horizon for the reader’s wandering viewpoint to consider the gravity and the cyclical nature of the psychological damage experienced by Vic, Gail, Brakey, Agnes Larwood, Boner McPharlin, Jackie, Raelene and Frank Leaper, Peter and Ricky Dyson, Sky Keenan and the ‘Aquifer’ narrator in their formative years. ‘Defender’ extends the reader’s cumulative apperception of these separate incidences as Vic becomes more acutely conscious of his tenuous mental state: “[H]e felt his mind teetering at its limit. He’d
been this close before but he’d never told her” (309). The story’s setting is replete with metafictional allusions that function as a guide for the reader to recognise the structural integrity of the work. The explicit use of shadows and a labyrinthian orchard connote the pathways, transitions and dead ends that both the reader and the characters have encountered throughout the narrative. As Vic wakes in his guesthouse, “all the shadows had moved so far across the room” (309), and he later walks with his friend’s daughter “through the orchard in the dreamy latticework of shadows” (311). The unifying motif of fire also returns for the reader to correlate its destructive and restorative significances with earlier narratives: “She would have preferred a burning bicycle, come to the think of it, some straightforward conflagration” (313). The story’s coda signals to the reader the work’s major turning point, from pervasive themes of suffering, guilt, alienation and the ineluctability of fate, to possibilities of release and redemption, as Vic finally understands he has the power to control and free himself from the cycle of damage:

He led but did not fire. He thought of the boy lurking behind the curtain. The skeet hummed off into the twilight. It was important to know he could resist the urge…He blasted away, pull after pull after pull, until he was covered in sweat and they were out of ammo and he realized that darkness had fallen around him and he was happy. (317)

While each of the seventeen individual stories functions as its own separate aesthetic, the reader develops, through a complex interplay of protension and retension, an omniscience that progressively amalgamates the generic signals, recursive motifs and patterns to deliver a conventional novel’s unity of effect. When The Turning is read sequentially, despite its anachronic presentation of events, the reader identifies the gaps within and between the stories and progressively resolves these tensions with recurrent modifications of the wandering viewpoint. Each story is characterised by its own narrative arc, plot, characters, voice and setting, yet the cumulative weight of these mostly tangential pieces combines to bring the aesthetic whole into view. The work’s title also assumes greater import upon completion of the reading act. The reader recognises the recurrent pattern of characters undergoing a physical, emotional or spiritual transformation or finding themselves trapped on the edge of a transition, and incorporates this pattern into a unifying theme of the experientially complex nature of human change. The title also acknowledges the experiential aspect of the reading act whereby multiple turnings and re-visions are required in order to extrapolate the unifying patterns and interpret the work’s meaning.
The Turning is an ideal exemplar of how a composite novel insists on the reader’s participation to achieve its unity of effect. Winton’s strategic structuring of dynamic, unifying elements and multiple gaps within and between the seventeen short stories induces the reader’s transformative operations to construct an aesthetic whole that transcends the boundaries of the short story genre and mirrors the aesthetic totality of a conventional novel.
Section Five: Creative Artefact

Wool Spin Burn
Creative artefact acknowledgements

The following stories from the creative artefact *Wool Spin Burn* have been published in these literary journals and anthologies and/or been recognised with the following awards:


‘DNA’: Highly Commended in 2014 Fellowship of Australian Writers (FAW) National Literary Awards (Short Story category).
Wool Spin Burn

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The Art of Preservation

The grass scratches at Matthew’s shins as he crosses the yard and dumps the bucket on the ground. The mulberry tree is drooping and swollen berries leer at him, some already weeping. There are so many. He cups his hand under a low cluster before ducking under the branches, crouching against the trunk in the damp shade. It smells like fermented fruit. It was the first thing he noticed about Anna. A heavy sweetness battling the dirty erotica of rot. Red-stained fingers, scarlet soles and that smell. From beneath the tree, Matthew can see through the gaps in the fence to Sam’s yard.

‘Why Robinson?’ he’d asked the boy that first day. He was uncomfortable around children.

‘For Robinson Crusoe,’ the boy replied. ‘He was lost.’ Then the boy took the gangly mongrel by the collar and dragged him back into his yard next door where empty beer bottles toppled from the porch.

‘Don’t forget to keep your gate shut,’ Matthew shouted after the boy as he disappeared into the battered house. ‘Lots of cannibals about,’ and immediately regretted it. Children did that to him. He became clumsy against the power of their surety, cobbled by a need to say something of value, something to remind them there is still so much they needed to learn.

Robinson turned up in their kitchen the next day, tail slapping against Anna’s legs as they pasted labels on empty jam jars.
‘Jesus Christ,’ she said, but then she was down on the lino floor scratching at
the dog’s ears, eyes scrunched as his huge tongue lapped at her face. Matthew reached
for Robinson’s collar. ‘No,’ she said. ‘Let him stay a while. It gets lonely in here.’

Matthew sat back down on the other side of the table, screwing lids on jars of
thick jam. Robinson lay beneath the sink, the sound of his wet panting enough for her.

‘What makes us stop loving something? And what makes us start again, if we ever
do?’ she once said.

It had taken Matthew several months to understand that Anna’s questions were
usually rhetorical. As she slept he would lie awake constructing answers, the cattle
train rumbling at the edges of town. And in the morning, as she steeped her tea, he
would deliver his response with gritty eyes.

‘Oh that,’ she’d reply, ‘I was only thinking aloud.’ But she was always close
to some truth.

Anna made gourmet preserves that sold well at local markets. Some of the
bigger towns and even a chain of elegant Brisbane delicatessens had started stocking
them, and from sales they made just enough for the two of them to live.

‘Just give them what they once loved,’ she said. ‘You can’t go wrong. They
loved them for a reason.’ She nudged customer memories by using fruit their
grandmothers had grown in their childhoods: cumquats, figs, apricots, custard apples,
blackcurrants and mulberries, sourced in season from local growers or her own
backyard. Then she would add a pinch of chilli, a sprinkle of cardamom, a splash of
tequila. ‘To make the old feel new again,’ she reasoned. ‘People like to recycle the
past. Everyone has memories of collecting berries in buckets or spooning fresh lemon
butter straight from the jar,’ she said over the bubbling pots.
‘I don’t,’ he said.
‘Yes, you do. You just wish they had been true.’

Her feet were bare when they first met.

‘My shoes are in the car,’ she said. ‘I forgot to put them on. It’s been a long drive.’

He had smiled at this. Her toes left ghostly imprints on the stone floor of his publishing office.

‘Do you want to get them now?’
‘Do I need to?’

‘It’s probably a good idea. We’ve got other people to meet,’ he said.

He had walked her to the car and waited as she searched through a snarl of old mail, sarongs, jars, books, rolls of ribbon, loose notepaper covered in scribble, and swatches of bright fabric.

‘That’s quite a mess you’ve made there.’

‘Where?’ She looked up at him. And he smiled again and breathed in her heady smell.

Anna had not written anything since he first published her book, a curious little children’s tale about a girl who lived in a maze. It hadn’t sold as well as he’d expected.

‘Why is it so important to you that I write again?’ she asked after he’d left his job and moved into her cluttered little house in Roweston, after he needled her to spend more time writing instead of cooking fruit.

‘I just think it’s a waste if you don’t.’
‘Feelings are wasted in words,’ she said, and he had no reply.

Robinson always found a way back in, claiming his spot at the base of their sink. They would reach over him to rinse saucepans, rubbing his stomach with their feet. Matthew had stopped wearing shoes at home. As he watered and pruned the trees, he grew to like the prick of dry grass under this soles and the squelch of overripe berries between his toes.

Before long, the boy followed the dog. He never knocked. The first time he walked into their house, Matthew had been at the post office. When he returned, the boy was standing on a kitchen chair stirring hot, pulpy mangoes over the stove.

‘Where’s Anna?’

‘Who’s Anna?’

She came in then from the yard. ‘So you’ve met Sam,’ she said. ‘He’s our new apprentice. I’m teaching him the art of preservation.’ The rain hammered their tin roof until the water tank overflowed.

It had been nearly a year since he had quit his job and turned to making jams. He no longer cared about the writings of others, not since he met her. She was his work now, and that was enough.

‘You need me,’ he said, cupping her chin in the watery moonlight. She wrapped a leg over him.

‘Do you think?’ He heard the smile twitching her lips.

Such a twig of a thing with tiny hands and ragged nails, scaly patches of skin unapologetically exposed on her elbows and knees. Long skirts, bright scarves, berets and brooches. He slept soundly under the warm blanket of responsibility.
Sam’s parents never came over to check on him. Occasionally, Matthew and Anna watched them through the fence. Oily-haired and lanky limbed, they moved silently and separately inside the shadows of their house.

‘You should let them know he’s here,’ Matthew once said. ‘They must wonder where he is.’

‘I know,’ she replied. She returned within minutes. ‘All sorted,’ and she stroked Sam’s hair softly as the boy stirred over the stove.

‘Why do you always make jam?’ Sam raised his spoon and turned to Anna.

‘That’s our job, and we have to keep up with orders. Keep stirring.’

‘What else do you make?’

‘Nothing. We just make jam.’

‘What will you do when you finish making jam?’

Matthew looked up from his jars. Anna wiped her hands on a tea towel and tucked it into the back of her skirt.

‘Then I will make something else.’

‘You mean we will make something else,’ Matthew said.

‘Yes. Okay.’

He was an unusual child. My little Borogrove, Anna called him. His hair grew in unruly tufts and lent him a strange, chicken-like quality. His eyes were green and flinty, small stones pushed by thumbs into his face. His neck was thin and he spoke quietly with unnatural authority, Matthew thought. After a while, she let Sam take over the labelling of the jars, pulling out Matthew’s chair for the boy at the kitchen table.
‘I don’t like you,’ Sam said to him once. The boy was placing embossed stickers on jar lids, placing the completed ones on top of each other in perfect towers of ten. Matthew could see a deep purple shadow above the collar of his thin shirt. The boy’s knobbly spine made the bruise bulge like a cluster of ripe mulberries.

‘Why not?’

‘You don’t see things properly.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous. You’re nine,’ he snapped. ‘What do you know?’ And then he was ashamed and wanted to put his hand on the boy’s shoulder, but Sam just kept sticking and placing and stacking, so Matthew went outside and sat against the water tank.

He knew there was another name for the boy beside Borogrove. There was a label that Matthew would find explaining Sam, naming him, containing him. Autistic? Aspergers? He was reassured by the thought of this label out there, waiting to be found and brushed with paste. Something that would explain why she gave him so much time. In the meantime, Anna taught Sam how to simmer the sugar and recognise when it was about to burn.

‘He should be in school.’

‘Perhaps.’

‘He shouldn’t be over here so much.’

‘He likes it here, and he’s useful.’

‘It’s just not right.’

‘Not right for who? You?’
That one was rhetorical, he was sure, so he rolled over and listened to the bats feast on the fruit trees, screeching drunkenly in the darkness.

Once he heard their laughter tumbling in the backyard, and when he opened the screen door juicy bullets exploded on his chest and face and against the green timber walls. A red bucket under the dense boughs, two pairs of purple hands flashing in and out of the leaves.

’Surrender!’ she cried.

He had laughed and shouted, ‘Never!’ Then he charged across the grass into a hail of berries.

That winter came early, icy winds stripping the trees of their foliage, spoiled fruit littering the ground.

‘This changes things, he said. ‘We’ won’t get anywhere near last year’s sales.’

‘We’ll be alright.’

He shook his head and returned to the computer, and he worked on fixing things for her as the frost slowly killed the grass.

Without fruit to boil, the kitchen was cold. Robinson shifted his scraggy frame to the carpet runner in the hall. He stayed there most days and Anna would take him for long walks at dawn, puffs of icy breath drifting behind her like speech bubbles filled with words too small for him to read.

‘I think we should have a baby,’ he said one morning as the walls shivered and the tin roof creaked.

‘Why?’

‘Because it makes sense.’
'That’s a silly reason. I love you. Isn’t that enough?'

He knew he could change her mind. He imagined her swollen breasts and ripe belly, her grateful murmur when he ran her a bath, the grip of her birdlike fingers cutting his skin as she sweated and yielded the greasy child into his world.

‘It will be good for us,’ he said.

She was silent.

‘You will be a wonderful mother.’

‘That’s beside the point.’

‘What is the point then? Tell me.’

‘I don’t need one.’

He was unsure what she was saying and was suddenly afraid to ask. Outside, the early morning sky was stretched thin and tight like the skin of a drum.

The shouting started that winter. They listened to terrible words smash against the walls of Sam’s house. Matthew would drag Anna back from the fence where she called the boy’s name over and over, her voice splintering in the bitter air. Matthew would pull her back to bed where she would fold herself away from him, and he would fall asleep to the young shrieks, the breaking glass, and he thought about moving.

When spring arrived, they threw themselves into making up for the loss over winter. Cumquats spilled from colanders and Anna feverishly sliced their orange skins while Sam silently wrapped the seeds in bundles of muslin, his little frame flinching at a touch. From his desk, Matthew watched them work.
‘I think I can get us some big Melbourne orders this year. Lots of interest there. We could even expand soon, get an investor and lease some factory facilities, develop the range. We could put some people on and you can get out of the kitchen. No more burnt hands. What do you think?’

Sam held the muslin over the boiling water, dropping it in gently on Anna’s nod.

‘Did you hear me?’

She wiped the back of her hands across her forehead. ‘The tank is almost empty. We could do with some rain.’

‘She doesn’t need you,’ the boy said.

‘Yes, she does.’

‘No, she doesn’t. She doesn’t need anyone. She just lets you think she does.’

Anna was collecting supplies and Sam sat at the table, his hands folded in front of him. Matthew wanted to hurt him, this scrawny man-child who had wormed his way into their home, had eaten away his share of Anna’s affections.

‘You are not our son,’ he said.

‘I know that,’ the boy replied, but his little eyes had darkened.

‘We don’t want you here anymore,’ he said. And immediately, he wanted to snatch it back, pluck it from the air so she wouldn’t find out. ‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘I shouldn’t have said that.’

Sam carefully turned his head to face him, a solemn little sideshow-alley clown. ‘I have work to do.’
Matthew was reconciling the accounts when she returned. He heard her bare feet pad over Robinson.

‘I got the new jars. The boxes are in the car,’ she called.

He paused. Let her ask again, he thought. Let her need me. Her bracelets jangled as she lowered a crate of fruit on the kitchen table.

‘It’s so green out there,’ she said. ‘Like a painting.’ And she clinked and jangled back down the hall to fetch the boxes.

He had grown used to the screaming and so that night it had not been the noise that woke him. There were no sirens, just strobes of blue and red lights that sliced through the curtains and tore him from sleep. Anna was not in bed. The front door was open, and from the hallway he saw her out on the road, squatting there on the bitumen in just a t-shirt and underpants, heaving in the sticky air with ragged sobs as she rocked back and forth on the balls of her feet. He grabbed a towel from the floor and ran out, wrapping her and shielding her from the glaring lights, the uniforms, the hollow stare of the lanky man being led to a police van.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said as the ambulance wove around them and disappeared with Sam’s body into the dark. ‘But things like this happen. We can’t always see it coming.’

She left that night, as Sam’s house was enveloped in yellow tape. She left the towel on the road and put Robinson in her car and she drove away. He waited on the front steps for two days until it grew too hot to sit outside.
There are too many berries, he knows. He cannot pick them all and does not know what to do with them anyway. Dust coats the pots on the stove, jar lids stacked in towers of ten still teeter on the kitchen table. Clouds of tiny fruit flies swarm over crates of decomposing fruit, and the house is thick with the stench of rot.

He lies down on the damp earth and the big mulberry leaves fan out around him. His back is sticky with sweat and crushed fruit. He could stay like this, he thinks, just gradually break down and dissolve into the soil. He knows there must be something he needs to do.
Field of Vision

Rule 5 (b): Prior to the commencement of each match, the controlling body shall appoint two scorers, one representing each competing team if possible, to record the events of the game.

The heat shimmers off the concrete pitch. You sit on the grass, a few metres from the boundary, close enough to hear the rattle of the ball. You never sit in the stand, where wives pass around wilted sandwiches from plastic tubs and children slouch over handrails like wet beach towels. You are not a cliché.

He blocks the ball and it jangles away to the offside. He holds his position—front foot lunge, left elbow up, bat square—longer than he needs, as if he is freezing his pose for an old photograph. And then he scuffs at the crease and faces up for the next delivery.

They will win the match. There are only six overs left to play, and he cannot exceed thirty runs in an inning, anyway. He could afford to swing if he wanted, lift his run rate. When he blocks the next ball, you mark it in the book. A fieldsman at square leg turns his face to the sky and sniffs at the air. In the distance, a band of dark cloud crawls over the hills, and you hope the rain comes soon.

Rule 14 (a): Prior to the delivery of each ball, the bowler must ask the batsman if he is ready and the batsman must distinctly reply "yes" or "no".

You had clung to him that night, back when he was dropped from the squad. You didn’t know the eclipse had started then, just saw him swing too wide, catches slip
through his fingers. There were other things, of course: stumbles at the gutter, broken plates, near misses on the roundabout. When he finally got the prognosis, you just loved him more. I am not going anywhere, you whispered.

You booked a hiking holiday to New Zealand while he could still see. He let you guide him over fallen logs on Arthur’s Pass and he swam naked in the alpine streams. At the top of Bealey Valley you both swigged whiskey from the bottle and you searched his face for signs of grief, but could only see your fear reflected in the glacier below.

You are still waiting, you know, for the fall. Still holding your breath after six years, as his capillaries deteriorated and the moon had inched its way across the sun. But he has not cracked, and you pretend that it is because of you.

*Rule 26: The batsman shall be given out if he or his assistant willfully obstructs the field.*

You took down the photo from the wall when he was reclassified as B1, when the sport officially acknowledged he could no longer recognise the shape of a hand. You’d given it to him on his twenty-second birthday; the frame cost almost two hundred dollars. You had captured the moment from the boundary behind the wicket. In the foreground, the middle stump hung in the sky, having been blown clean out of the ground. And below it, although slightly blurred, you could see the flames in his eyes as he roared, his tall frame leaping above the pitch like a dancing marionette. After that match, he was selected for the state squad, and you celebrated at a club in the city. He bought lines of shooters, lip-synched drunkenly on the stage, and kissed you hard in the alley behind the industrial bins.
You thought it would hurt him, this reminder of what could have been. But he had immediately detected the absence of shade, the whiteness of the wall. He accused you of pity, and you had raged at the injustice and wondered how he could see what wasn’t there.

*Rule 36(d): Play may only be interrupted, if, upon appeal by either captain, the umpires consider the ground or the weather (other than the light) to be unsuitable for play.*

He had made the first move, of course. You were still waking in the night with an aching jaw and a clenched gut. You were still dating a girl from your photojournalism class. Still couldn’t see a way out.

Australia was playing Sri Lanka, and the rec club beamed the match from a television over the bar. You stood at a table with some other guys, arguing whether Ponting was the new Bradman. You were loose with your predictions, vague with your terminology. He drifted into the conversation and bought you a beer. By the end of the night, you had agreed to watch him play that weekend.

You took her along, though, and watched as he launched missiles down the pitch, sneering at batsmen who flinched as the ball whistled past their ear. In the afternoon, he took up position at deep extra cover, just metres from where you sat, where she lay in your lap and read. At one point, he turned, and his eyes were laughing.

‘Maaaate,’ he called.

After that, you went to the ground alone. You always sat in the same place, and, eventually, you let him take you home.
Rule 21: At any one time, the fielding side may have only one wicketkeeper. He must stand wholly but not necessarily directly behind the batsman's wicket. He is the only player on the field eligible to execute a stumping.

You reorganised the house. Decluttered. Made wide paths from the bedroom to the lounge, but he was irritable when his hand grappled at the empty air and made you move everything back the way it was.

And it may as well have been the same. He kept up the morning swims, his body carving smooth arcs through the water. In the next lane, you’d tighten your goggles and frown at the patches of dark mould on the bottom of the pool. He still chose the music, even though you drove. At the red lights, he wound down the passenger window, blasting out Cold Chisel or Midnight Oil and thrashed at his air guitar. No one likes a stereotype, he laughed, as you smiled apologetically at the adjacent car. He cooked when you had people over, refilled their glasses, and told them they were due for a haircut.

He had dismissed the idea of a guide dog. Jesus H Christ, he said. Instead, you got a cat. He called it Curtly, after the lanky West Indian bowler, and you heard its little bell tinkling at night as it leapt up onto the windowsills and pawed at the geckoes on the glass. It did not like you, preferring to rub against his calves as he stood over the toilet bowl. You can feed it then, you would say, sliding a can over the benchtop, and you’d go to bed early with a book.

But it was you who had cried when you found it at the top of the stairs. Its body was unmarked except for a small patch of blood above one eye. He cradled the animal in his large hands and buried his nose in its fur. Bloody Bridgestone disease,
he said. He dug the hole in the backyard and buried it while you watched from the kitchen window.

Rule 18: A dead ball means the cessation of play until the ball is next bowled, and a batsman cannot be dismissed while the ball is dead.

You don’t know where he even heard about it. Who he had been talking to. He signed up to play without discussing it with you and rummaged through the cupboards looking for the bat you’d long since given to charity. You did not tell him the truth, but instead took him to the store and waited as he tested the grips and practised cut shots while the sales assistant stepped behind a shelf.

For his first match, you sat on the hill and clapped loudly as milky-eyed fieldsmen fumbled on the grass for the rattling ball. You should have been at lunch with friends. He wouldn’t have known you weren’t there.

Sometimes you wonder what he would do if you left. If you didn’t come home from work. Just left a message for him on the machine.

You would get an apartment in the city, you think, close enough to walk home safely at night, but not right in the centre where it is too noisy. You would grow a beard and see foreign films on the big screen. On Sundays, you would walk across the bridge to the art gallery and stand in front of one painting for hours. People would gather in small clusters behind you, wondering what it was that you could see and they couldn’t.

