Chiasmus as Constraint: negotiating with narrative form in contemporary creative writing practice

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the use of narrative forms as constraints. While it is not unusual for literary writing to make use of heightened forms — that is, forms that extend beyond the established conventions of form, such as chapters and parts — they remain relatively uncommon in contemporary fiction more broadly. When heightened forms do appear, they often arise organically, developing along with the narrative. In some cases, however, writers begin their writing process *from* a heightened form, allowing the narrative subject and themes to emerge from that form. This use of form as constraint is rare, and I contend that its rarity can be attributed to a perception of heightened forms as artificial, and constraints as prescriptive, rigid, and limiting in much of the contemporary writing community. Despite these perceptions, in practice, the writers who do use form as constraint find that this is creatively generative and facilitates the telling of stories in unique ways. I argue that these writers use an approach that I have termed 'negotiation': rather than strictly adhere to the form as a constraint, these writers cultivate a cyclical relationship between form and narrative, so that the narrative emerges from the form, while the progression of the narrative in turn demands the evolution of form. Through this continuous cycle, the concerns about form and constraint for practitioners are ameliorated, and new creative potential is accessed.

This project is practice-led and comprises a 22,000-word exegesis and a 28,000-word novella entitled *Nearly Already Not.* In my practice, I used an ancient narrative form, chiasmus, as a constraint. In my exegesis, my exploration of chiasmus as a form and my negotiation with chiasmus serve as the frame for my consideration of form as constraint more generally. I reflect on the experience of negotiation, and how negotiating with chiasmus shaped my practice and allowed me to construct narratives and themes in different ways.

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Statement of Original Authorship

The work contained in this thesis has not been previously submitted to meet requirements for an award at this or any other higher education institution. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made.

Signature: QUT Verified Signature

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Chapter 1
INTRODUCTION

I have always been fascinated by narrative form — and how narratives can take almost any form. When I was seven years old, we moved into my late grandfather's house, and I remember spending weekends going through the old cardboard boxes stacked in his workshop. In one box would be dresses and ribbons and a guide to young ladies' etiquette; in another, letters from cousins who worked at a lighthouse, recipes with less than five ingredients, and a newspaper ad for boots with rubber soles. Individually, they were objects, but together, they became stories. Thirteen years later, reading lists of exposure sites from the city, the people around me would piece together the constellation of a stranger's day, and wonder what they were like — and how their own life would look to somebody else, if viewed only as a series of locations and times. As a reader, I am drawn to these kinds of narratives: the ones that invite new ways of making connections and making meaning, that create spaces that we work to understand and to fill. This project emerged from the desire to explore such narratives as a writer; to discover how different forms could not only shape the narrative I was writing, but the way that I wrote.

I am not the only writer to begin my projects from this place of fascination with form. Carmen Maria Machado, author of *Her Body and Other Parties*, describes herself as a 'form vampire': when she encounters a form in a nonfiction text, she starts to 'think about how [she] might be able to use that form for fiction' (St. James 2017, para 24). Machado has drawn from legal documents ("California Statutes Concerning Defrauding an Innkeeper", 2014), summaries of television episodes (*Especially Heinous: 272 Views of Law & Order SVU*, 2013), and Kickstarter campaigns ("Help Me Follow My Sister into the Land of the Dead", 2014), among others. When form is heightened this way, it goes from being

something largely invisible — the division of a novel into chapters typically has little effect on how a reader makes meaning from that novel — to an essential feature of the narrative. For example, *Especially Heinous* is an interrogation of the media's fixation on narratives of violence against women, and a cultural obsession with spectating this violence; presenting the novella as twelve seasons' worth of episode summaries foregrounds this idea of spectatorship. As the episode summaries unravel from neat units of story to increasingly surreal horror, emphasis is placed on the clean edges of the procedural, and how this tidiness conceals the widespread impact of violence that carries on past the end of a forty-minute arc. Without the heightened form, the same story could not be told, and the same critique could not be constructed.

By the time that I first discovered Machado's work, I was already intrigued by heightened form. I read fiction by Jennifer Egan, George Saunders, and Jenny Offill, and tracked every segment, shift, and space, enamoured by this secret dimension of narrative and how it shaped my interpretation of the text. I was eager to experiment with heightened form in my own practice. While it is more common for heightened forms to arise organically as the narrative develops (Smith 2005, p.49), Machado's distinct approach — to find a form and 'start' there to develop a story (Futterman 2020, para 5) — appealed to me for two reasons. Firstly, form was the object of my fascination, and so it made sense to centralise it in my practice. Secondly, I enjoyed the idea of a narrative giving a different purpose or function to an existing form and allowing it to become new. However, rather than adapt a form from a nonfiction text, I became invested in the notion of reviving a lost form.

This line of thinking brought me to chiasmus. Chiasmus is an ancient form which arranges narratives into two symmetrical halves, so that the first part of the narrative is echoed by the last part, the second by the second last, and so on. These echoes are not exact

repetitions, but rather, opposites, either thematic or literal; for example, a house built at the beginning of the story may burn down at the end. Chiasmus appears frequently in religious books and epic poems but has been lost to contemporary writers. Despite this disappearance from practice, chiasmus has become an object of scholarly interest across several disciplines; since the mid-twentieth century, chiasmus has been analysed as a poetic device, a narrative form, and a conceptual figure. Recently, Paul and Wiseman sought to centralise much of this research, and published *Chiasmus and Culture* (2014), which investigates chiasmus through a variety of lenses. Paul and Wiseman describe chiasmus as having 'meaning-making potentialities comparable to those of metaphor' (2014, p.6). Naturally, this rich history and growing re-emergence captured my interest, and I decided to use chiasmus as the starting point for my own practice.

My initial vision for this project was quite straightforward: I would develop a thorough understanding of how chiasmus could be applied by conducting a literature review, and modify the form in order to make it my own. I would then use that revised version of chiasmus to write a literary novella. However, as I discuss in greater detail below, I soon began to struggle with my creative work. I quickly realised that in using chiasmus as my starting point, I had turned form into a kind of constraint, and that as a constraint, form was restricting my practice. I was torn between loving how chiasmus affects narrative and hating how chiasmus affected my writing. As a result, the focus of my research began to shift, and I sought to determine an approach to using heightened form as constraint that would support, rather than disrupt, my practice. In this thesis, I discuss my findings: an approach that I term 'negotiation', in which the narrative emerges from form, and form evolves as the narrative does. I argue that negotiation positions form and narrative in a cyclical relationship, allowing the writer to develop them in response to one another, rather than one restricting the other; in

addition, I argue that, through negotiation, new creative potential within form and narrative is realised.

1.1 Definitions of Key Terms

1.1.1 Form

The term 'form' is used with great flexibility by writers and critics alike. The most straightforward discussions present form as a means of classifying the length of a text; short stories, novellas, and novels are distinguished as separate forms of narrative. Within one such text, 'form' can also refer to how the narrative is segmented — whether it appears as a single unit, broken into titled or untitled chapters, numbered verses, or is divided by some other means. These forms are often unnoticed by readers; it is more unusual to encounter a narrative that is not segmented at all than to encounter chapters or parts, and so these formal features have minimal influence on how the reader understands the text.

In this thesis, I focus on narrative forms that disrupt 'conventions of sectioning, either by omitting the usual concessions to readers looking for breaks, or by calling attention to the usual way sections are ordered' (Keen 2015, p.24). These forms work to disrupt the 'tendency of teleologically and causally oriented "stories" to remain stable and serve an explanatory function that blocks innovative thinking, and ways of reimagining the world' (Higgins 2018, p.3). Such forms are often referred to as 'formal strategies', 'presentational modes', or 'strategies of presentation', to distinguish their function from classic forms that are so accepted as to be virtually unnoticeable to the writer or reader. Higgins uses 'presentational mode' to account for forms that invite specific reader expectations (ibid.), while Antin coins 'strategies of presentation' to encompass both the practitioner's choice of materials and their work in shaping those materials (1974). Although chiasmus does invite

particular reader expectations and my thesis explores the practitioner's process, I have not adopted either Higgins' or Antin's terms. I have chosen instead to use the descriptor 'heightened form', as this connotes the visibility and significance of the form while remaining generic enough to afford me flexibility as I discuss writers, texts, and readers.

Throughout this thesis, I also use the term 'features' or 'formal features' to describe the elements that make up a heightened form. I specifically discuss three main formal features: segmentation, polyphony, and structure. Segmentation is the manner in which a text is divided or sectioned, such as into chapters, parts, or distinct stories; polyphony is the use of multiple narrators throughout the text; and structure is the manner in which segments of the narrative or events within the narrative are arranged, particularly in relation to one another — I use this particularly to refer to nonlinear structure (when events in the narrative are read in a different order than they occur in narrative time) and symmetrical structure (when similar events are positioned opposite one another in the reading order).

1.1.2 Constraint

There are many ways to incorporate heightened form into narrative and creative practice; in this project, I investigate the use of form as constraint. Broadly speaking, constraints are a set of established parameters which in some way define creative practice. All texts are constrained — for example, a publisher may require manuscript submissions not to exceed 90,000 words in length, or for middle-grade fiction to exclude profanity. Just as conventional forms are often unnoticed, these conventional constraints are rarely thought of as constraints at all, to the extent that Baldick defines the novel as a form that 'disregards the constraints that govern other literary forms, and acknowledges no obligatory structure, style, or subject-matter' (2015). These conventional constraints are also typically externally imposed, as in the

examples above. In this thesis, however, I consider additional, self-imposed constraints; that is, further conditions that the writer places on their own practice.

Much of the language around such constraints is quite loaded — it is not uncommon to see ‘restrictions’ and ‘limitations’ used synonymously with ‘constraint’, particularly by writers themselves. To avoid the negative associations of these terms, Fischer instead characterises constraints as a set of ‘conditions’ — the ‘contours of any given set of circumstances that create potential’ (2018, p.5). Fischer’s emphasis on the capacity of constraints to access potential is drawn from the well-established relationship between constraints and creativity. When it comes to creation, complete freedom can be paralysing (Stokes 2006, p.135), and so specific constraints can offer a starting point that helps the writer to overcome that paralysis. For this reason, broad constraints — such as prompt words, images, or secondary texts — are popular pedagogical tools, and frequently used in workshops and classrooms as a way to encourage students past ‘writer’s block’ (Mishra 2015, p.171). These constraints are intended to serve as tools for generating initial ideas but are set aside as the writing process continues. Less common is the use of more specific constraints, such as ‘each sentence must be longer than the last’, which also serve to generate ideas, but remain an ongoing pressure throughout the creative process.

While the primary purpose of a form is to affect how a narrative is read, the primary purpose of a constraint is to affect the writer’s process, although in some cases, they may still affect the narrative. For example, many writers use time constraints to improve their productivity (Liikkanen et al., 2009), but a reader is unlikely to recognise from the text that time constraints were a part of creating it. However, if a writer imposes a constraint such as ‘you must not use the letter E’, as Georges Perec did in writing *A Void* (1969), then the

influence of the constraint will be apparent to the reader, even if it does not necessarily influence how they make meaning from the narrative.

1.1.3 Form as Constraint

In poetry, constraints and form are interconnected: that is, one follows constraints to achieve a given form, and a given form is defined by the constraints it prescribes. Some constraints for poetic forms are 'ordained by tradition', while others are determined 'by the occasion or by the author' (Sheppard 2016, p.51). I compare my own project to poetry in that poetic forms are typically selected before the poetic begins, and then composition occurs in alignment with that form, rather than the form organically emerging as the poem is drafted (as is the case with free verse). Although I am not writing poetry, by beginning from a form I sought to create, I placed particular constraints on my writing; while no subject matter was prescribed, my interest in constructing chiasmus meant that I had to make specific choices as I planned and wrote.

1.1.4 Chiasmus

I explore chiasmus — both the form and its function — in more detail in my literature review. Exactly what chiasmus is and what it does varies between the interpretations of different disciplines and scholars. In brief, chiasmus is a form composed of two halves, where the second half is a mirror image of the first half; the meaning of this second half is typically (although not always) also oppositional to the meaning of the first half. An example of this on the line level is 'eat to live, don't live to eat'. Scholars frequently assign letter values to the different components of chiasmus to make the corresponding parts obvious, as in AB-BA —

‘eat (A) to live (B) don’t live (B) to eat (A)’. This becomes particularly useful as in larger instances of chiasmus, where there are many more components to each half.

The function of chiasmus is to bind binaries: it presents two mutually exclusive opposites, holding them at once together and apart (Norrman, 1986). The reader is thus invited to consider these two opposites in the context of one another (Hariman 2014, p.51; Tyler 2014, p.118). For example, if a character is born at the beginning of a story, the literal opposite of this would be to have them die at the end; rather than perceive birth or death separately, chiasmus directs the reader to interpret them together. Death is understood in relation to birth, and birth in relation to death.

Although I had not previously used heightened form before beginning this project, I had, like many writers, used broad constraints. For various writing competitions, I had adhered to particular themes or word limits, and I had participated in organised writing events that involved writing particular amounts or at particular times. While I did not regularly involve constraints in my practice, I had found these instances of constraints to be valuable, and so I did not anticipate any issues in using form as constraint. I was so assured of this that my research was focused on employing chiasmus to achieve particular effects, rather than discovering its influence on my creative practice.

At first, the project went smoothly: using chiasmus led me past the initial assumptions I made and ideas I had when writing, pushing me to consider alternative — and often more original — choices. Instead of following a particular arc I had seen before, the demand to find and arrange opposites meant that I considered new and unexpected directions for character arcs and plotlines. However, once I moved from planning to writing, I began to encounter problems. Some of these unexpected choices worked, but others felt unnatural. I would have other ideas that excited me, but didn’t fit the form, and so I had to discard them. Each choice

I made early in the narrative locked me into a certain trajectory — even though chiasmus only requires thematic or conceptual opposition, rather than literal, this was still limiting. I felt trapped in my own work, and the joy of being surprised by my own writing as it developed was gone. At first, I believed that the narrative premises were the problem, and continuously started over with new story concepts. Each of these proved equally complicated and unsatisfying. Yet I knew that writing with heightened form was possible — I admired many novels with similar forms. Ultimately, I recognised that chiasmus itself was not the issue, but my approach to incorporating it into my practice.

1.2 Research Question

As I established above, I am fascinated by heightened form in narrative, and my initial research question centred on how chiasmus could achieve particular effects in narrative. Yet as I struggled to incorporate chiasmus into my creative practice, it became apparent to me that were it not for the requirements of my research project, I would have abandoned chiasmus and returned to writing with more conventional, invisible forms. What was at stake for me as a writer was not chiasmus, but whether heightened forms would become part of my creative practice, or whether I would be forced to leave this interest behind. The outcome I needed was not a specific effect, but sustainability — a way to manage using heightened form as constraint that did not frustrate or stifle me. Thus, my question became:

- **How can writers approach using forms, such as chiasmus, as constraints in contemporary creative writing practice?**

In responding to this question, I have produced a 20,000-word exegesis and a 28,000-word creative work, a novella entitled *Nearly Already Not*.

1.3 Methodology

When I first began my research, I conceptualised my work as 'practice-based'. I was examining the research on chiasmus, evolving the form, and reintroducing it into practice — in other words, academic research was leading to my creative practice (Smith & Dean 2009, p.2). However, my practice did not extend on my critical research in the way I was expecting; instead, my difficulties with practice raised new questions for research, and the answers to these questions allowed me to develop my practice (Gray & Malins 2004, p.1). My experience as a practitioner became central to my research (Brien 2006, p.56), and while the creative outcomes of my research are still paramount to me, my interests extended to the modes and methods of creating (Harper 2011, p.12). To deepen my understanding of both outcomes and modes, I also conduct two case studies — *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010) by Jennifer Egan and *How to be both* by Ali Smith (2014) — in which I analyse the texts and reflect on the authors' creative processes.

Barbara Bolt's writing on practice-led research (2007) is particularly essential to how I frame my exegesis and my project as a whole. Firstly, my experience throughout this research project is aligned with Bolt's notion of research through handling, which describes how practice exposes assumptions made while theorising and allows ideas to be tested and explored as the practitioner experiments with them in their art (p.32-33). In my case, I made several assumptions about the use of chiasmus, and heightened form more broadly, and it was only once I was engaged in creative practice that the flaws in these assumptions became apparent to me. In using chiasmus, I was forced to recognise both problems and potential that I had missed when working with theory alone: as Bolt puts it, 'handling revealed the limits of conceptual thinking' (p.32).

Secondly, Bolt describes the exegesis as ‘articulating what has emerged or what has been realised through the process of handling materials and ideas’ and providing a ‘vehicle through which the work of art can find a discursive form’ and participate in the broader knowledge economy (ibid.). I perceive my exegesis as allowing me to make sense of my own practice, and in particular, to give meaning and purpose to the creative practice that does not serve as this project’s creative outcome — in discussing my exploration of how best to make use of form, I bring what would otherwise be considered ‘failed drafts’ back into the project as artefacts for analysis that contribute to the whole. If the final creative work was regarded on its own, to avoid the process of creation intruding on the experience of the text, then the insights gained by this process would be lost.

1.4 Thesis Outline

This thesis explores my answer to my research question, which is to take an approach that I have termed ‘negotiation’. Previously, the term ‘negotiation’ has been applied in discussions of translation — a field which requires practitioners to work with intense constraints — to refer to how the translator must remain in constant dialogue with both the original text and the readers of the translation. For example, in translating a poem, the translator might choose to disrupt the rhythm in order to offer a more accurate description of the poem’s subject (Eco, 2003, p.34). Similarly, I use ‘negotiation’ to mean a continuous, cyclical process of revising the form, the narrative, and the use of the form in order to manage the relationship between the form and the narrative, and the form and the writer. When using form as constraint, the intention may be — as mine was — to ensure that the form is present in the final narrative and to use form to construct the meaning of that narrative. However, the constraints of form have the capacity to generate new thoughts and ideas throughout the writing process, which

in turn alter the narrative. This altered narrative will have a slightly different meaning, and so a slightly altered form may be most effective. In altering this form, new ideas may emerge, and incite the process again. Alternatively, negotiation may involve changing how the writer uses the form — whether they adhere to it throughout the process or loosen it as they continue through the narrative. Essentially, negotiation is an ongoing attempt to maximise both the generative capacity of constraints and the capacity of form to construct meaning.

In the following chapters, I explore negotiation in detail, focusing on my own experience negotiating with chiasmus. I begin with my literature review (Chapter 1). To effectively negotiate with a form, it is essential to understand how the chosen form functions to construct meaning; this way, the practitioner establishes which changes might enhance or compromise the effect. In this chapter, I review the history of chiasmus, and consider its various functions as discussed by scholars from the fields of ancient rhetoric, biblical studies, modern rhetoric, and literary studies. As part of my argument around the potential usefulness of negotiation to practitioners, I also observe that even as chiasmus has been given increasing scholarly attention, it is absent from contemporary practice[1].

The second chapter is titled *Negotiating Form and Constraint.* In this chapter, I consider why chiasmus has faded from practice. Chiasmus is not alone — there are relatively few cases of heightened form in contemporary writing beyond the literary genre, and here, I examine the attitudes towards form and constraint that have led to this. In response to these attitudes, I establish that negotiation emphasises what contemporary writers and readers value about form while minimising concerns around constraints, thereby making heightened form

[1] I do not claim definitively that there are no symmetrical structures within contemporary literature, or no forms resembling chiasmus. However, Douglas (2007) contends that modern readers often do not recognise or understand how to interpret chiastic texts, indicating that this is no longer part of contemporary practice. Further, a search for authors who discuss their own deliberate use of chiasmus in practice turns up little in the way of meaningful reflection on practice.

more accessible to more practitioners. In addition to accommodating practitioners, however, negotiation also has a significant second function: negotiation realises new creative potential within form and narrative. Adjusting a form also alters the effect that form has on the narrative, and so negotiating with form can facilitate representing and evoking the narrative's themes in different ways.

To explore this process of negotiation in practice, I analyse *A Visit from the Goon Squad* and *How to be both* as case studies (Chapter 3). These novels are examples of successful uses of heightened form in contemporary literature. In this chapter, I demonstrate how form constructs meaning in these novels, and how negotiation was an essential part of developing these forms throughout the creative process. I emphasise how some of the distinctive effects of these forms, which are essential to expressing the novel's themes, are the product of negotiation — initially, the authors had other plans for the forms, but as their narratives evolved, they adjusted their forms, and arrived at modified forms that more effectively realised the novels' themes.

Following this analysis of other creative works, I have included my own novella, *Nearly Already Not*. Working on this novella allowed me to develop negotiation as an approach to using form as constraint through my own experience with chiasmus, which I reflect on in the fourth and final chapter of this exegesis. I explain how my difficulties using form as constraint necessitated that I adjust that form. Discovering that these adjustments did not compromise how form constructed meaning in the narrative, but instead developed and furthered how form constructed meaning, led me to negotiation. I conclude that negotiation makes using form as constraint more productive and effective, and that as an approach, negotiation has applications for practitioners that extend to the use of other forms as constraints.

Chapter 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I review the secondary literature concerning chiasmus across four key disciplines: classical rhetoric, biblical studies, modern rhetoric, and literary studies. Through this review — and particularly through recognising what is consistent and what changes between different disciplines' characterisation of chiasmus — I establish the features and functions of the form. This understanding facilitates the development of my narrative and my own negotiation with the form in my creative practice.

As I trace chiasmus across these disciplines and across history, I also track the transition of the form from a device used by practitioners to an exegetical tool used by scholars. This disappearance from practice is significant, as it demonstrates a change in practitioners' attitudes towards using form. I address this attitude change in greater detail in Chapter 2. In this chapter, my aim is to demonstrate that chiasmus is both very useful for writers and no longer used by them; this reveals the value of negotiation as something that allows practitioners to access heightened forms that would otherwise be lost or disregarded in contemporary writing.

2.1 A Brief History

In this section, I provide a timeline to orient my review. I have elected to organise my review by discipline; however, the sporadic history of chiasmus, and the way in which scholarship across disciplines often stalls, intertwines, or overlaps, necessitates a brief chronology for the sake of clarity. The exact origin of chiasmus is difficult to determine, as many scholars are not in agreement. Thomson (1995, p.14) suggests that its first use as a technical term in

rhetoric was around the fourth century AD, while Paul writes that the term 'chiasmus' was coined by Hermodorous of Tarsus in the second century (Paul 2014, p.21), with the device having been used previously, but under the name 'antimetabole'[2] by Quintilian and other rhetoricians. Given that chiasmus was considered a basic device of limited use, little was written on the subject by classical rhetoricians and their inheritors.

In biblical studies, John A. Bengel is thought to have initiated the study of chiasmus in relation to religious texts in 1742, when he noted that chiasmus had a capacity to influence interpretation that extended beyond the ornamental (Paul & Wiseman 2014, p.3). However, only from the mid-twentieth century, and particularly in the last few decades, has the study of chiasmus as a narrative form arisen and gained wide acceptance among biblical scholars. Of all publications on chiasmus, the vast majority of them pertain to religious texts, and this field of study is only growing[3].

In the 1970s, chiasmus emerged in literary studies. The form was first brought to attention by Paul de Man in *Allegories of Reading* (1979), and further investigated by Ralf Norrman in his book on Samuel Butler and his obsessive use of chiasmus in his writing and life (1986). While chiasmus has never faded completely from literary studies since de Man's introduction of the form, it has remained obscure. In modern rhetoric, however — where scholars draw on the combined resources of ancient rhetoric, biblical studies, and literary scholarship — chiasmus has garnered increasing attention. Although the majority contemporary research into chiasmus is undertaken by modern rhetoricians, the most recent

[2] Some scholars differentiate between chiasmus — symmetrical grammar — and antimetabole — repetition of exact words. However, beyond classical rhetoric, this distinction is lost, and so I shall use 'chiasmus' going forward for both. Collapsing this distinction is not uncommon in contemporary scholarship (see Paul 2014, 21).
[3] In the past five years (2016-2021), more than a hundred articles have been published relating to chiasmus in various journals dedicated to the study of religious texts.

research I draw on in this literature review is from literary studies scholars, and so I have arranged the section on modern rhetoric before literary studies.