But instead, you go to every game, keep the scores, calculate stats.
Rule 8 (b): The nomination of a team must include the nomination of a substitute player from each category in the team and if a member of the fielding side cannot take their place on the field, a substitute may act in their place.

The lounge had been almost empty when you’d arrived, most of the delegates choosing to shower before dinner. You drank too fast, you know. He took the seat next to you at the bar and began to talk, an inane exchange about the conference and the weather. When you finished your drink, he passed you a key.

Rule 2 (ii): A match may also be determined by being given up as lost by one of the sides, or by refusal to respond to the umpire’s call of "Play". A match not determined in any of these ways shall count as a draw.

He tells you they even play for the Ashes. Surely not, you reply, as he stirs the pan on the stove. It’s hardly the same thing. He thinks he can make the team for the next series.

It’s a couple of years off, but we could do it. Make it a real holiday, he says.

He says you could hang out at the Tate between matches, walk along the Thames. And he pauses. Or maybe you would prefer to stay home, he says quietly. Can’t imagine you’d be lonely.

He waits. Does not turn.

You tell him that you cannot see that far ahead.
The man gouges his ear as they wait, screwing and screwing with his little finger as if he is turning a tap on full. Every so often he inspects the long, sharp nail closely, then starts over again.

‘Stop doing that,’ Yalda says in Arabic. ‘It’s repugnant.’

When the door opens, he sits on his hands.

Most of them talk too fast, desperately spewing their stories before their case is closed. She has to think quickly, so the officials do not think she is incapable. But language is a minefield. Words don’t cross borders as boldly as boats do.

Last year, during her first roster on the island, she’d been called in to interpret for the interview of a Hazara man. He had pleaded in Pashto with the officer, cried that he had seen his son killed. He sent his wife and daughter to Iran, but had no way of finding out if they were safe. He will die if he returns, he said. The man spoke of their great affliction—zaar—in Afghanistan, but in Yalda’s haste, in her anxiety to impress, she’d not listened closely, focusing instead on translating with perfect grammar. She translated the word in Dari, said the man had a great house in Afghanistan. When she immediately tried to correct the mistake, the officer had reprimanded her. ‘You don’t speak for yourself. You only speak for him. Don’t try to explain.’ He had then shut his folder and left, and Yalda could not look at the man with shivering hands sitting beside her in the plastic chair.

After all her studies and travel she still stumbles over these false friends: words that look or sound similar but have different meanings across languages. She writes these sneaky shape shifters in a journal so they cannot trick her again.

Beraten in German means to advise or discuss.
The interpreters don’t play table tennis with the immigration officials. These Australians with their badges and pens have shorter rosters than the interpreters, caterers, security and medical staff, but they arrive already hard and leave three weeks later with eyes as narrow as splinters. They don’t like it when Yalda is asked for by name to settle a brawl in Oscar block, when the gymnasium fans are broken, the computers don’t work or a doctor is not available, when a man refuses to eat for the fourth consecutive day and wants instead to tell her about his son’s birthday party.

Sanjaya, another interpreter, is popular with the detainees, too. His long body moves as though he is cross-country skiing, arms and legs slicing evenly as he crosses the thrusting scrub to the lime huts. He is often roused from bed to quell disturbances in the big dormitory late at night, when there is weeping that exceeds a reasonable duration or volume. Sanjaya’s voice is even and soft, the sharp edges of any definable accent polished away, and it is not long before he slips back to the staff ship that is shackled to the shore, leaving behind only the drone of mosquitoes and the bored click of the fans.

‘Did you know that in Persian the word sad means a dam, a barrier built across a river designed to stop water from flowing?’ Yalda asks.

‘Yes, I did,’ he replies, smiling. He is missing a tooth halfway back and she thinks of a felled tin duck in a sideshow shooting gallery.

Sanjaya worked at the centre when it was first opened. He was transferred to Christmas Island when the facility shut down years ago but was one of the first interpreters offered a contract when the relocations resumed. He does not talk much unless he is called up to translate and runs each morning along the dirty shoreline as
the sun claws itself up from the ocean. The undersides of his arms are like a river map. When he collects his plate at the dining room, she sees fine blue tributaries branch out like the Mahaweli and disappear under his shirtsleeves. She knows he can speak Sinhala, Tamil, Creole Malay, Hindi, Punjabi and Marathi and suspects he knows more. She thinks he is Tamil, but he says he is just Australian.

*Sensibel* in many European languages means ‘sensitive’.

Yalda is used to all these SAMs now, these single adult men. She no longer notices the absence of women in the detention centre, although sometimes wonders if they would choose different words to tell their stories. Here, the interviews are almost all the same: hostile or resigned. Her breath no longer catches when accounts of slaughter, rape, persecution and poverty slide from her lips. Instead, she listens to the men’s clicking tongues and feels centuries of cultural heritage pass through her. She knows how much is lost as she reshapes their stories into flat English syllables that are tapped into a blank form topped with long numbers by an official across the table.

‘Where did you get the money to buy passage to Australia?’

The young man is taut and strong. He has been here for months but there is still a flame in his eyes. He clenches and unclenches his fists and then rubs his fingers over his knuckles as though he’d punched the officer. Yalda wouldn’t blame him if he had. The Pakistani has answered this question twice already.

‘Fuckyoufuckyouarealyingbadfatmanyouuglywhitedog.’

She translates the man’s insults verbatim as she runs a thumb over a ragged fingernail. Her hair is also splitting in this heat.

When she arrived she thought she’d never be able to repeat such language. So she would sanitise, redress and accessorise it. ‘I am very saddened to suspect you do
not believe me. I am concerned you are prejudiced against my skin colour,’ she relayed. But after a day, she was taken aside. ‘You say exactly what they say,’ she was told. ‘And tell us only what is answered in response to our questions.’

She is also meant to repeat exactly what the officials say, but sometimes she slips in more. ‘Have you got any family in Australia? And don’t you dare use those obscenities in my presence. Would you like your mother to hear you say such things?’ she would say, blank faced in terse Farsi.

There is a swell of excitement, no, perturbation, at the centre when three men escape during an authorised excursion. She knows one of them quite well, a Sudanese man who told her his wife was pregnant but there was only room on a boat for him. Yalda scans the thick, dark hills that loom over the facility and wonders if the woman has given birth yet. There is no search party. For two days, officers stand on the deck of the staff ship. A few extra security guards patrol the fence line. Early the following morning, the three men emerge from the jungle and lie down against the wire, their skin swollen, whipped and bleeding from bites and branches. Sanjaya is called to deliver them news of their punishment.

*Brutaal* in Dutch means ‘bold’.

In some interviews detainees try to speak for themselves in fractured English. Yalda sits to the side and winces as they stutter and flounder, their hands fluttering at the air as though the language is hovering above them, dangling just out of their grasp. They always choose the wrong words but the officers don’t seem to notice. The men say they are fleeing control instead of oppression, use the word injury instead of brutality, scared rather than terrified. The French know how important it is—*le mot juste*—to choose exactly the right word for the right occasion. But even if the men managed to
do so, their claims would never translate with the same force as in their native tongue. And so their experiences are diluted and spayed, and they sit in their chairs, spent, as the officers shake the ink in their pens and scribble on a line at the bottom of the page.

The ship’s upper deck is quiet in the late afternoon, and she knows to find him here when the day has gone stale. Sanjaya always stands to starboard, binoculars sweeping the ocean for an ancient shell or a graceless dugong to break the surface.

‘Any action today?’ The light is draining from the sky, and the water looks grey and leaden.

‘A couple of turtles. Nothing more.’

Once, she asked to have a turn. After she had skimmed the water, she turned the lenses portside, towards the barbed wire and tin roofs. He took the binoculars from her then. ‘Let them be,’ he said.

‘One game before dinner?’

He nodded and followed her inside.

She likes interpreting for the Relaxation Therapy sessions. From the front of the room, she chants softly after the instructor. *Close your eyes and breathe deeply through your nose. Feel your shoulders sink. Now picture yourself in a lovely place.*

Yalda transports herself home to Margaret River and presses her spine against a jarrah’s rough grooves, rakes her fingers through low sand dunes that face off a churning winter sea, rolls oysters on the back of her tongue. She imagines Peter in the kitchen, whistling as he peels the skin from mushrooms. They argue over this sometimes. That’s where the goodness is, she says, imbued in the mottled skin. He is older, but takes good care of himself and is always ready to appreciate her when she returns between rosters. They didn’t meet till she was forty-six, too late for her own
children, but she never wanted them anyway. He only speaks English and compensates for this shortfall by emailing her with marvellous words he finds in her hulking dictionary. ‘You are so illecebrous and I want you to absquatulate from those island nomothetes right now.’ When she is home she fattens him up with traditional Persian meals of lamb Koresh, almond chicken and Tahdig. She passes him pomegranates with saffron-stained fingers and tells him stories from the island, such as the man who tried to swim to Australia but turned back after twenty minutes when he was stung by a jellyfish.

“You will not be transferred to an Australian hospital,” she repeats in Tarjik to the young man with blood congealed in his ear. ‘You are not haemorrhaging from your brain. You have just ruptured your ear drum and you must take these antibiotics.’ He has a long, sharp nail on his little finger and brushes the packet aside, stretching himself up like a cobra to where the doctor stands. ‘You did this to yourself,’ she adds in a low voice. ‘I have seen you.’

“That man is junk.” She raises her jaw and expels the word across the ping pong table to Sanjaya. ‘They must send him back. Maybe he does not plan to make big trouble, but he is a liar and a bully. No, he is no good for Australia.’ She hisses through her teeth as her paddle swats the air. Sanjaya picks up the ball from the floor and rolls it in his palm. ‘You are possibly right.’

The French word for ‘possibly’ is éventuellement. You are eventually right.

She loves France. French words are so lithe—parapluie, décolleté, dénouement, déclassé, échapper—and she swallowed them greedily and easily when she visited
once, long ago, on a semester break. When she returned to her studies in England the same words fell out, graceless and dull. Umbrella, low-cut, outcome, reclassified, escape.

Yalda met her husband there, long before Peter, on the banks of the river. He had an engineering text on his knees and greeted her in Farsi as she lay nearby. They married shortly after graduation, but when he wanted to return to Tehran she refused. She left all that behind when she won the scholarship to Cambridge. Besides, there was no future for linguists in Iran, especially during a war. And so they hugged, and she put him on a plane. Yalda visited him once, long after she’d settled in Australia. ‘Shazbot!’ she’d shouted when he opened the door, but he had forgotten their old *Mork and Mindy* joke. He was stout, and sweaty clots of grime darkened the hollows of his ankles. She had not stayed long.

*Compromiso* in Spanish means ‘commitment’.

Yalda starts walking in the mornings. Sometimes she spots Sanjaya’s figure far ahead on the shoreline, his limbs cutting through the early heat. If she rises late, he is already out on the jetty where he sits and stares at the horizon. She does not know if he is praying. She asked him once if he was a Hindu. ‘I suppose I could be,’ he replied.

When she returns to the ship there is a note on her door. She showers and heads downstairs to where the gangplank hangs from the staff ship like a dog’s lolling tongue. The flies are bad, and she flaps in front of her as she heads towards the dormitories. She passes a cluster of barefoot Iraqis who kick a football, sending up puffs of dirt that seem to stick momentarily to the heavy air. Outside Oscar block a chirpy support worker is trying to rouse a music session, but the tambourines and
maracas hang limply from the men’s hands like ornaments on a Christmas tree in January.

‘He’s asking for you,’ the officer says when Yalda reaches the end of the hangar, and there is the slightest note of scorn in her tone.

The man sits on the thin bed and she notices that his hands tremble. He looks at least fifty, but she knows he is thirty-seven.

‘What is the problem, friend?’ Yalda asks in Pashto.

‘I want to go home now.’ She looks at his stretcher and can see he has packed his belongings. A T-shirt, shorts and a pair of thongs are stacked neatly beside him.

‘But look at what you did to get here,’ she says. ‘And you have nothing to go back to.’

‘I want to go home,’ he repeats.

She leaves him there on the bed and signs statements and forms for the officer outside. On the trek back, one of the footballers whistles at her.

‘You have been here too long,’ she calls back in Arabic and just for a second, he laughs.

Sin in Spanish means ‘without’.

One of the catering girls finds him on her dawn walk. The rope was too long and had been wound all along the thick branch, so from a distance it looked as if he had been plucked clean off the ground by a thin tree snake. They cut his body down and arrange it on the floor in one of the ship’s cold rooms, covering it with a blue tarpaulin. Yalda is sent to retrieve his belongings.

Sanjaya’s room is bare, the bed is made neatly and curtains are drawn. In the corner, the air conditioner sighs. There is a pen on the desk and a notebook open to a
blank page. The bin is half filled with crumpled paper. She rummages through all her languages, all her vowels and consonants, but in the end, Yalda, too, is unable to find the right words.
Bedrock

It was almost midnight but table eight showed no signs of leaving. The group shrieked and brayed with slackened lips, and five painted toes nuzzled at a crotch in the opposite chair.

Sean had sent the waitress home earlier when lightning skewered the hills beyond the city skyline. Now he sat in the corner, running cutlery through a rag, as the rain slammed down on the roof. A man in expensive shoes refilled tequila in little glasses with an unsteady hand. Sean gave them the bottle an hour ago when heavy sheets of water began to cascade over the restaurant’s awning, rushing onto the road in thunderous torrents. There was no point kicking them out yet; taxis would be holed up undercover, and it was too dangerous for him to drive.

Soon it would be different. When the tunnel was finished, Sean would glide silently through a concrete womb for almost seven kilometres under the city’s tangle of buildings and then be shot out smoothly into the fresh air just two streets from home.

A man leaned across the table to lick salt from a woman’s wrist, his tongue lazily tracing the veins beneath her skin. Then he tossed the tequila down his throat and smacked his palm hard on his thigh as the group screeched in mock horror with poor Spanish accents.

Sean had been to South America. He had eaten sea cucumbers in Olón, floated in a sea as warm as tea. He’d gotten lost in a labyrinth of alleyways where a rabid dog staggered and foamed, danced barefoot in a bar beneath caged songbirds, prayed for mercy behind a crumbling statue in Yanque when he mistook the backfire of
motorbikes for a gunfight. His toast-coloured goddess had laughed at him as he crossed himself, and stepping out from the plinth she had shouted ‘nos rendimos!’ at the night sky.

Eventually the group stumbled out of the restaurant into the darkness where they were swallowed by the deluge, and Sean locked the door. At the rear of the building his car seemed to float on a black lake. He took off his shoes and socks and rolled up his trousers. The water was not as deep as he expected but still he inched his way, bracing for broken glass to slice his flesh. Every crack in the concrete made him catch his breath. Inside the car, he rested his forehead against the steering wheel.

The construction work had started so long ago that he no longer missed the mornings he would come in to the restaurant early, just to drink in the silence and roasted coffee. He could hardly remember when the main road had not been clogged with safety barriers and detour signs, with snaking lines of grey trucks that bullied past the crawling cars and trundled down into the dank depths below. He did not even know if the monstrous boring machines were still chewing away at the rock beneath him or if the trembling ground was all in his imagination.

She was still awake when he got home. He could hear her in the bathroom, the slapping of cream against her long neck, the rigorous brushing, the polite spitting, and the silence when she leant into the mirror, shallow minty breaths clouding the glass as she searched for new signs of decay.

The bedside lamp gave his chest a dead, waxy pallor. Julie climbed into bed with greasy limbs, the sheets clinging to her like wet plastic.

‘I had another reading today,’ she said. ‘It was incredible.’

‘What did she say?’ The cords of his throat tightened.
‘Well, she said that everything is going to be okay. This woman, you wouldn’t believe how much she knew.’

He closed his eyes as she told of all that lay ahead for them, of monogrammed staff in a riverside restaurant, cruises in Tahiti, tennis and yoga, a grand home with a rolling lawn. And two blue-eyed children as blond as milk.

Then Julie fell asleep quickly but was soon twitching as dreams pulsed beneath her skin like an astral charge. She quivered beside him, and Sean imagined he could hear the crack of a motorbike’s exhaust, smell that earthy skin, and feel the statue’s chalky coldness against his back.

As he left for the restaurant the next day, Sean noticed a small pothole had formed in their street. He pulled over and stared through the window at the depression in the asphalt. Fine cracks snaked from the centre of the hole, and for a moment, he imagined a baby had plummeted from the sky, and, if he moved just a little bit closer, he would see its tiny body embedded in the soil below. A bus approached in the rearview mirror. Sean shut his eyes as its wheels bore down on the bitumen. When it had passed, Sean checked the pothole and knew that more cracks had appeared.

A letter had been pushed under the door of the restaurant. He slipped it under the till with the others and turned on the coffee machine. It was early, but Julie’s tennis session had been cancelled and she was spending the morning at home. He peered through the window beside the till at the cranes that swayed like giant stick insects sensing a threat in the wind. The milk rippled in the jug.

Sean had let the assistant manager go in September. He’d also had to fire two waiters and an apprentice chef who’d cried and said he wouldn’t be able to tell his mother. Sean ran the floor himself most nights, though he still used Evie to help on
weekends. He found her strange in ways he didn’t have the energy to consider, but she never said anything when Sean would open a bottle of wine and sit outside in the dark. She didn’t try to improve things, and had just shrugged when he banned children from the restaurant. The restaurant had been struggling before work started on the tunnel. But once the end of the street was closed off with barricades and electronic signs, it relied on a smattering of loyal locals and those drawn by old reviews from the restaurant’s early days.

‘Solid,’ he said to Julie when she asked how things were, and she would smile and stroke his head like a baby. She rarely came by anymore, deterred by the towering exhaust stack that was now framed in the restaurant’s side window. It would still be some time before the funnel would belch toxic clouds into the city’s air, but he did not remind her of this.

Yet, while she was acutely in tune with every day—every hour—Sean knew Julie hardly noticed his longer absences. For more than a year, the void had been filled with harsh acronyms that she parroted excitedly like a foreign dialect as he rubbed the sleep from his eyes. HCG, FSH, HPT, FMU, HSG, ICSI, PIO, DHEA. But he was always needed at home for one or two days each month. Her Fertile Window was circled in red on the calendar, usually around the time the mortgage was due. On one of these days Evie would open the restaurant, and he would sit in a small room in the city staring at the pink buttocks of a blonde woman in a policeman’s cap, a plastic cup perched expectantly between the magazine’s pages. Julie always hovered outside for him, clapping like a child when he emerged, spent. And then he would wait for her too, as her eggs were excavated by a doctor with blinding lights on his head.

Sean turned on the kitchen lights and checked the fridge temperatures. The seals on the lower doors were getting mouldy and he scratched at the rubber with his
fingernail, wiping the black grit on his pants. There was still a couple of hours before the chef arrived, so he filled a bucket with warm water and vinegar. He took off his pants and shirt and folded them over a chair, and then, on his knees, Sean began scrubbing at the seals, working the cloth methodically between the rubber folds. As he rinsed the rag, he noticed the crack. Like a thick, kinked hair. He crouched down and ran his finger along the line and felt it widen as his hand reached beneath the fridge. He pressed his cheek to the floor but could not see where the fleshy pad of his forefinger was now nestled in the crevice. The concrete was cold and tremored against his jaw.

He scrambled to his feet and tried to yank the fridge from the wall, but it did not budge. Sean slid open the door to the storeroom behind and snapped on the fluorescent light. The crack was wider there, carving the space into two. At its deepest point, the crack swallowed Sean’s thumb to the knuckle, and the concrete inside felt rough and wet. He wriggled onto his stomach and pressed his eye onto the slit, blinking hard against the blackness. As the ground warmed against his skin, the crack widened and he saw a yellow light seeping from deep below. He held his breath and pushed his eye harder against the floor. Now he could make out a huddle of tiny hardhats and a truck being filled with soil. He cranked his neck and squinted to the right where he could see a huge borer grinding angrily at rock, hot red sparks strafing from its shaft. Workers scurried along the hollowed earth with clipboards and phones. Strobing beacons flashed warnings against the curved earthen walls. And then the crevasse narrowed again, and there was only black. Sean pushed himself up onto his knees, trembling, and wiped at the dust in his eyes. When he opened them, the crack had not grown any bigger, but he could suddenly feel all of his weight bearing down on the brittle ground. *There is too much pressure,* he thought. *Too many people. They*
have to carve new space just to make room for us all, but the ground will never hold all of our weight.

He looked around and saw how the shelves bowed under the strain of the bottles and cans, the gap that had opened in one corner between the ceiling and plaster wall. It was all barely holding together. Sean inched himself back until he was able to slide the door of the storeroom closed, and then got to his feet. It was later than he expected. The chef was due in any minute, and Sean dressed, taking his time to smooth the creases in his pants.

The light was softening outside, and he poured himself a glass of wine. He gathered the letters from under the till and took them with his laptop to the corner table. Carefully, he opened the bills and sorted each of them in precise piles. The letters with aggressive red borders and demanding headings sat to his left.

It would cost a lot to excavate the site, to clear the overburden, all that soft, crumbling bedrock that was waiting to collapse. He would replace it with soil that would better absorb the pressures, that would never be worn away. And then he would have to install a maze of steel retaining posts that would pierce deep into the crust of the earth, lay thick new concrete and rebuild the whole place.

He logged onto their joint bank account. There was no point checking the restaurant’s balance. It had not held enough funds to even pay the bank loan for three months. And it would now barely cover what he owed the suppliers, let alone work of this scale. But there was over fifty-five thousand dollars in their savings account. Enough for several more IVF cycles. He began to work through the piles.

Sean had finished when Evie turned up. She did not comment when he told her to help prep in the kitchen, that he would take care of front of house that night. He put on a new CD, humming to Peregrino de Tu Cielo as he refilled the pepper mills.
and lit the candles. When she went to unlock the front door, he patted her back and said, ‘Gracias, princesa.’

It was a quiet night, only seven tables, but he hovered over the guests and gave them free desserts. He turned up the music when there was only one group left, pulled up a chair to them and opened a bottle of expensive cognac, laughing when it dribbled down the side of their glasses. Evie closed off the till and left at midnight.

Then he drove home the long way, avoiding the main roads where the heavy wheels of buses crammed with noisy late-night revellers and vacant-eyed shift workers pressed down on the thin layers of asphalt. He stuck to the back streets where the earth was solid and the lamps cast gentle shadows on empty lawns.

When he reached his driveway, he parked the car and went to the shed. The house was dark, so he rummaged quietly for the bucket. It only took him an hour to fill the pothole on the road with soil that he dug from the garden, mixing it first with handfuls of gravel from the drive. He pressed each shovelful down firmly until the surface of the hole was hard and smooth, and then turned to the other cavities in the road, shallow craters that he hadn’t noticed from the car. As he scooped and filled, he could imagine all of the treacherous underground conduits collapsing as he stopped the trickles of water from pooling underneath the surface waiting to, one day, open up the ground and swallow them all.

He worked until the sun cracked over the horizon.

Julie woke him with a mug of herbal tea. Her voice was high and bright. ‘It’s late, my sweet. Let’s get going. This is it, this time, I can feel it.’

She had raised the blinds and the hot light burned. He imagined the new soil already dried and splitting in the road. He felt heavy, the weight of his body pressing an oily imprint in the mattress.
‘Just give me a second.’

She bustled out of the room, and he could hear her singing as she prepared the shower for him.

Sean hauled himself out of bed and fumbled in his pants on the floor for his keys. He dressed, leaving his wallet and phone on the bed, and closed the front door behind him.

He stopped the car just short of the new bus exchange. The tunnel’s opening yawned at him, metal scaffolding and mounted lights monitoring the entrance like an operating suite. Cars buzzed past and rubbish whisked up from the gutters against his ankles. He walked to the barricades where a cluster of workmen smoked. They did not look at him as he passed, did not see him don the bright safety vest and hardhat left unattended on a plastic chair. He nodded at the driver of a truck reversing up the ramp and then strode toward the tunnel.

The air was cooler below. The ground was not the raw, orange earth he had seen through the crack in the storeroom floor, but instead coated in sleek, grey cement. Men on steel frames fitted strips of square lights in tracks on the roof while others pored over large sheets of paper.

He walked on until the construction mess thinned and it grew darker, until he came to a bend. It wouldn’t be long before the road would start to rise, and the tunnel would push him up toward the fierce sun, up to where Julie was turning over the calendar page, red pen in hand, dreaming of two children, blond as milk.

He moved to the curve of the wall, sliding down until he squatted on his haunches. Eyes closed, he wrapped his arms around his knees and pressed his back against the fibrous grains of concrete. He sat there in the dim light as the distant
pounding of a machine pulsed a soothing rhythm, steady as a heartbeat, down and along the empty tunnel.
Look over there. Beyond the newsstand. He’s next to the older man who’s flicking through a fishing magazine, flicking the pages fast. A blur of reels and rods and marlin and motors catches Jimmy’s eye. He replaces his offroad magazine for a fishing one. And he flicks too. He stops at a page and nudges the older man to see. A woman, a girl really, reclines in a game fishing chair, gripping a long rod that’s wedged between her naked, retouched thighs. She’s barely dressed. Certainly not for fishing. See how Jimmy nudges the man again and raises a pale eyebrow. No bite. The older man wedges his magazine back in the rack and leaves. It doesn’t matter. That man isn’t important, and Jimmy isn’t bothered.

He leaves the store. It’s 29 degrees Celsius out there. Blue sky, thin puffs of cloud with fish-like scales. Pretty nice.

There on the right, next to the van. The grey car with the rear window taped in black plastic. That’s Jimmy’s. Don’t worry about what happened to the window. It’s irrelevant. The car is a sedan. Not fit for offroad, although he’s tried. Took it to Moreton Island once. Didn’t make it far off the barge. The back seat is covered in cheap fabric the shade of frostbite with a stain in the shape of an axe where a small child might have let go of their bowels in a sweaty protest. Jimmy doesn’t have kids. No air conditioning. A bumper sticker: ‘Don’t make me use my…’. The rest of the sticker has been peeled off. Not by Jimmy.

He sits at his computer and types. Jimmy is a writer. Note the setting here.
A white room facing west. During summer, Jimmy can only write in the mornings. Wide, pine floorboards and a double sash window overlook the vacant block on Furley Street. Squint and it could be an olive grove. Or a French battlefield. Maybe. The ceiling is high and a small wasp’s nest in the far corner draws the eye. Like a cat’s turd on snow. A low bookshelf against one wall is filled with various titles of various genres. Jimmy hasn’t settled on his style yet. The computer is old. He wanted a typewriter for its truth, but he could only afford an electric one from the seventies. Instead he has a 1995 desktop computer that emits a startling series of beeps when he tries to save his work. Two timber photo frames sit on his desk. In one, a blonde woman eyes the lens wearily, a doughy toddler arching in her arms. It is obviously an old picture. He does not know them, but he wishes he did. The other photo is more recent. A beaming, suited man shakes Jimmy’s hand. Jimmy is younger and wears a striped tie. His face is blotchy as if he has peeled strips of sunburned skin from his big forehead. You can see here how the vitiligo has spread over recent years.

He is typing. It is nearly afternoon.

Can you hear that? Jimmy can, but he ignores it. He keeps typing. A man is yelling from the street. Hammering on Jimmy’s front door, ‘Fucking thief.’ Adjective. Mrs Hancock is peering over the lilypillies.

Watch as Jimmy gets ready. He doesn’t know what to wear. He chooses the striped tie. Again.
‘We are concerned,’ says the man whose name is Matthew and may have a deep cleft in his chin. Jimmy doesn’t know who ‘we’ is. They are on the telephone. The man has the first three chapters of Jimmy’s new book. Jimmy imagines the man is in a white room with high ceilings and a window that stretches from wall to wall overlooking a green park with a wooden bridge over a creek. There are no wasp nests in the corners. ‘On the merits of your first novel, we expected more,’ says Matthew who surely has a cluster of short, black whickers in his cleft that escapes the razor’s sweep. That novel is problematic for Jimmy. See how he clenches his buttocks, how his white patches blanch as his neck flushes.

It is a Wednesday, and Jimmy sits at the bus stop. He has been to the library, and now his car is not working. It appears the bus is not coming. Jimmy has forgotten there are roadworks in the city. There will be trucks and signs and men in orange jackets, and there is no room for buses. There will be when the tunnels are finished. An old woman sits on the bench. Jimmy tells her that he thinks the bus is not coming. She smiles at him and nods. He feels there is something more he should say.

The cab takes a detour around the congestion, and Jimmy does not pass the Harrington Writers Retreat. He is relieved. Brian might be there.

The nosy neighbour carefully prunes her glossy hedge as she patiently hopes for another scandalous visit.

The animal shelter is busy on Saturday morning. Fat children push against wire fences as skinny dogs lick tomato sauce off their puffy chins. The cage at the far end of the
concrete compound is the one Jimmy goes to first. It smells no worse than the other cages. Inside, a grey dog sulks in the corner. Bandit. A bull terrier cross. The dog has one brown eye and one bright blue one. You’d imagine this would appeal to Jimmy, but see how he turns his head and walks away.

There are a lot of adjectives in Jimmy’s new book. He is overly fond of adverbs too. There weren’t many in his first novel, the one Brian calls *his*. Differential coefficiency is Jimmy’s main defence. He likes the way it sounds. Brian cannot afford to sue and apparently hasn’t written anything since.

A bird is feeding its baby in a nest outside Jimmy’s window. He thinks it could be symbolic of something. Jimmy was married once. That’s another story.

Jimmy is left-handed. This makes some things difficult for him such as wearing a regular watch, peeling potatoes and writing with ink. He is also apparently unable to throw a boomerang. Fortunately for Jimmy, he does not like potatoes and has no interest in physical recreation. Even fishing. However, lefties are supposedly more inclined to be divergent thinkers. Look this up. You’ll see it means he is creative, and this pleases him.

There are twelve houses in his street. Four are brick, five are timber, and three are made from a combination of materials. They all have gently gabled roofs. Most of them have fireplaces, although they are only used for a few weeks in July. During this time, the houses resemble steaming apple pies sitting on a sill.
He keeps typing but nothing much has happened, and Jimmy is bothered by this. But the banging at the door and the threatening letters have stopped. Jimmy goes to buy socks and can’t find his novel in the bookstore. It used to be there.

This is the part where Brian is dead. A significant event.

The actual details are sketchy; the Writers Retreat didn’t tell Jimmy much for he is being spurned, but you will get the general idea: a locked garage; a running engine; a wheezing wife in a thin, blue nightdress flapping around the hallway; an overweight, black dog whining and weeing and scratching on the garage door; Jimmy’s novel—Brian’s novel, if you are the type who automatically assigns innocence to the dead—lying open on the passenger seat. The car is expensive. So is the house. So Brian wasn’t upset about the money.

Jimmy’s fingertips are very white. The skin above his distal inter-phalangeal joints has now lost its pigmentation. It looks as though he has dipped his hands in bleach, and he has taken to sniffing them regularly.

He visits the museum, the new one with giant humpback whales suspended by wires. Jimmy hurries through this section without looking up. He does not look at their chalky, rippled bellies with their barnacles and carefully peeled patches of grey. Did you know that the world’s only albino whale has skin cancer? Jimmy also goes to the art gallery but does not see anything he likes.
Today is different from yesterday. His white fingertips scurry across the keyboard, and he does not pause to smell them. Aside from the tapping, it is very quiet. Jimmy has started a new book and is already up to chapter seven. The plot came to him as an epiphany in his sleep, if you believe that, and his lips now shape the words he types like a magical incantation.

Jimmy writes the story of a vanishing writer. The writer noticed himself fading bit by bit, and he was frightened. He embarked on a quest to create a salve that would restore his missing self, a pulpy ointment made from words. In a giant processor, the writer forces *Winesburg, Ohio* down toward the blades and pours in a litre of water and a little oil until a glutinous ball forms.

In the meantime:

Milk sours in the fridge;

Mrs Hancock buys a new hose reel;

New people with cats move in at number twelve;

The regional solar heating salesman goes home despondent.

*The Decameron* and *One Thousand and One Nights* help give the writer’s mixture a pastier quality. He works for days, blending and balancing, until he feels his very bones start to dissolve. It isn’t important to know how the story ends, but it’s 24 degrees Celsius when Jimmy finishes. Slightly overcast. He goes to bed in the afternoon and sleeps, dreamless, in greasy sheets.
Jimmy wakes, ready to print the new novel that he hardly remembers writing. It isn’t exceptionally long, but it is long enough. He will take it to the store in the city that has sixteen different colored binders to choose from and coffee while you wait. He will take the bus for his car is still broken, and he wants to rediscover the world. He will then post it to Matthew who has short, dark whiskers in his cleft.

But he cannot see his story. Jimmy stabs at the keyboard and the screen is now black. Jimmy looks under the desk and twiddles with the wires behind the hard drive. He presses the big round button at the front. A loud sound tells us something is not right. Another sound now. A small, quick hiss as the odour of charred metal wafts up Jimmy’s mottled nostrils.

Next door, Mrs Hancock’s sprinkler strafes Jimmy’s wall. Rat-a-tat-tat-tat-tat. She cannot hear him cry.
Singing the Terrorist

You’d be hard pressed to spot the difference in the little town of Roweston today and the photos that hung in the ‘Our Roweston since 1862’ gallery at the Good Bean café in Main Street. In fact, more than one tourist—for want of a better word to describe those who only pulled off the M1 in search of a decent coffee or clean restroom before heading back to the main drag and more purposeful destinations—had been heard to mutter loudly into their cappuccino (topped with Margot’s famous hazelnut cinnamon sprinkles) that the sepia 1906 photo of the town’s Federation-style masonry courthouse on the wall was most certainly fraudulent, for the building that they had just passed on the way in still looked exactly the same.

‘But it has big trees in front of it now, Terry. It’s all bare in the first photo,’ said Jeanne whose observations skills had somewhat sharpened since assuming the role of navigator on their caravanning trip around Australia.

‘Anyone can truck those in, love. Don’t be so bloody naïve.’

But the courthouse hadn’t really changed, apart from tedious little upgrades like wiring and insulation or new floorboards that were done over time (all installed by the Enrights, of course), and such modifications were invisible to the eye of the disinterested outsider.

And the same went for Dyson’s Family Department Store, the Bowls Club and the Railway Hotel, except the big signboard kindly donated by the Rotary Club in 1995 that was changed every Friday to showcase the Roast of the Day was an easy clue for those who chose to continue the challenge over a piece of lemon meringue pie.
Which was just as the residents of Roweston liked it. It’s not that they were against all change, for they congratulated themselves on being progressive folk who were well informed of current affairs and were even the first regional town in Queensland to introduce pokies, for heaven’s sake. But they simply recognised it was futile trying to improve on what their ancestors had created. The streets were extraordinarily wide with lovely deep awnings over the shops, and you could walk all the way from Col’s Butchers (‘We Meat Again’) on Church Street down to KFC on the corner of Eagle Street (which had its 1976 development application unanimously approved by council) in a February downpour without ever getting wet. Century-old Moreton Bay Figs stood sentry at the entrance of Memorial Park where the Anzac Day dawn service was held and where brides would gaze beyond the pond to the mountains in the west for what had become Glen Hunter, Professional Wedding, Family and Business Photographer’s, signature shot. The two schools had retained their charming weatherboard structures, and the difficult process of designing additional classrooms, libraries and other significant extensions to accommodate Roweston’s growing student population over the years had resulted in new buildings that satisfied even the oldest of the town’s citizens.

However, it was the town’s airport that had created the biggest consternation. Its one big terminal was covered by four black roofs that stabbed the sky at chaotic angles, and the exterior walls were rendered in thin sheets of galvanised steel that had giant gaps between each slat to expose the pipes and ducts behind. Inside, long windows reduced the views of the car park to mere slivers, and the clusters of seats in the gate lounge were screwed to the floor in hexagonal formations that made the Harrisons feel like they were about to partake in a game of musical chairs every time they flew out to visit their grandchildren in Brisbane.
But it had been out of the town’s hands. The airport sat four miles out of town and fell under the management of the State government who, four years ago, sent a young man to a community consultation meeting in the Roweston Civic Hall where he ate their scones and promised them he would take their objections and recommendations to The People Who Made Decisions. Despite the fresh cream, (kindly provided by Margot), they never got a response, and the money poured into the project by bigwig energy corporations who needed to access the region for ‘future growth’ saw the swift construction of the current eyesore that was apparently postmodern but just looked to the rest of them, from a distance, like two giant black mating moths being dissected by forks.

Not that they’d ever mention it to anyone, especially over a beer with the boys at the Railway Hotel, but the new airport had actually been a blessing for Jason Weller and Kevin Cobb. They’d both been avid trainspotters since high school, having cut most of their classes to hide out under the railway bridge at Curtin’s Creek with a pack of rollies and a bottle of Kev’s dad’s home brew. As the cattle trains thundered over their heads, they would dare each other to look up into the shower of dust, splinters and gravel and see who could count all the carriages. And so they ended up getting an education of sorts, becoming self-declared experts in the efficiency of the livestock freight system, bold analysts of the rising or falling fortunes of the town’s saleyards and farming families, and eventually, absolute guns at identifying the number plates of a locomotive before the engine had even rounded the first bend.

But the rail system had been streamlined over the last decade and road trains were now more economical; one hundred and thirty tonnes of snorting beef racked up like Tokyo apartment blocks now terrorised the highways, bearing down on trembling
seniors who clung to their steering wheels and darted glances in their rearview mirror at their quivering caravans, praying they would somehow survive to see the dinosaur tracks in Winton. As Jason and Kev each nursed a stubbie inside the mesh fence on the hill above Taylor’s mill that overlooked the tracks, the men both found themselves thinking that trainspotting just wasn’t like it used to be.

It was over a spag bol at Kev’s house one night (for Jason was yet to move out of his parents’ place in Riddell Street, their having Foxtel and all) that the conversation nervously turned to the airport.

‘It’s gonna get a lot of traffic, you know, with them coal and gas guys flying in all the time,’ Jason said.

‘Yeah,’ Kev replied. He already knew what Jason was leaning at, but didn’t want them to turn into Stanley and Jo, who always finished each other’s sentences over a pint at the pub, which everyone agreed was just weird.

‘Air traffic, I mean.’

‘Yeah, I know.’

‘Wonder what sort. Of planes and stuff.’

‘Dunno.’

‘Maybe some rich bastard jets.’

‘Yeah, for sure there’ll be rich bastard jets.’

‘And those twin engines, too. You know, the kind that always crash.’

‘Hell yeah. Heaps of them.’

‘Maybe worth us checking it out, you know, since the trains are shit.’

‘Yeah. Yeah, I guess that’s an idea.’ And even though Kev knew what Jason had been getting at all along, he still felt warm with the confirmation that they shared the same thoughts.
Which was how it came to be that Jason and Kevin researched and found themselves a perfect vantage point on the fence line at the far end of the airport terminal car park and assumed the title of Roweston’s Official Plane Spotters.

It wasn’t an easy start, what with the rather significant number of private and commercial aircraft gliding in and roaring out once the new runway had been opened. Not to mention the occasional helicopter, but the two men agreed that they should limit their specialty to aeroplanes to ensure optimal accuracy of data. They underestimated the notebooks they required and had to spend a weekend in that first March dedicated to formulating a better system for recording all the information in columns and rows. In June, they went to the bank (for there was only one in the town, which more than met the financial needs of its community while providing major sponsorship support for the annual Agricultural Show, the Roweston Rovers footy team, and the Driver of the Month award), and withdrew one hundred dollars from their individual accounts. It meant that they would have to make do with the home brew for a while, but they had simultaneously recognised that a good set of binoculars was essential to their endeavours.

The next six years passed by uneventfully for the men and for Roweston in general. The people adapted to the buzz of aircraft overhead, which dipped their wings at the western ranges as they prepared to swoop down over the unfortunate mating moths. The library received a government grant and updated their computers, though had a period of trouble where Johnno’s IT Solutions revealed their shortcomings in the installation of the security software; a hugely successful pie drive was held to raise funds for the Washingtons’ daughter who was subsequently able to fly to Melbourne and surgically correct her hare lip before the commencement of the school year; and there was, of course, the arrival of Senior Sergeant Lloyd Martin.
It’s not that anyone had objected to Roger’s retirement; it had become difficult to object when he would oversee a Friday night Random Breath Test on Norville Road at midnight having just driven directly from a big session at the pub with the boys from the tannery (although he rarely issued a ticket: ‘It’s not you lot I need to worry about,’ he’d say through their window as they exhaled their beery breaths into a straw. ‘It’s all those from out there,’ and he would waggle his arm in the vague direction of the highway or, if it had happened to have been a darts night, at the distant black fields of the Wicks’ alpaca farm. But Roger’s replacement presented a more serious dilemma. For Senior Sergeant Lloyd Martin was cursed with a stutter.

Roweston made every prominent new citizen feel welcome (although this courtesy naturally extended only to those who were appointed due to their clearly superior skillset, one that was only possible due to the technological advances of the metropolis, a skillset which reasonably exceeded the talents of very able and honest people of the town). That didn’t mean they just put the new resident’s photo in the Roweston Rag or Pastor Taylor included a special, warm mention at his Sunday service, but they made him (and infrequently, her) feel genuinely welcome. And so, on the day after his official arrival to Roweston—having allowed time to settle in with his wife (Stacey) and two young sons to the pretty three-bedroom colonial on Appleby Street—a community BBQ was held for Senior Sergeant Lloyd Martin in Memorial Park.

Rotary put in a splendid effort with sausages in bread (help yourself to onions, tomato sauce or mustard) and the music students at Roweston High did their very best with a rendition of Hail to the Chief which Mrs Martin had taught them in a flustered, extended session the previous week. Children vomited in the bushes after drinking too much Fanta and addling their brains on the park’s metal roundabout, and the women
fluttered around Stacey with invitations to dinner, advice on the best doctor for ‘women’s issues’ (Dr Mackerley), and furtively whispered recommendations to have her boys avoid developing friendships with the Carlton mob at school.

Everyone approved of the way Senior Sergeant Lloyd Martin stood diplomatically between the sizzling snags of the Rotary tent and the icy cans of soft drink, which the Lions Club dished out beneath their bright new, blue marquee. He smiled amiably to those lining up in a casual queue, shaking their hands and laughing at their quips about turning a blind eye during footy season, and all in all, the town was pleased to see how perfectly content Senior Sergeant Lloyd Martin seemed to be in his new surrounds.

Looking back, you could say the trouble all started when they called for him to give a speech.

‘Let’s hear it,’ cried Barry from over near the water fountain where he had been rinsing off the sausage his daughter had dropped in the dirt. ‘Give us a speech, Sarge.’

‘Come on, Sarge, give us a few words!’ shouted Helen from her fold-up chair.

And the chant took hold as fast as the great January brushfire of 2006. ‘Speech, speech, speech, speech!’

The Rotary crew turned down the heat on the barbie plates and the mothers shushed at the kids on the slide. The residents of Roweston moved together to form a perfect semi-circle round Senior Sergeant Lloyd Martin who had suddenly turned rather ashen.

‘Well,’ he said after the chanting had died down. ‘I’m honoured at being here. It sure is a warm welcome.’ And the crowd clapped and cheered in self-congratulation and silently decided to dismiss his grammatical misstep as simple nerves. He had such
a lovely voice, a deep, rich timbre, so distinguished, and he couldn’t yet be fifty, surely. But each of them did notice how a rather torrid red rash had crept up his neck and appeared to wash his jaw like an incoming tide.

‘More!’ shouted Barry when it was clear Senior Sergeant Lloyd Martin was preparing to wrap things up.

‘More! More! More!’ went the crowd.

And so Senior Sergeant Lloyd Martin looked to his wife, who smiled and gave him a nod, and he opened his mouth once more.

‘I am t-t-t-t-t-t-t-terrrroolly grateful for your kindness.’

Barry dropped his tongs in the tent.