2.2 Classical Rhetoric

Chiasmus has its origins in classical rhetoric, a practice-oriented discipline that aims to teach composition (Sloane, 2001). Although the field mainly focuses on the construction and delivery of argument, the principles of classical rhetoric can also be applied to other forms of writing, such as narration and exposition (Corbett, 1965, p.viii). Underpinning classical rhetoric is the assumption that some of the fundamentals of writing can be learned; rhetoric demystifies composition, identifying strategies that will best accomplish the text's purpose (Kennedy, 1984, p.3). Rhetoric offers a means of 'so ordering discourse as to produce an effect on the listener or reader' (Hochmuth Nichols, 1963) by providing techniques and explaining their effects.

Within rhetoric, these techniques are organised into more specific categories. Of relevance to my argument are rhetorical figures, which Quintilian defined as a 'departure from the simple and straightforward method of expression' (Chandler & Munday, 2011); these figures are devices that operate on the line level to affect the construction of a text. There are two kinds of figures: tropes and schemes. Tropes, such as metaphor, change the meaning of words (Buchanan, 2010). Schemes, on the other hand, 'merely rearrange' the order of words (Baldick, 2015), and are regarded as largely aesthetic, having little or no influence on the meaning of a text. Chiasmus belongs to this category, as it arranges phrases into a mirroring pattern; a chiasmus has two halves, and the second half is structurally opposite the first, as in AB-BA. For example, 'truth (A) is beauty (B), and beauty (B) truth (A)' (Keats, 1915).

The effect of chiasmus is to add ornament, emphasis through repetition, and package a message memorably. These qualities are reflected in the oft-quoted line from John F. Kennedy's inaugural address, 'Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country' (1961), which has endured for decades in the public consciousness. This excerpt also exemplifies chiasmus' capacity to create a dichotomy where one option is obviously preferred over the other, in the service of persuasion (Kuehne, 2018). Understanding that chiasmus has these effects means that a writer looking to create them could deliberately incorporate chiasmus into their prose and be reasonably sure of the outcome. However, chiasmus is far from the only rhetorical figure to add emphasis, and while the overt artifice might appeal to writers working in other modes, rare is the contemporary literary writer looking to disrupt their prose with such obvious construction. Thus, it is hardly surprising that chiasmus — as it is recognised by classical rhetoric — is not commonly found in fiction today.

Yet even as this version of chiasmus has faded from practice, the form has been rediscovered and repurposed by other disciplines. In the next section, I will discuss how chiasmus has been reframed by biblical studies as an exegetical tool and has evolved from only a matter of grammatical structure to a device for structuring entire narratives, progressing towards the narrative form which I seek to use in my own practice.

2.3 Biblical Studies

Chiasmus as it is described in classical rhetoric frequently occurs in biblical texts. For example, this excerpt from Genesis 9:6, identified by Dart (2004, 22):

Whoever sheds the blood of a human,

by a human shall that person's blood be shed.

The second half of the text is structurally opposite the first[4], and their meanings also stand distinct. Here, the chiasmus serves to neatly encapsulate the precept, and perhaps aid in memorisation — many religious texts were intended to be recited. For Kennedy, a rhetorician, the purpose of the chiasmus in the Bible is much the same as its purpose in any other example of rhetoric: 'the writers of the books… had a message they wanted to convey and sought to persuade an audience to believe it or to believe it more profoundly' (1984, p.3). In addition to this intent to persuade, many scholars also claim that chiasmus has thematic significance, as the cross pattern of the figure evokes the crucifixion (Bilbro 2013, p.130).

Biblical scholars have also discovered chiasmus in longer passages, such as this section from 1 John 3:9, identified and marked by McCoy (2003, p.21):

A - whoever has been born of God

B - does not sin

X - for His seed remains in him

B' - and he cannot sin

A' - because he has been born of God

This chiasmus is longer and more complex than the original AB-BA pattern. McCoy differentiates A and B from A' and B' to indicate that while the key words are repeated, the meaning is not; 'does not sin' and 'cannot sin', for example, do echo each other, but are not the same. The most significant difference from the first chiasmus is the addition of the X, a

[4] This excerpt is from the King James Version of the Bible. In the Hebrew version, the structure is more clearly chiastic: 'Whoever sheds the blood of man by man shall his blood be shed'.

central line that does not have a counterpart in the chiasmus. That it stands alone, unrepeated, emphasises or elevates the X line from the others. Biblical scholars call this the ‘crux’ or ‘turning point’ of a chiasmus, and it is thought to contain the key message or most important idea of a passage (Tomasino 2019, 106).

This notion of the crux reflects a shift in perspective from classical rhetoric to biblical studies. Biblical scholars have taken the idea that chiasmus can be used in practice to create emphasis and repurposed it for analysis, turning chiasmus into an exegetical tool. That is, if chiasmus can be used to emphasise important points, then identifying a chiasmus will also indicate the most important part of a text. This speaks to a shift in the objectives of the disciplines themselves; the impetus of biblical studies is not to teach composition, but to determine the intended meaning of religious texts. Chiasmus, imagined this way, seems especially suited to this goal. Yet interpretation using chiasmus is still *interpretation*; through the lens of a form is merely one way of making meaning from a text, and this way relies on the subjective work of the interpreter. Thus, this approach to determining intended meaning becomes increasingly complex — and contentious — when chiasmus is identified beyond single lines and passages, and instead as the underlying form of much greater parts of religious texts.

In 1941, Lund argued that there are larger examples of chiasmus in the New Testament: while individual verses are set against one another in close pairs, groups of these pairs can be arranged into a longer narrative with the same symmetrical structure. The pairs in these longer narratives are not exact inversions of phrasing, but rather, comprise repeating narrative elements, such as characters, settings, or conflicts. In response to Lund’s discovery, terminology evolved to distinguish between chiasmus in a short passage and a longer narrative. A ‘micro-chiasmus’ is a structure with two sets of parallel components (i.e.,

ABXB'A'), such as in McCoy's example above, and any structure with three or more sets of parallels is a 'macrochiasmus'[5].

For some time, the study of macrochiasmus in the New Testament was perceived as 'little more than the esoteric pursuit of a few enthusiasts' (Thomson 1995, pp.), but it has become less obscure since the work of scholars such as John Breck and Ian Thomson in the 1990s. The study of chiasmus has become increasingly popular; in his review of structures in the Old Testament, Dorsey (1999) finds more than 260 instances of chiasmus on varying scales, and since the 1990s, numerous similar identifications have been published.

This body of work uses both the terms 'macrochiasmus' and 'ring composition' relatively interchangeably, with the theory being functionally the same and any distinctions in labelling dependent upon the scholar in question. Both describe an ABCD…X…D'C'B'A' structure that can be expanded indefinitely, as long as it remains balanced (Paxson 2001, p.134). Just like parallelism, macrochiasmus is composed of pairs, where each half of the pair relates to the other half — in macrochiasmus, their relationship is one of opposition, but in ring composition, it may be one of similarity. While in parallelism, the pairs are side by side in a text, in macrochiasmus, they are structurally juxtaposed, or facing one another within the text (Douglas 2007, p.6). For example, at the beginning of a story in the book of Numbers, the people of Israel complain, wanting better food, and in anger, God sends a great fire; at the end of the story, when the people ask for water, God makes Moses strike water out of the rock (ibid.). Between these two points — A and A' — other echoes occur.

[5] This terminology is attributed to M. J. Dahood (1976), by D. E. Aune (2003, p.94) and S. E. Porter & J. T. Reed (1998), as well as others; however, I have not been able to recover a verifiable copy of this article. Some other scholars do not define the difference between micro- and macro- chiasmus clearly in their works, seemingly applying the terms ad hoc, while others use micro- to mean the line level (pairs of similar phrases), and macro- to mean the narrative level (pairs of similar events, characters, or concepts).

Just as micro-chiasmus is thought to help indicate the intended meaning of a small passage, macrochiasmus is thought to guide the interpretation of an entire narrative. Breck describes chiasmus as a 'hermeneutic key', and an answer to the question, 'How do we *read* the Bible?' (1994, p.7, emphasis in original). For Breck, 'exploring the *shape* or literary structure' (p.1, emphasis in original) is crucial for opening 'new and significant avenues towards understanding the author's message' (ibid.). As with micro-chiasmus, the unrepeated centre of a macrochiasmus — usually a story or scene — is thematically significant, given special importance as containing the main message or point (Schwartz, 2003, p.196), although the pairs also create meaningful contrasts (Welch & McKinlay, 1999). Douglas explains that the pairs have been 'selected and polished and carefully matched so as to guide the range of interpretation', and in this way, macrochiasmus 'controls meaning, it restricts what is said, and in doing so it expands meanings along channels it has dug' (2007, p.13).

Given the extent of what macrochiasmus is claimed to achieve in a text, it is unsurprising that it has its detractors. The primary criticism of macrochiasmus is that unlike micro-chiasmus, where the repetitions of words close together make the 'clearly intentional relationship between the component parts' very obvious (De Silva, 2008, p.346), macrochiasmus is more subjective. Therefore, the identification and analysis of a chiasmus can indicate more about the 'ingenuity of the commentator than about the intention of the original author' (Thomson, 1995, p.13), as exegetes might be driven to cherry-pick corresponding passages that would support their interpretation of the text (Frolov, 2016, p.17). De Silva refers to this as the 'danger of preferring form to content' and warns that too much focus on the structure of a text prevents it from being read 'accurately' (2008, p.344). Just like the proponents of chiasmus, its critics are concerned with precision and determining the intended meaning. The response has been to more tightly regulate the proofs required to argue the successful identification of a chiasmus (Welch & McKinlay, 1999; Boda, 1996).

However, if the claim of chiasmus being a tool for unearthing true intended meaning and absolute interpretation is set aside, then the text can be seen differently. Assis argues that chiasmus 'often directs the reader to the fact that the text is constructed, and not necessarily to the center of the structure' (2002, p.287); this sense of deliberate construction can then be transferred onto the characters, signalling that their actions are premeditated (p.288). Similarly, McMahon places less significance on the centre, and instead of using macrochiasmus to extract a specific, stable meaning, McMahon takes it as an invitation to read parts of the text together to generate new meanings. This approach focuses on reflection, seeking to '[deepen] participation in the work' (2006, p.42); read this way, biblical texts are 'meditatively inexhaustible' (ibid.).

This notion that chiasmus can shape meanings without prescribing a specific interpretation of a text is discussed further in modern rhetoric and literary studies. In these disciplines, scholarship primarily focuses on how chiasmus constructs ideas and themes, rather than using chiasmus as a decoding device. This shift in focus, while not a return to practice, makes that return to practice more simple: as a writer, I am not interested in using a form to prescribe a particular interpretation of my work; instead, I want to use heightened form as a way to explore particular themes in narrative.

2.4 Modern Rhetoric

Modern rhetoric primarily focuses on chiasmus as a figure of thought. That is, chiasmus not as a large and complex narrative form, but as a device that binds the two halves of a binary together, so that a reader understands them in the context of one another. Thus, much attention is given to how chiasmus facilitates reflexive interpretation. Unlike biblical studies, modern rhetoric does not suggest that chiasmus can prescribe an intended meaning; rather,

that chiasmus invites complex ways of thinking. As a result, chiasmus is applied as a means of conceptualising and analysing oppositional relationships, such as between the self and the other in ethnography (Wiseman, 2014), instead of reading texts.

This is the result of the perspective of the discipline more broadly, which frames rhetoric not as a compositional aid, but 'a process by which humans interpret themselves and their world' (Sloane, 2001). In light of this progression, many figures are being revisited and re-evaluated. Metaphor receives the most attention, although other tropes have similarly been elevated as having a special capacity to create truth, notably including metonymy, synecdoche, and irony (Tell, 2004). Schemes, on the other hand, were largely dismissed as ornamental even by scholars of modern rhetoric until recently, although recent research has begun to explore how schemes might shape meaning, with chiasmus prominent among these (Paul, 2014, p.21).

Norrman attributes this dismissal of chiasmus as a solely structural device to scholars not accounting for translation (1986, pp.2-3). Chiasmus originated as a device in Greek and Latin — both synthetic languages, where subject and object are denoted by case. English, however, is an analytical language that indicates subject and object through structure; therefore, chiasmus 'inevitably affects both form and content' even on the line level, and conceptually, the figure is 'something philosophical or psychological' (1986, p.2). When understood this way, chiasmus has a significant capacity to make and express meaning (Paul & Wiseman, 2014, p.6).

This comparison is intended not only to emphasise chiasmus' capacity as a figure of thought but refers also to the similarity of their functions. In metaphor, two distinct terms are brought into juxtaposition so that the reader is invited to interpret them in relation to each other (Sapir, 1977, pp.7-9). The mind moves between the two terms, connecting them in an

‘indefinitely large number of ways’ (Richards, 1936, p.125), and the same can be said of the two terms in chiasmus; the mind moves between the two opposing halves, locking them at once together and apart. According to Strecker, while metaphor demonstrates a relationship of similarity, creating a ‘stabilising’ effect, chiasmus is ‘destabilising’ (2014, p.77), describing an oppositional or dissonant relationship.

In classical rhetoric, chiasmus can be used to package a dichotomy, and clearly indicate a preference for one choice over the other, such as in the adage ‘eat to live, don’t live to eat’ that I referred to earlier. However, chiastic contradictions are not necessarily constructed to be resolved; chiasmus can create a ‘sustained presentation of alterity’ (De Groote, 2018, p.207). Thus, chiasmus is very useful in situations where opposition needs to be represented without being resolved, reduced, or overcome, such as when mapping difference within identity (Tyler, 2014).

This sustained alterity and constant oscillation back and forth between two terms generates processes of thinking, in particular lending itself to reflexive interpretation. Hariman explains chiasmus as directing the reader to ‘dual apprehension’: it both says and shows (2014, p.50), as the key ideas within the text are played out through the form. This is particularly valuable when ‘saying’ is inadequate to represent a concept, or when what needs to be evoked or communicated cannot be clearly expressed (ibid.). For example, Petrarch’s poetic claim that ‘I am already wearied of thinking of how my thoughts never weary of you’ (Petrarch, 2002)[6]. Here, the mirroring of the chiasmus forms a kind of loop, driving the reader’s mind around and around, just as the narrator is caught in the endless echoing of an idea. While the words express the feeling, the form helps to evoke the feeling.

[6] As with examples from Hebrew translations vs. the KJV, other translations of this quote are more clearly chiastic. For example, ‘I am tired of thinking about how thinking of you never tires me’.

From a practitioner's perspective, the findings of modern rhetoric are very valuable. The idea of chiasmus as generative of ways of thinking and creating sustained alterity, rather than prescribing a single stable, intended meaning is an exciting one. Further, Hariman's notion of saying as well as showing is fascinating and particularly interesting to me as a practitioner. If the form shows what the narrative says but does not *prescribe* what the narrative says — or how it makes meaning — then there is more creative flexibility than indicated by biblical studies. This is discussed further by literary scholars, who focus not on the intended meaning of a text, but how chiasmus generates and plays out a narrative's themes.

2.5 Twentieth Century Literary Theory

Much of the theory I discussed in the section above is indebted to scholarship from the field of literary studies. The idea that chiasmus as a device is of greater scale and significance in narrative than imagined by classical rhetoricians was first introduced to literary theory by the deconstructionists. Given deconstruction's focus on internal contradictions and avoidance of stable meaning (Bouissac, 1998), the appeal of chiasmus is not as an exegetical tool, pointing like a compass to some important part of a text, but in its capacity to shape theme through shaping structure. Paul de Man originated this study by observing a conceptual chiasmus in Rilke's poetry (1979), one that represented the relationship between two opposing ideas. For example, positioning language and reality in a chiasmus invites reflection on their dynamic; language is our way of understanding reality but can never encapsulate reality as it is. The two can never merge and binding them together in chiasmus draws attention to both their interrelatedness and the impossibility of their synthesis.

Just as biblical scholars are preoccupied with what is at the centre of a chiastic structure, de Man is interested in what is absent at the centre of the figure. He argues that the impossibility of synthesis is at the heart of chiasmus, drawing thesis and antithesis into opposition — for if synthesis were possible, then there would be no opposition, and thus no chiasmus. Accordingly, chiasmus represents the 'emptiness and lack of identity that resides at the heart of things' (1979, p.37), and necessarily evokes negative themes like fragility, death, destruction, and the insatiability of desire (p.50). De Man speculates that Rilke was fascinated by chiasmus and selected these themes accordingly to fit the figure. Despite viewing Rilke's use of chiasmus as deliberate, de Man does not conclude that Rilke is attempting to restrict the meaning of his poems; rather, chiasmus is framed as generative of concepts and themes and reflection, from which meaning can be made.

De Man's characterisation laid the foundation for how chiasmus would be regarded in literary studies, including establishing textual analysis as the method of study. Ralf Norrman, who published the first book-length study on chiasmus (1986), continues to explore the relationship between author and figure, suggesting that his subject, Samuel Butler, had a chiastic mindset that translated into his work. Like de Man, Norrman describes the central absence of chiasmus as evoking sterility, death, and destruction (p.20), but also suggests that the impossibility of synthesis activates a longing for it — a longing that the figure simultaneously frustrates (p.23). Subsequent scholars have used this effect to help identify chiasmus in other texts, assuming this sense of tragedy to be inherent in the figure (such as Bronzwaer, 1991).

However, as Paul points out, these themes are a fascination of modernism, not a function of the figure (2014, pp.31-32). Paul responds to similar suggestions that chiasmus

was used by Proust and Joyce[7], arguing it is more likely that these poets began with these themes and developed forms that reflected them than vice versa. Figures of thought 'arise naturally from our ordinary, unconscious attempts to make sense of ourselves and the physical world' (Gibbs, 1995, p.434), and as modernism views the world as fraught and filled with loss, it follows that modernist art 'strives for unity, turning around an absent centre or glimpsing a dim foundation which disappears as soon as you look at it straight' (Eagleton, 2000, p.35). Many literary scholars have focused on examples of chiasmus discovered in modernist literature, and this narrow sample size makes it difficult to determine whether chiasmus *always* has a specific effect, or whether chiasmus *can* create a specific effect, and has been repeatedly used to that effect within the sample. I argue that the latter is the case, given that other scholars who have examined different texts characterise chiasmus differently.

While de Man and his inheritors primarily focus on conceptual chiasmus in poetry, other scholars are investigating macrochiasmus, particularly in classical works such as epic poetry. Unlike in biblical studies, macrochiasmus is not considered a solely structural device; Niles writes that 'one cannot conceive of structural phenomena in literature that are devoid of aesthetic implications' (1979, p.931). In a study of macrochiasmus in *Beowulf*, Niles observes that the repeated alternation between opposites within the text creates a sense of balance or transience; when 'human success and human failure are… an inseparable pair… joy does not occur apart from sorrow, creation apart from dissolution' (ibid.), then the emphasis is on the inevitability of change: for the worse, for the better, for the worse again. According to Engel, this ceaseless alternation between states 'bespeaks an inclination to represent the disquieting turbulence of human passion… even while exhibiting a longing for, some higher order' (2009, p.2). As a reader encounters opposites and echoes, chiasmus inspires reflection on

[7] The works of Proust and Joyce are the subjects of significant and diverse research; evidently, not all scholars agree that their novels indicate the presence of chiasmus, much less an intentional use of it.

previous elements of the story, allowing ‘new and richer meaning to be inferred and read back into the whole’ (ibid.). Neither Niles nor Engel views chiasmus as negative, but rather, like Hariman, as a device that invites reflexive interpretation.

This reflexivity constitutes part of the experience of the text. While figures of thought more generally represent our attempts to make sense of the world, chiasmus at once makes and comments on an attempt, foregrounding the process of sense-making. Quint (2011) studies chiasmus in Virgil’s *The Aeneid* and explains that by distinguishing two sides of a war only to undercut these distinctions with a reciprocal brutality, ‘the epic stages the simultaneous attempt and failure of thought and figure to make sense out of the violence that is its subject’ (p.295). This attempt and failure results from efforts to reconcile a paradox, as the text critiques and valorises Rome, producing a ‘double effect… it is not either/or but both/and’ (Quint, 2018, p.ix): a ‘final stability’ cannot be reached (Hardie, 1993, p.58). This repetition and reinforcement of paradox serves to sustain alterity, but also to ‘aesthetically distance the poem from — and thus invite reflection upon — its own making of form and meaning’ (Quint, 2018, p.25). In its refusal to resolve contradiction, the text ‘asks the reader to *think twice*’ (emphasis in original, 2018, p.xiii). Quint’s analysis presupposes that Virgil anticipated these effects and used chiasmus deliberately to create them (ibid.).

Scholarship from across literary studies demonstrates the versatility of chiasmus. While earlier scholars assumed that chiasmus generated specifically tragic themes, subsequent research has revealed that chiasmus is more versatile. Chiasmus lends itself to thematic ideas of incompatibility and insatiability, but also to transience and doubleness, as well as potentially many more. Although chiasmus as a narrative form is constraining — particularly in that to facilitate these effects, the narrative requires symmetry — the form does not limit the writer to only evoking certain themes.

2.6 Conclusions

This literature review has allowed me to explore in-depth the features and functions of chiasmus. From this exploration, I conclude that the key features required to create the form are: 1) opposing ideas that are 2) arranged structurally opposite one another, with the number of possible idea sets being theoretically infinitely expandable. In practice, however, the more sets of opposites that are within the narrative — whether due to increased narrative detail or length — the more unwieldy the narrative will be to manage for the writer. These key features facilitate the primary functions of chiasmus: that the form invites reflexive interpretation and can 'show' what the narrative 'says'.

Establishing these features and functions guides my negotiation. I have altered the form of chiasmus for my own use by incorporating additional features without compromising the existing key features that are required to achieve the form's function. As I discuss further in my reflection in Chapter 4, I struggled to accommodate the necessary symmetry in an ongoing narrative. Thus, I separated my novella into several shorter stories, which allowed me to work in smaller, self-contained units, and gave me more flexibility when crafting the thematic pairs that comprise the chiasmus. This segmentation of the novella also allowed me to incorporate polyphony and nonlinearity. These further supported the form 'showing' what the narrative 'says', as the novella's themes centre on the difficulties of human connection and intergenerational disconnection.

Before I discuss my novella any further, I want to consider the struggles I experienced when attempting to write it. After I had completed my literature review on chiasmus, I had an extensive understanding of the form and was confident in my ability to use it. However, I found the use of form as constraint restrictive and stifling, and it was difficult to produce any

creative work at all; I felt that I understood why chiasmus had been lost to practitioners. This sense of being trapped and stuck in my own writing awakened my curiosity: I began to wonder *why* I was experiencing such trouble using form as constraint and sought to develop a solution. In the next chapter, I discuss both contemporary interest in reading and resistance to writing with form and constraints and establish how taking the approach of negotiation allows a practitioner to make the best use of form as constraint in contemporary creative writing practice.