It was like the man had started to sing Gilbert and Sullivan to them—had he just sung Gilbert and Sullivan to them? Senior Sergeant Lloyd Martin had taken a deep breath and sang. They were sure of it. It was only brief, but yes, he had most definitely trilled the word truly.

‘Bugger me,’ said Jacob Finlayson. ‘A singing copper.’

The new Roweston and District Head of Police scrunched his face and rubbed at his forehead with his thumb, as if perhaps castigating himself for forgetting the rest of the lines. And then he looked up, around at all the befuddled faces, and said as smooth as old Joe’s whiskey, ‘Sorry folks, it’s my stutter.’ With that, he sidled over to where Stacey was holding out her hand to him like a lifeguard in treacherous swell.

Faced with such an awkward social situation in which no one had any really useful experience from which to draw, it was left to Margot to rescue the situation.

‘Bravo!’ she yelled. ‘Wonderful speech. Top, top stuff, Sarge!’

And the relieved crowd clapped long and loud, then gathered their children and went home to ponder what this curious development meant for their town.
It turned out that it wasn’t that big a deal after all. After years of therapy that had enabled him to mostly overcome the debilitating condition, Senior Sergeant Lloyd Martin was now only troubled by words starting with T. And it was inexorably worse when he was stressed or required to speak in public.

A few years ago, the situation nearly got him killed. When a crazed and armed drug addict was pacing a suburban street, he got his men in position and then grabbed the megaphone. ‘T-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-’ and on it went as he desperately tried to address the man. It did have some effect, this staccato din, as the junkie stopped his pacing and turned—just as Senior Sergeant Lloyd Martin had been trying to order him to do—to find the source of the terrible sound. But the junkie pointed his gun at the megaphone and so all the police shot him dead.

Understandably, Senior Sergeant Lloyd Martin now did his very best to evade using any word beginning with T at all. For those occasions when such vocabulary was unavoidable, he employed the only strategy with which he had any success. He sang the word. And once Stacey had patiently explained the tactic to Barbara (who was never backward in coming forward) in aisle four of the supermarket, it wasn’t long before the entire town understood that Senior Sergeant Lloyd Martin was not particularly fond of musical theatre, and they chose to regard his stutter and his strategy as endearing.

He went on to dispel any doubts they might have harboured by proving himself to be more than capable in his new position. In his first two years at Roweston, Senior Sergeant Lloyd Martin cracked the baffling case of the disappearing underwear, hauling young Jerry Pike into the station for a stern dressing down after finding bags crammed with spandex knickers and flesh-coloured bras hidden in the back of his bedroom closet that he’d snatched off washing lines. He busted a nasty operation that
had ‘future cartel’ written all over it, conducting a dawn raid on three trailers almost
overgrown by a shamble of weeds on the fringe of the Carlton’s property. And he had
shown impressive professionalism and a touching compassion when he arrested poor
Tony Doonan for beating his son to death. In the city, Tony would have been granted
none of the kindness that Senior Sergeant Lloyd Martin displayed as he snapped a
mugshot and gently guided him to the only holding cell with a working toilet. They
would not have understood that Tony had never had much of a chance in life—Mrs
O’Rourke recalled that she often had to share her lunch with him at recess and his
nose was always running—so the blame could not be entirely laid at his feet. And
anyway, Tony’s boy, Sam, had never been quite right in the head. A strange little
child, he was, always saying inappropriate things and staring rudely at people like
there was something he was trying to decipher on their chin. No, those city coppers
would not have understood, as Senior Sergeant Lloyd Martin had, that sometimes
there was more to a story than met the eye.

And so Jason and Kev did not have to deliberate long before agreeing to report
the troubling matter of the empty plane behind Hangar Two.

It had been there for three weeks now, and the men remembered commenting
on its arrival early on the morning of August 29 because it was rather noisy for a
Merlin twin-turbo prop.

‘Rich bastards?’ asked Kev, as he squinted through the binoculars to try and
see any identifying markers on the fuselage.

‘Rich enough,’ said Jason. And they both turned their attention to the SkyLink
Bombardier Dash-8 that was preparing to taxi down the runway, seventeen minutes
behind schedule, and paid no notice to who eventually disembarked from the rich-
enough-bastard jet behind Hangar Two.
It was not uncommon for private aircraft to sit unused at the hangars for several days. Often, they would be towed into the big sheds for a maintenance check, or Jason and Kev would see the pilot pottering about in preparation for when the passengers would return to lumber up the little steps and flump into their leather seats. Only Narelle and Allan Pickering’s little Cessna 172 sat there for any extended period of time. And then in July, they would pull it out onto the tarmac and zip back and forward for a month, like a frenzied bee on a spring flower, to do the accounts and tax returns for many of the big farming families as far away as Nargola. They were quite famous, being able to fly and account, and had been in the paper and even on the regional evening news, which, of course, everybody watched.

So when the Merlin twin-turbo prop just sat there behind Hangar Two with no sign of any activity for eight days, Jason and Kev decided to wander down the fence line for a closer look. It was a nice-looking job, all right.

‘Gotta be nearly new,’ Kev suggested.

‘That’s just what I was thinking.’

Jason jotted the registration number in their journal, and after the last Skylink flight had lifted off for the day, they decided to go back to Kev’s place where they could use the internet without Jason’s mum checking they weren’t ‘going surfing’ for porn. There was no information on the Merlin twin-turbo prop in the Civil Aviation Authority’s registration database, so they switched their search to the American FAA records. That’s where they discovered the jet was registered to Hussam Abdullah Husseini.

‘Fuck me,’ Kev said.

‘Fuck me,’ Jason agreed.
They made sure they were thorough in their research, searching the name in Google, Yahoo and even Bing (which they knew was always going to be pointless), but could not find any match for an individual or company called Hussam Abdullah Husseini. What they did find, however, were pages and pages of stories that contained at least one of the three names. And the sound of those alarm bells in Kev’s little unit above the hairdressers (Cut That Out) was almost too loud for them to bear.

So they returned to the airport and watched that little plane for another six days, dropping their voices as they debated what to do, for no one ever went near the plane, not even a pilot. And because they were intelligent men, responsible men, they finally decided the problem was bigger than they could handle alone.

Senior Sergeant Lloyd Martin was not at the station when the men arrived, having agreed to talk at the primary school assembly about Stranger Danger (not that this had been an issue in Roweston, apart from the unfortunate case of Harry Buckley in 2012 who lobbed jelly beans at school girls from his ute to watch them bend over in their little skirts, but he wasn’t a stranger—just a bit soft in the head since the war). Jason and Kev waited in the plastic chairs, checking their notebooks to ensure the logs were all neat. After an hour, Senior Sergeant Lloyd Martin slapped them on their backs and invited them into his office where he unwrapped his Zinger burger on the desk.

‘What can I do for you two good gents,’ he asked, licking the mayo from his thumb.

Jason and Kev told him about the Merlin twin-turbo prop. And as Senior Sergeant Lloyd Martin listened to how it had turned up out of the blue, how no one had been seen near it since, how the registered name wasn’t on the internet but what
they had found instead, his chewing slowed and he let a little shred of lettuce hang from his chin.

‘And so,’ Jason said, ‘we thought we should tell you. Those bastards obviously know they can’t get here by boat anymore, so…’

‘…now they’re trying to get in by plane,’ Kev finished, and the two men looked at each other and exchanged a fleeting, surprised smile.

Senior Sergeant Lloyd Martin thought for a while before speaking. ‘You’ve done a good thing here,’ he said. ‘It’s all about vigilance these days. And you are proof that we all must keep our eyes open for what is going on under our noses.’

‘But whaddya think, Sarge?’ Jason prompted. ‘Do you reckon it’s a…?’ He let the sentence fall away, unwilling to be the first one of them to say the word, to make the nightmare real.

Senior Sergeant Lloyd Martin let the ellipses hang for a bit. He knew the terrible trouble to come.

‘A what, Jason?’ he finally asked, trying to delay the inevitable. ‘A…TERR-or-Rist?’

The word warbled brightly in the air, a high falsetto stretching out the TERR like a rubber band, before dropping sharply to a deep and severe Or, and lifting again to brisk Rist in a high tenor C.

‘Fuck me,’ they said.

Senior Sergeant Lloyd Martin wiped his chin and gave a little shudder in his chair. Then he continued as though nothing extraordinary had just occurred. ‘Leave it with me, gents,’ he said. ‘I won’t let anyone, from anywhere, bring danger to this good town.’
Jason and Kev left the station and decided they needed a beer after the strange meeting. The word was out now, they figured, so after two more pints, they shared the unsettling tale of the Merlin twin-prop at the bar with Jack Carlinger, who needed another bowl of peanuts to relay the story to Benny Potts (who had decided to knock off early as it looked like rain). Benny was highly strung and easily agitated, downing several beers in quick succession as he loudly broadcast the news to all those who came through the heavy double doors of the Railway Hotel for the usual Topless Tuesday lunch.

‘What did Sarge say, Jase?’ Jack said, ‘Does he reckon it’s a terrorist?’

Jason and Kev swapped a quick glance.

‘He didn’t come right out and say it,’ Jase replied carefully.

‘Of course it’s a bloody terrorist,’ Beryl screeched through the kitchen’s servery window.

‘I knew it,’ Darren said, ‘I just knew this was gonna happen.’

And the pub erupted like a flock of cockatoos at dusk, so that by the time Senior Sergeant Lloyd Martin arrived at three o’clock for a quick one (the topless meat tray raffle draw having been rescheduled for Thursday), he was set upon as soon as he stepped foot in the door.

‘Settle down, people,’ he called above the din, gesturing at Nicky for his usual.

‘Let’s not all get carried away.’

Jack pushed Margie off the centre stool to make room for the Sarge, and the people gathered around him in a semi-circle, just as they had in the park several years before.

‘Whaddy ya reckon, Sarge?’

‘Tell us straight, go on!’ they called.
Senior Sergeant Lloyd Martin held up his hands. ‘People, let’s not jump to conclusions. No one is saying the plane is owned by a guerrilla.’

‘No one said that,’ shouted Ian, ‘That’d be a bloody stupid thing to think.’

Senior Sergeant Lloyd Martin tried again. ‘What I mean is that we don’t necessarily have a radical in our midst.’

The patrons looked confused. They had more than a few radicals, that’s for sure. There was Tyson Best for one; he had metal studs right along his left ear and a big tattoo of Jim Morrison on his back. And there was Hayley Lowell who didn’t shave under her arms and sometimes stood outside Col’s butchers waving a big poster of slaughtered cows.

‘That’s not what we’re saying, Sarge,’ said Marjorie who had been shunted further back in the throng.

‘I know what you’re saying,’ he replied.

‘So…?’ The crowd leaned in, anxious to hear it become official, this threat to their homes, their families, their Way Of Life.

‘What I’m getting at is that we may or may not be dealing with a TERR-or-Ri-ist.’

This time, when he sang, Jason and Kev thought of Bohemian Rhapsody and Freddie Mercury frolicking up and down the scale.

Galileo (Galileo)
Galileo (Galileo)
Galileo Figaro.

Senior Sergeant Lloyd Martin was flustered and tried again.

‘TERR-or-Ri-ist,’ he trilled and dipped, a little louder this time.
The pub was silent. But they quickly realised the subject of his pronouncement far outweighed its peculiar delivery.

‘EXACTLY!’ shouted Don Jenkins. ‘A TERR-or-Ri-ist!’ Don’s hand flew to his mouth as he heard him echo the sarge in perfect pitch and tone.

But no one seemed to be amused, and Don was relieved as the mob erupted again in feverish debate.

‘If we’ve got a TERR-or-Ri-ist here, I’ll bloody chop their head off myself,’ cried Barry.

‘I’ll lend you me axe,’ said Jim. ‘There’s no room for TERR-or-Ri-ism in our bloody town.’

‘Oh my,’ breathed Margot (who had scuttled down from the café when she’d gotten the call from Beryl at the deep fry). ‘Whoever imagined we’d be fighting a TERR-or-Ri-ist in Roweston.’

And as they went on into the night, their numbers swelling, forcing Nicky to switch the hoses three times on the kegs, none of them found it at all odd that they, too, were singing ‘a terrorist’.

It was a restless night in Roweston with the bedroom lights in more than a few houses still on in the dead hours of dawn. Dogs, perhaps sensing the evil that had snuck past their sleeping noses in previous evenings, yanked at their chains and howled warnings across the wide, empty streets. Benny Potts had been right; heavy clouds rolled across the ranges, strafing the tin roofs in a sharp and sudden downpour, and a hot wind whipped the leaves from the Moreton Bay Figs.

When the morning had broken, the people of Roweston planted their feet firmly and decisively on their bedroom floors. They had had their little panic, but now
they would take control. Take appropriate action to eliminate this TERR-or-Ri-ism threat. Protect their borders and never have such a bad night’s sleep again.

Nicky’s younger sister was called into the television station early. She quickly did her hair and makeup (for the local network had no budget for the luxuries of their big city counterparts), and then helped Geoff polish the script. Once he had checked the lighting and waved at Megan to shut up at the coffee machine, he assumed his position behind the camera and they proceeded to record the special bulletin. It was broadcast that night, into the homes of Roweston and far beyond, far west to the farms at the foot of the mountains, north to the gaggle of truckstops where men in singlets let the ash burn, unbothered, on their cigarettes, out to the east’s river country where women ushered their husbands into the lounge, for once not nagging them to leave their pungent fishing boots at the door. The coverage went south too, of course, but no one really watched it there as that region was famous for its obsession with Deal or No Deal, and the promos had promised someone would take home the big money that night.

‘Roweston has been rocked by TERR-or-Ri-ism,’ Nicky sang, her eyes fixed solemnly on the lens, ‘with the mysterious abandonment of a plane registered to possible TERR-or-Ri-ists at the town’s airport.’

By Thursday morning, TERR-or-Ri-ism was the only thing people were talking about. Roweston and its neighbouring towns trilled and warbled as they formulated a plan to expose and expel the deadly TERR-or-Ri-ist or TERR-or-Ri-ists from their communities. It was almost beautiful, this anarchic opera, that went on and on and on like Wagner’s Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg, although a lot more pitchy.

On Friday, Senior Sergeant Lloyd Martin called a public meeting at the Civic Hall. He knew he had to impose order before it got out of hand. He had not informed
his superiors in the city of the situation, knowing that breaking this case alone would be immeasurably positive for his career. Neither had the airport guys mentioned anything to the CAA. He had promised Reg in the tower a bottle of Chivas Regal if he kept it under his hat for another week or so.

‘We must be cautious,’ he began from the raised stage at the front, where only the Friday before the Roweston Amateur Theatrical Society had performed a wonderful rendition of *The Pirates of Penzance*. ‘We must be united like never before in this face of evil.’

Mothers drew their children close and Kev twitched his hand just an inch so that it pressed reassuringly against Jason’s thigh.

‘And above all, we must remember that we are a diverse and a proud community, one that welcomes and celebrates cultures of all kinds.’

This brought about spontaneous applause from the hall and many cries of ‘hear, hear!’ for the people of Roweston could not abide the thought of racism. One only needed to look around the main street for evidence of their tolerance. There was the Rising Sun restaurant that was famous for its double fried spring rolls and everyone always gave Wendy Li a tip if she delivered their meals in her little pink Honda Jazz within twenty minutes; they simply couldn’t do without Murat’s kebabs on Friday evening and he was originally from Hungary, or maybe Turkey; Stelios ran a good trade at the newsagency (although he could be a bit sloppy with his change); and, of course, they tried to embrace the tribe of wild school kids from that big Aboriginal family like they were their own. No, this was not an issue of race.

When Senior Sergeant Lloyd Martin had finished his speech, the women took the children home, tucked them tight in their beds, stroked their fair brows and whispered gentle lullabies. The men remained behind and sang as they hatched a plan.
At precisely five o’clock on Saturday morning, a small convoy of utes and cars followed the flashing lights of Senior Sergeant Lloyd Martin’s police car out of Main Street and along Railway Parade, turned left into Thompson Street and right into Stockyard Road, before snaking their way onto Lamington Drive. There was no other traffic for the commercial flights in and out of the airport were all scheduled after eight. They continued past the terminal and pulled up to the fence that separated Hangar Two from the road. The plane was still there, its sharp little nose and blackened cockpit windows pointed brazenly at where the town fidgeted nervously four miles away.

The men of Roweston silently unpacked their tools from the backs of the utes—crowbars, wrenches, tyre irons, hammers—a veritable artillery. Benny began hacking at the fence with his wire cutters until Senior Sergeant Lloyd Martin shook his head. They followed him through the side gate, which Reg had left unlocked the night before.

When they got to the Merlin twin-turbo prop, there was an awkward silence for they had not discussed exactly who would kick things off.

‘Do the honours, Sarge,’ Ernie said. And they all agreed it should, of course, be the Sarge.

Senior Sergeant Lloyd Martin took the sledgehammer that Darren held out, and taking a deep breath, he swung at the plane’s slick red stripes.

At the sound of the iron hitting the aluminium fuselage, the men unleashed their tools in a chorus that sent the kookaburras on the fence fleeing toward the hills.

TERR-or-Ri-ist! They sang.
And the sound of their tools tearing at the tin was immensely satisfying, like the swell of an orchestra rising from the pit to lift their voices even higher.

They sang until the plane sagged on the tarmac, one wheel mount buckled, and the men jimmied open the door and clambered over each other to get inside.

They sang as they tore the leather from the seats, smashed the instruments in the cockpit and cracked the windows. They ripped the lining from the ceiling and the tray tables from the chairs. Once Max whipped out his chainsaw, it did not take them long to hack gaping holes in the walls of the plane. They screamed as the little galley was reduced to a twisted pile of metal.

But they did not find anything there. No bombs. No encrypted maps. No pictures of Allah (although none of them admitted they weren’t quite sure what Allah looked like). They climbed out onto the tarmac and considered the crippled Merlin twin-turbo prop aeroplane.

‘Cunning bastard,’ Jerry muttered.

‘He knew we’d be onto him,’ Stelios said, and they shook their heads at the cunning and nerve of this man.

And that was when Juan José Diaz arrived. The pilot’s olive skin was particularly tanned after his fortnight in the Whitsundays. He’d read three books by the pool, gone snorkelling off the reef and even got to nurse a koala at the resort’s animal sanctuary. He was refreshed and ready to set off later that morning to collect the owners from the city where they’d been busy doing deals at the big Home and
Lifestyle industry expo. He liked working for them; Abdul Hussam did a great impersonation of Bill Cosby, and his business partners Ameer Abdullah and Faisial Husseini sometimes brought their children on the trips who spilled soft drink on the leather chairs.

The men did not see the pilot at first, but then Benny turned.

*TERR-or-Ri-ist!*

Juan José Diaz had no time to appreciate the beautiful tenor range of Benny’s cry, for the men descended in song upon the pilot with their axes and crowbars, their hammers and chainsaws, and they hacked off his head and Kev held it up high bellowing ‘Beelzebub has a devil put aside for me, for ME, for MEEEEEE!’ as Jason cried with pride, and they all bashed and butchered until there was not much left to do.

So they followed Senior Sergeant Lloyd Martin to their cars and they drove home along Lamington Drive, left into Stockyard Road, right into Thompson Street, down Railway Parade and back into Main Street, to where the pub had changed its big sign to show Roast Pork was on the menu that night.
The children clamber over Tom, clinging to his limbs and squeal as they press him down on the tinsel and torn Christmas paper. He growls at them, pretending to struggle against their weight. He worked out while he was inside, Neil thinks, for the muscles in Tom’s shoulders ripple as he pushes himself to his knees. And then, with a tremendous roar, his brother rises to his feet like Atlas, children swinging from his arms.

The big house surges with laughter, and the doors and windows have been flung open to release the heat. Their grandmother watches with cloudy eyes from the old tapestry chair, her papery skin fluttering as the pedestal fan swings back and forth. Clare runs an ice cube down her shins to where a dragonfly tattoo glistens on her ankle. Seamus and Andy jostle over the LPs, and the cousins scream desperate appeals on the cricket pitch that has been freshly mown between the clothesline and the mango tree.

In the kitchen, their mother hums brightly. She is drinking cheap champagne, and her cheeks are flushed. Tom sweeps her into the lounge where Eartha Kitt purrs Santa Baby and sofas have been pushed back to make room for the tree, and with his arm around her waist he Waltzes her in clumsy circles. Neil notices that Tom’s eyes are clearer now. Their mother’s eyes.

Tom’s face is a montage. As if all of the faces of their family were individual tubs of paint from which a brush had dabbed to create on him the fine, sharp streak of their grandmother’s brows, the deep hollow of Seamus’s throat, their mother’s black-rimmed eyes, their father’s widow’s peak, Andy’s wide lips, Molly’s crooked smile.
Neil is barely a year older than Tom, and while he shares some of these features, he is just a crudely sketched draft, as though the artist immediately realised they had made his nose too small, his chin too soft, the arc of his brow too shallow, and had hurriedly finished him off so they could start something new, something better.

But each of the family recognises something of themselves in Tom. His face bears the courage they suspect is anchored somewhere deep in their gut, the wild hunger that sometimes invades their dreams, and the weakness—such dangerous weakness—that they bury down deep, out of reach. And because of this, they love him more. And they forgive him everything.

On the afternoon he was sentenced, the family had descended on Tom’s small house in Brisbane with casseroles and wine for Clare and armfuls of presents for the kids. Brothers, sisters, cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents all appeared, uninvited, throughout the evening, as if drawn by a magnetic force. Mary put on Nina Simone and they dragged the chairs into the backyard. Andy lit a fire in the steel drum and they sat, mostly in silence, shackled by some unnamable, irrational guilt, watching the flames leap and spark into the winter sky.

They marked off calendars in their kitchens and brought him ginger cake and Molly’s oatmeal soap on visiting days. And for nearly two years, they gathered on birthdays, Easter and Christenings at his parents’ house and talked of him.

Only eight more months.

He’ll hold his own in there.

And he’ll be out before next Christmas.