Chapter 3
NEGOTIATING FORM AND CONSTRAINT

In this chapter, I argue the usefulness of negotiation to contemporary practitioners. I do this by establishing the current concerns with the use of form as constraint and exploring the origins of these concerns, before demonstrating how negotiation offers a means for the practitioner to manage them. Firstly, I focus on form; contemporary writers and readers have a preference for 'authentic' uses of heightened form — that is, not the incorporation of heightened form for the sake of it, but because the form is essential to the narrative. I then consider common fears that while broad constraints may initially be generative, ongoing constraints are restrictive and stifle creativity and originality. I position negotiation as an approach that addresses these concerns. Negotiation centralises authenticity and prevents form as constraint from becoming stifling by making form flexible the way that narrative is. Forms are an essential part of how a narrative expresses themes and ideas, and so as these themes and ideas evolve during drafting, negotiation facilitates the evolution of the form as well. At the same time, the constraint of form can be generative, and so evolving the form often opens new possibilities within a narrative. Beyond this, negotiation involves changing how a practitioner uses a form in their practice — whether they plan out a narrative to fit the form or write freely and consider their relationship to form as they progress. I argue that the act of negotiating is itself a creative practice, as the practitioner discovers and builds potential within form and narrative alike.

3.1 Heightened Form

According to Lea, the 'novel that challenges traditional formal conventions has always been marginalised… but it has become increasingly so in recent decades' (2017, p.14). Similarly, James Wood describes the literary world as 'strongly infected by simplicity, presentism, blankness and a love affair with the cinematic', and writes that the contemporary story 'only aspires to be a quick savage swipe of the cloth across reality' (2000, para 10). Wood's criticism centres on the manifesto, *All Hail the New Puritans*, which lays out a set of writing 'rules', such as avoiding all devices of voice and poetic license in all its forms, in service of creating a narrative that feels 'real' (2000). The dominance of these pared-back stories results in what Masters calls our current 'time of linguistic plainness' (2018, p.1); Masters attributes this 'recessionary mood' to a 'prevailing minimalist sensibility' (ibid.).

To understand this minimalist sensibility of the contemporary literary landscape, I return to the modernist era, when form was central and essential to creative practice. Modernist writing experimented with form, questioning the dominant formal conventions, and crossing the presumed boundaries of writing as a discipline (Wilson, 2007). According to Armstrong, this play with form was driven by restlessness: modernist writers saw their world shattered by war and felt that existing modes of expression failed to capture their experiences (2014). In response, they sought to make writing new (Pound, 1934). This project involved open endings, unique forms, and an overthrowing of 'traditional forms… moving towards fragmentation, juxtaposition of images from widely scattered times and cultures, complex intertextual allusion and patterning, and personal discourse, often purposefully obscure' (Birch & Hooper, 2012).

Over time, these heightened forms became increasingly particular and obscure, resulting in a sense that these forms were being used as a show of originality and uniqueness,

rather than because they contributed much to the narrative. As Miller points out, 'late modernist writing was not particularly successful in either critical or commercial terms, and each work tended towards formal singularity' (1999, p.13). Modernists came to be criticised as 'a generation of authors who esteemed form to the near-exclusion of other considerations' (Seshagiri, 2006, p.488). Such privileging of form overwhelmed the work itself, and as a result, writing with form has 'fallen into disrepute' (Lewis, 2020, p.4). Modernism continues to have a significant influence on both practice and theory (Stringer, 1996), and a part of this influence is a colouring of how form is perceived. For many practitioners, the use of form reflects a value of style over substance; Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Richard Wilbur, for example, says that he wants his students to begin from the 'urge' to write, rather than becoming 'clever executors of formal problems' (qtd. Donnelly 2011, p.84), implying that the use of form as a starting point is somehow artificial. This sense is perhaps amplified by the fact that, in the wake of the late modernists, many uses of form were ironic or self-referential, designed to draw attention to the construction of a narrative as a text (Funk, 2015, p.31).

Despite this perception of form, contemporary literature is not entirely devoid of novels that play with formal conventions; these novels are still a minority within the broader literary landscape, but are 'acquiring new force and relevance' (Mitchell, 2015, p.12), and are often well-regarded[8]. Of those writers who do make use of heightened form, many consistently return to it, and incorporate heightened form into multiple works (Calder, 2021)[9]. Both novels that I discuss in the next chapter examples of critically and commercially successful novels written by authors who have previously written with heightened form: *A*

[8] Examples not otherwise discussed in this thesis include George Saunders' *Lincoln on the Bardo* (2017), Martin Amis' *Time's Arrow* (1991), and David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2004). Like my chosen case studies, these novels also play with narrative time and perspective to explore their themes. Due to word count limitations, I am unable to similarly analyse them here, although they certainly fit within this discussion.
[9] Authors such as J. M. Coetzee, Margaret Atwood, Adam Johnson, and the aforementioned Saunders, Amis, and Mitchell all repeatedly return to heightened form across their oeuvres.

Visit from the Goon Squad (2010) won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the National Book Critics Circle Award, among others, and made several bestseller lists; *How to be both* (2014) was shortlisted for the Man Booker and Folio prizes, in addition to receiving several other awards. I attribute their success, in part, to what Funk terms an 'authentic' use of form (2015) — that is, form that contributes to the construction of the narrative as a narrative, rather than the perception of the narrative as a text. As I explore in my case studies, these forms work to realise the novel's themes; they do not serve to mock the text or deliberately undermine verisimilitude. These authentic forms facilitate processes of meaning making.

To be authentic, a form must be essential to the narrative, rather than an imposed feature. That is, the form cannot be prioritised over the narrative, but serves a function as a part of the story. Therefore, it is unsurprising that many authentic forms and formal features emerge organically as these narratives are written. For example, in Marcus Zusak's best-selling novel *The Book Thief* (2005), there are several distinct formal features: the novel is separated into parts as well as chapters, and within these chapters, there are regular interjections of lists and observations, centralised and bolded so as to be discrete from the rest of the narrative, even as they are a part of it. These interjections occur at irregular intervals, arising as the occasion demands. These formal features undoubtedly contribute to the realisation of the narrative as a narrative rather than the narrative as a text, and they manifested as Zusak drafted the novel; he did not begin by drawing inspiration from forms, instead gathering ideas from stories his parents told him about their childhoods (Stillman, 2012, para 3).

However, when using form as constraint, the form is the starting point, not something that arises naturally over the course of practice. It is important to consider how starting from form affects the use of form: if form arises naturally from a narrative, this is because it has a

role in realising the narrative; if form precedes narrative, then the situation is more complex. As I established earlier in my discussion of the late modernists, if a writer uses a heightened form simply to prove it can be done, the result often feels artificial. Essentially, for an authentic use of form when using form as constraints, a narrative must arise naturally from the form. As Jennifer Egan puts it,

> …the challenge of using a radical structural approach is not "Hmmm... how can I create work that can somehow be squeezed into this unconventional structure?" but the opposite: how can I create work that requires such a structure, and can't be written any other way? That necessity is critical — otherwise you're barely making it work, and it would work better written conventionally. (Dinnen, 2016, para 34)

What is required to ensure that the use of form as constraint is authentic is an approach which allows the narrative to arise from the form, and the form and the narrative to develop together. In 3.3, I discuss in detail how negotiation responds to this need; first, however, I consider constraints, to review the additional requirements that negotiation must address.

3.2 Constraints and Creativity

In the previous section, I considered how using form as constraints might be unappealing to writers on the grounds that this approach would artificially impose form on the narrative. In this section, I discuss how constraints can raise similar concerns, in that they impose on writing practice. Contemporary writers tend towards a preference for organic composition — that is, to begin from a blank page, with no limits or expectations around what they might write. Here, I discuss the origins of that preference and changing ideals of creativity that affect perceptions of constraints.

Earlier, I referred to the poet Richard Wilbur, and how he encourages his students to write from the 'urge' — that is, the desire to write about something in particular, rather than to meet any kind of external demand or expectation. I suggest that this 'urge' is a notion inherited from writers during the Romantic period who were vocal about their conceptions of their own creativity. Many of these writers felt that creative work arose from 'an invisible source of emotion within the poet' and did not 'draw from resources external to the poet' (MacFarlane, 2007, p.39). The writing process began with what Wordsworth described as 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings' (1802/2017). This perspective prompted a dislike of imitation or replication (Abrams 1953, p.102), which Millen contextualises within the Romantic distrust of industrialisation (2010, p.93). As industrialisation facilitated an unprecedented production of identical artefacts, art came to be positioned as a counterpoint; Romantics felt that 'good art avoided mechanical restriction and its forms and structures were determined by the sentiment and feeling that impelled it' (Slater, 2014, p.179). Romantics elevated the unique and strived for complete originality. Thus, Kant's definition of artistic genius is 'a *talent* for producing that for which no definite rule can be given; it is not a mere aptitude for what can be learnt by a rule' (Bernard, 1790/1951, p.133, emphasis in original).

This perspective is no longer dominant; the literary world has been through several seismic ideological shifts since Wordsworth and Kant. Creativity is now perceived differently, as something 'attained through play and exploration' (McCrory & Heywood 2021, p.1); the role of the external in stimulating and shaping narratives — particularly the influences of culture and identity — is recognised by, and arguably central to, contemporary literary scholarship. The surge of creative writing programs at universities (Donnelly 2011, p.9) indicates a prevailing sense that at least some aspects of creative writing can be taught, and that writers be stimulated or trained to work on cue, rather than waiting for inspiration to naturally occur. However, the echoes of the Romantic perspective still linger; this is reflected

in Wilbur's sense that writing should in some way arise from an organic, internal desire, and from a persistent idea that, while writing can be taught, there is some innate quality that distinguishes some writers from others (Monk, 2016, p.93-96) — that is, there are some 'born writers' who naturally exceed the others with significantly less guidance (Weldon, 2009, p.174).

This compromise between old and new perspectives on creativity is evident in the use of constraints in contemporary practice. As I explained in my introduction, constraints are frequently used in classrooms as a pedagogical tool, offering students a starting point. Moreau and Dahl find that without constraints, a person is usually inclined to do something familiar so as to avoid uncertainty; constraints help to diminish that uncertainty while still inviting the person beyond the familiar (2005, p.15). According to Boase-Beier and Holman, 'creativity is often intimately tied to constraint, it is a response to it, it is enhanced by it… Constraints in this sense can be seen as one of the main sources of creativity' (2016, p.6). The constraints in classrooms are designed to invite students to think beyond what they might ordinarily write about, but are open enough that within a group, each student will have a distinct and original story. Thus, the constraints are intended to offer some support, but not much, lest the task be considered prescriptive. The prospect of producing students who in turn produce homogenous output is currently a prevalent concern for tertiary writing programs (Bishop & Starkey 2006, p.198); accordingly, constraints are typically quite broad and open to many interpretations.

However, unique work can also be produced with highly specific constraints. The Oulipo, a collective of writers dedicated to constraints-based composition, focus on creating unique and distinct rules for themselves, and then adhering to them. Such a constraint might be that each sentence in a story must be longer than the last, or for the last word of every page

to link together in another, shorter narrative. Roubaud, a key theorist and Oulipo member, writes that ‘the ideal constraint generates one text only’ (1981, p.63). This notion of ‘one text only’ evokes Miller’s observation that late modernist texts ‘tended towards formal singularity’. Many readers do not respond well to texts with such specific constraints for the same reasons they do not enjoy formal singularity: it creates a sense of artificiality (Andrews 2003, p.224).

This use of intense, ongoing constraints is not popular among contemporary practitioners; constraints invented by the Oulipo have yet to be adopted and used extensively by more mainstream writers (ibid.). I attribute this lack of popularity to the restrictive nature of such constraints conflicting with the ideals of organic composition I have established — in practice, intensive constraints chafe for most writers, who are accustomed to working more freely. Indeed, the Oulipo consider their work to be a ‘critique of the traditional notion of *inspiration*’ (Baetens 2010, p.56; emphasis in original) because it is not founded in a valuing of spontaneity (Baetens 2008, p.271). The work of Oulipian writers, and similar adherents to severe constraints, is something of an exception that proves the rule: evidently, such intense constraints can be observed, but most practitioners have no interest in observing them.

When taking all this into account, the complex role of constraints in contemporary practice becomes clear. On one hand, broad constraints are considered generative, and can be beneficial to practice, as they invite a writer to think in new ways. On the other hand, most writers are uncomfortable with intense constraints, as these encroach on the entrenched belief that freedom is essential for creativity. Using form as constraint falls into this second category: in order for a form to be legible in the final text, the writer must consider that form throughout the creative process, and a form is usually more prescriptive than prompt word or other broad constraints. Thus, for using form as constraint to be viable for most contemporary

practitioners, an approach is required that allows constraints to be generative without these constraints stifling the development of the narrative, even as they remain present.

Negotiation offers such an approach. It is not the case that constraints must be either set aside after the initial planning phase, or staunchly maintained throughout the writing process: they can grow along with the narrative itself. Negotiation involves adjusting constraints in response to narrative and writing practice; this means that if constraints that were once generative start to impose on the development of the narrative or on the writer's work, then these constraints can be modified. These modifications will affect how the form constructs meaning.

3.3 Negotiation as Creative Practice

When I first attempted to use form as constraint, I found myself stuck: these constraints were demanding and limiting at once, and I felt that I had no space to develop my narrative organically. Initially, I tried to navigate this problem by continuously changing the story I was telling; I imagined that it was a case of having to create the perfect narrative, and then everything would fall into place, and my difficulties would end. After discarding numerous drafts, I realised I was not making progress by adjusting the narrative, and I would have to adjust the constraints instead. At the time, this felt like a failure — I was unable to meet the constraints, and was forced to simplify things for myself. However, upon wider reading, I discovered that modifying constraints is not an uncommon practice in creative disciplines where constraints are more common, such as poetry. In these cases, constraints can be modified for several reasons, but frequently, these modifications are driven by a desire to experiment with introducing new elements to established forms. For example, Healy writes that he works against his poetry students' belief that form is 'confined to a limited range of

rigid categories bequeathed to us from the past', and instead teaches that forms can be 'reinvented, usually by loosening the given formal constraints or by combining them with unexpected new elements' (2009, p.60). Notably, in Healy's case, these modifications are made at the beginning of the creative process; in negotiation, as I define it, involves modifying form as required throughout a project.

Negotiation occurs naturally in creative practice. The modernist boundary-pushing I discussed earlier in this chapter stands as evidence of this. Where there are limits, rules, or restrictions, practitioners are often driven to experiment with breaking them or adjusting them. As Boden puts it,

> … nothing is more natural than 'playing around' to gauge the potential – and the limits – of a given way of thinking… nothing is more natural than trying, successfully or not, to modify the current thinking-style so as to make thoughts possible which were not possible before. To put it another way, nothing is more natural than the progression from exploring a given style of thinking to transforming it, in some degree. (2004, p.58)

Negotiation is the act of transforming, in some degree, the constraints that comprise a form, and therefore also the form itself. However, the adjustments made to form during negotiation do not only serve to accommodate the writer's desire to escape rigidity but introduce new creative elements and realise unexplored potential within the narrative. These adjustments can facilitate new, unexpected effects, and these effects can in turn spur the narrative to progress in different ways or affect how it constructs meaning. These adjustments and their effects often cannot be anticipated at the start of the project; it is only as the work evolves and changes that these opportunities present.

For example, in writing *Especially Heinous* (2013), Carmen Maria Machado found that the form she was initially using as a constraint was too restrictive (Kane, 2017), and so she made adjustments. She describes the process below:

> I looked up the little capsule descriptions of the episodes, and I was trying to manipulate them to make them surreal, but it was too restrictive. Then I realized that all the titles are one-word titles. And what if I just use the titles? I put only the titles all in a row, and then just started writing and imagining Benson and Stabler. Something about having the titles to hang onto—I was able to swing through them like monkey bars. I wrote the story, surprisingly, in a pretty straightforward way (para 23).

Here, the adjustments that Machado made enabled her to write more naturally and gave her more flexibility within the narrative. Manipulating only the first few episode summaries means that the reader is able to recognise and understand the form from the outset, and thus relaxing the form later to only the titles does not diminish the form's effect. However, as I noted in my introduction, relaxing the form creates a *new* effect: as the protagonists Benson and Stabler become more and more disconnected from reality, the episode summaries vary wildly in length (some are several pages long; others are only a few words), deviating more and more significantly from the initial neat capsule form, which evokes the characters' unravelling. If Machado had persisted with her original idea for the form, not only would she have felt that her practice was restricted, but this effect would also have never come about.

3.4 Negotiation: A Process

Negotiation is a creative process, and I consider it to be most effective when it is personalised to the practitioner and their project. As I explore further in my case studies, negotiation looks

different on a case-to-case basis: for some writers, negotiation primarily takes place early in the project; for others, most negotiation happens towards the end, in the redrafting process; in writing this project, I negotiated with my form over several drafts, making different modifications each time and responding to their effects. In this section, I outline the steps I use when negotiating with form as constraint. These steps would be applicable to other practitioners, with some alterations to suit their practice.

1) Negotiation begins with selecting or inventing a form. This may involve repurposing a nonfictional form, revitalising a lost form, or creating a new form. For example, chiasmus[10]. Beginning with this step ensures that form is centralised within practice.

2) This form is considered as a constraint, like a prompt, to generate themes and ideas. For example, as a form, chiasmus describes two opposites that deepen one another thematically, but are kept apart structurally. To me, this evokes relationship dynamics, and the ways in which unbridgeable distance between people can reveal them. This step is essential, because if the narrative does not emerge from the form, then form risks serving only as ornament, or intruding on rather than shaping the narrative.

3) The writer begins crafting a narrative that uses this form and these themes and ideas. For example, I began writing about a pair of teenage best friends, both would-be Olympians, and the collapse of their adolescent intimacy. Through this step, the writer experiences the form as a constraint, and learns how the form feels and functions as a constraint: Does the form impose on the narrative? Do the ideas generated from the form work on the page?

[10] I selected chiasmus as the subject of my negotiation out of personal interest. I had previously encountered a discussion of the form several years before and was fascinated by the concept; this fascination drove me to explore chiasmus in greater detail, both from a critical and creative perspective.

4) As the narrative progresses, these themes and ideas may lead in unexpected directions, or result in new ideas that the form seems to resist; alternatively, in practice, the form might be more restrictive than anticipated. The practitioner may alter the features of the form in order to allow these developments and accommodations. For example, I wanted to explore different points in the characters' lives, and I found that writing a linear narrative that fit the symmetry requirements of chiasmus was too limiting. Thus, I modified the form so that the novella comprised five separate, interlinked stories, rather than one ongoing story. This new flexibility meant that the symmetry requirement invited ideas rather than stifling them, and further facilitated my exploration of the characters' pasts and futures. Through this step, the writer is able to ensure that form as constraint remains generative.

5) These altered features of the form may in turn function as generative constraints, themselves encouraging new ideas and shaping narrative meaning in new ways. In my case, separating the novella into distinct stories also led me to introduce different narrators. This offered a new approach for exploring dynamics between characters and constructing the central thematic ideas around human connection — different narrators for different parts means that the reader must make connections between characters across as well as within the stories. This step is the most significant, as here, negotiation is creative practice, revealing new potential within the form that could not be accessed through rigid adherence to all constraints.

6) This cycle repeats as the form and narrative are refined. In practice, a writer might only make one or two small modifications to the form, or they may make dozens. Previously in this chapter, I have mentioned that negotiation ought to be 'continuous'. However, I do not mean by this that a writer must constantly adjust the constraints of the form — rather, that

form should not be regarded as set or finalised at any point during the drafting process, lest opportunities for evolution, and thus new creative possibilities, be missed.

3.5 Conclusions

Contemporary writers have concerns around incorporating heightened form and constraint into their creative practice. I suggest that a general hesitance to use heightened form is the legacy of late modernism, during which time many works made use of increasingly singular forms, which resulted in obscure texts that were in turn critically and commercially unsuccessful. Similarly, readers often find narratives written using intense constraints to be artificial, and writers perceive these constraints as imposing on the freedom of creativity, although broader constraints are considered generative. I propose negotiation as a means of addressing these concerns, as negotiating involves focusing on how form contributes to the narrative meaning and adjusting constraints to accommodate the development of that meaning. I also argue that in addition to accommodating writers' processes, negotiating with form can realise new potential for meaning making. In the next chapter, I explore the process of negotiation — and its creative potential — in practice by examining two case studies.

Chapter 4
CASE STUDIES

In the previous chapter, I established the purpose of negotiation and its role in both accommodating the writer's practice and realising new potential within the narrative form. In this chapter, I seek to extend on this discussion by presenting two examples of negotiation in practice. My aim here is to demonstrate that negotiation is an effective and productive approach to using form as constraint, and to emphasise that negotiation reveals new potential in these forms. I have chosen *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010) by Jennifer Egan and *How to be both* (2014) by Ali Smith. I selected these novels as they are contemporary examples of heightened form in literature[11], and they have been both critically and commercially successful, demonstrating the capacity for heightened forms to reach a wide readership. Egan and Smith are also open about their creative processes, and their reflections on their own practice reveal how they negotiated with form as constraint. In considering two examples, in addition to my brief overview of *Especially Heinous* in Chapter 3, I demonstrate the diversity of negotiation, and the different ways writers can negotiate with using form and with form within narrative.

4.1 *A Visit from the Goon Squad* by Jennifer Egan

A Visit from the Goon Squad (2010) is Jennifer Egan's answer to the question, 'What would a contemporary novel about time look like?' (Sanders, 2011). This question arose during a

[11] Neither of these novels is definitively chiastic. Different scholars use different terms for their respective forms. *A Visit from the Goon Squad* can be considered a 'composite novel' or 'short story cycle', as it is a text composed of shorter, interrelated narratives. *How to be Both* can be considered a diptych, as it comprises two mirrored halves. However, the majority of discussions simply refer to both as 'novels', and discuss their forms in the particular.

period of Egan's life when she was reading Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* (1913-1927; Sturrock, 2003) and watching HBO's *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), a graphic modern-day mob drama (Itzkoff, 2011). Their influences intermingle in *Goon Squad*: as in Proust, the novel is composed of a large cast of characters, all of whom undergo both sudden and gradual reversals of social standing at the hands of time (Cowart, 2015, p.244), and time itself has taken on the violence characteristic of *The Sopranos*, becoming the eponymous 'goon' (p.134). In addition to the violence of time, *Goon Squad* also explores how time can be cyclical or spiral, contesting 'the notion that time flows in a straight line towards some vague, distant endpoint' by representing history as 'a sequence of similar recurring events' (Moling, 2016, p.72). Form is essential to how *Goon Squad* is able to construct time as a thematic subject; it is through the form that the novel is able to play out the ideas about time that are expressed within the narrative.

Goon Squad is composed of thirteen stories; these stories are self-contained, but all overlap, featuring shared characters and places. Each chapter has a different narrator, and each is set at a different point in time. These narrators are all connected — most are relatives, colleagues, friends, or lovers — and pass in and out of one another's lives. The novel's first two narrators, and arguably central characters (as they appear most often), are Sasha and Bennie: Sasha is a woman with a traumatic past who struggles with her kleptomania; she is, at one time, the assistant of Bennie, a washed-up record producer who has lost his passion for his career. The various chapters reveal parts of their pasts and futures, as well as those of the people who surround them. These chapters are arranged nonlinearly.

Egan drew this form from several sources. While writing a short story, she became curious about a peripheral character, and decided to centralise them in a new story; this notion of exploring the periphery itself came from watching television, and observing how in

later seasons of a series, characters who were once minor often become more significant in the story. Egan recounts in interviews that she created the heightened form of the novel by adhering to three 'rules' that she set herself — that is, she used form as constraint. These rules are as follows: each chapter had to have a different narrator; each chapter had to stand on its own as a complete story, independent from the others; and each chapter had to be technically distinct, in terms of tone, mood, and style (Ohlson, 2011, para 30-31). Negotiating with these rules involved changing the narrative, rather than the rules themselves; in several cases — such as a failed attempt to write a chapter as epic poetry — Egan chose to discard a draft rather than adjust the constraints. This is significant as these constraints facilitate the novel's polyphony and diverse stylistics, but the other key feature of *Goon Squad*'s form, nonlinearity, is the product of another instance of negotiation.

At first, *Goon Squad* was ordered as a reverse chronology. Egan was inspired by the form of the concept album, which is 'built around an idea of one story told in ways that are really diverse' (Ohlson, 2011, para 46); like a concept album, *Goon Squad* has a Side A and a Side B, and the individual chapters serve as tracks. The central chapter of the novel is titled 'A to B', and acts as a kind of transition. Egan's initial plan was to arrange the chapters so that Side A chapters took place post-9/11, and Side B chapters took place pre-9/11. However, Egan felt that this structure ultimately 'lacked combustion', as the order seemed to 'dictate' the narrative too much; when Egan let go of this constraint and arranged the sides of the 'album' more intuitively, 'the time payoff was bigger' (Ohlson, 2011, para 39). Just as with the form of *Especially Heinous*, negotiating with form revealed new creative potential.

The nonlinear form of *Goon Squad* enables the novel to 'show' what it 'says' about time. By arranging particular chapters far apart in the novel's structure, the form replicates the feeling

of an expanse of time. For example, in the first chapter, the narrator, Sasha, goes on a date with Alex. After they have sex, she imagines herself being forgotten by him:

> It jarred Sasha to think of herself as a glint in the hazy memories that Alex would struggle to organise a year or two from now: *Where was that place with the bathtub? Who was that girl?* (p.14)

In the novel's final chapter, through the prompting of a mutual acquaintance, Alex vaguely recalls Sasha. For Alex, it has been nearly two decades since their meeting, and for the reader, it has been several hundred pages and numerous other stories. Alex's experience of an unexpected memory is shared by the reader, as they too are invited to reflect on a scene from long ago:

> …a girl he'd dated once… her name, what she'd looked like, what exactly they'd done together — those details had been erased. […] …he now remembered… A bathtub in the kitchen — yes, she'd had one of those! It was the only one he'd ever seen. (p.318, p.347)

Just like a chiastic text inviting a connection between corresponding parts, *Goon Squad* uses keywords to ensure that one moment evokes another. In this instance, it is the description of the bathtub in the kitchen: something unique that neither Alex nor the reader forgets. By linking these moments together, everything that has happened between them is thrown into sharp relief. If the novel were arranged as a reverse chronology, these chapters may have been consecutive, or at most, had two chapters between them (several chapters occur within the same year), which would not have resulted in the same effect.

Similarly, placing chapters close together that would otherwise be far apart in the reverse chronology allows the reader to experience time the way it is described in the novel.

In situating two chapters close together, the novel evokes the experience of time passing as a kind of sudden whiplash. This is most clear between chapter 3 ('Ask Me If I Care'), which is set in 1979 and narrated by Rhea, and chapter 4 ('You, Plural'), which is narrated by Jocelyn and takes place in 2005. In 1979, Rhea and Jocelyn are seventeen and heavily involved in the punk rock scene in San Francisco; there, they meet Lou, a middle-aged record producer with whom Jocelyn ultimately runs away. By 2005, Rhea and Jocelyn are in their forties; Rhea is married with three children, while Jocelyn is living with her mother and struggling to maintain her sobriety. In 'You, Plural' Jocelyn feels that the past twenty-five years have blurred by too quickly, and that in the haze of the endless party of her youth — which she calls her 'lost time' (p.90) — she missed out on doing anything meaningful. She reflects that 'Everything went past, without me' (ibid.), and barely remembers much of her life following her adolescence. Situating these chapters in such proximity replicates the suddenness that Jocelyn is experiencing: for Jocelyn, it *feels* as though her teenage years were not long ago; for the reader, they were actually not long ago.

These two chapters are also an effective example of how the novel's form incorporates polyphony to represent the instability of time and memory. Through multiple voices, *Goon Squad* demonstrates that perspectives on the past change, and how the same point in time can take on different meanings to different people. That is, time passing is not just something that changes the present into the future, but that also continuously rewrites the past. Examining Rhea and Jocelyn's perspectives in the context of one another reveals this. In 1979, Rhea is plagued by imposter syndrome and low self-esteem, comparing herself to the beautiful and desired Jocelyn; she regards herself as 'the girl no one is waiting for' (p.45), and feels as though she is being left behind by Jocelyn — and is literally left behind at the end of the chapter, when Jocelyn runs away. By 2005, running off with Lou, which once seemed like a thrilling adventure to Jocelyn, has become nothing but a 'punchline' (p.91).

Rhea has built a life for herself, and now Jocelyn is the one who feels left behind, as Jocelyn's adolescent glory transpires to have been short-lived. As an adult, Jocelyn reinterprets the past: at seventeen, Rhea is terrified that she is not a real punk rocker; in her forties, Jocelyn characterises this distinct quality as what saved Rhea, imagining that she was only ever pretending to be a part of something, when she was really meant for more (p.92). Holding these voices and stories together reveals an inescapable alterity: 1979 is both how Rhea saw it then and how Jocelyn sees it later, even as it cannot be both; setting subjectivities against one another results in a contradiction that cannot be resolved. While polyphony was already a feature of Egan's form prior to negotiation, disrupting the chronology of the novel shapes the effects of polyphony in such a way that emphasises the novel's themes.

Egan likely negotiated with her form and constraints in more instances than she has discussed publicly. However, the extent of her negotiation that she has spoken about reveals the usefulness of negotiation when writing with form. In Egan's case, she did not adjust her constraints while writing, as she did not find them limiting and understood their role in creating the form. When arranging these chapters, Egan discovered that her initial plan, which was also a feature of the form, did not engage with the central theme of time effectively, and thus modified this feature. This modification was in service of creating an 'authentic' use of form — rather than the imposed requirement of highlighting the 9/11 tragedy as a turning point, Egan instead returned to the novel's main theme, time, and adjusted her form in service of realising that form.

4.2 *How to be both* by Ali Smith

As its title suggests, Ali Smith's 2014 novel *How to be both* is about duality and simultaneity. The novel tells the story of George and Francescho, who lead very different lives at different

points in history, but nevertheless between whom there are numerous thematic and literal connections. George is a teenager from contemporary Cambridge who enjoys the meticulous intricacies of grammar and historical facts, while Francescho is a painter from the Renaissance, born a woman but living as a man in order to pursue a career as an artist. Both George and Francescho have experiences with grief, love, art, and sex that contextualise and contradict each other, revealing the doubleness inherent within these ideas. The novel's form is essential for realising this doubleness and allowing the reader to experience it (Attridge 2021, 33).

How to be both is split into two halves: George narrates one half and Francescho narrates the other. George's half begins the year after the sudden and unexpected death of her mother, Carol, and continues through the next few months of George's life; as she grieves, George is adrift in her own memories, reflecting on her time with her mother, and particularly a trip they took together to Ferrara, where they saw frescos painted by Francescho. George's half ends with her visiting the National Gallery to see another of Francescho's paintings; this is where Francescho's half begins, as (it is implied) George's fascination pulls his spirit back into existence. Francescho's ghost follows George around, and he is prompted by her life to remember parts of his own, from the death of his mother to the highs and lows of his artistic career, to his death by the plague in his early forties.

While *Goon Squad*'s form evokes the concept album, Smith based this form on a fresco she found in a magazine (2014). In the novel, the fresco represents thematic ideas around doubleness, and what is hidden and revealed throughout history. As Smith puts it:

> … you have the very first version of the fresco underneath the skin, as it were, of the real fresco. There's a fresco on the wall: there it is, you and I look at it, we see it right in front of us; underneath that there's another version of the story and it may or may

> not be connected to the surface. And they're both in front of our eyes, but you can only see one, or you see one first. So it's about the understory. I have the feeling that all stories travel with an understory (ibid.).

How to be both offers a story and an understory, but the two stories are interchangeable — each half is both. Smith describes the two-part form as ‘very simple and unostentatious’ (2014); the form is effective at exploring the central themes, but not overly complicated — that is, it served as a broad constraint — and so did not require negotiation. Smith understood that the form could not be changed and still have the same effect, so when her first draft of the novel was not working, rather than attempt to negotiate with the form, she began anew with a different narrative voice (The Booker Prizes, 2014, paras 4-5). However, while Smith does not discuss negotiating with form, the fresco as she discovered it in the magazine does not prescribe the use of polyphony or nonlinearity; these features would have arisen either as she wrote, or during planning stages. Their addition is also negotiation, as incorporating these features allows the form to construct meaning in new ways.

Although Smith did not set herself specific rules as Egan did, the fresco form of the story and the understory involves more than simply two separate halves: these halves must also be interrelated enough to bring out new meanings in one another, lest the form serve little function. Thus, while Francescho and George never actually interact, their lives are intertwined. In many ways, they are quite similar. For example, after the loss of their mothers, both turn to art as a means of preservation: George pastes together photos of her mother at various ages, documenting an out-of-order version of her life, and Francescho immortalises loved ones in his paintings, adding them into beautiful worlds. There are numerous such similarities; their function is to bind the two halves of the novel together, but also to emphasise the differences between them. George, for instance, commits herself to

watching a specific pornographic film every day, as a kind of guardianship over the film's young, exploited subject; Francescho, on witnessing this, instead remembers the erotic drawings he did of prostitutes at their request. While both experiences centre on sex, they are opposite: for George, sex is violent and intrusive; for Francescho, sex is intimate and giving. Polyphony prevents any one voice from 'dominating the story and finalising its meanings' (Belova et al., 2008, p.494), so the result is not that sex is portrayed as *either* violent or intimate, but as having the capacity to be *both*. At one point, George asks Carol, 'Past or present? Male or female? It can't be both. It must be one or the other' (8); the two-part form means that the novel can essentially reply to George as Carol does: 'Who says? Why must it?' (ibid.), by revealing this capacity for doubleness.

Just as the two-part form requires the reader to move between George and Francesco, the narrators themselves are suspended in between-states. George is 'in transit' between childhood and adulthood (Andermahr, 2018, p.261), as well as caught between the past and present by her grief, and as a ghost from the Renaissance waking in 2014, Francescho is between life and death, history and modernity. That the structure of each half is also nonlinear further emphasises this dislocation and suspension and emphasises thematic relationships as the key pattern of connection, rather than chronology.

This nonlinearity as a feature of the form also works to realise simultaneity — a doubleness of time. As Smith points out, in narrative, 'one thing has to follow another' (Lyall, 2014, para 12), and so literal simultaneity is impossible. However, by positioning two contrasting moments side-by-side within the text, the past and the present engage with one another to such an extent that they almost occupy the same space in the narrative. For example, an innocuous conversation George has with her mother a year in the past becomes significant when it is contrasted against George and her father sitting together in a bereaved

silence: George makes a joke about both her parents having to die in order for her to be sent to an orphanage; Carol replies, ‘Well, one day… With any luck later rather than sooner’ (p.42). Encountering this line, the reader cannot interpret it without the context of Carol’s death — the present inevitably encroaches on the past, resulting in a simultaneity. Numerous similar instances occur in both George and Francesco’s stories.

This pattern invites making these connections across time, and sustaining the contrasts they create, as an approach for making meaning. This is demonstrated in a scene where George finds a documentary airing on television about a train; given that it is already partly over, she pulls it up to watch from the beginning on her phone, so that ‘On one screen the train has just broken the hundred-mile-an-hour record. On the other screen the train has just been superseded by cars’ (p.40). Here, the juxtaposition of apotheosis and defunctness emphasises ephemerality — it is holding these two images in the context of one another that gives them meaning. The image of the train’s peak gives significance to its retirement, and that retirement colours the train’s peak, pointing out that this glory is temporary; the very progress that has resulted in the train’s invention results in its destruction.

While polyphony and nonlinearity allow the novel to explore simultaneity and duality, Smith also modified the narrative’s form in the later stages of drafting. Rather than select one half or the other to be the first within the novel, Smith arranged with her publisher to have two different versions of *How to be both* printed (Masters, 2014, para 12): one with George’s half first, and one with Francescho’s half first. Both are labelled ‘One’. That the two halves are reversible indicates their interchangeability and suggests that the relationship of order is not what constructs meaning, but the relationship of content. There is not a first and a second part, but two parts.

The form of *How to be both* allows the novel to create the experience of duality and doubleness, and the negotiations of polyphony, nonlinearity, and reversibility are essential to this. The two narrative perspectives mean that thematic ideas are often interpreted in two contradicting ways; the narrative invites the reader to sustain rather than resolve this tension, accepting that something can be both at once. Other similar events between and within the two halves demonstrate that meaning is made through context, and to understand any given event, it must be held in relation to another, whether similar or different. The nonlinearity of the form adds further emphasis to using thematic relationships as the main means of connecting events, while also replicating the narrators' sense of detachment from their times. The two-part form is also modelled on the fresco, which itself evokes doubleness. In *How to be both*, form is necessary for constructing the experience of doubleness that the text describes; the characters explain that it is possible for something to be both, and between and within its two parts, the novel realises that possibility.

4.3 Conclusions

Negotiation is always a unique process; exactly what negotiation involves is dependent on the needs of the individual author, form, and narrative. Through these case studies, I have explored a variety of negotiations, made for different reasons — such as to accommodate the author or to respond to something lacking in the text — and with different effects on the narrative. I sought to demonstrate that negotiation not only accommodates the writer and the development of the story but reveals new potential in the form for constructing meaning. It is only through negotiation that new thematic possibilities are realised. Negotiation with form was essential to the way these forms express the key themes of the narratives.

Nearly Already Not

The Smooth Place

The job at the grocery store was going to pay for a membership at the pool, but until I had enough, we swam at the quarry. We agreed it was important to practice at a real pool if we were going to become Olympians. I still couldn't swim in a straight line, which we hoped the lane markers would help with, and we both needed to learn how to dive. And to swim in chlorinated water, which Jade said made the water thicker and thus would slow us down. It was only by microseconds, Jade told me, so normal people hardly noticed it, but we'd watched races on television, and we knew that sometimes microseconds made the difference.

For months, we held a stalemate. I didn't want to work and neither did Jade, and worse still was the possibility of what our parents would demand of us for the money, if they had it to spare. So, we swam at the quarry, late in the afternoon when it was already empty, but never at night. And never all the way across — we swam the sideways lengths, sticking to the shallows. It seemed that something terrible might swell up from the depths. We didn't have a clear imagining of the monster that dwelled down there, and neither of us would've admitted aloud to believing in it. Perhaps we didn't truly believe. But it was real enough to offer a threat, a promise, so possible that neither of us risked it. When we were faster, maybe we'd dare to swim over the top of its sleeping place.

And then Jade grew two inches. Our whole lives, we'd been the same height, give or take the shoes we wore. We were sure we must've been born the exact same size as babies, but we couldn't prove it. If we asked our mothers, they'd hold out their hands in approximation, unable to appreciate the importance of exactness, because what we were in search of was exactness. And their memories were precarious at best. They forgot all kinds of critical things from when they were our age. We couldn't trust their word. It didn't matter that much though, in the face of our certainty.

Jade's extra two inches seemed to happen entirely over the week that my brother Dan and I went to stay with our grandparents, as though proximity had been the key to our sameness and without it, we began to change in sudden and separate ways. She was now the wrong height to hug. My chin used to hang perfectly on her shoulder, whether I held her from the front or by standing behind her, but now there was nowhere to put my face that was not overly intimate or too closed off.

The extra height came with stronger shoulders and arms, bigger hands. She could swim across the shallow width of the quarry in less than twenty seconds, and I realised that if we didn't find a way to join the pool, then I would be caught between the possibility of being eaten by the monster, as the slower of the two of us, or of being left behind by Jade in a way that seemed gaping, yawning, and irreversible.

Getting a job at the grocery store was easy enough. There were always a lot of applicants but there were always a lot of people leaving or being fired. A lot of people who left or got fired eventually reapplied, but new people got hired before they took the old ones back, which was because Mr P. wanted to teach them a lesson. I only met him once, when he interviewed me. He had an office behind the deli section, but I never had cause to go in there or even walk by, and never encountered anything to definitively suggest he either was or wasn't in there. Not unlike our school principal, who emerged once a week for assembly, and disappeared again to do principal things. I liked to imagine Mr P. being there, though, in case we really needed something we couldn't do ourselves. He'd come, if he absolutely had to. And until then, he was probably playing solitaire and watching Jackie Chan movies on that crappy box TV he had on top of his filing cabinet.

When I got the job, I got given a little red vest to put over my clothes — ideally a white shirt, Mr P. said, but understanding that I didn't own any, said that my school shirt or a

black shirt would be fine. The name ‘Linda’ was embroidered on the front of the vest. Nobody would see it from afar, so there wouldn’t be an instance where someone called me and I forgot to turn around, but if I was helping someone and to my face they called me Linda, I was to smile and act as though yes it was really me.

At first, I stocked shelves, but I had told Mr P. that I was good with numbers, and after Mitchel was caught slipping fives from the register, I got upgraded to the checkouts. I shared my register with Merissa. We stood back to back, except for when it was slow, and then we could turn around and chat to each other.

Merissa had gone to my school. She was two years older than us, but I knew her, because she was the smartest girl to have ever gone to our school. They did a piece on her in the local paper because she got the highest OP score that anyone had got in our town since they changed it all over.

Jade had a good deal of contempt for her. Mostly because this store was not the one that Jade went to usually, except for now that I worked here, and she’d been under the impression that Merissa had long-since left. She was experiencing a dramatic reversal in her vision for the girl whose picture hung in the administration hallway. Merissa was not at university in the city. She was still where we were.

Once Jade got used to it and the feeling of having been let down wore off, I think she was quite pleased with it. This meant that she would be the first. Jade would become an Olympian, and with Merissa not even having made it to university, she would be the most special person to ever leave our school.

I liked Merissa, though. Her hair was long and beautiful and the clothes she wore were second-hand, but she meant them to be second-hand, like she wanted the echoes they contained within them. She sometimes put on different affects with the customers. She

remembered what lies she'd told to which regular and also the true things that they'd told her, so that when they came back she could ask about their grandkids and new secretary job and tell them in turn about her traveller aunt who didn't exist, or her plans to grow basil and rosemary.

Jade would often come by, especially in the middle of the day. She would dawdle up and down the aisles, waiting until there was no line at my register and then come through to buy one small thing, like a Chupa Chup, and I would pretend I was having some difficulties with the register and could she just wait a moment, so that we could hang together for a second, secret and undercover. Over my shoulder, Jade would look at Merissa sometimes. At the back of her head.

Soon, we could afford the pool. Jade would swim there while I worked. It felt strange, that gear shift having never really shifted back; it was as though it had been silently agreed upon that Jade was the one with the real shot, that it was important she practise more, and that my second-fiddle status had been abruptly unveiled, as little as we acknowledged it. A grim necessity, like an amputation, that Jade had been kind enough to muffle from me all this time, ungagged and in the sunlight at last. It made a tiny bump of something hard begin to grow behind my eyes, so that when I saw Jade, I saw the bump too. I felt it press.

I never did close the growing gap. I got Dan to measure me several times over the next few weeks, but I didn't grow at all. My mother said she had stopped growing at about my age, at about my height. More approximations. Jade grew more. She ate more. Her arms got longer. She told me that the chlorine didn't slow her down at all, and on the days that I wasn't working, I went to the pool with her and saw that this was true. She was faster here, even. Maybe we'd had it backwards all this time and the silt in the quarry water had added drag.

I swam before and after work. I did push-ups and sit-ups at home, with Dan holding my feet, and when he wasn't there, I did lunges instead. I ate fruit and vegetables and Weetabix. At night, I slept with my arms flung back above my pillow, like the wall behind my mattress was the edge of the pool, and I had just finished a race. I did this because my mother believed in believing things, and that if you believed them, the universe had no choice but to gradually reorient around this truth you had forced into existence. Perhaps this was part of why I had feared the monster at the quarry; because I had feared it since I was young, long enough for the world to rebalance around me and set into its new self like concrete.

Merissa told me about the original Linda, who had worked at the store from when she was seventeen. Merissa had been to Linda's wedding and used to sometimes babysit her son, Arlo, when Linda and her husband both had shifts. But Linda had quit about a year ago, when her second baby had been born with a smooth brain and bad lungs, which often went together. I tried to picture a woman who looked a lot like me, who was wearing my vest, who was holding a baby when the baby was new, and inside the baby was a smoothness that from the outside she couldn't see. They didn't know the baby was different until he was six months old. For the first few months of your life, I suppose you don't need any of the folds and creases in your brain.

Merissa and Linda were still friends. Merissa brought her groceries after her shift, sometimes, when Linda was too busy or overwhelmed. In my head, the name Linda was a mother's name, but like an old mother, old enough to have a child my age. I found it all strange, and when Merissa offered to introduce us, I declined both her and this invitation to an extra, greater adult world. I was enjoying being Linda with my smooth, perfect, unknowing baby, sometimes, when I put on the vest. I didn't want to have to see the real Linda or worse still, the real baby. Which probably wasn't a baby anymore, but a toddler who

would become a child who would die. They got support from the government, Merissa told me, but not enough. There was always so much paperwork to get any little thing.

Not having met Linda gave me much space to imagine her. She might be selfless, expansive, capable of couching any new human in her love, relentless in her ability to adapt and cope and overcome. Perhaps she would be one of those people with a kernel at the centre of themselves, who seemed fun and relaxed but if you got down to it, there was a hardness to them that could swallow anything it needed to. Maybe she collected cushions and pretended, cheerfully, that the baby was fine. Maybe she was an alcoholic, and the baby had been born the way it had because she'd filled its body with dangerous things.

Sometimes, as I tried to fall asleep, I pretended Linda was there with me, with her hand in my hair. She would smell like bread or one of those motherly smells. Someone like me, with a working brain, would seem like a miracle to Linda. Full of promise and potential.

When I was sat next to my mother, pushing defrosted fava beans out of their slick, rubbery shells, the hum of her gaze hanging on me like a landing wasp while I struggled through my homework, I was ensconced by a new generosity. Whatever had happened afterwards, she had made me without breaking me, in that first part of life where it's just physical, and it's possible to put a person together without also hurting them in some way. She felt small to me, in her unknowing of what I knew: how lucky she was that we were even whole. Her complaints seemed petty, compared to struggles we might've had.

I still went to the pool, but I tried to go at different times to Jade. I'd sink my head under the water, which was so clear here. It hurt my eyes to look at, so I bought goggles at the kiosk, because I had money now. And then I would just lie on top of the water and look down, and see the bottom, and try to think of absolutely nothing. To smooth out the world.

Moving fast was the only thing that could keep Jade calm for a moment. She would never have done this with me.

Jade had made friends with other girls at the pool. They were all tall too. Slender, firm limbs that seemed designed for being looked at, while Jade was crafted entirely and exclusively for the water. Jade, on land, looked slightly off, like somebody who had wandered into a room and forgotten why she was there, what she had come in for. But once she was in the pool, it was apparent that any separation between her and the water was the product of how we perceive shapes. There was no distinction, really.

The girls at the pool had boyfriends. They weren't as serious about swimming as Jade or me, and I wasn't as good as Jade. In the middle of the summer, past the arch of Christmas, she came into the store. It was holiday time, and Mr P. was paying me more than usual. Merissa and I were standing carefully far apart, as the air-conditioning barely reached up, and with the heat from two bodies it would be too easy to begin to sweat, and then impossible to stop.

Jade arrived and on buying her Chupa Chup, informed me that the owner of the pool had come out to speak with her. He would give her lessons at a massive discount. I was ready to get mad at her for asking even more of me, but before I could, she said that her father had offered to pay. That he was taking her seriously now. She asked if I would come by the pool that afternoon and I said I would. She took her lollipop and left.

Merissa turned to face me after that, still with the extra distance between us. 'Are you okay, Louise?' she asked me.

At the pool, Jade and I swam laps together, out of sync. Maybe I could become a lifeguard, I thought. And watch over her always as she perpetually gained speed. The owner said she swam like a man, the way her big hands scooped the water, broad and strong and

deft. Briefly, I imagined Jade as a boy, and for a second things made sense in a way they never had before, but then the feeling ended.