It just won’t be the same this year, though.
Neil had gone to see him too. He took Clare and the boy most Saturday afternoons, chewing through tanks of fuel as his car seats grew sticky with little hands.

And of course Christmas wasn’t the same last year. The family house had felt bigger. Emptier. Neil did his best. He played Santa but felt self-conscious in the thin beard and cheap felt suit, and the children’s thanks were stained with disappointment as he handed out gifts with a joviality that was too loud and forced.

His mother decided not to do a ham as well as turkey. ‘Let’s not go overboard,’ she said.

‘I’ll carve,’ Neil offered.

‘Do it Tom’s way then, alright? Big chunks.’

But he didn’t. He sliced the bird finely, the pieces of meat folding over each other on the platter like a concertina. As he made room for it on the dining table, he could feel his mother’s lips sealed as tight as a prison cell door.

One of the uncles turned the music down after lunch, and Neil’s new wickets remained untouched. The cousins left early, taking with them mince pies and unopened cartons of beer. Molly had gone too, after cleaning up the wrapping paper and plastic plates of nibbled turkey in pools of congealed gravy. Seamus took grandmother home when the pavlova was served, saying, ‘The heat is just too much for her,’ and the rest of the clan somehow slipped away as the colour leached from the hot afternoon sky.

But his parents had insisted Clare and her son stay for the night. They didn’t like the idea of her being alone. Neil waited up with her until the child wilted and fell asleep on the floor, then he scooped him up and carried him to bed. From the doorway, he watched as Clare blew gently on the boy’s forehead and smoothed back his sweaty hair.
The candles on the table spluttered as Clare shifted down in her plastic chair. Drowsy with rum, she dragged her fingers through her hair and tilted her head back, eyes closed. The lights of the Christmas tree danced on her white throat. His mother bent to kiss Neil on the top of his head.

‘Make sure she’s okay,’ she whispered to him before disappearing down the hall into the darkness. A shard of resentment pierced his chest. Tom had said the same from prison in a letter that arrived a few days earlier. Look after her for me, he’d written. She’s the only one who can save me.

They didn’t need to ask. Neil had been looking out for Clare long before Tom was put away. Jesus, he’s the one who always saved them both.

When Tom was 11, he nearly drowned in a narrow creek that ran through a no-man’s land behind the school oval. It was a summer afternoon, and the rain thundered down in noisy sheets. Tom was waiting for Neil outside the classroom, jiggling impatiently. He dragged him across the soggy field, tearing off his uniform as he ran. He didn’t slow down when they reached the bank, and with a whoop, he dived, naked, into the creek where the water rushed and churned as it forced through long reeds and jagged boulders. Neil watched from the grass, his hand shielding his eyes from the hard rain, for his brother’s head to appear. When he knew that Tom wasn’t fooling around, he peeled off his own clothes and edged his way down to the water just as Tom’s lifeless body drifted to the surface. He dragged him up the bank and squeezed his nose, like he had been taught at school, then between hoarse, panicked shouts, he pushed his hot breath into Tom’s mouth. When the retching was over and Tom opened his eyes, Neil was struck by how much older he looked.
Tom stayed behind when Neil went away to university. But there were days when Tom would turn up, out of the blue, tapping his foot impatiently as a wave of students cut around him outside the lecture theatre. They’d snake the old Kingswood out of the city, teasing the dogs that yapped at their tyres in the far-flung suburbs, then Tom would press the pedal to the floor along the ragged dirt roads that carved shortcuts to the coast, jolting the wheel hard around the gravel potholes until they were swallowed inside billows of dust. They would drive until the colour of the earth changed and the sky opened up, and Neil watched Tom stick his head out the window and haul in deep breaths of air, as if he had been suffocating until then.

Tom would know of some bay where, at sunset, the light fanned out across the sea like a hand of cards, or a hill marked by one lone tree with branches so heavy and knotted that the trunk bent to the ground. They found peeling pubs, too big for the towns, and Tom sat on the stools telling jokes that made the old men roar while Neil traced wet patterns on the timber bar with the bottom of his glass.

They met Clare on one of those nights.

She worked behind a bar in Roweston, a country town where the curve of the streets hugged the showground. Her cheeks were speckled with faint acne scars, her painted nails chipped, and she regarded him coolly when he asked for a beer.

‘You’re not much more than a kid,’ she said.

‘Look who’s talking,’ Tom replied.

‘But I’m doing the pouring, idiot.’ She flicked her top lip with a cherry-red tongue, and Neil could see Tom was already as lost as he was.

They sat at the bar until Clare had stacked the last of the glasses, then they followed her out to the carpark where she pulled a bottle of rum from beneath her shirt. They had stayed out there, all sprawled on the hood, her back pressed against
the windscreen between them, singing until the stars shimmied in the cold air. When
the chill of dawn woke him, Neil was huddled like a baby in the garden bed. He
rubbed the frost from the Kingswood’s windows and peered in to see an ink dragonfly
hovering on Tom’s naked back.

He scraped through university on coffee and aspirin, and after graduation,
vowed to put his degree to use. But when he was with Tom and Clare, the
constellations unfolded at their feet in ways he’d never learnt in books.

Although, as he dragged Tom away from the rumblings of another fight or ran
the tips of his fingers over the gleaming bonnet of the car he knew was stolen, Neil
would be struck by their differences.

Tom lived in absolutes. He loved or he hated, and the passion that drove his extremes would exhaust him, often leaving him languishing for days under a grey blanket of desolation. When the doctor sliced off their mother’s breast, long after she’d first felt that hard little pea beneath her skin, Neil brought her flowers and rang her daily. But Tom disappeared for three weeks, and when he and Clare did turn up, his shirt was torn and he wept hot tears in his mother’s lap.

At times, Neil longed for just an ember of the fire that scorched Tom’s veins to catch on him, to set him alight, so he could feel what it was like to flare and blaze, to throw off such heat that people came closer to warm themselves against him.

They got married in a small church, clusters of artificial white lilies strung limply from the end of the pews like rabbits waiting to be skinned in a Chinatown window. Clare walked down the aisle with small, quick steps, her plain white dress slipping at her shoulder. Tom whistled long and low. ‘Amen to that,’ Andy called from the fourth pew.
‘I don’t know about being the best man,’ Tom said, as Neil looked at Clare with lead in his stomach, ‘but I reckon you’re the better one of us by a fucking mile.’

Their house was small and dull on the outside, but Clare had a good eye for the trash and treasure of the Saturday markets. She cluttered it with Persian lanterns, mismatched wine glasses, a set of red vinyl cinema chairs, an ancient rug embroidered with proverbs. She could play the mandolin, whistle through her teeth, and her dark green eyes would squint at the first scent of bullshit. Some nights, Neil would stop by after work, but when he saw Tom’s arms circling Clare in the backyard, or the flicker of candlelight from beneath their bedroom door, he’d walk back to his car, kicking hard at small stones on the way.

At home and with the family, she wore her pregnant belly like a medal, while Tom went out at night, toasting his future child with strangers. Over time, he would come home later, cursing and punching at shadows as Clare fumbled for the phone. When Neil arrived, Tom would be flailed across the bed like a fallen tree, and so he would sit with Clare and they would toss baby names back and forth until the darkness broke.

He suggested Elijah, Jonah, Ezekiel and Malachi. She laughed and said, ‘Tom knows more about life than a boxful of prophets ever did. This kid will do just fine without them.’

One night, she let him rest his palm on the blue veins that flowed like tributaries beneath her tight, swollen skin, and he felt a restless kicking from within. But then she yawned and slipped out smoothly from under his hand.

Sometimes Tom didn’t come home at all, so it was Neil who drove Clare to the hospital when her waters broke, too early, on the brown carpet. He squeezed her hand
when her body rippled and tore and blood pooled on the tiles. And later, as she slept, he handed the swaddled baby to Tom who could not look him in the eye.

‘What did she call him?’ Tom asked, his voice thick.

‘Nothing. She's been waiting for you.’

Tom tried for a while, but there was never any money, and soon the gutters sagged, the oven died, and accusations were thrown and tangled like knots of frayed rope. And when Tom was arrested, Neil watched with guilty pleasure as their mother cried.

But now it is late, and George Faith washes the house in a high-pitched, bittersweet lament. The Christmas tree blinks as their mother snores softly on the lounge, the top three buttons on her blouse undone and a film of sweat trembling on her upper lip. Seamus is in the backyard getting misty as Andy opens another bottle of red. The sprinkler cools the hot earth as the cousins lean against the mango trees, smoking rollies and fighting about the Ashes. Inside, the children are asleep, and the tables and chairs have been pushed back against the walls. Tom and Clare dance close, their hips joined. Her hands cradle the back of his head and her cheek is pressed against his jaw. From the corner, Neil cannot look away, and the whiskey burns in his throat. It is time to go home.
The week had been fiercely hot without even a breath of breeze, and humidity draped the house like a wet towel. Scott had even suggested they might have to cancel the dinner. But just after lunch a dry wind bullied its way under the blanket of cloud, whipping the leaves and curtains with a furious energy as though defying anyone to complain about its absence.

Donna set the table early knowing how much had to be done later in the day, and had shut the windows at three when the wind began to topple the glasses and nudge the new linen napkins from the centre of the plates. The metal chimes on the verandah screamed like a huddle of children being beaten, while the trapped air in the kitchen became unbearable. She peeled off her clothes at the bench, slicing capsicum and eggplant in her underpants as rivulets of sweat streamed from her armpits and between her thighs. That morning, Scott refused to let her do the hot roast suggesting a cool lamb salad instead, so she began cooking the meat in mid afternoon. She cried out as she opened the oven door, the wall of heat blowing her hair like a fiery backdraft.

Donna could hear him outside above the gusty wind and chimes, as he swept the leaves from the front path. He had already done it twice and she wondered why he bothered. They are just going to fall down again, she said when he came in earlier for a drink. But he was still out there, clearing the debris from the path. Back and forward, back and forward, refusing to surrender. He was relentless like that, she thought, never giving up when he considered something was worth finishing.

At six o’clock, they showered and Scott mixed them a gin and tonic. They sat on their narrow verandah watching leaves rain down on the path.
'Don’t talk shop all night’, she said. ‘There’s more to life than restaurants, you know.’

He pulled her ankles onto his lap. ‘Then we’ll talk politics and religion,’ he smiled as the wind ballooned her skirt.

‘God, no. I like these people.’

And it was true. They rarely entertained, Scott’s colleagues were either single or dull, and he said her friends were tedious. But she liked Julie and Sean. They had a kind of loose, careless confidence and weren’t bound up in knots of co-dependence that she observed in her other friends. She and Scott had never been that way.

He wasn’t much of a talker, and this was what drew her to him in the beginning. He had stood at the back of the art gallery just watching the crowd. She sensed him there as she twisted through the clusters with a tray of flutes. He was with friends—they kept returning to him throughout the night—but he was content on his own, as though the exhibition was his, or he was capturing the scene in his mind to write about later. And as the years went on she learnt he never said anything unless he meant it.

It was Scott who’d arranged the dinner that night. He had met Sean two months ago after reviewing his newly opened restaurant. Sean had been pleased with the feature—and the resulting increase in business—and invited them both in to dine with him and Julie shortly after.

They had been greeted at the restaurant door as if they were long-lost school friends. Sean had spent time in South America and she liked the way he expelled the names of dishes as though his full lips were firing bullets. *Tom-a-till-o, su-da-do, ar-e-pa.* And Julie was sparkly and luminescent. The four had only called it a night when they noticed the street sweeper rumbling along the deserted road.
‘They’re like us,’ Scott said during the taxi trip home.

Sean and Julie arrived on time, bottles of wine clinking in a chiller bag as they locked the car, laughing as the wind tried to push them off the path.

‘Sweep up the bloody leaves while you’re there!’ Scott called. Donna smiled widely as the men clapped each other on the back, and Julie skipped up the stairs to kiss her cheek.

She put some music on and they sat on the verandah with icy drinks. When the old light finally melted over the hills they moved inside to the table. The chimes banged together happily as the four talked over each other, animatedly braiding strands of one conversation with another so that it seemed the night would not be long enough to finish a single thread.

‘Sean should put you on in his kitchen,’ Julie said. ‘The meal’s superb.’

‘You couldn’t afford her,’ said Scott, and Donna squeezed his forearm across the table. ‘And I’d never let her loose around Sean, anyway.’

Julie tipped her head back and laughed prettily, exposing her long, milky neck.

‘No fear of that, I’m afraid,’ Julie said. ‘He’s married to that bloody place. Not much time for me in the bedroom lately, let alone giving Donna anything on the side.’

Donna glanced at Sean but saw no hint of irritation and was relieved. She and Scott never spoke that way; she’d be mortified if he ever joked about their sex life in public. Their ninth wedding anniversary was coming up, and he had never stopped treating her like he did when he first proposed on the banks of the Brisbane River. He would never change, she knew. She felt a rush of grateful love when he steered the conversation to the new tunnels that were scheduled to start construction underneath the city.
'Might be a bit noisy in the beginning,’ Sean said, ‘but I can’t see it affecting the business.’

‘I wouldn’t like to be living on top of one, though,’ she replied. ‘Think of all that nothingness underneath. I need to be on solid ground.’

Julie refilled her glass. ‘It won’t be nothingness. It’d be like living on an ants nest—just think of all those people underneath you as you slept.’

‘Like living in a cemetery, then,’ offered Scott.

Donna affected a shudder. ‘Oh god, can you imagine? I think I’d rather have a big hollow nothing,’ she said, getting up to clear the plates.

Julie scraped her chair back and rose unevenly to help. ‘Give me dead people any day. There’s nothing wrong with that.’

‘Jesus, don’t get her started,’ Sean said loudly, ‘Jules is right into that stuff. Thinks we can talk to the dead, like they all hang around playing solitaire in a big call centre and just give us a ring every so often when they get bored.’

Donna flinched. His words shattered the air like broken glass. She wondered how Julie could bear it. When she was small, her father took the training wheels off her bike and pushed her down the driveway. And then he just laughed as she lay on the gravel weeping, her blood spouting through ragged skin. It was no different to this. She knew Scott would never put her down.

She turned her back to them as she piled the plates on the kitchen bench. Julie lurched a little at her side as she tossed the dirty cutlery in the sink.

The power went out just as Donna was opening a new bottle of wine. It was likely the wind had brought down a tree on nearby lines, and the two men cheered as the house was plunged into darkness.
‘Look what you did, mate,’ called Scott. ‘Don’t take this piss out of the dead. First they cut the power and next thing you know you’ll be pinned to the ceiling.’

‘Scott! Get some lanterns,’ she shouted over their laughter, holding onto the bench as the blackness rippled all around her. Julie’s hand grappled at the folds of her skirt, and she felt like she was wading on the bottom of ocean.

Scott knocked something from the table as he worked his way from the chair to the kitchen. She could not even make out his outline, only hear the clumsy patting of his big hands along the walls as he found the cupboard.

‘Shit. I threw out the lanterns at Christmas.’

Julie started to giggle again, and Donna had an urge to swat her needy hand away. ‘Then candles, get some candles,’ she said, and in the dark her voice sounded as thin as water.

‘I don’t know where the bloody candles are. I didn’t even know we had candles.’

Sean was still in his chair. His barking laughter reached out from the table and nipped at the corners of the room.

‘Here, move,’ she hissed, and Julie gave a little yelp as Donna slapped her hand from her skirt and groped her way to where Scott was fumbling blindly. There was only one tealight candle left in the drawer. The match flared brilliantly in the dark and she put the little candle on a saucer at the centre of the table. Julie edged through the shadows to her chair and her eyes looked too bright in her head.

‘Can’t let the wine go warm,’ Scott said, his large frame forming behind her in the flickering light. He refilled the glasses and the coarse hairs on his forearm shone like blades of burning grass as he leant across the table.
Julie nuzzled the rim of her glass against her lips. ‘No, I don’t think of it as a call centre,’ she said. ‘It would be more like this. Like right here and now, in the shadows. That’s what I think.’

The jangling chimes outside sounded brassy without the music from the stereo, and Donna suddenly thought how stupid this woman was. ‘No. Dead is dead. You live and then you don’t. I’m afraid that’s all there is to it.’ She drank deeply from her wine. ‘Should I bother trying to serve dessert like this?’

‘Well, I don’t want to die,’ said Julie, and Sean snorted.

‘Not a lot you can do about that, honey.’

‘I know that. But I think there’s got to be more to it than being so alive and meaningful one minute and then just lights out the next. It doesn’t seem right.’

Donna looked across at Scott, wanting to see the disdain in his eyes that she knew he would be feeling. But he was sitting too far forward to see his expression. It didn’t matter. She always knew exactly what he was thinking. They had a connection. Impenetrable. Unbreakable.

‘When I go, I want it to be fast,’ said Sean. ‘You can hit me with a truck or shoot me in the back of the head. Just don’t tell me it’s going to happen.’

‘I’m with you on that,’ said Scott. ‘Couldn’t handle a long death. Not patient enough, I’m afraid.’

‘That’s true. You’d be tearing out the tubes before they could even inject the first lot of drugs.’ She ran her hand along the brushfire of his arm and locked her fingers through his.

‘What about you, Donna?’ Julie cocked her head across the table like a talk show host.

‘I don’t think about it, to be honest.’
‘Don’t be silly. Everybody does at some point.’

‘Then I guess I would want it to be quick. But not before I had a chance to say my goodbyes.’

‘I never picked you as the dramatic sort,’ Sean said.

‘I wouldn’t call that dramatic,’ she shot back. ‘Isn’t wanting to say goodbye to your family and friends a natural instinct?’

‘But why? Would it be for your sake or theirs?’

‘Both, of course. It would make it easier for everyone to move on.’

‘Except you,’ replied Sean. Unless you had a cubicle ready in the great call centre in the sky. Then you could just phone whenever you wanted.’

Scott laughed abruptly, and she jerked her fingers away from him, as if hot embers had blown onto her skin.

‘I hate the idea of being kept alive,’ said Julie, strands of her white hair sticking in flat patches to her temples like the scalp of a newborn. ‘What if I could hear and think and smell, but everyone thought I was as good as dead and then pulled the plug?’

Donna rolled her eyes. ‘I doubt it works like that.’ She pushed her chair back and opened the door of the fridge, pressed her shins against the cool shelves. There was no point fixing dessert. She couldn’t find anything in the blackness, and she was no longer hungry.

‘Would you do that to me, darling? Would you pull the plug?’ Julie whimpered, and in the low light Donna could see she had lurched onto Sean’s shoulder and was raking her nails through his hair.

‘No, Jules,’ he replied. ‘I’d keep the life support on. You’d only come straight back and haunt me. At least I could keep you quiet this way.’
‘That’s so romantic,’ she giggled and she rubbed her beakish nose along his jaw and pulled his flaccid lips to hers.

Donna blew hot air through her teeth and shut the fridge. ‘Of course, any couple would do the same,’ she said. ‘That’s not especially romantic. When you really love someone, you never let go. Ever.’

Julie nodded, her head bobbing up and down on her spindly neck like a dashboard toy, sending a frenetic motion of shadows up the wall.

Donna began to clear the glasses. The wind had fallen away as quickly as it arrived, and the house felt larger around her. She had no idea of the time.

‘I’d pull the plug.’

She froze. Her hand inches from the kitchen counter top. The stem of the glass cold on her fingertips.

‘No you wouldn’t, Scott.’ Julie’s voice was high and breathy like a child’s.

‘Yes, I would. I’d pull the plug.’

‘On Donna?’

‘Yes.’

Sean let out a rough bark and slapped the table. ‘Well, I know someone who’s not getting laid tonight.’

She placed the glass down carefully and slid it away from the edge of the kitchen bench. She could not see Scott’s hair, only the side of his face was aglow; it was as though part of his skull was missing.

‘Oh, you’re just saying that,’ trilled Julie. ‘In reality, you’d never be able to do it.’
‘Yes. I would.’ He looked at the table as he spoke. Did not turn to her. ‘What would be the point of dragging it on? She would not really be there. Not in any way that mattered.’

Behind them, half lost to them in the gloom, she felt the membranes and ligaments inside her seize and tighten, heard him speak as though she was not in the room. Watched him from above as he cut those dragging tethers, never once looking back.

‘Well,’ said Sean. ‘I think on that note—.’ He held Julie’s elbow as she grappled on the floor for her bag, then placed his hand against the small of her back, guiding her through the kitchen. Scott followed behind them with the candle. The couple paused at the bench, and Donna could only just turn her cheek for them to kiss as they jumbled promises of getting together again soon.

She stood there in the immense blackness as Scott walked them out through the litter of leaves to their car.

And then, as the latch fell in the gate, there was a hum and a flicker, and the house suddenly blazed with harsh, new light.

In the kitchen window, she could see her reflection, cut in half by the frame. She was translucent. Already disappearing. As good as gone.
DNA

My mother used to joke about our family’s tendency to murder each other when things got tough. *Don’t push my buttons, Evie. You know what we Cullens are capable of.*

For a while, back when I was younger, she’d gleefully celebrate the discovery of old family crimes and regale us with the grisly details over the dinner table. Her great grandfather had crushed his wife’s skull with an iron bar when he didn’t get potatoes with his meal, and my great aunt’s mother was locked away after the body of her youngest child was found stuffed inside a steamer trunk. There was a slow-witted uncle tangled in our forest of branches who had accidentally killed his sister after first gaining ‘felonious, unlawful, and carnal knowledge’. And I guess you could count the distant cousins from somewhere on my father’s side whose sibling rivalry was swiftly resolved by the PN-307 freight train when their brawl spilled onto the tracks of the Cleveland line.

Dad would prompt her for more juicy details as he carved into a bloody lamb leg, and we’d sometimes trade secret smiles at the sound of her yapping on and on. Her eyes would glitter as she read us a few lines from an ancient news clipping she’d unearthed at the State Library, and when she had finally wrung herself dry with the effort of sharing the scandal she’d fall, exhausted, back in her chair. ‘So, there you have it,’ she’d breathe, ‘quite the skeleton in the closet, wouldn’t you say?’