I saw Jade less and less after that. When we were together, a lump of awkwardness smeared between us. She was better than I was, and this fact was swelling to the size of the irrevocable. She might really make it. She might, and I never would; I would be the girl in the photographs who had helped her get her start, and when she thanked her friends in interviews, that would be me. A pillar of a collective noun.

It was apparent that swift action was required if Jade and I wanted to remain friends as we had been our whole lives. Otherwise the pity she felt for me would have space to multiply and thrive. I had to have something she didn't, and the world would reform around us again.

The day the air-conditioning in the front of the store broke down completely, Merissa took me next door to the liquor mart on our break. We still wore our vests. The clerk waved to her; he knew her, he liked her, as everyone did. We shuffled into the cramped cold room. The frost crunched around us, slapped flat against our skin. I remembered coming in here with my dad when I was small, after school and on hot days, trying to cool down for just a moment.

Merissa folded her arms across her chest. I stared at the fine hairs on them. At the shape her body made when it was held this way, around itself. She was gorgeous, in a non-celebrity way. She was very ordinary, and by this, I mean she was beautiful, but only once you liked her. And before that, she was just someone who worked at a grocery store.

She kissed me. We kissed. There were no cameras in the cold room and the clerk wasn't going to come in after us even though he'd said hi. Then Merissa heard the doorbell

which meant somebody else was coming into the store, and in case they wanted something from in here, we stopped, and moved apart. Our break was almost over anyway.

We went back to our registers and when we stood back to back, it still felt like she was facing me, like we'd never be in another room without facing each other again.

I went to the pool after work and Jade was there, swimming laps. All the way across, because this pool was clear enough to see the bottom, and there never had been or would be any monsters at all. I watched her and felt inside of something else that wasn't the two of us, and it was like a scab had lifted, leaving something raw and new underneath. The tender pinkness of it pushed through my whole self, and Jade saw it, when at last she hopped out and walked over to me.

Her cap made her head shiny and tight. In the quarry water, her hair would drift and swirl around her, like a sea creature itself. But that would create drag, and the drag would add microseconds, or even whole seconds, to her time.

She stood close enough that the chlorine smell was chlorine on person smell, and sunscreen. A thin film of sunscreen was settled atop the water, too, in the parts where it was almost still. I thought of oil spills and cutting out photos of oil spills from the newspaper — of pelicans in rainbow-shimmered slick, their giant beaks emphasising the frailty of their dampened bodies — and gluing them onto a poster. I remembered Jade sitting across from me. Her strangeness to me then so much more immediate and exciting than it was now. Now, strangeness was sad and insurmountable.

'How long have you been standing there?' she asked, making it the wrong thing to say as she said it. What I was waiting for immediately became apparent. My visit here had been a test, which I saw only in Jade's failing of it.

'Not long.'

‘Come with me. We can race.’ Jade reached out and took my hand. ‘I’ll give you a head start.’

We did race, and afterwards, in the changing room, as we stood back to back wrangling ourselves out of our togs, I caught a glimpse in one of the mirrors of Jade entirely naked. It had been so long since I’d seen her that way in passing that I ached with something not reducible to the simplicity of a desire to touch.

I took all of this and put it elsewhere. It was surprisingly easy. That hurt in its own way.

Merissa lived with her parents still. She was only two years older than us, so that wasn’t really embarrassing yet. Not like Wally from the butcher section, who was twenty-four. He said it was because he was saving up to buy a house of his own, but seeing as he’d never actually afford one, we didn’t understand why he wouldn’t just go rent somewhere.

When I went over to Merissa’s place, after work, pushing my bike into the back of her car, I felt as though I were doing it twice, once on the inside and once on the outside. Merissa, beside me not behind me or in front of me, was different. The way she focused on the road, her hand on the gear shift, jilted her again into that grownup terrain I could never seem to access.

The house was empty, but there were signs it wasn’t always. Her father’s high school cricket trophies were on the shelf below the TV, and there was a knitted square of orange wool that looked like nothing and could’ve belonged to either of them. Merissa had a brother at footy practice and a slew of other siblings much younger than her, all of them at after-school care. Sometimes she picked them up early, but not today.

We went to Merissa's room. In primary school, I would sometimes have a friend who wasn't Jade. I'd touch their things, hold them up, stroke them, listen to the explanation of who had gifted them and what their purpose was, whether they were special or only okay, occasionally asked if I could have it for myself.

One girl, Wilma, had a collection of Kinder Surprise toys. We kneeled and regarded them. She regarded them anew next to my newness. They were small, petite in the way only plastic things can be. I coveted them, and the mother who could buy them and would. But Wilma had a birthmark that stretched across most of her neck, all the way around the front, and I'd decided that it probably wasn't worth it, to have to take her life as a whole. So, I left her be. She must've seen the moment I chose and understood why. She must've felt it.

Merissa just stood there too, as though she hadn't been here before either. But she watched me. I wanted to do something or say something, to earn the watching, to take that sense of being looked at and make it into something. I couldn't.

'Did you paint that?'

'When I was little.'

'Nice.'

I went over to examine the painting more closely, only so that when I walked back, I could stop closer to Merissa. She turned to me. Something swivelled in my chest, violent in only one direction, and I followed it, turning too.

Merissa must've kissed enough people to feel sure of what she was doing, which meant the tentativeness was to do with me. I tried to imagine her being my age and found it impossible, or impossible to imagine her any different. That I had seen her around two years ago and even before that didn't change anything.

She told me where to put my hands, and where I could put them if I felt like it. I thrummed with a second layer of questions: was I annoying her, was I doing it right, did it matter, was I getting better, was she picturing someone else? So many questions that I had to start forgetting them just to make room.

With her shirt pushed three inches up and my hands on the soft skin of her hips, she felt like a real girl in a way that I never was, and in a way that Jade hadn't seemed to be when she was just an extension of myself, but now did. Given enough space away from me, it seemed anyone could turn real. Just like that.

As she kissed me, I became angry that she hadn't left and gone to university, as though she'd poked pencil holes in me and let a great rush of oxygen in. And then that anger turned into fear for myself so strong that it filled up my throat and made it impossible to be this close to her. The fear and anger turned oblong; I could feel them from afar and feel nothing, except the contracting of a shrinking world.

On the bike ride home, it gave way, at last, to tenderness towards us both. When I was eight, my father had bought some chickens to keep in the back yard, because we couldn't afford a dog and all a dog would eat. The chicks were the size of a plum with their fluff stood out, and more frail underneath that. An overwhelming smallness. We kept them in an old mango tray; my mother set up a lamp to peer down on them and keep them warm. Maybe they didn't know for the whole three weeks we kept them in there that the world ever got dark. I would crouch beside them and lift one up, cup it in my hands, close to the light. This felt like that. Like I'd hold the both of us close to the light if I could, but I couldn't, and in the place of that I could only be gentle.

Instead of going home, then, I went to Jade's.

On the couch, her mother was asleep, covered in the thick swathe of a migraine. In old times, they would've bored a hole in her head. They could've peered down through the water of her brain and seen the curves and creases, eyes stretching as they do when you look up at stars and planes and all that.

Jade wasn't home, so I waited for her. When she got in, her hair was nearly dry.

She stopped in the doorway, and I had the avalanche sense that she would understand everything if only I explained it to her, and the avalanche that I would never explain. It would be too much. It had become too much, just like that.

The grief towered and then flattened out endlessly like an oil spill, barely a millimetre thick but covering anything.

I made up my mind that if she asked, I would tell her everything, impossible or not. But she didn't ask.

'Want to go to the quarry?' The pool was still open; I didn't like it there.

'Now?'

This kind of urgency lacked immediacy or desperation. We could've gone whenever. But it was urgent because if we didn't go now, we wouldn't. I'd kiss Merissa and Jade would swim, and for all our years as half the same person, as easy as splitting cells, we would cleave apart. I thought there must've been so many girls before us who played out this exact story. I thought that it was insane and incredible how something like a summer could work like a jack to lift a car, could be so small and resist gravity to effectively, and separate two things that had always been intended to touch with very little effort at all. Time was salt; you just needed a little.

We walked. The back of Jade's hand and mine would brush, and in some cage the panic monkey danced, out of habit and thrill. I felt the tremors of it from the main part of my world.

On the walk there, I told her about Linda, and Linda's baby with the smooth brain. Jade listened intently, which she rarely did. Jade always acted as though I'd already told her everything that she could know about me, which I suppose before I worked at the grocery store, I had. That went both ways, even if the boredom didn't. But there was nothing satisfying about knowing her less well.

'What can the baby think?' Jade asked, finally.

'Normal baby thoughts. But it'll never think anything else.'

'That must be nice,' Jade said. Her expression twisted a second later, and I knew she'd felt she was being unkind. 'Does it upset you? The baby, I mean. That it'll die?'

At this point, we were stripping off our pants, the quarry stones familiar underfoot. Jade was moving slower than me, still waiting for a reply.

It was sad about the baby. But I felt sadder for Linda, and all the scans that must've said the baby was fine, and then the baby being born seeming fine, and going home normal, and being normal until suddenly it had been strange all along.

Jade launched herself into the water, which was dark and lethargic and alien compared to the pool in town. I followed her. I couldn't say which of us turned and began it, but soon we were swimming further and further, out across the quarry pool. The entire time, I kept imagining stopping swimming and just waiting in the water until I sank, and how far I would sink, as neither of us knew how deep the water really was. But even further inside me

must’ve been some desire to keep swimming, because I did, and after all, it didn’t take more than ten minutes to reach the other side.

We hauled ourselves out onto new rocks. We looked back. We felt the coolness of the breeze and the night and how silly we’d been, to fear a monster all these years, and immediately wanted to fear it again. Already, the world seemed less firmly shaped.

Jade stood beside me. I was so sure she was going to reach out and take my hand, or I was going to take her hand, that when neither of us moved it was more like something changed than nothing happened. But something had changed before we came here again. All we were doing was looking at it.

That softness I kept towards Merissa was large enough to fit Jade into it too, and we waited there, delicate and distant, for some signal that it was time to swim back.

Soft Impact

Sylvia's crying now, and Wally looks at you, like hey, this guy has a daughter, he'll know what to do. But this guy's daughter is six, and her problems are either totally manageable or utterly incomprehensible, and neither qualifies you to handle this. Besides, usually you ask Mina how she's feeling (you know how Sylvia's feeling, you just got fired too), and then give her a hug. But you can't hug Sylvia. Probably. You've never hugged before, anyway, so there's no precedent.

You wave over Harper. Harper: safe choice. She and Sylvia sit across from one another. Used to. Harper sets down the box of her things (a fake succulent from IKEA, some photos, a pen that writes in seven colours) and gathers Sylvia up in her arms. Suddenly, they remind you of your older sister and your younger sister, and the impenetrable closeness they had, like a second, secret family at the nucleus of the bigger one that you were a part of. Sisters are just like that, Amy told you once, and she's right about most things.

Speaking of. You should call her. You slip your phone out of your pocket. Mina glued some googly eyes to the back of your case, but they've almost all fallen off now, so there are just these vaguely sticky circles pockmarked at random, like shallow craters on a plastic moon.

'Let's get fucked up,' Dunc says. He slings an arm around your shoulder. You and Dunc: not that close. Though you get the feeling you would've been in high school. You guys are the same kind of guy.

'Where?'

'Let's just head to the square and see what's quiet.' He runs at about a thousand degrees. Stress? Or is Dunc always sweaty-hot, and you've just never noticed before? Maybe

Dunc's wife is one of those perpetually cold people, and he keeps her warm. Her name is Lorraine. Or Laura. Lucinda? The picture of her that Dunc keeps on his desk is now in his hand. She is okay-looking. So is Dunc. They are the exact same amount of beautiful.

You always notice how attractive people are, relative to the people they attract. Amy has this theory. She says, you will never find a couple where the man is significantly more gorgeous than the woman. Women get with funny guys and kind guys, but you never see a 10/10 guy dating an average woman because she's smart or makes him laugh. You never get that, Amy says, except with us.

You had visible abs when the two of you met, and Amy has never forgiven you. You were an underwear model in your early twenties, just torso, no head, and Amy had braces until she was twenty. She got them off a week before she met you. Just in time, according to her. Because you brought her caramel popcorn instead of flowers on your first date, and if she had her braces, she wouldn't have been able to eat it. But if she'd had her braces, you would've brought her something else.

'I could go for a beer,' Wally says. Before the GFC, Wally used to work in the tallest building in the city, two hours from here. A whole different life. He turns to you.

More than anything, you want to go lie down on your own couch and put your head in Amy's lap. She'll scratch your scalp and smooth your hair and you'll stop feeling like a bramble of fears and instead you'll go spacey and weightless, flung out away from your mortgage and utilities and the financial stability Mina needs to have the opposite childhood to yours. And you know that Amy will do exactly that, because this is the second job you've lost in three years.

You tell them you're in.

Harper hands Sylvia a tissue from her purse. 'Me too. What about you, Syl?'

‘I’m just gonna go home.’

‘Okay. Sure.’ Harper checks her watch. ‘I’ll just call Dave and let him know I’ll be home late.’

‘Same,’ Dunc says.

Any other day, Wally would go, ‘Oh, you’ll call Dave too?’ Not even a dad joke. Just lame. But he lets it go.

‘I’ll walk you to your car,’ you offer.

You and Sylvia set off through the evenly spaced splurges of streetlight. She walks a little ahead of you. You’re struck by her smallness. How old is she? Twenty-one? Twenty-two? She clutches an Aldi tote full of mugs and forks and magnets from her desk. It’s that feeling you had of taking Mina to school for the first time, holding her tiny chair-bag in one hand and her hand in the other. It’s that feeling but in reverse.

‘I’m okay.’

‘I know.’

She doesn’t wear heels; your shoes are louder than hers. Or your stride is just heavier.

‘I must seem pretty childish right now, huh?’

Surprisingly few children have mascara trails down their cheeks. Also, there’s generally more snot involved in the crying. Not what Sylvia wants to hear, you assume.

‘Will it be alright?’ she asks. Her words draw across the night like a satellite passing. If you don’t answer, they’ll come back around.

By some mistake, you're the grownup here. Jeez. She's never looked up to you before, but what you say now will matter. At least for tonight, until she calls her mum or her dad or whoever she's still speaking to.

'Everything is usually alright,' you tell her. 'If you give it long enough. But it only feels like that afterwards.'

Oldness crashes into you. Nobody is ever old, your dad used to say. Oldness is a trick of the light you see from the outside. But a lot of things about your dad were a trick of the light.

'I broke up with my boyfriend last week.'

'I'm sorry.'

'Not really even over anything. Everyone says relationships are work, and I thought, that's fine, I'm a hard worker.' She sighs. 'He's really rich. Like, his parents are. Riverfront apartment and housekeeper level rich. If I'd known this would happen, I wouldn't have —' She shakes her head. 'God. That's stupid, right?' She stops. 'That sounds insanely selfish.'

You don't tell her it isn't. Instead, you say, 'That's okay too.'

She's quiet for three streetlights. 'It'd have been one more option to have.'

'Maybe. Maybe it would've been more complicated in a different way.'

'That's your advice?'

'It wasn't advice.'

'Did you ever break up with Amy? And get back together?'

'Sylvia, that's kind of a personal question.'

'We'll probably never see each other again, after this.'

You're at her car. She unlocks the passenger side and sets her bag in the seat, then turns back to you.

'We didn't,' you admit. 'I think she thought about it a few times, though.'

Once: it came so close you had to shut your eyes. You were watching her dress in front of the mirror, watching her hands slide over her hips and stomach after she snapped the clasp on her bra. You remember wondering, who invented the bra? Was it a man or a woman? Did they set out to design it, or stumble upon it by accident, like penicillin?

And then Amy was saying, 'Is it a fetish thing?' She had this bluntness to her on occasion that made you feel far away. Like she'd replaced you with someone else or put them over the top of you.

'What?'

'I'd just feel better if it was. If you had a thing for fat girls.'

'I don't have a *thing*. I find you beautiful. I love you,' you said.

'A fetish is more reliable.'

'You're being unkind.'

You stared at her back. You pictured something fierce and bright and tentacled tearing out through her skin and reaching for you, squeezing you so hard you died.

It was the first time she'd seen you cry.

'I'm sorry,' she said. And kept saying. 'I love you, too. I love that you love me. I love loving you. I'm sorry.'

'You're beautiful. You are.'

You and Amy tell each other everything, but that morning something in her, or between you, discretely closed. You can say nothing that will make her believe you, and her not believing you will always hurt. You're good together despite it.

These days, she teaches Mina that everybody is perfect the way they are. That the world needs all shapes and sizes and what matters is somebody's heart.

And their brain, Mina invariably replies. Brains make your feelings.

You explained to Mina that Mum meant a metaphorical heart, and she asked where that was. Was it also in her chest? Her belly? Very small, inside her eye? And then you had to break it to her, while Amy laughed, that no, people only had one real heart.

Sylvia hums. 'I reckon he'll take me back.'

She walks around to the driver's side and gets in. Once the engine starts, you wave — invisible in the dark — and head back to the others. Everybody piles into your car and you drive off into the warm and milky night, windows down.

'Anyone want music?' Dunc asks, flipping through the CDs in your glovebox. 'Ryan's got ACDC, Bowie, Blondie, Cranberries. And the Wiggles.'

'The Wiggles mine. Everything else is Mina's.'

By the time you reach the centre of town, you've played 'Scary Monsters', 'Ashes to Ashes', and half of 'Fashion'. Your favourite of his is actually 'Five Years', but that's nobody's favourite Bowie song. You drop the others off and drive away in search of a park. You cruise block after block, but it's weirdly packed for a Thursday, like everyone got fired tonight, or everyone's got something to celebrate.

You find a spot by Welton bridge. Which goes over the busiest road in town: the one that leads onto the motorway.

You text Amy. *Home late tonight - everyone getting drinks. Love you*.

If you called, she'd get it out of you, tease it question by question like pulling magnets off the refrigerator until the picture falls. And you've got to tell her face to face.

She replies, *Should I save Mina's rejected spaghetti for you? Ha.*

That's how she laughs in actual life. *Ha*. One quick kick of sound.

You inhale. The thick bulb of adoration that swells in your throat is making it hard to swallow. You remember, sometimes, how much you love her. The rest of the time, you have to forget. At least a little. A person can't go on like that, fully conscious, not all the time.

The others haven't messaged to say which bar they're at, but there's only four in town. May as well do a lap. The walking has been good, anyway. You used to run a lot, not so much now, but you still could. You're still strong.

The Charlotte Hotel is empty, almost. Unsurprising, as they have lacklustre happy hour deals. There are two women at a corner table, and at the bar is Grant.

Fucking Grant. You recognise him by the back of his head, and so there's a decent chance you're mistaken, because you don't see enough of him to know the back of his head like that. Except you did stare at it for a long time as he summoned you from your desk and lead you down the long corridor to his office. And you like to imagine he stared at the back of yours, as you left.

It doesn't already feel long ago. It feels like instead of walking out into the corridor, you left Grant's office and appeared right here.

You were a brave kid. A silly kid. You did things without knowing why. When you stuck your foot in the water and it was too cold, sometimes you'd just leap in regardless. Amy says it was because you didn't process risk well, and that's still true; she's the thinker

out of the two of you. Stand Amy next to anyone, and she's the thinker. Your brilliant woman.

You lurch forward, pulled by the chest and slide onto the bar stool next to his. 'What are you doing here?'

Grant looks up from his drink —— something clear and neat and not his first. 'Ryan.' He speaks too slowly. Another annoying quality of his. 'I'm having a drink.'

The first time you met Grant, you were nearly thirty. He's always looked older than you, but you're almost the same age. He made you wait twenty minutes past your scheduled interview time, and when seated opposite him and the framed certificates behind his desk, it was obvious that his chair was significantly higher than yours. Too obvious, you thought. Surely, he only wanted you to assume he was insecure, and he was throwing you off.

Later, Amy said, sometimes it's just what it seems like.

Then, you couldn't settle on whether she was right. She was. He really is insecure. But there's also more to it, because everything he does for show, he still does.

'Didn't realise you clocked off this early,' you say. You've passed his office late on occasion and seen the light still on. Maybe he doesn't care about the environment. Maybe he always leaves the light on so nobody ever knows whether he's in or not.

Grant rolls his head forward, then to the side. He has a manliness to him. A corporate manliness. You can't imagine him Mina's age, or out of a suit. You want to press him under the ball of your thumb until, in some way, he gives.

'Normally, I don't have to fire thirty people and feel like shit,' Grant replies. He takes a sip of his drink and swishes it around his mouth. 'Alcohol absorbs through the capillaries in

your cheeks, as well as your stomach. If you want to get hammered quickly, you should swill it like Listerine.'

Sympathy protrudes into your gut and then immediately disappears. 'You should buy me a drink,' you say. He owes you one. He owes you loads. And you owe loads to everyone else, drinks upon drinks, for everything you've ever fucked up. Which is a surprising amount, considering the relatively short time you've been alive.

'Alright.'

Grant buys you one G&T, then two, and waves for your third. The others might be wondering where you are. More likely they haven't noticed, because you're all friends only in the loosest sense, the prolonged proximity sense. They think you've gone home to Amy. You should've.

'I'm sorry,' Grant says. 'I figured I'd wait till we were even, gin-wise, to say that. I am sorry.'

'Good for you.'

'Don't be a dick. I didn't want to.'

'I didn't think you did. But I've got to be angry at someone, Grant. They pay you the big bucks for that to be you.'

'Do you have to? Be angry?'

'My wife would say it's tangled up in unhealthy cultural ideals of masculinity.'

'She's probably right.'

‘Feels good, though.’ And then it doesn’t. You crawl out of the rage like a cicada out of the shell, and into something else. Unknown. Different. You don’t always feel what you’re supposed to feel.

‘It does.’

‘You got someone to be angry at?’ you ask. ‘Higher than you, I mean.’

‘No one who isn’t still paying me.’

‘Right.’

One of the women at the corner table is talking about moving to Fiji one day. You twist around, just for a second, and realise that the one speaking is old.

Grant’s face sags into his hands. His whole body is one big sag. ‘Was I a good boss to you?’

‘Not particularly.’

‘Do you think my bad boss qualities would’ve made me a bad father?’ He stops. ‘You’re a father, right?’

‘Yeah. Mina. She’s six.’

‘Does Mina think you’re a good dad?’

She always makes you cards and drawings at school. You have until she’s eight, you reckon, before it comes to an end. And then she will never be this giving age again. Nobody has ever loved you as much as Mina has and does now and won’t forever.

‘She doesn’t know any better. But. Yeah, I reckon she does.’

‘My wife didn’t think I’d be a good father. A *present* father, is what she said.’

You remember Grant's wife from a Christmas party. She looked like an art teacher from the seventies, with loose clothes, glittering bracelets, and chunky glasses on the tip of her nose that rose when she smiled. She drifted through the crowd on her own and you hadn't seen them together, although they'd never been far apart.

'You work too much, you mean?'

'No. When I'm there, she doesn't think I'm there. Enough there.' He flags the bartender for another gin. 'She's off to get artificially inseminated. She's going to do it herself, on her own, she says.'

'That's a lot.'

'I never thought I could take being left for another man,' Grant murmurs. 'I figured that'd just kill me. But this is worse. To have someone pick another person over you is one thing, but to have them pick being alone? It hits you.'

You should call Amy and then stay on the line with her until you get home. 'Well, do you want to be a dad?'

'Not particularly.'

'Do you want to be alone?'

'It's not so bad. So far.'

'There you go.'

Grant's voice is crouched and tiny. 'What about when I'm old?'

'Things will be different when you're old,' you tell him, like you believe it, and you do. 'Things have got a lot of time to get different.'

You wanted him to turn out to have been secretly wiser than you. You still want this from every adult you meet, even the ones your age: for you to be the only lost one, and the others to see you as you are and give you attention without pity. You wanted Grant to put his hand on your shoulder and tell you what you had always suspected, always waited for someone to say out loud: that it has all been unfair. Everything. Even the good things, because you were never ready for them. Mina is slipping into personhood beyond you and you've never managed to make Amy feel the way she deserves to feel. You need somebody to listen to you say these things. Somebody needs to say them to you. You are burning a hole in the Earth.

Instead, Grant says, 'I've got some weed in my car, if you'd care to partake.'

'No thanks.'

'Don't like it or haven't tried it?'

'My dad's uncle had schizophrenia.' You went with your parents to his funeral when you were seventeen, although you hadn't seen him since you were in primary school. You have one memory of the man: sitting with him under the table, eating Maltesers, surrounded by the anonymous legs of adults in the chairs. He had a big smile and an orange shirt and a necklace with a dice charm on the end of it. Your mum didn't recall the necklace and said you were very small; perhaps you'd made it up. Didn't you agree that you had a tendency to make things up? Especially at that age?

'So?'

'Marijuana can activate that gene, sometimes. If you've got it.'

Grant bobs his head slowly. 'That's too bad.'

'Yeah.'

You wonder what Grant is like stoned. Whether he gets paranoid or slow. In your last year of university, Amy ate a weed brownie and held your foot for an hour, tracing the bones of your ankle, while you sat back and watched the endless blinks of her giant wide eyes. Every time she looked up at you, she smiled. She didn't feel quite like Amy, but she loved you. That was still there.

'What about other stuff? Coke, ice, E, that sort of thing.'

'Not sure.' Truth: the idea scares you a bit. Any of it. All of it. What if you loved it? What if you let go of the helium balloon of yourself and drifted off into some yawning eternity of nameless pills?

You're catastrophizing, though, which Amy says you do sometimes. Put things in the worst light you can find for them.

'You should give it a try — ask your doctor, or something. It's good. It catapults you,' Grant says, 'out of all this.'

'To where?'

'Everywhere. Everything.'

How did you feel when Mina was born? Like a pinprick. A dot in the world.

'Is that nice?'

'Sometimes.'

Grant is a sad sack, and you're supposed to get to be the sad sack. But maybe observing the sadness is better than feeling it and it'll be nearly cathartic in the same way.

'I wanted to be an actor when I was young,' Grant tells you. 'Did you? A lot of people did.'

‘Astronaut.’

‘Mina?’

‘Penguin trainer, currently.’ Whatever that means. Whatever penguins can be trained to do. At first, you thought she said pigeon trainer, as in carrier pigeon, as in teaching birds to fly messages far away.

‘I could still become an actor.’

You squint. Grant would be no good for *Play School* — he’s not friendly, not patient. Too needy. And *Play School* is all they make here, pretty much. You suppose he could go to America and be a background character on SUV. SVU. That one. Dun-dun.

‘Grant. Don’t bother. You’re just lonely.’

‘Yeah.’

‘I’m going to call you someone. Who do you want me to call?’

He’s got to think about it for too long, on account of the loneliness. ‘My sister. Merissa.’

‘Okay.’

‘I’ll call her.’

She lives nearby, he says, and she arrives quickly. She looks like your mother’s friend Fiona, when Fiona was the age that she remains fixed as in your memories. Fiona. You try to think of what Fiona might be up to now. Retired? Possibly. Or was she the one who had cancer?

No, it was her daughter who had cancer. Fiona used to mail out a Christmas card with a family photo every year and then didn’t for your whole high school life. Your last

Christmas living at home, she sent one with a picture of her dog in a Santa hat. Your mother read the card and went off to make biscuits in the shapes of trees; your mother cried only a few times in front of you and the times she did always puzzled you. It was never the moments like that, with the dogs and their hats.

Merissa helps Grant off the barstool, regarding him the way you must've the day he interviewed you in his tall chair, except for Merissa, it was spliced with love. You're not sure how to feel both at once, although you have before. It mixes with everything; you can feel almost anything *and love*.

She nudges him towards the door, turning back to thank you. She doesn't know he fired you. She doesn't know who you are.

You head out across the street, and on your second try, you find the others playing pool and downing beers. They might not have noticed your absence, but they notice your return. You get a few good rounds in and then the place starts to clog with teenagers getting off shift, winding up for an eternal weekend.

'Where's your car?' Dunc asks you. 'I can drive everyone home and we sort it out tomorrow.'

The four of you cut through the park, rather than stay on the street and move against the grain of the night scene. Above you, bats swirl through the sky like fingertips in water, and the trees press themselves into new shapes every moment, leaves shifting among leaves. The breeze is balmy and not fast enough to cool you. It blows thick and warm like exhaust.

This reminds you of staggering home from university parties years ago, wrapped in a toga. That first time, your balls were cold because you weren't going to be the only guy who wore underpants, but then it turned out that lots of guys wore underpants. But you weren't embarrassed, because you're hung, and you had those visible abs. Everything you did, people

assumed you did it on purpose; you were cool and funny and could point to your torso on the packet of boxer briefs sold at Kmart.

If you don't look at the others or down at yourself, if you just gaze up, it could be back then. There's no reason for it not to be, no reason why it should be today. It's such a kind feeling that you don't take the others to the car, but to the bridge, so you can all stand on it look down.

Wally's even drunker than you are. He's a lightweight. You nudge his shoulder to check if he'll sway, and he does.

Suddenly Wally says, 'I'm going to move to London.' He grabs your hand tight and says it directly to you, so you'll hear it, and maybe hold him accountable to it even after this moment of weightlessness has passed.

When was the last time you held a man's hand? Primary school. Were you five? Six? Six, you think.

An ache dovetails through you and disappears.

You go, 'Okay.'

Headlights glide out of the distance below, like a marble rolling towards you, ready to drop into your lap.

And Wally goes, 'Okay.'

Dunc leans forward against the railings. He is a statue of a thinking man. A philosopher from the old times, pitched towards the dark middle distance. Dunc dropped out in Year 10 and followed bands on tour in his uncle's Toyota for three years before going to TAFE and then to interning with you, and then working at the desk nearest the printer, and

you don’t think he is any smarter than you in most ways measured and counted. But if Dunc is the one to say the things that Grant was supposed to say — that would still be nice.

The sound of the crash impales the belly of the world. It all flinches at once: your heart, the sky, the trees, the shadow form of Duncan in front of you.

The concrete doesn’t shake under you, but you feel it should’ve shaken. Wally is still holding your hand. Harper makes a noise like breathing in and breathing out at the same time.

You fold yourself half over the railing and peer down. The car’s headlights have been smashed to submission, but the brake lights have spilled the road with a hot red glow. The alcohol gently folds your brain.

‘They crashed,’ you say. Everything is around you. Everything is a film. If you stretched up high, you could climb outside of it and watch. ‘We have to go see.’

You lurch forward, pulling Wally with you, running to the end of the bridge and around the edge of the rail to stagger down the side of the embankment. The undone button at the top of your shirt leaves a wedge of your chest open to the wind, and the coolness of it cups your throat.

The car is folded into the side of the support column. It is still right-side up, but the bonnet is crushed like a can in a gutter.

Beside you, Wally is saying, ‘Fuck, fuck, fuck.’ What he is supposed to say.

You breathe out. Somebody else will come who isn’t you.

‘Are you alright?’ you shout at the wreck. Your voice withdraws from your mouth and hurls itself away.

The car is a black Corolla. You can’t see the numberplate.

Suddenly, you're convinced it will be Sylvia's car. That she's been trapped and dying while you were out getting drunk and worrying and shrinking.

But she left hours ago, and you only just heard the crash. And what are the odds? It won't be her.

'Oh jeez,' Wally says. 'Fucking jeez.'

You should tell him to call somebody. He should already know to call somebody.

The others will be coming over in a minute.

'Triple-oh, Wally,' you tell him.

'I was gonna.'

'Okay.'

You step closer to the car, but Wally grabs your forearm and hauls you back.

'Wrecks can catch on fire,' he reminds you.

You shrug him off. You've got a torch keyring that's shaped like R2D2, and you turn it on, squinting as the light shines out of its little droid legs.

The woman in the passenger seat is bent low, her throat at the gearstick, her head somewhere near the seat adjuster, buried under the airbag. You can't see her face, but her hair is long, and her hair is blonde.

Not Sylvia.

The driver's face has been unpicked by windshield glass. Powdered like this, it could be the tiny glowing pebbles at the bottom of Mina's fish tank. He is staring up at the ceiling, or maybe through the edge of the broken window and up.

You've seen one dead person before in your life: your father. In his chair. They look a certain way. Alone. They look asleep and alone, but more asleep than you ever are and more alone than you ever are, until then. And then you're that forever.

Under the airbag, the man's belt buckle sears in the torchlight. His jeans are open. Boxers, silky, open too. The man's penis is still hard, and you stare at the small gulp of flesh for a long time. Or what seems a long time. It's unruined. You wait for disgust, revulsion, but instead, you just feel very, very gentle towards this man. As you felt towards the plovers you tried to return to their nests as a child, even though their mothers never took them back.

You drop Wally's hand and walk around to the driver's side of the wreck, grabbing the door handle. You wrench it violently — the hinges will be warped, the mechanism must be mangled, after an impact like that. But it opens easily. Or you're stronger than you think.

Strange that you never wanted to play soccer. Like, professionally. You loved it as a kid, but you never dreamed of being a soccer star. Your parents supported you in everything and never pushed you any which way. And you fixed on astronaut.

Did they show you a documentary? Did you watch satellites? You remember a lot of late drives home under a frozen moon.

Right now, you can't look anywhere else but in front of you.

'Don't,' Wally says, before you can reach out. He's come after you. Good old Wally, you think.

But you can't bear this. You can't bear it. The night is piercing you.

With the care in your hands that gave you the courage to pick up Mina the day she was born, you slowly guide the man's penis back into his underwear. You don't zip his fly. You don't need to. You don't say anything, either.

You step back and wipe the drying saliva off on your pants. Wally is still watching; you are both glad and ashamed that he has seen.

‘Did you call somebody?’ you ask.

‘Not yet.’

There are grocery bags in the backseat. They’ve spilled open. There are apples and passionfruit and tomatoes loose in the car, some squashed, some perfect. A jar of peanut butter. Some Alka-Seltzer tablets to settle a stomach.

‘I will.’ You feel brave. You have touched a dead stranger’s penis out of mercy; you can probably do anything.

You are calm. You are a tall, calm man, alone at the side of the road. You hold your phone in your hand and are a part of the world.

Small Matter

Of the five of us, only Jemma had a sibling — a stepbrother who lived far away. If we hadn't found each other, we'd have been lonely and sister-less, and we didn't want that for the babies. Thus, babies in plural. Duchess and Roz would carry them; they were the healthiest, with Duchess's strong crew arms and the calligraphy curves of Roz's body. Vivian was still girlishly thin, spindly in that prepubescent way, and we worried that any baby might starve, being a part of her. To be clear, Vivian ate loads. She ate everything. We'd all envied her metabolism, at one time or another. But we wouldn't get a second shot at this, and so we couldn't take unnecessary risks. We ruled Mina out for the same reason: she didn't purge anymore, but if she backslid — which happens to everyone, no judgement, just love — it could end badly. And Jemma, last among us, we simply couldn't risk. We didn't know what pregnancy hormones would do to her, or what her meds would do to the baby.

Whose idea was it to begin with? We didn't know, or it was nobody's. It belonged to us equally, rushing over us like alcohol that night at Vivian's as we lay draped over one another, almost asleep. We were talking about the list we had kept over the past few years, which wasn't written down anywhere, instead kept alive by reciting the names to each other every so often. It was a list of girls who were important to remember, who we did the work of remembering.

The tradition began because of Mina's father, and a car accident he'd seen. We were very small when it happened, but a few years ago, we'd searched it up. The man driving had been mildly famous — a cricketer — and most of the articles were about how he'd been cheating on his wife with the woman in the passenger seat. The comments decided it was karma: he and his slut mistress were dead, and his wife was alive. Perhaps it was because Duchess's mother had cheated on her father, but she was still a good person, or tried to be,

and a good mum, that we found the mistress's name, Sonya, and decided to feel kindly towards her. To balance everyone else out. After burning alive and drowning, dying while bent over the gearstick to give a blowjob was for sure one of the worst ways to go. Sonya hadn't deserved that. Her old MySpace from when she was our age was still online; her favourite song was by Ke$ha, and according to her last post, she was super excited to go to a pool party that had taken place at least a decade ago.

Our next addition to the list was Michelle W., Vivian's neighbour from when we were kids. She'd been the sixth member of our group until something mysterious (?) happened between her parents, and she was thrust away to the city to live with her aunt. We had stopped missing her by then, but we still had photographs of us with her, and in the photographs, we were all pink and happy, pre-growth spurts and so roughly all the same size.

Third was Louise Bauer, who'd once worked at the IGA near the Welton bridge. The closer we got to eighteen, the younger it seemed. Perhaps if she really had been younger, say thirteen or fourteen, or prettier, people would've cared more when she disappeared. But Louise was stranded in that teen-adult limbo: able to buy alcohol and never be found. Everyone knew she was dead, except us. We decided not to know.

Last on the list was Angel Tams. We hadn't liked her. She never sat still, and always asked the teachers questions about their personal lives that we could tell made them uncomfortable, such as why did Mrs Suez have that scar, or Ms Stevens not have a boyfriend? She got taken out of school partway through Year 9 after one of the prefects got her pregnant. She hadn't had the baby, and she went to another school in another town now.

It had been a while since we'd gone through the list, six months at least, and it was Roz who brought it up again, in her never-ending quest to return things to normal, ripping out our new awkwardness at the roots. She had her head in Jemma's lap, and Jemma was slowly

tracing the line of her nose, up and down; sometimes, late at night, their distinction from the rest of us became more pronounced. Roz counted through the names, Sonya, Michelle, Louise, and then Roz was saying, ‘Remember Angel?’ And we all said yes, we did. Between us, we had a sense of dark hair and busy eyes, and maybe she was taller than us, but that must’ve changed since then. There was a good chance that everything about her had changed.

That was all that was said on the subject: ‘Remember?’ Later, we would think of that as the beginning, because usually we considered Angel with sadness, but this was something other than sad.

The next morning, we went down to the beach, to see if Arlo was back. He slept underneath the jetty, where it was dark and shady, and said that he didn’t subscribe to sleep cycles based on night and day, but rather high and low tide. When his feet got wet, it was time to wake up.

The ocean was rife around the wooden posts that held the walkway up, and we could make out Arlo perched on the far side, watching the birds. He had that lazy affect that smokers had in indie movies, and in another life, he probably would’ve smoked. He’d have enjoyed tapping the ashes into the sea. He was oddly adolescent in his fascination with how he appeared from the outside, even when he was alone. Or maybe he could just tell when we were coming, however far away we were, and he was always ready.

We’d met Arlo when he first took up residence at the jetty. There never used to be anyone there at sunrise during the off-season, apart from us. According to Vivian’s aunt Beth, Arlo had lived here ages ago, and his arrival was in fact a return. Nobody knew where or why he’d gone; we suspected he’d been building schools for orphans up in Indonesia, or something similarly noble, but he just shrugged when we asked. The rest of the town assumed that he’d been off on a bender, and Arlo hadn’t helped the rumours by hanging

around Jade, who was pushing thirty and had doubled down on the blackout binge drinking at the age when most people backed off. Occasionally, we found her asleep near him on the sand, or lying with him under the early sun, and on those days, we kept walking, driven away by whatever quiet, pulsing threat she represented.

We'd heard from Nate that Jade was in hospital, and that Arlo had been with her these past few days. But now he was home again, his back to us. He was wearing several coats, which he'd shed over the next hour or so as the morning warmed.

'Hello,' Roz called as we approached. Our group had no leader, but when we saw somebody, Roz greeted them, and the rest of us clustered behind her. If she was the beak of our group, then Duchess was the body, Vivian was the tail, and Jemma and Mina were wings. They fluttered like wings.

Arlo turned and waved. He spoke when he wanted to, not when you addressed him. This was one of many qualities that had first drawn us to Arlo. He was in his mid-twenties, he was handsome, and at one time, he had known everything.

'Do you have kids?' Duchess asked. The image of Angel had clung more tightly to her than the rest of us. Duchess thought fiercely about everything, which often surprised our teachers. Duchess was strong, her entire body a calculated manoeuvre, and adults struggled to make sense of her without the autofill of generic girlhood. She was unplaceable and unshrinkable. Even her name struck people, given to her by her beautiful, unfaithful mother, who had conceived her at a Renaissance fair in a swampy purple tent with a man who sold authentically crafted armour. He was not Duchess's current father, who had come along months later, just before she was born. She had a story before she even existed. Duchess was outside something the rest of us were inside of, and we loved her for it.

Arlo squinted over at us. Exhaustion coated his eyes. ‘I look like a deadbeat dad to you, huh?’

Roz raised an eyebrow. ‘Could be.’ Our growing, embryonic suspicion that Arlo might be nobody special weighed on Roz the most. Or at least, she had been the quickest to doubt him, and was the least guilty about it. She was a sceptic and a cynic, and in recent months, the two had been breeding, filling her up.

Arlo shook his head. ‘Nah. No, sir.’

‘Do you want them?’

‘Why?’

Duchess shrugged. We sat down on the jetty beside him and let our legs dangle in the air, gazing down at the ocean below. It was too early to tell whether Arlo was thinking about his answer or had already decided not to give one. His replies could take days, and often they were just mutations of the question. Mina was the same; she never forgot anything, and sometimes, she would repeat back to you something you’d said, weeks after you said it.

Except for the magpies, it was quiet.

Vivian said, ‘I have a dream sometimes that I’m holding a baby.’

‘I have that dream too,’ Roz added, to the surprise of us all. She was our jagged one, unmaternal, careening towards her twenties with a vengeance, but suddenly she changed. At once, we could see her as gentle and open, and sense the kiss she might press to a baby’s head.

‘You’re just teenagers,’ Arlo reminded us. ‘You’re only supposed to think about yourselves.’

Soon, we were all having the dreams. They felt prophetic. They felt mythic, as though we had one day become part of something enormous.

‘Babies are a lot of work,’ Mina said.

Roz nodded. ‘Exactly. They scream and vomit and never sleep.’

‘Like, ever.’

‘And they shit.’

‘*And* they shit.’

‘Only an idiot would sign up for that.’

We staged this conversation often, taking turns who got each line. We were smart, well-rounded girls. We had potential. We were pleasures to have in class, even Roz, who was more argumentative than the rest of us. But now the adult world loomed over us, thick and acidic and melting fast. And what good was potential against a thing like that?

Mina had wanted to study polar bears, but the ice was going. Vivian had dreamed of being a journalist, before the world stopped reading and caring in one fell swoop. Duchess used to dance, but she’d given it up; there was no funding in the arts anymore. After changing her mind every week for our whole lives, Roz had finally run out of ideas, and as far back as we could remember, there was nothing that Jemma had ever wanted to be.

‘I thought I’d be dead,’ she said. We knew she didn’t mean to hurt us when she said it.

But we were all still here, none of us dead or gone or disappeared. We were fine. We had made it to the edge of childhood, perfect specimens with perfect As, and at the edge there was nothing. We'd brought so much with us, and there was nowhere to set it down.

Duchess first put it into words. It was late and dark, and we were with the boys in Nate's back yard, surrounded by the soothing felt of their drunkenness. When Jordy asked Duchess what she wanted to do next year, she told him, 'I just want something small that matters.'

Kostas leaned forward and threw up into his own lap. Jemma patted his hair. He would've brushed her off, if he were sober, or if it were anyone other than Jemma.

'You're all good,' she murmured. A brief slash of moonlight made her shine.

Nate passed Kostas his water bottle and turned back to Duchess. 'I get that. Like, something uncomplicated. Right in front of you. That's important.' He paused. 'I wish I was a shepherd.'

'Like from the Bible?'

'Yeah, but for cows. A cow-shepherd.' Like this, he was easier with his smiles, with his leaning close to her. Nate had been in love with Duchess for an indeterminate amount of time, but usually was polite enough to pretend he wasn't.

'A cowherd.'

'Cows are so big and peaceful. I think they'd like me.'

'Of course, they'd like you,' Vivian said.

‘And I’d like them. We’d be a gang. I was meant to live in the olden days. I could sleep under the stars.’ He tipped his head up and pointed, but Nate’s chosen star moved. A satellite.

‘It’s just fake nostalgia,’ Roz replied. ‘Everyone’s teeth just rotted out of their heads back then. You’re only romanticising it because everything seems simpler from a distance. You’re like one of those Rolling Stones fans who says they were born in the wrong time.’

Nate shook his head. ‘No. No, Roz, you’re wrong. I think it was actually simpler, for real. I think humans aren’t supposed to have to know about everything bad in the world.’

‘Or about superannuation.’

‘It’s just too hard.’

‘*Everything* is too hard. And too big. And too much.’ He slung an arm around Duchess, and she let him, perhaps because he was drunk, perhaps because at this moment, his fascination was something she could allow. ‘Tomorrow I’m going to get rid of my phone and become a desert hermit.’

‘Okay, Nate.’

Roz looked across at Duchess. Their strange friendship radiated outwards while we watched. Between them, it had always been strange. At first, you might think they were both leader-types, and that was why they clashed, but that wasn’t it. Growing up, Roz had wanted to be the rebel and have Duchess be the one to govern us, only to be let down when she realised what Duchess already understood: Roz was not a wild rogue or deviant spirit. She was good at making decisions and holding people together, and Duchess was the only one of us who enjoyed telling Roz she was wrong. They never agreed, but when they did, the world moved. Whatever they were thinking, they seemed to be agreeing now.

The idea, which had been everyone's idea, revealed itself to Duchess and Roz first, and they unclouded it for the rest of us. We would have two babies, two babies to five mothers being the perfect ratio. There would always be somebody who'd slept properly, who wasn't working, who had enough energy to give a little more. And rather than dissipating ourselves into the world, we would have a place to put all our love.

We didn't tell our parents. They would talk us out of it. We knew this with certainty: given enough time and words, they would buckle us back into the people we'd been. Even if only one of us changed our minds, it would be over — we would only do this if we were all in. And we were.

First, there was the problem of boys. The babies would have to be real siblings, so nobody could keep them apart no matter what happened in the future. But we had no boyfriends. Kostas, Jordy, and Finn wouldn't be interested, even with the incentive of getting to have sex twice and being held to no account after the fact. Nate probably would be interested, but only if he could be involved properly. Only if it meant something that we'd chosen him, and it wouldn't. If we pooled our Dollarmites, we could afford two sperm donations, but none of the banks would set up appointments with minors. Which left Arlo.

Arlo had many excellent qualities. He was beautiful, charming, and absent. He had almost definitely built schools for the underprivileged. Perhaps, once the babies were toddlers, we would bring them to meet Arlo. He would shake their tiny hands, and over the tops of their heads, we would share a glance of understanding. They would never know Arlo's part in their existence, but he would care for them in his distant way, and always remember what he had gifted to us, all that time ago, which was still currently now.

The five of us went down to the jetty the morning after another sleepover, this one filled with plans, with the stir-fry of collective imaginings. Vivian could knit. She'd knitted a tiny hat that enchanted us all.

Arlo was already awake, and looking in our direction, not out to sea, as if he'd sensed us coming. A sign, surely.

We gave him the sandwich we'd brought. At the beginning, we brought Arlo a lot of food, out of a deity-like worship that had now stooped to practicality. He was surly when hungry, more closed-off. He ate the sandwich in three bites.

Yesterday, he'd been to visit Jade, but she hadn't wanted to see him. Did we reckon that was the doctors interfering? Or that she'd got worse overnight? Had she got tired of him? We promised Arlo that wasn't the case, and he finally went quiet.