Those were the good times, back when she got off on thinking we were better than the bad apples in our orchard.

I yelled out to her from the lounge as I gathered my bag, but she didn’t answer. I could hear the printer spitting out another chart as I shut the door. A couple of years
ago, before Dad left, she’d bought a big commercial machine that could print
documents up to A2. ‘Fiddlesticks,’ she’d said to him when it was delivered. ‘A
holiday is over in a heartbeat. These family trees will carry down the generations
forever.’ She’d started talking fancy after my suspension. Apparently there was a lord
somewhere back on my mother’s side.

The holiday had been his idea, a week in Fiji for some ‘quality family time’.
The resort had no internet or phones, but I was looking forward it. Had even stolen a
new bikini—emerald green with dancing pineapples. But my mother was already
happy with the quality of time she was spending with family, despite most of them
being dead. She’d converted the spare room into an office and we rarely saw her
unless an unexpected email from a third cousin once removed propelled her into the
lounge to interrupt the ABC. Dad stopped muting the sound after a while but would
nod vacantly as volcanic ash closed Europe’s airports, rescuers searched for survivors
under the rubble in Haiti, and Obama welcomed gays into the military.

I didn’t call out again and slammed the door as I left. My exam was later in
the afternoon, but the bus tunnels were still a few months from opening and the city
was constipated by roadworks. I took a seat next to a woman in a suit and killer heels.
Her red handbag was the expensive, buttery leather kind and slouched open like a
gash. It was too easy to lift the purse while she looked at herself in the window’s
reflection.

I leafed through my notes as the bus stopped and started and stopped and
farted clouds of diesel, and I knew I’d nail the exam. Just as I’d known I’d get into
medicine despite the suspension. Apparently I had my grandfather’s gift for
storytelling, and it was too easy to tearfully convince the principal that my
indiscretion was the manifestation of unbearable peer pressure and I would accept any
punishment he deemed appropriate. I got three days and a supportive hug, and managed to slip the silver cardholder from his pocket as he patted my back.

Marko was waiting at the campus terminal, slouched on a bench, and did not see the bus pull up. He glanced at me from beneath shards of serrated hair as I approached.

‘Hey.’

‘Hey yourself,’ he replied with his thin lips.

I let him sling his long arm around my waist, and we walked toward the clusters of students in the central courtyard who buzzed over open textbooks like flies. They scheduled all the exams over three days and the campus seemed too small for so many agitated people. That’s why I liked Marko. I’m sure he probably cared about his engineering test, or whatever it was he had that day, but he didn’t let on. He wore a kind of weary nonchalance about everything, a sense of detachment from life that I couldn’t be sure was real. People wanted to know him; guys made clumsy attempts to bump fists as they passed in the cloisters, but Marko just arched a thin black eyebrow and they would bumble on, unsure if they had just been mocked.

I showed him the purse in the café and he smiled.

‘Nice. Not your typical choice. It’s actually useful.’

‘I was bored,’ I said.

‘Any money?’

‘I haven’t checked.’

He peeled open the wallet and took the notes. ‘Want them?’

I shook my head. I rarely kept anything I stole. There was no value in it anymore. It was only ever about the taking. I’d worked out a long time ago that you didn’t get anything because you deserved it.
He lobbed the purse into the bin as he left.

The genetics exam was easy. Just a game of spot the syndrome hiding in the writhing snarls of chromosomes. The pages were filled with karyotypes of DNA coils, like twisted tree roots, their strands urgently grabbing at each other to try and make some meaningful connection. The exam also tried to get tricky with a methylation test to see if we could identify which parent had contributed dodgy DNA. I didn’t need the test to know that my hair was a gift from my mother’s gene pool. In the hallway, there was a photo of her father when he was young, squinting into the sun as he jostled for space in an army of sisters. Although the photo had been recoloured, there was no mistaking the blaze as the sun struck that wild, untamed sea of red.

Marko just shrugged when I asked how his exam went and we drove back to his house. I liked fucking him. He had jagged edges and a long, knuckled spine like an artillery belt. I never took anything from his place, because that’s what he expected me to do. He was too obvious with his setups. A watch on the coffee table. His mother’s ring on the kitchen bench. I knew it bugged him to find everything still in its place when I’d gone. But it was only good when there was risk. I didn’t care about what I was stealing, and I didn’t need the money. I just got a rush when there was a chance of getting caught, and that had only happened once.

There was a man in our living room when I got home. My mother was wearing lipstick and giggling.

‘Evie, meet Brian. He’s from the writers’ centre and is going to help me with my book. Isn’t that just wonderful?’

I looked at this man who had foolishly encouraged her to think our DNA would be of any interest to strangers. He was older than my father with salty streaks
in his short beard. A loose band of gut rolled over his belt and he wore expensive hiking sandals.

‘Fascinating ancestry, Evie. You must be so proud of your mother for all this work.’ He swept a meaty arm around at the walls. The room looked like a genetics lab. Dozens of framed prints filled the spaces, each chronicling the twisting strands and rungs of relatives who had clung together and scattered new seeds that spilled over to frames along the hall. My mother’s own family branched out in the largest frame, hung above the fireplace where the wedding photo used to be. She’d had it done by a commercial printer and it cost more than three hundred dollars to frame. She’d asked Dad to help her hang it straight, and he took a long time to unhook their portrait from its nail.

Brian didn’t stay for dinner, and I scraped the knife hard against my plate as she twittered about her great uncle James playing trumpet for wounded soldiers and structure and plot and setting.

In bed, I thought about flying over to see my father. I wasn’t getting many shifts at the restaurant, enough to skim the till each weekend, so it wouldn’t be a big deal to head off for a week or two over the Christmas break. It was over two years since I’d seen him. He lived in Margaret River with some Iranian woman and had lost a lot of weight. He looked younger. Yalda had chunky ankles and spent most of the time in the kitchen mixing spices for evening meals that enveloped the table. She was curious about my studies and never said anything about my hair. I heard them through the walls at night, laughing. There was no television, and the house was peppered with an assault of Indigenous paintings, Persian hangings, oriental sculptures, water colours of elephant gods, and gaudy South American mosaics. On the night before I
left, I took a little bronze griffin with candleholders in its wings from the mantelpiece and threw it in the bin at the airport.

My mother had hardly noticed when I returned, just as she hadn’t seemed to notice the cupboard suddenly empty of Dad’s things a few years before. I’d told her about Yalda over breakfast.

‘Goodness me,’ she said. ‘Well, I hope they don’t get married. It would be a pretty pickle trying to trace that family tree.’

Brian was back the next afternoon. They sat at the kitchen table and he wiped the dribbled coffee from the rim of his mug with a hairy thumb as my mother rambled about the Battle of Salamanca and sheep thieves in Gippsland. I watched as she patted his arm and tripped over her words like a child.

Brian finished his coffee and stretched back in his chair.

‘Another one?’ I asked.

He had not seen me there, and his eyes flickered briefly at my chest as he turned.

‘Lovely, thanks Evie.’

I took my time, and then, as I placed the mug in front of him, I pressed my breast hard against his shoulder.

They sat there for hours, and when the sun burned through the slits of the blinds, I returned to the kitchen.

‘Any chance of getting a lift with you to work, Brian?’ I asked.

My mother blinked as I stood in front of them in my tight black skirt, as if a stray cat had just strolled into her house. ‘The bus is such a nightmare and I’m already running late.’
‘Of course you can.’ Brian fumbled with the papers on the table as he got out of his chair.

‘Leave them,’ she said. ‘We can just pick up where we left off next time.’

My mother trailed him to the door like static energy and pawed at his sleeve as he pecked her cheek. I waved at her as I folded my legs into the front seat.

The car was European, the kind that was expensive but not showy. The radio was tuned to a classical station. As we crawled past the twisting safety barricades and flashing construction lights, I asked him what he had written. He whined for a while about a great novel he’d nearly finished but a fellow writer had stolen the premise and then sold thousands of copies. His wife was a dentist and supported them both.

I snapped down the visor and examined myself in the mirror. I could feel him watching from the corner of his eye as I ran some gloss over my lips. The car was stationary, stuck in a trail of red lights that snaked past the construction zone and toward the city. I put my finger in my mouth and slowly sucked the gloss from the tip. He was so still. I knew he was already hard before I reached over.

‘Turn here,’ I said, and shut off the music. He jolted the car sharply and swung into the side street. We drove in silence, me pointing directions as I slowly rubbed, until we came to a service road behind an empty sports ground. There were no houses and I ordered him to pull over on a patchy strip of gravel under a broken street lamp. He wrestled his pants to his knees and slid his chair back. As I bent over him, he grabbed at my hair. ‘So red,’ he wheezed.

He had to pull up his stomach when I peeled off my shirt and bra and straddled him, and as he groaned I watched how long the whorls of my fingerprints lasted on the window’s glass before they faded into nothing.
I stayed on him when he was done, and I fished for my phone in my handbag. The hairs on his chest were knotted in sweat.

‘A pic for prosperity,’ I said as I turned on the camera. ‘Our own little piece of history, if you like.’

He nuzzled my breasts. ‘My first selfie,’ he said. ‘Wild red Evie, you make me feel like a boy again.’ And he took my nipple in his mouth as the flash lit up the car like a lone gunshot in the night.

I decided against going to Margaret River at Christmas. There was no point ever going back, I figured. After I had emailed the photo to my mother and Brian’s wife, I booked a holiday to Japan. It was too late for the cherry blossoms, but the temples looked interesting and I loved sushi. I booked a luxury hotel in Yamanashi with a big spa that looked out across the lake and up to the sharp peaks of Mount Fuji. That would do, and anyway, I was pretty sure we didn’t have any relatives in Japan to visit.
Ryan discovered that his father listened when he accidentally played *Here Comes the Night* twice.

‘No one likes Van Morrison that much,’ he said. ‘You’ll go nowhere unless you know your market,’ and he turned up the volume on the television. That night, Ryan played *Into the Mystic* in the first segment and *Bright Side of the Road* just after midnight, but his father didn’t say anything when he next called.

The station was on Coronation Drive, the top level of a squat, brick three-storey building that was erected sometime in the late seventies without any fanfare or acclaim. There was a small sign with the company’s logo on the roof that was now obstructed from view by the branches of a large Brushbox, stubbornly holding its ground against the towering apartment block next door. From the studio window, Ryan looked down onto Coronation Drive and across Brisbane River to where Sanctum, the giant new residential precinct was being constructed. When the late afternoon sun struck the scaffolding, the apartment blocks seemed to sneer at him across the water like a gang of privileged teens, mouths crammed with braces and opportunity. It would soon be mostly filled, he guessed, by AB couples with no children. Double income. 65 per cent professionals. Average age 38.

Aside from Renee who usually turned up around eight to vacuum and empty the bins, Ryan worked alone. The year before, he had declined the offer to switch to the morning drive shift, sparking rumours among staff he was an alcoholic and never got up before midday. Even if he did drink, he knew it wouldn’t necessarily impair him. His father still woke at five each day to get the paper from the lawn. But the night shift suited Ryan. He didn’t need a producer and could programme his own segments. Occasionally he had a guest in, some old rocker who breathed too close to
the mic, rasping tales of surfing atop their tour bus along the Newell Highway while
topless girls chased them in Kingswoods, bikini tops whipping from the windows like
ticker tape. But mostly Ryan liked the solitude, and management left him alone. His
ratings weren’t ever going to get him headhunted by a network, but they had been
solid enough to keep his job for the last two years.

‘Good numbers again, Ry’ they would say at the fortnightly meetings. And
that would be it, because everyone knew the late night shift didn’t count with the sales
department anyway. But he would take the ratings home and study the figures for
days: the subtle changes in audience demographics, the small rise or drop in listeners
according to the date and the correlating events of the day.

The studio windows flickered with the steady strobe of headlights rounding
the river’s bend into the city. It was only Tuesday, but when he looked down toward
the university, red brakelights bubbled out along Coronation Drive like a thin stream
of lava. There were no coffee pods left, so he boiled the kettle and slung a stale tea
bag over the rim of his mug. The sink was filthy. Renee had not been in tonight, and
rubbish had spilled out of the kitchen bin onto the floor. He considered washing up
but knew he would not have time before *Fix You* by Coldplay finished.

He was much tidier since Sarah left. Learned behaviour. She, on the other
hand, was genetically programmed for order and cleanliness. On their last Christmas
together, she wrapped the handle of a mop in tinsel and draped the yellow cloth head
over the top of the tree where it flopped forlornly like a dead starfish. But she didn’t
leave because of his mess, and he knew his conversion to cleanliness was pathetically
obvious.

‘There’s no such thing as spontaneous actions,’ his father used to say when
Ryan would beg him for money so he could go to the movies with friends. ‘Human
behaviour is ninety-three per cent predictable. I know you’re not going to see a film.’ Ryan would swear as he slammed the bedroom door, and his father would shout up the stairs, ‘I knew you were going to do that.’

He used a coaster for his mug and put his headphones on. There was a lot to get through tonight, and he’d had to cut one song from each segment to fit it all in.

‘There’s reports of a large pothole on the inbound lane of Musgrave Road approaching the corner of Greens Lane. A crew is onsite but no detours are in place and traffic is building quickly. Your best bet is taking the Hale Street overpass if you’re heading into the city or beyond.’ And then he played Riders on the Storm followed by Pretty Woman, because he knew his listeners would change stations if there were more than twenty seconds of talk at that time of night.

‘Despite what it seems, women are not mysterious beings,’ his father had said when Ryan’s date stood him up for his semi-formal. ‘Gender doesn’t really come into it. It’s all about patterns. Past actions reveal future intentions. I bet she’ll say she was too sick to come.’ That was back when they still played the game. Before Ryan moved out to study sociology and statistics, and a good ten years before the tunnel was built. He wondered if his father still kept the books.

They were only spiral-bound notepads, but they had filled at least eight during Ryan’s school years. He can’t remember when it began, when his father had first thrown him the baton over the table, daring him to foretell the future. He must have been young—maybe eight or nine—and he wasn’t allowed to leave the table until he made a forecast based on a story in the newspaper. At first, the challenges were simple. A family of five was killed when their new Toyota Corolla inexplicably ran up the back of a parked semi-trailer. Prediction: Toyota would recall Corollas within six weeks. Madonna has adopted a baby from Malawi. Prediction: Her record sales
will increase along with donations to African charities. His father kept a record of their forecasts in one notebook, a second one used to tally whose predictions were correct. If the newspaper did not publish a follow-up story, he would make some calls or tap at his computer while Ryan sat at the kitchen bench listening, pen poised to make another mark in his father’s column.

When he hit his teens, the challenges progressed to more difficult tasks like guessing where future residential development zones—the next master-planned community—would be declared, based on geographic and economic demographic trends his father provided on a single sheet of paper. When plans for the satellite city of Springfield Lakes were announced, a new bike was waiting for Ryan after school. ‘Herd behaviour,’ his father said proudly when Ryan forecast that worldwide computer sales would stall in the lead up to the new millennium.

By the time he was fourteen, Ryan understood the fundamentals of predictive analytics, and his mother had tired of trying to surprise them with evening meals. ‘I told you it would be chicken,’ he said to his father, and she would just laugh and swat at them with a tea towel. That was back when his father was still teaching demographic studies at university.

‘Traffic is down to a single lane on Ann Street in the Valley as night works continue on widening the road. You’ll be stuck for a while if you’re planning on heading out of the city, so I’d suggest you turn off and head up round St Paul’s Terrace.’

It was almost one am and he did not know who was really listening. His bosses weren’t, he knew that, and he’d been free to try and direct the traffic—guide the herd—between songs for almost two years. A.C. Nielsen data said his audience was mainly men aged 45-59, working in “Trades and Technical” for the most part.
Probably the road gangs. Irony had begun to sneak into his days more and more lately. Ryan still wasn’t sure where it belonged in any algorithm.

‘It’s going to change the face of the city,’ his father had said over the phone when he accepted the job with BluCity. ‘The roads simply can’t sustain us all. Exciting times, son.’ And they were. Sarah and his mother would drink wine in the lounge room, while he hunched over the latest data his father had collected on the tunnel’s expected traffic usage.

‘100,000 vehicles a day. 100,000, son! Just imagine what that will do for the congestion.’

BluCity was generous, investors having greedily snapped up all the shares when the traffic forecasts were announced. His parents went to Italy for three weeks. They rented a villa in Tuscany and emailed Ryan a photo of his mother drinking wine at an outdoor ristorante overlooking a vineyard, a monstrously large pig nuzzling at their scraps on the grass. The road most travelled! his father had written in the subject line. Ryan suggested to Sarah that they might fly over for a week as a surprise, but she said she wouldn’t be able to get away from work. Much later, he wanted to ask her if that had been true but didn’t know where she was.

The final hour of his shift was his favourite. There was still two hours till sunrise, but the inky blackness of the sky began to thin and Coronation Drive was relatively still. Only taxis, delivery trucks and the occasional shift worker would cruise smoothly below his window, and Ryan would imagine that a few kilometres away, sixty metres below the river, the tunnel was humming with diverted traffic. People were meant to
choose the most logical route—the *projected* route—and he wanted to believe it could still happen.

After adjusting the levels on U2’s *I Will Follow*, Ryan pushed back in his chair. He closed his eyes and imagined how he would heat the bottle, testing the milk on his forearm while the baby grizzled on his chest. He would hush it, listening for Sarah’s steady breathing in the bedroom, and watch reruns of *Seinfeld* on the couch as the baby fell asleep drunkenly in his arms.

‘Watch out if you’re heading northbound on the Pacific Motorway this evening. There’s reports of a stationary vehicle on Captain Cook Bridge. At this stage, it doesn’t look like any delays are expected, but keep your eyes on the road and be prepared to change lanes. Here’s some Creedence to keep that bad moon rising as you go on your way.’

He never planned to go into radio. On graduation, he swiftly climbed the ranks at one of the city’s largest market research firms and been given several big clients to oversee. When Sarah first complained of sore breasts, he had just been put to work on their biggest client, a major insurance agency, and was developing a predictive algorithm to guide the sequence of questions that call centre staff would ask when presented with a claim. He took her to the doctor, and later she watched as he tossed a pair of baby’s booties over the power line that blighted their apartment’s view of the city.

‘I hope it’s a girl,’ he said.

‘It doesn’t matter to me,’ she replied.

‘I knew you were going to say that.’
They joined the seething mass of people to walk the tunnel when it was officially opened. He caught a glimpse of his father, his back pressed against the yawning concrete mouth, just watching the bodies trickle past him and into the earth; his mother stared at the mayor who beamed for photographs just metres away.

‘This is ridiculous,’ Sarah said as they elbowed for space in the pack. ‘They’ll need another tunnel if this is any indication.’

Fraud, they said a year later when the traffic volumes continued to drop. Inflated numbers. Misleading data. The toll was lowered for a time, but it made no difference. They did not come.

She got it done the day before BluCity was liquidated. He found her in bed when he came home from work, a hot water bottle on her belly, empty wine bottle on the floor.

‘I wasn’t ready,’ she slurried.

He stood in the doorway and cried. ‘I had no idea.’ But she just turned over to face the window, and moved out by the end of the week.

His father stopped talking, too. There were phone calls, his mother said, lots of calls that lasted for months, but he sat on the couch and let them ring as he watched *Family Feud* or the shopping channel. His mother never answered them.

‘I wouldn’t know what to say,’ she told Ryan. ‘Why didn’t people use the tunnel?’ she asked him, and she would drum her short nails hard on the kitchen counter. ‘Your father had the data. It was all there on paper. You saw it.’
Ryan knew he was drinking even before the suicide. A man had invested his family’s savings into the tunnel and threw himself under a train at Roma Street station when the shares were deemed worthless.

‘You couldn’t have seen it coming,’ he told his father.

He quit his market research job when the class action was filed. His mother was afraid to leave the house, didn’t know what would happen if his father was alone. For a while, Ryan visited and tried to talk with him, but he discovered they were no good at discussing the past, and they could no longer foresee the future.

The radio gig came by chance. He ran into a friend from university at a petrol station one night. Ryan told him he was between jobs. The man worked in sales for the station and suggested he give them a call if he was after something to fill the gap. ‘I always thought you had a great voice,’ he said. ‘I’ll put in a word for you,’ and Ryan was lost for words at the unexpectedness of the offer.

He set up the next segment for forty minutes of classic rock and took his mug back to the kitchen where he washed the dishes and squashed the wrappers from the floor into the bin. When Steve arrived late, as Ryan knew he would, he signed out and drove home.

There was no advantage to him taking the tunnel. At that time of the morning he could get to his apartment in sixteen minutes if he went around the CBD and along Ipswich Road. But he always took the tunnel, even though it cost him nearly twenty-five dollars a week.

His toll tag beeped brightly as the overhead concrete cut into the acid-wash sky. He could still hear the last of his programmed songs playing before the static
started to scratch at the guitar solo in *Sultans of Swing*. He left it on, preferring the sporadic white noise to the alternative. There were no cars ahead of him and the chain of overhead lights cast a yellow glow on the bonnet, illuminating him like an incubated chick. In his rear view mirror, a distant motorbike weaved recklessly across the lanes. He was not afraid of an emergency—the odds were too low—but as he glided through the concave walls he couldn’t help glancing up at the signs, at the glowing men all running to somewhere he didn’t know.

Dire Straits crackled as the motorbike hummed passed him. Sound was different down here, like the moments when sleep released its hold and the world reformed, just before he would wake and remember that he knew nothing.

His exit. Thin shafts of dawn reached in and hauled him from the ground, and he felt his lungs inflate as he was shot out into the fresh air, out onto the major arterial road where he was absorbed quickly in the throng.
This year the street party is on Jeanie’s lawn where the grass fries and curls in the January sun. The men sit on eskies tossing gnawed lamb chops to the dogs, and the women drop ice cubes in their wine. Children pedal up and down the footpaths with Australian flags flapping listlessly in their handlebars.