The subject change was left to Jemma, as we suspected that, secretly, Arlo liked her best.

'You never told us whether you want kids.'

Arlo held out his hand, but we had no more food for him. 'I have a baby brother. He's about two.'

'That's a pretty big age gap.'

'He's a few years younger than me. But he's got this thing with his brain. It's all flat. He didn't grow up, and he won't.'

Arlo cast his gaze out to the ocean like a line. He could reel in the horizon with those eyes, and we felt the dawn sun on us as suddenly as if Arlo really had. 'Someday,' he said at last, 'this will all be gone. In fact, you can't even say *someday* anymore. It'll be gone real soon. Underwater. Parts of Louisiana where people used to live are riverbeds now. Other

places, too — even here. Towns on the coast like ours? I give them ten years. The world is getting smaller.'

Duchess threw herself to her feet. 'Christ, you don't think we know that?'

Because we did know. We could feel the future pushing into us like an accordion, compressing, closer and lesser every minute.

Arlo was always lazy, dragging out every tilt of his head, elongating each breath. 'But it's whatever, right? It's got to be. We just have to let the world go on as it is. I reckon we should be the last. No more kids, no more anybody. How's that, girls? Is that the answer you were after?'

Duchess's gaze jumped to Jemma and back to him as she vibrated in place. 'Fuck you, Arlo,' she said. She stormed away. The rest of us hesitated. If we went after her, we wouldn't see Arlo again for a long time. He looked at us like he knew it. He smiled in that gormless way, already laughing at us for whatever we chose, for taking anything seriously, ever. And then just like that, we were tired of him.

The only remaining option was to find a stranger who we could convince to sleep with two of us. We knew from television and the women in our lives that men were essentially basic creatures. One of the basic things they wanted was to have sex with girls our age, or slightly older girls who passed as younger.

Sex was like the past, we discovered: something that seemed simple from far away but was made complicated by greater detail.

We collected around Roz's phone and watched missionary porn. We were practical about desensitising ourselves to the gory mechanics of it.

Jemma was the first to bow out, grimacing. ‘I don’t think I could do it. Like, physically. I don’t think I could.’

This was true, but Jemma might also have realised that we never would’ve let her, even if she’d wanted to.

‘I could,’ Duchess said. Duchess had torn her ACL when we were fourteen, and she hadn’t so much as cried. She didn’t even remember it now, she said, although when the incident came up, Roz claimed to still recall the sound of the tendon snapping. Do tendons make a sound? Mina asked. And Roz replied, you mean, if there’s no one in the forest to hear them?

Roz nodded. ‘I could, too.’ When Jemma had been out of the room, Roz was the most insistent that the duty didn’t fall to her. That Jemma was to be spared any part in this.

Vivian and Mina put themselves forward as well, but after a lot of debate, we settled on Duchess and Roz. The choosing was performative, anyway. It would’ve been the two of them regardless.

Technically, it was catfishing, though we chose not to think of it that way. We divided the most promising hook-up websites and apps between us and spent the next week sorting, swiping, and messaging the various men who responded. Our bios listed us as university students; we put up real photos and fake ages.

Jemma found him, in the end. Eamon: 49, separated, lover of anchovies on pizza, father of a grown-up son. Fertile, lost, and desperate, we decided. Perfect.

We watched over Jemma’s shoulder as she arranged the meeting with him through QuickLoveMatches.com.

‘Does anyone else feel kind of like the bad guys in an episode of *NCIS*?’ Vivian said. ‘Or *Criminal Minds*.’

‘We’d never be the bad guys in *Criminal Minds*.’ Roz was right. The girls like us were always the ones who died.

Eamon agreed to meet Jemma at the motel near the beach. He booked the room and paid in advance, so Jemma could just go into the lobby, show her ID, and collect the key. She told the clerk that Eamon was her father. He’d be coming later, after he’d finished work for the day.

We all went, not just Duchess and Jemma and Roz. It was important that we were together, for each other, and for the babies.

The room was beige and had an unsettling painting of an weirdly proportioned person on one wall. We all piled into the large bed, limbs overlapping. It was like a sleepover, only odd and loaded and without space for breath, as if we’d crammed our teen selves into our child selves, and we were too small and too big at once. We watched YouTube videos on Mina’s phone, mostly of babies, to remind ourselves why we were doing this. That whatever happened, it would be worth it.

Despite all our waiting, the door opening was unexpected. Eamon slung himself into the room and closed the door quickly behind him, pulling up short when he registered us: all of us.

He was a tall man who had probably once been thin and gangly, like Jordy, but was now solid, fatherly. Unthreatening, but even if he wasn’t, the five of us were safe; we had never been anything less than safe around each other.

Eamon's eyes flinched between us, face to face, as though taking in each claw on a creature's outstretched paw. 'What's going on?' he asked. He had a principal's stern voice. 'Jemma?'

'We wanted to meet you,' Roz said.

Eamon frowned. 'Uh. Why?'

'To make sure you have good intentions,' Duchess told him. Eamon's gaze fixed on her, although it was impossible to tell whether he was one of those men who instantly hated Duchess or liked her too much.

'Jemma wanted to meet in a motel room,' Eamon replied. 'I would've thought the intentions were pretty obvious.' When we were silent, rallying ourselves, he added, 'Look, if this is some joke to you, some way to get a free bed, it's really fucking weird. But I'm not here to be laughed at.'

'We're here to have sex with you,' Roz replied flatly.

Eamon swallowed. We watched the empty mouthful move down his throat. The barren stubble range that stretched across his skin was overwhelmingly masculine. Overwhelmingly adult. 'What, all of you?'

'Just her,' Roz said. 'And me.'

'Not Jemma?'

'No,' Jemma answered.

We could feel Eamon racing — either his heart or his mind. There was a new fastness to him. 'You're all university students?'

Duchess shrugged. 'We like older guys.'

They wouldn't advertise being virgins, unless Eamon seemed to be into that. It was hard to predict what fetishes a man might have. We'd heard about so many.

Eamon leaned against the door. 'This isn't some sort of hazing thing, is it?'

'No. Nobody asked us to do this. We just want to. We like to watch. Do you have a problem with that?'

'I'm trying to be more adventurous, actually. So, this is good. This is right up my alley, these days,' he assured Duchess.

'Good.'

He fixed on Jemma again. 'And you? You only want to watch?'

Maybe he had a thing for red hair, or grey eyes. She wasn't prettier than the other two, but Eamon seemed tugged along by something in her.

Jemma's head didn't turn towards Roz, but we all felt her look back. A look back without looking. 'I can be a part of it, if you like.'

Roz's hand fell to Jemma's thigh, but Jemma didn't take her offer back.

Eamon stepped closer to the bed. Mina and Vivian slid off the mattress silently, retreating to the corner of the room, where they gripped one another like trees planted too close together.

Jemma lurched to her feet with that random, vicious boldness of hers that had come to terrify us all. She moved into Eamon's space and set her hands to his hips. It made him suddenly even older and her suddenly young, young in a way that Jemma hadn't seemed to us since she'd tried to kill herself. That razor had made her ancient, and now that ancientness was reversed.

Eamon kissed her. His fingers tripped through her hair, which she'd washed with Vivian's watermelon shampoo, and so smelled a bit like Vivian.

Jemma kissed him back, valiantly. We stood in the forest and listened.

He pulled away first, slipping his jacket off his shoulders. We could see the sweat circles at his armpits, like oil spills, spreading outwards. He must've finished work later than expected. He must've hurried here, to make it on time.

Something around us all was moving.

Jemma fumbled with the buttons on his shirt. Her red hair flared fiercely against the starched white cotton. Eamon helped her tug it the rest of the way off.

'You?' he asked, pinching the hem of her tee-shirt.

Jemma shook her head. She wasn't breathless, but her breath was thick. 'Them.'

Duchess approached him with a bravery that was almost transparent, tugging her spaghetti strap singlet over her head. He was one of the men that liked her, then: Eamon's hunger sloped out of him in a long, wide wave that covered us.

'Are you really all just going to watch?' he asked.

'It's what we like.'

'I haven't done this sort of stuff before. Group stuff. Did you — are you — do you fuck each other, as well?'

'No.'

'Okay.'

Roz took off her shirt, too. Everything felt odd. Not clinical, but mute and careful, like carrying a full glass of water through the dark.

Eamon's eagerness clotted the room, shoving the air up to the ceiling so we all had to tilt our necks to breathe. It was at once powerful and pathetic that he wanted us. We felt like miniatures in that motel. And if we'd gone outside, the whole world would've been miniature too. None of this mattered, we realised. None of this was glossy or enticing or remaking. Like most adult things we'd come to discover, when we finally reached it, it was already deflating, already a mix of sad and strange.

Duchess unbuttoned her shorts. We could see how she shivered; Eamon could not. She was beautiful. She reminded us of her twelve-year-old self, slithered out of the pool, caught in the wind on the way to her towel. The shorts dropped to her ankles. We had all witnessed her naked, but Duchess in her bra and underwear was different. We tried to imagine ourselves into her, to split the burden, but could not.

Eamon dropped his own slacks. He wore black underwear that was taut and clean, maybe new. He toed off his shoes gracelessly, and just like that, we were in front of a mostly naked man for the first time in our lives.

His eyes jumped between Duchess's chest and Jemma's face and instinctively, they drew nearer to each other, until their bodies were pressed together. Although sometimes a few of us would hang out without the others, Duchess and Jemma didn't pair off for anything. They were never alone together, but they seemed alone now. Mina had been the one to find Jemma in the bathtub, but that was forgotten. Obviously, it had always been Duchess and Jemma, not opposites but some other kind of contradiction. Obviously.

Later, this sense would fade, and they would just be our friends again.

Eamon reached for the front of his trousers and grasped himself. Mina turned her face into Vivian's shoulder, because sometimes in uncomfortable situations, she was stricken with laughter. She had laughed when her dog died and when her grandmother took a fall and when

Mina called to tell us what had happened. And if she laughed, Eamon would leave. We knew this about men too. They couldn't stand to be laughed at.

'Sorry,' Eamon said. He wasn't hard. 'I'm not as young as I used to be. Maybe — if you took off your bra?'

Vivian gently covered Mina's mouth and turned her back to see.

We all still changed in front of each other, careless, catapulted into that familiarity so consuming that somebody's hipbones or chest or thighs were nothing but shapes that made them up. This nakedness lacked the ease of changing before bed, but it wasn't sexual either. We watched Roz and Duchess fall into the in-between, where neither was really themselves.

'It's not always easy for me now,' Eamon repeated, sliding a hand inside his underwear to reach himself properly.

We waited, feeling that abrupt pity it was only possible to feel for adults when we glimpsed the uncertainty that we didn't want them to have.

'Is there anything we should do?' Jemma asked.

Eamon's smile had slipped off the fringe of embarrassment and into something cavernous. 'If you could, if you could tell me you love me? Maybe.'

We believed that Jemma would have. She eluded us, in a lot of ways. She was kinder than we were.

But then Eamon said, 'I'm sorry. That was — I'm sorry.' He took his hand out of his pants and rubbed the back of his neck.

'It's okay,' Jemma said.

'You look like her,' he told her. 'My wife. Erin.'

For a second, this made us sure that Erin had died. But she was fine. They had been together since they were undergrads. She lived in their old house, which Eamon had moved out of to escape the sucking stagnation and irrelevance and boredom; it had somehow followed him out, transpiring to have been Eamon's all along. These days, he mostly ate Lite n' Easy meals in front of a crappy television, because she'd locked him out of their Netflix account. Erin's pettiness amused us. It spared us from dwelling on everything else.

'Couldn't you just talk to her?' Roz said. 'Tell her you miss her and that you're confused, and you regret it.'

Eamon shook his head. He was perched on the edge of the mattress now with Jemma and Duchess on either side of him and the rest of us standing in front. Arms folded. A council. 'You don't understand,' he replied. 'You're very young.'

'Did you try?'

Eamon shook his head. 'Untangling it all now? It's too late.'

'You'd rather just try to fuck students?'

He shrugged.

Us standing and Eamon sitting made him seem small, watered down. We felt compassion and fury. They were easy to feel together, even as we did not want them to be. We demanded one or the other, but they were not a paradox, after all.

Everyone put their clothes back on. Eamon turned away from us to redress, suddenly modest. He stayed in the room when we left, lying on top of the bed and gazing at the ceiling, as if he was our age, dreaming after school.

The motel wasn't far from the beach, and none of us could go home. We just couldn't. Not until we knew whether we were different somehow, for not having truly done something but for having nearly done it in all the ways that counted.

We walked in the sand, taking turns in holding and letting go of hands. Mina pulled out her phone and put her summer playlist on, the one with radio hits that were popular in Year 7. Half the tinny noise was swallowed by the wind, but it still settled the world. It gave us the soundtrack to make this a movie, and then it was less real.

Low tide was ending. Arlo wasn't in his usual spot, curled beneath the jetty — later, we'd find him and forgive him — but there was somebody at the end of the walkway. We didn't recognise Jade until we were right next to her. She was thin, a slash of a person, her forehead holding up the slack of her face.

After a beat, Jemma sat down next to her. We all followed suit, dangling our legs over the side. Jade might not have noticed; her face was tipped back, her eyes closed, and the bottle tucked between her knees glowed like a lantern in the sun.

Once, we had told Arlo about our list of girls. He'd suggested looking Angel Tams up on Facebook to discover what had become of her. She was probably doing well, he told us. It might be comforting to know for sure. There was no reason for it to be a mystery, he said, as though mystery were something that he wanted to keep for just himself, and anyone who dared to make themselves visible deserved to be found. But young as he was, Arlo hadn't grown up quite like we had, knowing for sure about every little thing. We hadn't been able to explain that this was how we kept Angel safe. Michelle, too. And even Louise, who was maybe dead. Only Sonya, the oldest, the first, had escaped us.

Already, the possibility of the babies was becoming far away, like a ship sailing off, closer and closer to the curve of the Earth, gliding towards its own invisibility. When our

mothers told stories about being our age, they laughed at the lost adolescent logic that had buoyed them around. But we would always understand today. It would always make sense, even when we were old. If we were ever old.

Jade's eyes opened. We hung in her periphery and shrouded ourselves in our silent loss. The world folded, light expelled, as though night had clamped down on us hours too soon. The water rose slowly and Vivian, who was tallest, was the first to feel it on the soles of her feet.

Hatchling Season

Opal had a scar that ran from the top of her forehead down her nose and forked at the corner of her mouth, one line stretching to her ear and the other most of the way to her jaw. But Beth didn't notice this. Well, she did notice, in a courteous and respectful way; she appreciated her beauty, felt no pity, et cetera, and all the things she suspected Opal might want her to feel.

'Lovely to meet you,' Beth said. 'I'm Beth.' Which Opal would know, of course, because Opal had heard as much about her as she had about Opal. Rick often read aloud parts of his letters before he sent them — just the parts mentioning Beth or funny shared anecdotes from their life, of which there were many. The other parts, the parts meant for Opal alone, she never asked about. She wasn't a prying wife. Rick never took more space than he needed, and it was healthy, in a relationship, to have a bit of wondering.

Sometimes, Rick relayed to Opal stories that he wasn't a part of, like Beth's awkward run-in with a failing student's parent at the grocery store, or a song lyric she'd misinterpreted, and Beth's throat would clench, as though to hold her objection in. Now and then she said, 'I'm sure Opal isn't interested in *that*.' But Rick insisted that she was.

Grateful. Yes. Beth was *grateful* for Opal's presence in their lives, shadowy as it had been, since well before Rick and Beth had met. Beth had never even seen a photo of her — Rick's pictures from when he was that age were in heavy albums at his father's house, a state away. On the few occasions they'd visited, Rick had forgotten, and Beth had forgotten too. She'd sat there, viscerally absent-minded, waiting for Rick to clap his hands to his knees and say, 'Just a minute, Dad. Got some ancient stuff I'd like to show Beth.' Recently, she'd decided to stop minding, and resolved to never ask again.

But now Opal was here, and Beth was vindicated: she was as beautiful as Beth had always imagined. Rather than suspicion, or resentment, Beth was crowned with relief. She felt as though she had managed to somehow know Opal after all.

‘I can’t believe we’ve never met!’ Opal trilled. She hugged Beth even before she hugged Rick. In Opal’s scrawny, tight, sweet-smelling embrace, Beth heard Rick chuckle. A brilliant, home-flush sound; a mantle of a sound. ‘Oh, you’re wonderful.’

They both agreed about how excited they were to finally meet, and Rick added that he was as well. And he did look it. Beth was not ashamed to concede to herself that she — at first — kept an eye out for Signs. All for nothing, though, of course. Rick and Opal were each other’s oldest friend.

Together, they reminded Beth of her father and his old army buddies. Those men would come over unannounced, and they would stand together in the mutual gruffness and stoicism that grows over a shared closed door. For Beth, it was precious to see her father with them. Like something had been saved. Or something lost had been given importance, and in that way saved. The older she got, the more she came to recognise how ridiculous that was. Still, she had always lingered, when she brought the tea, the biscuits. Her father would swoop an arm around her shoulders and say, ‘Takes after her Uncle Stevie, hey, with those eyes!’ Beth would slim to a preen, a shaft of pride.

Opal only had two bags and insisted on carrying them both herself. They settled in the living room, where Beth had already set up a spread, although the cheeses were back in the fridge and had to be brought out again; she’d anticipated Opal earlier. But no matter.

She watched Rick tighten and unfurl by turns, caught in a strange limbo of Rick/Beth, Rick/Opal. Of navigating between the two. Like touching the wires, poor boy. He did seem a

bit boy-like now. As if Opal's presence had compressed the last fifteen years, accordion-like, and he was twenty again.

'Tell us everything,' Rick said.

Opal's most recent letter had arrived two weeks ago, but with Opal, so much was guaranteed to have happened since then. Beth could extrapolate from the slips and snippets he shared of her words. Rick never regaled her verbatim, preferring to recount his own version later as they ate dinner or worked in the garden. As such, Beth didn't realise what a storyteller Opal was until she was sitting across from them, weaving gestures and words like a cat's cradle that Beth couldn't help but slip her hand inside, enthralled.

Beth and Rick had been to Greece for their honeymoon — baklava, to this day, brought back Rick's stubbled cheek resting on her thigh and the soft stroke of sun on her chest — but Opal had been everywhere. She'd burned through the whole world.

This was in part because Opal's very interesting and specialised job involved a lot of travel. She worked in maritime law, flying out onto ships that were about to crash and assessing the situation to determine what kind of trouble the company was in. Massive boats, the ones like sea-born skyscrapers, oil tankers and freighters and so on, encountered a unique problem: because of their size, they could only be steered slowly. An adjustment from the helmsman wouldn't manifest in a change of the ship's course for hours. Which meant the captains knew very far in advance when they were in trouble, but this advance notice did not help them avoid that trouble. They headed towards it regardless, but for this last part of the journey, Opal joined them.

Beth wondered whether Opal stayed for the actual crash. Did she see the oil spill and the containers fall? Or had the same helicopter that brought her returned to take her away by then? But it would've seemed gratuitous and ungenerous to ask, as if Beth were insinuating it

was Opal's fault that birds drowned in slick or crates full of prized belongings sank to the bottom of the sea.

Most recently, Opal had been based in Seattle, but after a decade away, she'd returned home, for unspecified reasons. Not that Beth wasn't thrilled to have her here. Not that she needed to know, when this was such a blessing.

'You live a very free life,' Beth observed. Rick looked at her strangely — some envy that she hadn't meant had filtered in her tone. Or maybe she was envious, but not of Opal's lifestyle; rather, that she was the kind of person capable of it. Beth kept within her margins.

When Opal smiled, her face crinkled around her scar. Like a dimple, or crow's feet that showed something lateral instead of sun and age, the lines were illuminated by her expressions. Something in Beth twisted; a tourniquet that failed to shut anything off.

'I try to,' Opal replied. Without gestures to busy them, her right hand held her left hand— cradled it, as though it were something small and separate that she was trying her best to keep alive. 'Certainly, an adventurous life, at any rate. Like Rick used to.'

Rick was transformed by ruefulness into someone much softer than her husband and in her mind, Beth lurched closer to him, pulled by this sudden exposure of his past. 'I still have adventures. I'm trying to grow a pineapple in the backyard. If you think that's easy, Opal, you're crazy.'

Opal glanced at Beth — a secret, sleepover glance, checking that Beth knew it, that Opal really was crazy. And Beth did.

'I must try some of this famous pineapple.'

'It's green.'

She laughed. 'Then I suppose I'll have to stay a bit, won't I?'

Rick's arm, which had been resting over the back of the couch, fell around Beth's shoulders. He was a warm guy, but especially his armpits; when she was tucked into him like this, the top of her shoulder was always hot. In the early days of their relationship, she worried that she might start to sweat, or that it meant that he was sweating, and she'd start to smell like man and manliness. But now it made her feel safe. Docked.

'Would you like to stay a bit?' he asked.

Opal's expression didn't change. Perhaps she'd never meant any of it as a joke. 'It'd be nice to be in town again. And I haven't seen you in so long.'

Rick's hesitation would've been invisible to anyone but Beth. And maybe to Opal, who was adapting, gearing up to launch another laugh, as if she'd been teasing —

'Stay as long as you like,' Beth said, before Opal could divert. 'We've got a spare room. There's not much to do around here that you haven't already done, but you're very welcome.'

It was only after Opal smiled at her, directly, not a Beth-and-Rick smile but one just for her, that Beth realised how desperate she'd been to pass some invisible test. And now she had.

'There's never been much to do,' she agreed. 'Although I would like to head down to Mon Repos, at some point, before January ends. To see the turtles hatch.'

'Wonderful,' Rick nodded, and the weighty bob of his head briefly reminded Beth of the older male teachers at school and their impenetrable professor auras, or perhaps of her own father.

'You two should come along. If you haven't seen them too many times.'

‘I haven’t been, actually, since I was a girl,’ Beth said, surprising herself. She remembered it so clearly. Surely, she must’ve gone more recently.

‘Perfect.’

They ate carrot sticks with hummus and seaweed crackers and apricots and three kinds of cheese — ‘Eclectic,’ Opal called the platter. Was there an opposite to passive aggression? Where you could deliver an observation and have it ring as a compliment, but subtly, as though in code? Opal managed it.

Over the course of the afternoon, even before they cracked out the wine, Rick eased. The conversation inched backwards from recent memory to the old days. The first days.

There were two versions to how Rick and Opal met.

The first was that Rick had packed off to Cambodia to build schools and teach English during his gap year and at a hostel he’d found Opal, who was there for the same reason. They’d shared some cheap beer and some bai sach chrouk and spent the next few months inseparable. Beth hadn’t questioned this story, mostly because Rick had admitted that a shared food poisoning disaster was a key bonding moment, and Beth had assumed that men didn’t lie to their new girlfriends about getting explosive diarrhoea. Rick still knew how to ask for more toilet paper in Khmer.

Beth heard the second version later, after her cousin’s wedding, when she and Rick were huddled under a pagoda with a bottle of champagne, swiped but not stolen, because it was open bar. They’d been near enough to the reception to hear the music but far enough away to talk without being overheard or interrupted. Just the two of them. Beth had radiated an active casualness the entire day, not wanting Rick to think that this was her trying to send a hint, while juggling persistent uncertainty over whether their relationship was truly *going* anywhere. Beth’s cousin had been with his girlfriend — wife — for three years before they

got married, but even months after he met her, Beth could tell it was different. She'd never known Rick before she'd known him. Was he Different? Was this?

The appetisers had got her onto the subject. The grilled pork soft tacos, the best she'd ever had, and she'd asked how they compared to the street food from his trip, excepting the gastro.

'I've never been to Cambodia,' Rick said. 'That wasn't true.'