His mother has gone across the road to get more food. She started stocking up for the party weeks ago, although their pantry has always been full. Ever since Aldi opened a store nearby, their cupboards have strained against rolls of toilet paper, tubs of laundry detergent, hulking sacks of flour, jars of gherkins and onions, and rows and rows of tinned fruit. At first, Marko imagined this hoarding was triggered by her impoverished childhood, survivalist instincts kicking in like a squirrel bracing for a long winter. But while they had left the Ukraine when he was ten, wispy plumes of memory would sometimes waft across his thoughts—lime curtains in his friend’s kitchen, the silver scar on his grandfather’s chin, scratching his initials in his school chair—and he would remember just enough to realise his mother was born well after the Holodomor.

He sits on Jeanie’s bottom stairs and shakes his head when she offers him another lamington.

The lecturer points at a diagram of an old building on the screen at the front of the theatre and talks about structural discontinuities and hidden distress.

‘You can’t always trust the plans,’ he says. ‘It’s likely that a heritage building has undergone significant alterations throughout its lifetime. Exploratory fieldwork is the only way to understand a place’s history.’
A few seats over, a student has his laptop open and Marko can see him scroll down his Facebook feed. He has a broad, sun-tanned face and the bleached hairs on his legs look like a wheat field before a harvest. On his forearm is a fresh tattoo of the Southern Cross, and the skin around the inky stars is white and flaking.

Even after nine Brisbane summers, Marko’s skin still winces and flushes in the sun. He has never worn sunscreen. His mother sent him out into the street two days after they arrived to join a knot of kids who belted a taped-up tennis ball along the cul-de-sac’s blistering bitumen. They had pointed him to a stormwater grille near the gutter and then screamed at him when he watched the ball sail over his head and let it bounce away into the hedges. Between unpacking boxes and cleaning windows his mother kept pushing him back out into the street, and the sun seared his scalp until he learnt to lob the ball at the big green bin whenever it came near.

He had not played sport back home, although he liked to listen to the football through the walls late at night when his father came home from the coal mine beneath the city. He’d stuck a poster of Andriy Shevchenko above his bed and had decided to try out for the school team the following year, but then the accident happened, and three months later he was bouncing across the clouds with a plastic tray of chicken nuggets and shielding his eyes from the impossible blue that burned through the cabin.

He picked up the new language quickly, but felt he was always missing something as the short, plain syllables slouched against each other to make short, plain sentences that were rarely fully formed.

‘Ya reckon?’

‘Gunna smash ya.’

‘Howzat!’
He shed his own language just as swiftly, and his mother insisted he teach her what he had learnt as she flattened thick chunks of steak in the pan, serving them up when they were as dry as the thorny rose bushes that defended their house. At night, red-eyed beasts thundered across their tin roof and unleashed a squadron of shrieking bats as they leapt into the mango tree. The timber walls shifted and creaked, and when he woke in the morning, another long crack would have appeared between the vertical boards.

‘Full of history, your house,’ Jeanie said. She had immediately taken his mother under her wing when they arrived. But she never elaborated on this declaration, just looked approvingly at the sagging verandah, and Marko wondered how much could really have happened there in just sixty years. In return for the Sunday pavlovas and midweek outings to the pokies, his mother taught Jeanie how to treat indigestion with caraway seeds and she stuck a needle into her doorframe to ward off evil.

His introduction to school had been unremarkable; he was deemed a wog for his black hair and dark eyes, and, along with the lebos and chinks, quickly discovered it was better to hold the bat in two hands when sprinting between the wickets. The white-haired boys with teeth as long as fence palings invited him to their homes on weekends where he learnt he could dive bomb and burn ants and that he liked pineapple on his hamburgers. He leapfrogged the normal trial period, his name giving him automatic membership to a tribe filled with Johnnos and Davos and Thommos, and he wondered at the reasoning that permitted some words to be stretched when others were slashed.

When he was fourteen, the teacher had asked him to talk to the class about the Ukraine. Three days later, the air conditioner hummed as he stood at the front of the
room with a sheet of paper and read notes on the Golden Horde, the Cossacks, Chernobyl and the Russian Revolution that he had found on the internet. When he returned to his desk he could feel his teacher’s disappointment settle over him like nuclear ash.

Australian history was worse. Marko felt himself drifting as his classmates fought for roles in the reenactment of Cook’s landing, carefully traced the steps of Burke and Wills on big sheets of cardboard, and, in later years, debated Whitlam’s dismissal with a hot-headed bias that had been passed down through generations. At these times Marko would tune out. He marched with his friends on Anzac Day and stared curiously at the old men who cried in their wheelchairs. On a school trip to the Blue Mountains, he leaned against the cave wall as a guide droned about Aborigines burning leaves in a ceremony of respect for the spirits, and he chipped at the cold rock with his thumbnail, then flicked the grains to the ground.

He hears her car pull back into the drive. She bustles in, her thick calves swollen above her socks like squeezed balloons.

‘I forget my purse,’ she says, and he watches as she takes off her earrings to counter the bad luck she will receive for returning so soon. ‘I leave you dinner in the fridge. I work late tonight.’

She has taken more shifts at the nursing home and spends her days at Jeanie’s or at the RSL. It has been a while since they’ve eaten together, maybe not since they balanced their plates on their knees in front of the news and watched as Crimea was annexed and Donetsk burned. She does not know he has dropped a class, or that he sometimes fucks a girl who steals things for pleasure.
In the early afternoon, he listens to music on his headphones as the bus nudges its way through the traffic to the university. There is a ten-minute delay in the city while a crane hauls a steel beam up a small church that is encased in metal scaffolds. Across the intersection the bells of the town hall chime, and he remembers going up the clock tower when he was younger.

‘This is the oldest lift in Brisbane,’ the operator had said reverently, as she strained to close the iron gate. ‘And the tower’s spire is actually topped with an iron plumber’s ball and a metal bed knob because they ran out of money when they were building.’ Marko recalls how empty he felt as the lift groaned its way up to the bell platform.

The lecture has already started when Marko arrives. He slinks in the door and takes a seat on the end of a row, next to Brett, a round-shouldered, quiet student from his tutorials. He has not done the readings for the week, and pulls out his notes on geosynthetics and reinforced soil structures. He does not know why he is there. He does not want to be an engineer, only enrolling because his mother said it was what his father wished he had done. But he can hardly remember his father now; he is only a shadowy figure who could click his jaw and argued that Anatoliy Tymoshchuk would one day be Ukraine’s most famous footballer.

He tries to concentrate but the lecturer is talking about geomembranes and control fluid migration, and he closes his notes and stretches back in his chair. Brett is scribbling on a blank page, gouging his pen around the pad in a dark whorl. Small shaded rectangles hug the perimeter of the circle like an arc of old bricks, its rippled floor peppered with tiny stars. Marko tilts his head to read the jagged graffiti at the top of the page. *Dsanktuary – Smitten Come Smote.*

‘Not bad,’ he murmurs.
‘The real thing is better.’

Marko arches an eyebrow.

‘Want to see it?’

He does not sleep, but stays in his room when he hears his mother return from work just after midnight. She is quiet in the bathroom, and he knows she does not look in the mirror as she brushes her teeth. ‘Forever bad luck if you look after dark,’ she has told him many times. He listens to her guttural snores for an hour, and just after one, he pulls on his socks and locks the front door gently behind him.

He hails a taxi on the main road. The driver is Indian and has a picture of the goddess Lakshmi taped to the dash. The streets are all but empty as they wind their way silently through the suburbs. A street sweeper blasts litter into the gutters and a lone bus trundles along in the left lane, the driver draped over the wheel like a potter. The houses are dark, except for the odd glow of a television, and Marko wonders what it is that keeps them awake.

The taxi pulls up outside a line of old warehouses on the river. The original facades have been ripped out and replaced by sparkling walls of glass. Mounted overhead, a series of alarms strobe blue flashes on the bonnets of Ferraris and Bentleys, the stainless steel armrests of designer lounges, on polished concrete floors. Security cameras scope the footpath like hooded effigies.

At the end of the buildings, Marko follows a tall wire fence down to the river where Brett is waiting on the rocky crest. A backpack distorts his silhouette, which glows faintly against the city lights rippling weakly across the water.

‘Did you keep your head down?’ he asks. Marko shrugs.
The tide is low and the breeze ushers a rancid stench up the bank as they edge their way over the greasy boulders. A shadow twitches in the blackness and scurries into a gap in the rocks. Marko’s boots suck at the mud as he follows Brett along the river’s edge to where a large stormwater outflow yawns open in a squat retaining wall.

‘Don’t turn your torch on until we’re inside,’ Brett murmurs.

Marko does not need to duck his head as they step into the drain. When the flick on their beams, he sees a black slick of water staining the tunnel floor like a lane marker in a pool. A trail of plastic bags and rotting flotsam clings to the curves of the concrete walls. Not far along the passage, the city’s lights waver and shrink back. It is dank and suddenly cold.

The tunnel turns then flattens a little, and in the glow of the torches, it becomes an esophagus, decades of watermarks lining the bowed roof in steady increments. Brett does not talk, and Marko is grateful. He lets the silence engulf him as they trudge deep into the grey throat. After a while the tunnel becomes even shallower, pressing them down to their haunches until they inch along the floor like crabs. He is aware of the dread that has not come.

His thighs and back are burning when Brett finally stops.

‘Over here,’ he whispers, but the word whips off the drain’s walls like a whistling squall. Marko clambers up to join him at the tunnel’s sharp bend. Their lights blaze into a narrow cavern that soars to a perfectly arched roof, all lined in rich red bricks that glitter as their beams dance off the shallow pool of water below. Marko jumps down in the inky water and runs his hand over clusters of moss curled on the walls. Fine green grains coat his fingertips, glinting in the beam of his lamp.

‘Welcome to Dsanktuary. Kill your light,’ Brett says.
The cathedral is plunged into an impossible darkness, and swirling clouds of stars lap at their ankles.

‘Bioluminescence,’ Marko murmurs.

He kicks at the water and it swirls into a brilliant night sky. Sucking in the cold air, Marko feels the walls expand around him. The bricks pull and whisper at his skin. He presses himself against the wall, dissolves into the stone, loses all sense of time. It is Pangaea, he thinks. Deep in the crust of the earth before the world was splintered apart. Before politics, religion, language. He closes his eyes and exhales, imagining centuries of muddied history rushing out of him in tangled, hot plumes of smoke that hover then evaporate on the water’s icy surface. It is where it ends, he thinks, and where it begins.

Brett’s torch snaps him back into the cavern, the light blazing off the bricks and transforming the starry ground back into a solid pool. He rustles in his backpack and pulls out a metal whisk with a thick leather strap, the whisk’s spokes threaded tightly with grey steel wool.

‘Keep back,’ Brett says. He turns off his torch and flicks a lighter at the whisk. The steel wool erupts in a spitting, fiery ball.

He begins to spin the whisk in giant circles, and blinding ribbons of light envelop them. The wool hisses as he twirls in smaller, tighter loops, and the ribbons around the cavern are like brilliant jet streams. After a minute, the wool splutters and dies, but in the dark, the streaks still blaze against the back of Marko’s eyes.

‘It’s called a wool spin. Drainers should always pay respect to the past,’ Brett says. ‘I brought one for you.’

Marko takes the whisk and runs his thumb over the rough steel threads. Then he sparks the lighter and the wool flares and rages above his fist. He holds it out and
begins to swoop the whisk in giant arcs, slashing the darkness with golden fire. The leather strap grows hot in his palm but he grips it tighter, and begins to lob streams of light like he is tossing a boomerang. Sparks strafe off the whisk as he throws. The ribbons get shorter as the wool starts to fizzle, and Marko swings the whisk around his head. A shower of red embers rains down and scorches his arms. He drops the whisk and slaps at his skin.

Brett laughs and signals at him to plunge the searing metal into the water. The whisk sighs like a dying man as it hits the surface.

‘We need to get going. It’s been too long.’

The silence in the chamber has been replaced by a distant hum, and Marko climbs after Brett back into the shallow tunnel. He can feel the blisters forming on his palms as they clamber along the concrete floor, can feel the air thickening within the smooth, grey walls. Brett is racing now, and Marko shreds the skin from his knee as he tries to keep up. The throat seems longer, and the hum has swollen to a menacing rumble. The thin lane of stagnant water now laps around his wrists and ankles. Eventually, the tunnel widens and Marko stoops, trying to lift his feet over the swirling water as he lopes after Brett’s beam.

They round a bend and the water is at the hem of Marko’s shorts, rolling waves of thunder bellowing in the distance. His legs ache as the tide rushes in. The water pushes at his stomach, daring him to lift his feet and be washed back into the darkness.

‘Hurry up,’ screams Brett. Marko’s lungs burn as bottles and paper slam into his legs below. The water is closing fast. Their torch beams are small orbs on the roof. Marko raises his face and sucks at the air. An empty beer can shoots past his chin.
And then the tunnel turns and they are there. The concrete mouth gapes open to the river, swallowing the flotsam in hungry gulps. Brett reaches around and pulls himself up the side of the drain’s lip. He follows, dragging himself out of the tunnel, and grasping at the jagged rocks that line the wall. He hauls himself along and up the boulders, up onto the grass where Brett lies splayed and heaving.

Early morning traffic drones on streets somewhere behind them. Across the river, the city glitters in the dawn light.

Marko’s arm smarts, and he uses his shirt to wipe the muddy streaks from his skin. His forearm is peppered with several dark, weeping holes, and he holds it up to the rising sun. The burns are deep and scattered from his elbow to his wrist. They look just like a constellation.

<END>
Section Six: *Wool Spin Burn*: Considering the reading act as a composite novel author

Written in tandem with the research undertaken on the composite novel, my creative artefact *Wool Spin Burn* is a collection of eleven stories connected using a variety of strategies that aims to achieve an effect of marginal unity through an “aggregate or composite portrait rather than a more complex sequence” (Luscher 1989:163). This aesthetic effect, which places the composite novel toward the lower end of the genre’s text unity continuum, reifies the work’s underpinning themes of dissolution and anxiety in contemporary society. Unlike *The Turning* (2004), which concentrates its lens on the unfolding life experiences of Vic Lang and his family, *Wool Spin Burn* incorporates the intersecting narratives of a diverse range of characters, each destabilised to some degree by the limits to understanding another’s interiority. With the majority of its stories set in Brisbane, *Wool Spin Burn* also extends its narrative branches to the fictional Queensland town of Roweston, Margaret River in Western Australia, and an offshore Australian immigration detention centre.

*Wool Spin Burn* was written with conscious consideration of the Iserian school of reader-response theory. Acknowledging that the author and reader hold equal status in the construction of literary meaning—that the reader actively interprets and responds to an author’s textual cues—I wrote the stories of my composite novel to include a range of unifying strategies that would prompt the reader to make meaningful connections and recognise a loosely binding pattern to the greater work. I was also mindful of excluding any explicit authorial articulation of obvious connections and correlatives, focusing on the placement of unifying devices or “schematized aspects” (Ingarden 1973:264) that the reader would interpret using a “kaleidoscope of perspectives, pre-intentions and recollections” (Iser 1972:283) throughout the reading act. While my intention for *Wool Spin Burn* is to convey pervasive themes of insecurity as a consequence of personal and societal change, this reflection cannot speak to individual reader interpretation. Instead, it seeks to respond to the epistemological question of “how is meaning produced?” from the perspective of a composite novel author, complementing my corresponding research undertaken on the reader’s role in this endeavour and ultimately functioning to expand academic discourse on the genre.
Prior to the commencement of the writing process of *Wool Spin Burn*, I envisaged that I would design an overarching pattern of connective tissues that would strictly direct the construction of each story and afford a relatively concise plan for the creative process. However, upon drafting various potential ‘webs’ of unifying devices, I realised the early story concepts that would frame these correlates lacked a sense of integrity, being conceived with clinically academic motivations rather than creative impetus. Canadian short story writer Alice Munro acknowledged this problem of writing a composite novel when discussing her 1994 work, *Open Secrets*:

> I don’t want to second-guess things too much, but I’ve often wanted to do another series of stories. In my new book, *Open Secrets*, there are characters who reappear. Bea Doud in ‘Vandals’ is mentioned as the little girl in ‘Carried Away,’ which is the first story I wrote for the collection. Billy Doud is the son of the librarian. They’re all mentioned in ‘Spaceships Have Landed.’ But I mustn’t let this sort of plan overtake the stories themselves. If I start shaping one story so it will fit with another, I am probably doing something wrong, using force on it that I oughtn’t. (McCulloch 1994:246)

This realisation that I was intending to force my stories to explicitly fit with each other because of my concern with the reader’s aesthetic response adhered to Barry K. Beyer’s arguments on the tension between critical and creative thinking: “Creative thinking is divergent, critical thinking is convergent; whereas creative thinking tries to create something new, critical thinking seeks to assess worth or validity in something that exists” (1987:35). My acknowledgement of this chasm led to a reassessment of my original intentions. Rather than striving to conceive of a series of stories that were explicitly connected in a single web of common unifying devices, I elected to be guided more by creative instincts instead of research findings, deliberately positioning certain correlates and letting the subsequent series of patterns emerge organically. Upon completion of the composite novel, I then revised the work using a critical lens to assess these patterns and adjust the use of correlates where required.

‘The Art of Preservation’ was the first story written for the *Wool Spin Burn* and expressly designed to engage the reader using a centripetal force of energy in its intimate examination of a couple’s relationship. Set entirely in a suburban house in the fictional country town of Roweston, the narrative opens in the dramatic present with the protagonist, Matthew, looking through the gaps in the neighbour’s fence. While its significance is not intended to be immediately explicit to the reader, this simple act was included to function as a metaphorical viewfinder as the reader is invited to look into the gaps that characterise *Wool Spin Burn* and embark on a
challenge to make meaning in the voids. Using close third person narration, ‘The Art of Preservation’ charts the deterioration of a relationship between Matthew and Anna, with the neighbour’s son Sam acting as the catalyst for their demise. As it is the opening story in Wool Spin Burn, the unifying devices and metafictional cues indicating that ‘The Art of Preservation’ is part of a larger whole would bear no immediate significance to the reader beyond their interpretation within the confines of the story’s single framework. It is only as the reader progresses through the sequence of stories that a process of retrospection and synthesis could imbue these correlates with greater meaning. These connective elements include the reference to Matthew’s previous occupation as a publisher and its metafictional allusion: “Anna had not written anything since he published her first book, a curious little children’s tale about a girl who lived in a maze” (89); the event of Sam’s death; portentous references to the desire for rain; and explicit allusions to Matthew’s psychological instability and metaphysical disintegration: “He could stay like this, he thinks, just gradually break down and dissolve into the soil” (97). In addition, the story introduces the concept of the pressures created by the limitation of personal knowledge: “We can’t always see it coming” (96); “He knows there must be something he needs to do” (97). The story’s force of anti-closure is effected by Matthew’s paralysis at Anna’s sudden departure. The creation of this gap is intended to provoke in the reader a consideration of the story’s “temporal, causal, and overt thematic links” (Wright 1989:119) in order to extract greater meaning.

‘Field of Vision’ emulates the structure of ‘The Art of Preservation’ with its extensive use of external analepsis to unfold the relationship between an unnamed second person narrator and his partner who progressively loses his sight. The shortest unit in Wool Spin Burn, ‘Field of Vision’ is set in Brisbane and acts as a fringe story with no apparent connection of character, setting or plot to the preceding or following narratives, although it would not be expected that readers would experience a disruption to the temporal flow of the reading act at this early stage in the composite novel. Instead, ‘Field of Vision’ works to consolidate thematic suggestions of ‘The Art of Preservation’ using the burial of the cat to correlate with the earlier images of Matthew dissolving in the soil, and the repetition of the phrasing, “you hope the rain comes soon” (98), to inject weight to the notion of the protagonist narrator’s increasing mental pressure. Reinforcing the concept of the limitation of personal knowledge, the narrator concludes ‘Field of Vision’ with the observation, “You tell
him that you cannot see that far ahead” (103), an indeterminacy designed to activate the reader’s wandering viewpoint to retrospectively correlate with Matthew’s similar sentiment, “We can’t always see it coming” (96). The characters’ relationship is gradually revealed in a series of vignettes that are scattered among extracts from the rules that govern the official game of blind cricket. This intertextuality is intended to implicitly represent the myriad societal regulations that contrast with the unpredictability and intractability of human behaviour. In addition, the story’s structural framework paves the way for the third story, ‘The Interpreter’, which continues the fragmented narrative structure and use of intertextuality.

As with *The Turning*, *Wool Spin Burn* does not provide strong correlations between its first three stories, paralleling the reading experience of these early narratives with that of a conventional short story collection. There is no recurrence of earlier stories’ characters in ‘The Interpreter’, and its setting shifts from the previous stories’ suburban backdrops to an unnamed offshore immigration centre. Readers with *a priori* knowledge of these Australian centres should recognise the story’s setting as Manus Island, with “all these SAMS…these single adult men” (106), and the presence of a moored ship for staff accommodation. However, I elected to refrain from identifying the centre to avoid reductive interpretations informed by personal political subjectivities, aiming instead to establish more universal themes that address the capricious nature of language and the often-untranslatable dimensions of another person’s experience. Using present tense, ‘The Interpreter’ explores these themes through the third person narration of Yalda, an Iranian-born government translator, with sporadic analepses offering glimpses into her past with the relationship with her partner, Peter, in Western Australia, juxtaposed with the professional relationship she shares in the dramatic present with her colleague, Sanjaya. Emerging themes of personal limitation and powerlessness relating to another’s experience are manifested in the indeterminacy created by Sanjaya’s suicide: “She rummages through all her languages, all her vowels and consonants, but in the end, Yalda, too, is unable to find the right words” (112). Again, the narrative in ‘The Interpreter’ is disjunctive; exemplars of false friends—“words that look or sound similar but have different meanings across languages” (104)—are inserted between scenes to correspond with the story’s unfolding events, contributing to the fragmented aesthetic of the story and the emerging structural pattern of the greater work. I continually shift the focus of the narrative lens between past and present in these first three stories, creating
indeterminacies for the reader through narrative gaps within the non-linear chronology. This activation of the reader’s wandering viewpoint is also intended to assist in the establishment of a reading behaviour that will enable them to more subconsciously participate in an interplay of protension, retension and synthesisation as new correlates appear in later stories.

Recurrent correlates are employed in more explicit form in the fourth story, ‘Bedrock’, which is set in suburban Brisbane and tracks the psychological breakdown of a restaurateur who is brought undone by financial and familial strains. The rain, which was threatening the horizon in ‘Field of Vision’, is unleashed in the opening passage, as “heavy sheets of water began to cascade over the restaurant's awning” (113), and the scene is set for the narrative to explore what happens to the protagonist, Sean, when the burden of contemporary pressures becomes unbearable. Recurring metafictional terms from ‘The Art of Preservation’ are placed in ‘Bedrock’ as a cue to the reader that the story is another piece of a puzzle that demands their active participation to assemble as the stories progress: “He’d gotten lost in a labyrinth of alleyways” (113), and “he would have to install a maze of steel retaining posts that would pierce deep into the crust of the earth” (118). ‘Bedrock’ works to extend the emerging themes of deep-seated instability with the introduction of the city’s tunnels as Sean’s psychological trigger. His anxiety over his dissatisfactory marriage and reluctance to have children is exacerbated by the financial impact that the construction of the tunnels has effected on his business. Issues of increasing urban density, economic downturn and societal pressure underpin Sean’s increasing sense of detachment from his wife, Julie, who is oblivious to his discontent and solicits psychic predictions of their future: “He closed his eyes as she told of all that lay ahead for them, of...a grand home with a rolling lawn. And two blue-eyed children as blond as milk” (115). Reference to the clairvoyant sessions is a cue for the reader to synthesise Julie’s quest for assurances of security with the previous stories’ allusions to the unpredictability of fate. When Sean begins to lose his grip on reality and imagines his restaurant is set to collapse into a sinkhole, creating indeterminancies for the reader who must distinguish between the literal and figurative: “He looked around and saw how the shelves bowed under the strain of the bottles and cans, the gap that had opened in one corner between the ceiling and plaster wall. It was all barely holding together” (118). The tunnels are endowed with metaphorical significance,
representing the anxiety and instability that can inflict individuals in contemporary society, and continue in this capacity with recurrent employment in later stories.

The reader is assigned a relatively passive role in the first four stories, as the emergent network of connections is not immediately apparent. However, ‘In Pieces’ presents an abrupt departure from the conventional style of the previous stories using a disjunctive and experimental approach that emphasises emerging central thematic concerns of fragmentation, insecurity and dissolution through a deliberate destabilising of the narrative base. It is also a signifier that the network of stories in a composite novel is not always bound by similarities in narrative style and structure. ‘In Pieces’ is highly metafictional in an attempt to jolt the reader into an awareness of the reading act and their aesthetic “concretization” (Iser 1978:21) of a text. This metafictionality is first apparent in the story’s title; its allusion to the fragmentary nature of the narrative also extends to the notion that Wool Spin Burn is constructed as a whole made up of independent units. The opening line of ‘In Pieces’ reaches out and pulls the reader into the scene—and the greater story—as an active participant in the chronicling of Jimmy’s conflicts: “Look over there. Beyond the newsstand” (122). This strategy is continued throughout the narrative, never permitting the reader to return to a passive position from which to observe the action: “He sits at his computer and types. Jimmy is a writer. Note the setting here” (122). While the form of ‘In Pieces’ initially seems to resist the patterning of Wool Spin Burn’s previous narratives, the opening description of Jimmy flicking through an adult magazine in the opening scene functions as a recurrent motif that urges a synthesis with Sean’s experience in the IVF waiting room in ‘Bedrock’: “he would sit in a small room in the city…a plastic cup perched expectantly between the magazine’s pages” (116). As the reader adjusts to the unsettling sense of narratorial displacement in ‘In Pieces’, additional recurrent devices act to trigger the pattern-making faculties and reconcile the unconventional story’s inclusion in the composite novel. Indeterminacy of setting, with only a reference to a past venture to Moreton Island as an early guide for Australian readers, is intended to be resolved with the connective tissue from ‘Bedrock’ confirming the primary setting as Brisbane: “There will be when the tunnels are finished” (124). The reader’s retension of Matthew as a character in ‘The Art of Preservation’ is to be recalled and synthesised with his reappearance on the other end of a phone line in ‘In Pieces’. This synthesis of Matthew’s recurrence is also intended to instigate a reconsideration of temporal organisation of the overall
work. The remembrance that Matthew no longer worked as a publisher in ‘The Art of Preservation’ is intended to force the reader to renegotiate the stories’ sequence and consider temporality as another factor in their pattern-making schema. Matthew’s reappearance aids the reader in filling the gap in ‘The Art of Preservation’ created by the minimal details provided about his life prior to meeting Anna.

Intertextuality in ‘In Pieces’ also functions as a generic signifier with the reference to seminal precursors of the composite novel in the story’s closing scenes: “In a giant processor, the writer forces Winesburg, Ohio down toward the blades and pours in a litre of water and a little oil until a glutinous ball forms” (127). Jimmy’s blending of the texts functions as another metafictional allusion to the structure of a composite novel—the “tension between simultaneous separateness and cohesion” (Lundén 1999:125)—as well as suggesting his insecurities and despair at his lack of creative inspiration. With the reader’s wandering viewpoint firmly activated, the events, characters, settings and motifs of the story are expected to be absorbed with a more conscious awareness of the possibility they will be re-evoked and modified within new contexts in later stories. The inconsistent narrative perspective of ‘In Pieces’ creates numerous indeterminacies for the reader as anticipations of plot development, such as the truth behind Jimmy’s alleged appropriation of Brian’s novel and the latter’s suicide, are not resolved. The narration only offers flashes of an event, fleeting insights into Jimmy’s thinking, disconnected observations, and piecemeal plot vignettes that never directly reveal background information on his life, or suggest what he will do after ultimately finding—then losing—his creative inspiration. The story is explicitly recalcitrant, but although its narrative elements are disjunctive, they serve as important correlates that are intended to be retrieved and synthesised by the reader as Wool Spin Burn continues.

‘Singing the Terrorist’ further disrupts the reader’s pattern-making consistency using an explicitly satirical tone and a preposterous premise. Extending the composite novel’s emergent themes of personal and societal anxiety and instability, ‘Singing the Terrorist’ provokes the reader to consider the adverse nature of collective hysteria and fear of terrorism using reductio ad absurdum to an outrageous climax. The central story in Wool Spin Burn, ‘Singing the Terrorist’ is also the longest. Its traditional linear narrative adopts a laconic tone and features a cast of quirky characters that were intentionally created to afford verisimilitude as a balance to the story’s far-fetched plot. As with ‘In Pieces’, the story contains significant
recurrent elements that challenge the reader to correlate the surrealism of ‘Singing the Terrorist’ with the realism of the early pieces; while the first six stories are often dissonant in narrative style, plot and structure, the unifying devices employed in each story are designed to work together through the act of reading to create an emerging pattern that insists on their affiliation. In ‘Singing the Terrorist’, the primary setting of Roweston is the story’s predominant unifying strategy, which is intended to prompt a recall in the reading act of ‘The Art of Preservation’, which was also set in the fictional town. The synthesis of these correlates directly pits the bleak realism of the opening story’s act of filicide against its satirical re-presentation in ‘Singing the Terrorist’:

And he had shown impressive professionalism and a touching compassion when he arrested poor Tony Doonan for beating his son to death…And anyway, Tony’s boy, Sam, had never been quite right in the head. A strange little child, he was, always saying inappropriate things and staring rudely at people like there was something he was trying to decipher on their chin. (138)

This juxtaposition of perspectives is intended to create a new indeterminacy that challenges the reader to consider implicit notions of variegated perspectives and the interiority of another’s experience, as previously suggested in ‘The Interpreter’. The plot of ‘Singing the Terrorist’ relies heavily on the activities at the regional airport, which was built by “bigwig energy corporations who needed to access the region for ‘future growth’” (131). The new terminal’s development functions to prompt the reader of the tunnel construction undertaken in ‘Bedrock’ and ‘In Pieces’ in response to burgeoning population demands, and is intended to be contextually synthesised in the progressive patterning of theme. Likewise, the satirical treatment of Roweston’s rapidly rising hysteria was conceptualised to reinforce through a synthesisisation with underpinning themes of societal instability and anxiety in earlier narratives.

In a return to realism, ‘A Boxful of Prophets’ is less explicit with its placement of connective cues. Its exploration of the destructive power of familial bonds takes place in Brisbane, however interspersed analepses recall when the two brothers, Neil and Tom, would “snake the old Kingswood out of the city” (154) and find “peeling pubs, too big for the towns” (154). On one of these trips, the brothers met a girl who “worked behind a bar in Roweston, a country town where the curve of the streets hugged the showground” (154). The recurrent use of Roweston is expected to be easily synthesised with its feature in previous narratives, however the town was also employed to reshape the reader’s interpretation of the previous story, ‘Singing
the Terrorist’. Using Roweston as the setting for two realist stories (‘The Art of Preservation’ and ‘A Boxful of Prophets’) that flank ‘Singing the Terrorist’ was intended to force a closer reading of the latter’s surreal and absurdist narrative and recognise that the commonalities between the three stories extend beyond setting to the greater work’s implicit thematic concerns of anxiety and dissolution. As in earlier stories, metafictional references in ‘A Boxful of Prophets’ allude to the stories in *Wool Spin Burn* being part of a greater whole: “the constellations unfolded at their feet” (155); “Tom’s face is a montage” (150). Neil’s despair at the story’s close is similar to the denouements of ‘The Art of Preservation’ and ‘Bedrock’, where the three separate male protagonists experience futility and resignation after unrelated events destabilise each of their lives. It is intended that the sequencing of these analogous scenes will “condition each other in the timeflow of reading” (Iser 1980:119) to contribute to the consistency-building schema.

With the referential fields of setting, character, motif and theme forming a loose relationship through the previous stories, ‘Old Light’ works to strengthen these connections and move *Wool Spin Burn* toward being a more cohesive whole. Sean and Julie from ‘Bedrock’ return in this story as secondary characters at a dinner party hosted by their new friends, Donna and Scott. As with ‘In Pieces’, the reader is forced to recognise the non-linear chronology of the stories in *Wool Spin Burn* when Donna describes Sean and Julie as having “a kind of loose, careless confidence and weren’t bound up in knots of co-dependence” (159). The reader’s anticipated retension of the couple’s relationship in ‘Bedrock’ as strained with Sean on the brink of an emotional breakdown is intended to effect a mental restructuring of the narratives’ sequencing. It also creates a new indeterminacy and new protensions surrounding the unspecified details of the shift in Sean and Julie’s relationship that must occur in the temporal gap between the two stories. Clues to ‘Old Light’ being a prequel to ‘Bedrock’ are also provided through the recurrent (and metafictional) use of Brisbane’s tunnels: “She felt a rush of grateful love when he steered the conversation to the new tunnels that were scheduled to start construction underneath the city” (161). However, ‘Old Light’ is not about Sean and Julie, but rather how the loss of household power precipitates Donna’s epiphany regarding the instability of her marriage. The thematic concerns of ‘The Art of Preservation’ and ‘The Interpreter’ are fortified as Donna is confronted by the limitations to her knowledge of her husband’s interiority, and compounded by the closing line which is reminiscent of the personal dissolution individually experienced
by Matthew, Yalda and Sean in previous narratives: “She was translucent. Already disappearing. As good as gone” (166).

‘DNA’ functions to provoke frenetic pattern-making activities in the reading process through the consolidation of recurrent characters, setting and theme from a range of previous narratives, as well as the use of metafictional motifs. The story employs a sociopathic narrator, Evie, and positions the reader’s wandering viewpoint at the junction of retension and protension as her fleeting acknowledgement in ‘Bedrock’ is recalled:

Sean ran the floor himself most nights, though he still used Evie to help on weekends. He found her strange in ways he didn’t have the energy to consider, but she never said anything when Sean would open a bottle of wine and sit outside in the dark. She didn’t try to improve things, and had just shrugged when he banned children from the restaurant. (116)

Evie’s first-person narration of ‘DNA’, which belittles her mother’s obsession with tracing their family tree, assists the reader’s resolution of the indeterminacies created by her character presentation in ‘Bedrock’: “Those were the good times, back when she got off on thinking we were better than the bad apples in our orchard” (167). Evie’s kleptomania and narcissism are demonstrated with destructive consequences as the branches of Wool Spin Burn’s recurrent elements begin to connect more explicitly. Evie’s father, who left as a result of his wife’s obsession with genealogy, had moved to Margaret River and lived with “some Iranian woman…who spent most of the time in the kitchen mixing spices for evening meals that enveloped the table” (171). The reader is expected to synthesise this correlate with the retrospective recall of Yalda’s reflections in ‘The Interpreter’—how she prepares for Peter “traditional Persian meals of lamb Koresh, almond chicken and Tahdig” (109). The two narratives collide with metafictional significance when Evie relays the relationship to her mother:

“‘Goodness me,’ she said. ‘Well, I hope they don’t get married. It would be a pretty pickle trying to trace that family tree’” (172). The story’s intertwining of connective tissues is also ironically hinted at as Evie undertakes her studies:

The genetics exam was easy. Just a game of spot the syndrome hiding in the writhing snarls of chromosomes. The pages were filled with karyotypes of DNA coils, like twisted tree roots, their strands urgently grabbing at each other to try and make some meaningful connection. (170)

The reader is challenged to position ‘DNA’ within the greater chronological sequence, synthesising the stages of tunnel construction in ‘Bedrock’, ‘In Pieces’, and ‘Old
Light’ to its declaration that “the bus tunnels were still a few months from opening and the city was constipated by roadworks” (168). In addition, the presence of Brian “from the writers centre” guides the reader to rearrange the story’s sequence to precede ‘In Pieces’, which had created predominant indeterminacies with its disclosure of Brian’s suicide. The reader is provided the opportunity to resolve this gap with Evie’s calculated and heartless seduction of Brian at the story’s close, in the process reinforcing a thematic pattern that suggests how shifting perspectives and limitations of access to other’s interiority can distort interpretation. As the reader’s pattern-making faculties have been activated and consistently deployed through these ten stories, the introduction of Marko is expected to create a new protension as to the potential of his connection in the remaining narratives.

As the penultimate story in *Wool Spin Burn*, ‘A.B.C.D.’ provides a blockage to the temporal flow of the reading act with no inclusion of familiar characters from previous stories. Instead, the reader is challenged to find meaningful connections in other elements of the narrative to create a continuity of *Wool Spin Burn’s* underpinning themes. The story’s explicit repetition of the phrase, “You couldn’t have seen it coming” (182) prompts a retrieval of these sentiments in ‘The Art of Preservation’ and ‘Field of Vision’, and its plot-based association in the majority of the other narratives. Similarly, the abrupt breakdown of protagonist Ryan and his partner, Sarah’s, relationship in ‘A.B.C.D.’ is intended to be correlated with Anna’s sudden departure from Matthew in ‘The Art of Preservation’. The dissolution of both relationships is anticipated to be correlated and synthesised by the reader in conjunction with the composite novel’s pervasive themes of one’s inability to truly understand all dimensions of another’s experience. The story intersperses the dramatic present with a series of analepses that chart how Ryan’s father was affected by his role in calculating traffic estimates for one of Brisbane’s planned tunnels. The flashbacks serve to temporally position these recalled events as preceding all other narratives, although the primary narration of ‘A.B.C.D.’ is set in the present day, with the tunnel open and fully functioning. Consequently the story acts as a chronologic frame for the entire work, using the construction progress of Brisbane’s tunnels as a guide for the reader to sequence the individual narrative’s temporality. The tunnel motif also functions to precipitate the work’s recurrent theme of humanity’s capricious nature. Ryan’s father teaches him the fundamentals of predictive analytics as a child, insisting: “It’s all about patterns. Past actions reveal future intentions”
His statement also acts as another metafictional cue to the significance of the reading act, particularly the reader’s wandering viewpoint that prefigures new horizons as it travels through the text. When his father’s projections on traffic volume through the constructed tunnel are incorrect and economic failure forces the tunnel’s operator into receivership, both Ryan and his father are destabilised by their recognition of the futility of predicting human behaviour. As with the previous stories featuring the motif, the tunnel serves as a dual metaphor for burgeoning personal and societal anxiety, and a ‘womb-like’ sanctuary from the pressures of contemporary life.

It is this second metaphoric suggestion that dominates the closing and eponymous story of the composite novel. As the reader reconciles the character of Marko from ‘DNA’ as the protagonist of ‘Wool Spin Burn’, they are prompted to retrieve the memory of his sexual liaisons with Evie at his home and synthesise it with the opening scene of an Australia Day street party underway at the house across the road. The thematic and metafictional correlates that have been placed through the composite novel’s ten previous stories are designed to be consolidated in more explicit form in ‘Wool Spin Burn’: Marko’s engineering lecturer speaks of “structural discontinuities and hidden distress…Exploratory fieldwork is the only way to understand a place’s history” (184). Prompting a synthesis with suggestions of destabilisation due to geographic displacement in ‘The Interpreter’, ‘Wool Spin Burn’ charts the sense of isolation Marko still experiences nine years after his immigration to Australia from the historically rich Ukraine. His inability to forge a connection with his adopted country is exacerbated by his curtailed experience of his homeland:

When he was fourteen, the teacher had asked him to talk to the class about the Ukraine. Three days later, the air conditioner hummed as he stood at the front of the room with a sheet of paper and read notes on the Golden Horde, the Cossacks, Chernobyl and the Russian Revolution that he had found on the internet. When he returned to his desk he could feel his teacher’s disappointment settle over him like nuclear ash. (186-187)

Marko’s feelings of cultural isolation from his peers—one of whom has “a fresh tattoo of the Southern Cross” (185)—are juxtaposed with correlating references to the gaps of language in ‘The Interpreter’: Marko “picked up the new language quickly, but felt he was always missing something as the short, plain syllables slouched against each other to make short, plain sentences” (185). His remoteness is structured to consolidate with earlier references in ‘DNA’ where, “He wore a kind of weary nonchalance about everything, a sense of detachment from life” (169). The network
of tunnel references in the preceding narratives is deliberately constructed for the reader to detect a ubiquitous undercurrent of anxiety or instability; however, the tunnel motif in ‘Wool Spin Burn’ subverts this notion in order to guide the composite novel to a sense of closure and loose cohesion. The tunnels—or rather, the city’s network of underground drains—serve as a medium for Marko’s eventual attainment of a sense of place. When drawn by the allure of illegally traversing the Dsanktuary drain with an ‘urban explorer’, Marko discovers a new kind of history, and, pushing against the tide of his divided past, finally finds his place in the greater schema: “The burns are deep and scattered from his elbow to his wrist. They look like a constellation” (193). As the wandering viewpoint consolidates his burn marks with earlier reference to a student’s Southern Cross tattoo in the delivery of thematic significance, the constellation reference is simultaneously intended to be synthesised with its use in ‘A Boxful of Prophets’. The use of the term as the composite novel’s final word is a consciously metafictional nod to the binding nature of the work’s dynamic and static properties.

The use of the constellation metaphor in Wool Spin Burn is also pertinent from a critical perspective when discussing the work’s success in creating in the reader a sense of whole text cohesion. As the author, it is not my position to determine how effectively Wool Spin Burn functions as a composite novel; such a pronouncement can only be made by individual readers, and this also depends on the degree to which the reader is able to “climb aboard the text” (Iser 1972:282). The varied range of interpretations that can be made of the work must also be considered when examining any composite novel, as “textual unity, like beauty, lies mainly in the eye of the beholding reader” (Kennedy 1995:ix). The use of the constellation motif in Wool Spin Burn is imbued with additional significance when Iser’s analogy is recalled: “…two people gazing at the night sky may be both looking at the same collection of stars, but one will see the image of a plough, and the other will make out a dipper. The ‘stars’ in a literary text are fixed; the lines that join them are variable” (1972: 287).

However, the impetus behind my creation of Wool Spin Burn was to explore how an author constructs a composite novel, considering the primacy of the reader in the determination of connections and degree of holistic cohesion. To this end, my exegetical examination of how the reading act functions in a composite novel to resolve the indeterminacies between and within the individual stories and ultimately realise an aesthetic of whole text cohesion was unquestionably beneficial. The
creative process was occasionally strained as I experienced conflicting impulses, my consideration of the reader’s temporal flow and acts of synthesisation threatening to dominate the creative instincts that guided the development of each individual narrative. Yet, this was resolved by committing to prioritise the creative process and then regard the emerging works through a reader-response critical lens during the ongoing editing stages. With this approach, I was able to more effectively regard each story and its existing unifying strategies more objectively, then revise these where necessary to make intended static and dynamic connections more explicit for the reader. My progressive review of each story in context of the larger whole shaped my editing decisions regarding the anticipated effect of tense, narratorial perspective, temporality and recurrent elements on the reader’s synthesising activities. This process conformed to the reader-response school of thought that argues: “Reading and writing join hands, change places, and finally become distinguishable only as two names for the same activity” (Tompkins 1980:x).

Given that an increasing number of published Australian and international works corresponding to the composite novel’s definition continue to be met with confusion by both critics and readers, this research project argues for greater scholarly emphasis on the primacy of the reading act in furthering the critical and mainstream understanding of the genre. Through the experience of constructing my own composite novel *Wool Spin Burn*, supported by a critical knowledge of the reading act, I also argue the myriad benefits for a writer when the reader is more fully considered during the creative and revision processes. While Welty is correct in asserting that “all any of us [writers] can know about writing is what it seems like to us” (1976:161), my doctoral project asserts that the composite novel demands an author’s conscious acknowledgment of the reader during their creative processes. When the composite novel reader is elevated to a position of greater significance as the co-creator of meaning and textual cohesion by writers, critics and readers themselves, the genre may finally achieve the autonomy and recognition it has longed sought.
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