He was confused. Or it was an odd joke. Why lie? To impress her, perhaps. In fairness, the building-schools-thing *had* impressed her, but he was still volunteering at the youth rec centre by then, and donating to charities, and it wasn't like Beth didn't love him for plenty of other reasons.

'Oh,' she said.

'Opal and I met at a clinic.'

She swallowed. But felt emboldened. He was being vulnerable at last, in some way, and Beth was going to take it. Beth's mother was a noble woman who coped with things — whatever happened, Beth's mother just handled it with equal parts effort and stillness. She was practical and kind, two qualities that held each other up. Even if Beth or one of her siblings had done something really bad, Beth's mother would nod and get on with it. Getting it done was how she loved you.

So, Beth injected her face with serenity, and her body too. She held him nonjudgmentally. Humans were complex and flawed. She'd always been told that, and read that, but by twenty-six she *knew* it. In that intimate way. 'Rehab?' she asked, in a beautiful, inviting voice she'd never had before.

‘Kind of.’ He breathed. She let him be, and just as Beth was beginning to think that a nudge was what he needed after all — permission, or something — he said, ‘For eating disorders. We were both bulimic. Do you know what that is?’

‘Like Jane Fonda and Princess Di?’

Rick was still. Stillness as flinch. ‘Boys can have it too.’

Beth had never really considered it. ‘Okay.’

‘We went to a treatment centre to get proper help. My family doesn’t know, except my grandpa.’

Beth wanted to ask why him, but Rick’s grandfather had died while Rick was in Cambodia. While Rick was in treatment. And he got morose at any mention of him. They were close, she’d surmised, but all Rick had left was an old jacket and according to Rick’s mother, the same strong eyebrows.

‘Did it —’

‘I’ve got a better relationship with food now,’ Rick answered, un-Rick-like, but calm at least.

‘That’s good. Opal?’

‘She’s been back a few times.’

Beth had noticed an uptick in the letters recently. ‘Is she back now?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Is she okay? Will she be?’

‘It’ll always be there, our whole lives, you know? It’s just up and down forever.’

‘I’ll help you,’ Beth promised. ‘Whatever that looks like.’

‘I don’t know what it looks like.’

Beth was her mother who was Beth who was coping with things. ‘We will.’ She leaned up and kissed his cheek. Her hand was resting on his chest and she thought of him naked, and the times she’d dragged her fingers lightly over the ladder of his ribs while they lay together, and whether that had been the wrong thing to do. Whether she’d been doing wrong things all this time, and that was why he maybe wouldn’t ever want to marry her.

But —

In ten seconds, she’d made it about herself, and wasn’t that such a Beth thing to do?

‘I love you,’ she told Rick. She didn’t want to add ‘*no matter what*’ because that would’ve made this a Matter that she was generously overlooking, something that would’ve derailed a lesser girlfriend.

He kissed the top of her head.

For a time, she’d almost envied Opal, or at least Opal’s ability to understand Rick. To have shared something terrible and formative with him that Beth had no part in or equivalent of. Eventually, without an explanation for its own disappearance, the feeling just faded away.

And here they were: seven years married, stable, content.

And here was Opal: bright, brilliant, having always been a part of them and now gazing at them with an expression that Beth couldn’t read, a fact that didn’t trouble her.

Later, Rick went out to pick up dinner while Beth took Opal upstairs. The guest bedroom was glaringly ill-appointed; the only person who ever stayed there was Beth’s sister, Dana, who

had lived a while in Scandinavia and didn't appreciate bric-a-brac of any kind, even sentimental.

Beth walked into the room and Opal leaned against the doorjamb, watching her.

'Make yourself at home,' Beth said. *At home*. She hated that expression.

Opal's stare poured from her and into Beth like a river, and it filled her up like a river. 'It's been a long time since I've seen Rick.'

'I can give you two some space.' She'd been planning to and was pinched with the urge to inform Opal of that; she wasn't some wife who inserted herself into all her husband's friendships, with women or men.

'That's not what I meant,' Opal replied. 'Just that when you haven't seen someone for a long time, even though you know they must've changed, you sort of expect them to be how you remember them. He's very happy here with you, Beth.'

'That's kind of you.'

Opal didn't reply. She just nodded. Beth felt the expectation that she would say more. As easily as Opal could spin words, she could weave vacuums, these cavernous spaces Beth was desperate to fill, to inflate herself with whatever helium it took to reach Opal's approval.

'I'll leave you to rest a bit.'

Beth went downstairs and packed up their afternoon's indulgences, and when Rick walked through the door, she relieved him of the plastic bags of Indian take-away and kissed him properly. His hands settled on her waist and pulled her closer, holding her together — enough of her, between the specific lifted scabs his palms weren't big enough to coax down again.

With schools on break, Beth worked planning lessons from home, so while Rick was in the office, she bore witness to all of Opal's comings and goings. Of which there were a lot. Beth never felt she could ask where Opal was off to, but Opal offered vague bits and pieces on her own. She was seeing old friends or visiting markets or meeting someone.

'You should come with me,' Opal suggested, and it was being invited sometimes and not always that made Beth sure she meant it, rather than being leashed by politeness. And the fact that unlike Beth, Opal wasn't particularly polite.

Beth shook her head. 'No, you go on. It's alright.'

About a week after Opal arrived, when Beth was waking up and expecting to find her in the kitchen, no longer just someone whose presence Beth remembered on seeing her, Opal insisted on coming along when Beth went shopping.

They were supposed to go for groceries, but when they passed a dress shop having a sale, Opal ushered Beth as effortlessly as if Beth had wanted to go all along.

'You're going to try this one,' Opal commanded. 'And this one. And that.' She grabbed the dresses off the rack and swept Beth into a changing room, the largest one at the end. Opal locked the door behind them and leaned back against the mirror, so that Beth couldn't see more than a flash of her own limbs or hair reflected back, couldn't assess herself in the unflattering light and shadows that found new lumping places to congregate.

Beth began to unbutton her shirt. Opal didn't turn away, and suddenly it would've seemed childish to ask her. Asking would've made Beth a let-down to women, feminism, a slave to the Victoria's Secret waistline witch hunt and the gaunt frame her students craved.

Beth slid her shorts down her legs and stepped out of them without enough grace. As she bent, she felt her belly crouch into rolls, and hoped her head and neck obscured this fact from Opal.

‘You’re very beautiful,’ Opal said.

‘Thank you.’ Beth’s mother had taught her about taking a compliment. False modesty over something so small made you trite and inconvenient. ‘You are, too.’ It must’ve seemed like Beth was only saying that because Opal had first, but she wasn’t, it was the truth; maybe she was bolder because of Opal. She could breathe better with that out there: how Opal’s beauty weighed on her, all the heavier for the lack of jealousy, the lack of envy.

Beth’s body keened with her own awareness of it, a thrashing between self-consciousness and overwhelming existence.

Opal’s smile stretched, luxe and easy. Beth was sure she was going to say, *I know*. She obviously knew.

‘Here.’

She took the dress that Opal offered and held it. If she put it on, then Opal would no longer be looking at her without her clothes, she would be looking at Beth in a dress, and briefly, that shift was unbearable.

Beth slipped the dress on.

‘I’ll zip you,’ Opal said.

Beth felt that movie feeling come on. That sense of a hundred mechanisms in her head, ninety-nine of them fail-safes to correct for instinct. Each moment whirled around her, churning its moving parts.

Opal zipped her, possibility cauterising as Opal held her shoulders and then let her go. Beth tried on all three dresses and bought none of them. Each, she tried on more slowly than the last.

Rick had cooked. Black bean salad and lime white fish. Delicious. He found it meditative, cooking. He'd started with eggs on toast at age eleven and gradually worked his way up to perfecting most of what he liked to eat. Beth had started by picking beautiful, complex recipes and producing poor imitations.

'Just try with something easy,' he'd told her.

Beth, at twenty-three, thought nothing worth doing was easy. She was smart and capable. She should be able to start with difficult, fail once, and then succeed.

If she'd listened to him then, perhaps she'd be brilliant by now.

Rick had deboned the fish — fine bones in her throat was a phobia of Beth's — but Opal still ate it with artful, minute delicacy.

'What did you get up to today, ladies?' he asked.

'Grocery shopping,' Beth replied. Her imagined reluctance to mention the changing room had built up in her chest, but it vaulted into a post-cry catharsis when she added, 'And tried on a few dresses.'

Rick told them about his co-worker Lucille, who was waging a silent HR war against Quentin and his flowing hair. Lucille argued this was unbecoming. That if a man had been alive long enough for his hair to grow that long, he was too old to have hair that long and be taken seriously. Rick had informed her that he once had waist-length hair, which was untrue,

but watching Lucille forcibly unclutter the distaste from her expression was too good an opportunity to miss.

When he finished, Opal said, ‘I was going to ask whether you would be open to trying something. And there’s no pressure, none at all. I thought I’d go for a bit of a walk now, to give you some space to talk and think it over. But I’d like to kiss Beth.’

She stood.

Rick’s eyes hooked through Beth’s. He must’ve seen that she didn’t know. That she did know. As always, it wasn’t too much for him, no matter what she did or what they became.

Opal made her way past Beth with a gentle, flighty touch to her shoulder. Beth willed herself to catch Opal, to just reach up and hang on, and as though these signals had reached Rick’s hands and not her own, it was him who stopped Opal from leaving.

Rick said he found it beautiful, watching the two of them, as though what he felt for Beth was now also something outside himself. For Beth, it was sudden. The feelings. Like how mothers describe loving their infant the moment it is born, or even earlier: Beth loved Opal from that kiss and maybe before, love that doubled and brimmed and doubled again, surrounding Beth from the inside. She couldn’t move for thinking of Opal’s hands.

Beth hadn’t been with a woman before. Once, at the tipping point of adolescence, she’d kissed Laurel Jennings, quick as a shoulder tap, any feeling of the kiss itself entirely swarmed by the giddiness of the act: her first kiss. They’d been sitting in a circle with nine or ten other girls, their kiss commanded by Penny Fontaine, unquestionably the ruler of their little coven. Their friends cooed, and Penny nodded with steely satisfaction, as though by

watching, she'd neutralised a looming threat. Laurel had been commanded to kiss Edith next, and then Penny herself. This had taken place in another room while the rest of them ate chips and a few hunched at the door, reporting to the others. At the time, Beth had wondered whether Penny was embarrassed about something — but that was impossible; she was more confident than any of them, and had been kissed by one of her older brother's friends at a PCYC dance, certifying a pass into teenager-dom. They must've left to tell ugly secrets about the rest of them.

Now, with the evening wrapped in the gloss of hindsight, Beth drifted a hug to Penny across space and time. This was the kind of life change that might've prompted her to look Penny up in the phonebook and see how she was doing. They'd lost touch when the other girls went off to the private Catholic high and Beth went public. But Beth never did reach out, in the end, finding herself unwilling to perforate those childhood days. Too much had happened in the meantime, and she couldn't risk the present deflating the past. She didn't want to learn anything beyond who they'd been, content to let those girls rest as they were, preserved against divorce and death and estrangement and time.

But Opal's softness, her shape, her delicate frame and gentle voice; these were things that Penny, even then, seemed to have recognised as precious. Beth had arrived late, and behind, as she did to everything.

She was glad to have Rick there with her. Nobody knew her better than he did, which every few months or so would twist into something terrifying, only to settle again. These days, she was the least fearful she'd ever been.

Rick and Opal were intimate too, but in an ancient, platonic way, affection without desire. Or the desire they experienced presented in lying beside one another and smooth,

unrefined touching, the kind of naked care that Beth imagined the first humans had for one another before culture tightened the noose.

The three of them together, Beth in the middle, this was love, felt all around. Even the house must've been different, this lustre tanning into the walls.

Perhaps it was because their summer holidays were only six weeks, not three months, that summers were never as infinite as they were described in the novels she read as a child. From the first day, they opened into a narrow shape, always ready to close again, easy as a drawstring pouch, swallowing watermelon drips and cicada sounds.

But this thing with Opal was both at once. Blooming into some grand, endless existence, and already almost ending. It undulated around Beth: the lust, the fear, the vividness.

And then soon, too soon, Opal tracing absent shapes over her back before they fell asleep, talking about the turtles. Apparently, the season was reaching its peak. Any longer and they risked missing it. Beth unhitched herself from the fissure of anxiety that went through her. There was nothing final about a trip together. It would be nice. Charming. A long drive, a night at an upmarket hotel, maybe. But this was the only thing that Opal had wanted to do here, really, and now she was wanting to do it.

'Let's go on Saturday,' Rick suggested. He was facing Beth, their knees touching, speaking louder than he would if it were just the two of them so that Opal could hear.

'Saturday,' Opal agreed.

Beth flailed wildly for the recent past. 'Excellent,' she said.

The bush around the Mon Repos tourist centre reminded Beth of her first house, a former pineapple farm that had grown over with native plants again. She and her siblings had run wild across the property, although less wild than her father had probably imagined they would. Beth was bookish, even then. They'd uprooted to the suburbs in her early teens, and she'd never brought herself to go back and see the place again. What if they'd knocked everything down and built over it? What if it was the same?

The queue for the turtle hatching evening wound back through the trees. The three of them stood close together, like the other families.

'Anyone for the restroom?' Rick asked.

Beth offered to wait while the other two went, and they handed her their bags, the light wrap they'd brought in case one of them got cold.

'We'll be back in a minute,' Opal said. She squeezed Beth's hand and Rick kissed her cheek. Nobody was looking at them. Nobody knew to look, but Beth felt a thrill. They were getting away with something. The dark had covered their connection, and their connection pounded through the dark.

She watched them walk off together towards the toilets. If she were a stranger, she'd think that Rick and Opal were married, only she wouldn't know their names were Rick and Opal. She imagined being a stranger imagining their marriage, gazing at them with the fondness of distance and deciding they were a very happy couple, because nobody ever looked at two happy people and thought they were missing anything. But they were. And what they were missing was Beth.

The shadows enclosed them, and Beth was left to the dull, human sounds of the queue. People moved around her. The night was thin with bald patches, brightness swatted on by random torches.

She allowed herself longer and longer blinks, enjoying the coolness of the early evening now that the January heat had curved away.

A tentative voice, high and adolescent: ‘Mrs Porter?’

Beth turned. The girl was shoulder-height, barely chubby but at that age where the barest of chubbiness leaves its mark. Her short brown hair swarmed around her face, almost boyish, though not the way the boys now had their hair — the way they had when Beth was young. Out of uniform, the girl took her a second to place. ‘Louise!’ She’d been in Beth’s Year 10 English class. Quiet. Reasonably well behaved. Always following around after that friend of hers. Another year or two without teaching her, and Beth would forget her completely.

‘Hi, Mrs Porter.’

‘Hi.’ Louise had presented herself and was waiting for her reply. Mrs Porter’s, not Beth’s, because to be Beth in this moment would be a world-piercing crime. ‘How are you? Have you started *The Great Gatsby?*’ An opening for Louise to claim praise from Beth without feeling awkward or needy.

‘Not yet.’

‘Well, good. You should be enjoying your freedom.’ Beth paused. ‘Any highlights from the holidays so far?’

The line moved, and they shuffled a few steps forward. This close to the tourist centre, the artificial light washed over them. Louise’s eyes were flooded with dark liner.

Opal and Rick would be back soon. She couldn’t see them yet, but she could feel their imminent return like water beginning to boil at the edge of her consciousness, the first few bubbles on the rise. What would she do? Introduce them to Louise? Louise wasn’t a stand-out

student, but she was observant, curious, engaged. Opal might stand too close, or touch her, and instead of seeing Mrs Porter's female friend, Louise might realise there was more to the three of them. And then what? Panic trundled through Beth's chest, gathering momentum. Asking a fourteen-year-old to keep a secret wasn't feasible, or kind.

Louise spoke experimentally. 'My dad left.'

'Oh, sweetheart.'

In front of her, Louise throbbed with vulnerability, with anger, with something daring and adult. 'Yeah.'

Beth probed the words in her mouth with her tongue, deciding not to voice them. At Louise's age, Beth's father had died, but that wouldn't help the girl now.

She remembered her mother, sat on the veranda, looking exceptional. Her mother hadn't stopped looking exceptional since her father's death; or she looked no different, but Beth just couldn't get over seeing her, and seeing how nothing radical had changed.

'It's been six weeks,' Beth had said, with a shatter to it, vibrating in the un-sameness of the world.

Her mother had reached out with her gaze, her hands still around her cup of tea, the one that was never full and never put down since her father's passing. She told Beth, 'Before we know it, it'll have been six years.'

And then six had been twenty, and even now, her memories of him were a rough bark, splintered and strange, the grain turning against her at the oddest moments. Like this. It was so easy to be fourteen, for a second, dissolving in loss and inadequacy, because for Louise, Beth could do nothing; sadness, like love, stretched without thinning. Beth's sadness didn't lessen Louise's. It didn't lift anything.

Louise nodded.

‘Are you here with your mum?’

‘Yeah. We’re on our way up to Cairns to see my grandma. I should get back to her.’

‘Okay. Stay well,’ Beth told her. A big ask for someone that young.

Louise disappeared back down the line, into the dark, and Beth felt changed. Then Rick and Opal appeared at her side, and the feeling slid away, retreating from the familiarity they brought with them.

They bought their tickets, and while waiting for the rest of their group, they wandered the displays. Beth stared at the large leatherback shell in the plexiglass case. Did the shell feel heavy, or like a part of them? What was it like to never not have carried it?

Rick found her by a fact sheet near the back of the room and slung an arm around her shoulders. ‘You’ve been quiet.’

‘I ran into one of my students. Good kid. She’s having a tough go of it.’

‘Ah.’

He hugged her lightly but didn’t pry; that was Rick: he held the walls, and nothing entered or left that she didn’t want.

Once in their groups and off walking through the brush, their dampened conversations spreading over them in a whispered canopy, they drew Opal to them again. She introduced them to Eamon, the father of the young boy weaving his excess energy through the group. Lucas. Beth couldn’t have been much older than him when she last came to Mon Repos.

The sand was no longer warm from the sun, and the cool texture underfoot was soothing and timeless. Somebody from the past walking here would’ve experienced it the

exact same, and so would someone from the future, after landing in the sea like those NASA rockets and finding their way to shore. And when they touched the sand, they'd think, I've made it.

Rick and Opal walked on either side of her. What had they talked about, on their way to the restrooms? Had they talked at all? Beth loved to listen to people, loved to feel their presence slide over her and around her, but Rick was probably the only person she could really be silent with. And he could be silent with her and with Opal. It made up for the imbalance of whatever she and Opal shared that Rick had no part of and no way into.

Lucas kept tugging on his mother's hand. Beth could hear his high, small words, drifting upwards like bubbles. Would the turtles have names already? Could he name them? Would any of them swim to his pool at home? Would they one day be as big as him, or bigger?

They waited as a group on the beach for almost an hour, still and ready — how like a clutch of eggs themselves, Beth thought. The ocean, to their left, was gentle, crawling close and then retreating; the kind of smooth water that made you wonder how waves even ever happened.

This was probably the middle of the world, right here. If it was spinning right. This would be the exact middle.

And then, at last, in the spears of torchlight, the turtles' heads began to emerge. Small as coins, their dazzling newness pressed like thumbs into the eyes of the world. Tiny slivers of eggshell broke away until there were gaps big enough for the baby to wriggle through — they didn't need to smash the whole shell to escape, though some of them did regardless.

'Mum, look,' the little boy said.

The boy's mother rested a hand on the back of his head. 'I'm looking.'

The first of the turtles had managed to make it to the very edge of the sea.

'There she goes,' Opal murmured, and her grin caught and held the dark.

'The female turtles among them will return here in years to come,' the guide said.

Rick, next to her, breathed his huge, even breaths. They'd got married on a beach, she thought suddenly and inexplicably — they'd got married at a church because it was an affordable venue, religion aside. There'd been no beach that day, no reason for the jab of certainty that there was.

In two days, Opal will announce that she's been contracted out again, to be based in South Korea for a while. Beth will ask, involuntarily, whether she'll come back. Almost compulsively, Opal will promise. I'll come back, she says. Later, long after this turns out to be untrue, Beth chooses to believe that Opal meant it at the time.

They watched the turtles push their peach-sized bodies towards the ocean. Opal said, 'Such purpose.'

So quickly and easily, Opal had put her finger on that elusive quality that made everything here beautiful. Because it wasn't just the moonlight spilled carelessly across the languid ocean, or the stray pebble digging into Beth's knee, or the breeze or the stars, which Beth had barely glanced at. They weren't far enough from home for them to be different stars. Nor was it the turtles themselves, which were cute, in their smallness, both vulnerable and robust, brilliantly new. It was the way these things came together, not to make a vast beach as it first seemed, but a tunnel. None of the turtles turned back; none of them wavered. Their limbs coped with sand but wouldn't become wings until they touched the water. They didn't know that yet, only Beth did, although she didn't know what it felt like.

‘Many of them won’t survive to adulthood,’ the guide told them. His torch was off now, and with his face in shadow, Beth was struggling to recall what he looked like. ‘But if they do, fully-grown turtles have almost no natural predators.’

She had the abrupt urge to begin picking the new turtles up and throwing them, hurling them into the water, skipping them like stones, saving them that perilous, draining, seagull-flecked journey. They’d bounce down that corridor of moonlight too fast to catch and then sink into the deep, and Beth would’ve saved them the hard part. She would’ve rescued them, as much as anything can be rescued in the very beginning.

‘You hear that, Beth?’ Opal said, her voice closer than before. ‘The ones who make it live forever.’

The Shelter Job

She was thirty-seven. As old as their mother. Older than he'd thought anyone applying for the job would be — she could tell. His eyes kept pushing at her, waiting for some part of her to give.

'I was really thinking of a university student. Someone with flexible hours,' he said. His accent sloshed around. He was from further out, like she was, but either decades in the city or deliberate effort to curb his vowels had softened it, but only on some words.

'I am a university student,' Jade told him.

'Studying?'

'Architecture. Part-time.'

'Very little to do with children.'

Yes, but she'd briefly been a teaching assistant in a previous life. She had first aid qualifications, of course, that she renewed religiously. For a time, she'd considered becoming a paramedic — by way of closure — but it had been too hard. Not the coursework, although there was that, but all of it.

Lucas told her he'd call, although she didn't think he would. She hadn't impressed him. She didn't cut an impressive figure, except by stature. She was tall, broad, and still had some of the deliberate musculature of her adolescence. Another former life. Jade stacked them on top of one another, folded them together and away.

Call, she thought. She willed it.

When he did leave a voicemail, there was a different tone to the way he spoke. He'd googled her, then. She had that kind of wilting half-fame: you remembered her, but only if you were made to remember. And even then, it was just a recognition, that she was a person, known by more people than she knew.

She met Ava and Cole at the park, because Lucas and his wife, Marie, figured they'd take to her more easily under the gentle pressure of sunlight and ice cream. Jade understood it was a test of her supervision skills, too. Picking them up after school would sometimes involve taking them to games or practices or parks like this, and they wanted to know she could manage them both without either dying.

Her own mother's headaches had curled her like a centipede, leaving Jade in charge of a sibling every now and then, when her father wasn't home. Children weren't hard to understand. They wanted specific things, and anyone who wanted something could be predicted well enough. Jade had been just that way, at their age. Full of empty spaces for specific things.

Jade watched them twist around and unravel on the swings. They spun endlessly one way and then the other. She felt Lucas and Marie checking on them and on her. She turned to them and smiled, although with her sunglasses blocking her eyes, she doubted it meant much.

The money was decent, and the kids weren't too hard to manage. They adored her, to start with. She was older and mysterious and not parental and hovered somewhere between teacher and friend.

Ava was the more talkative of the two. She'd call for Jade, insist that Jade had both eyes on her before she spoke. If Jade looked away, she'd clap loudly until she had Jade's attention again.

'That's rude,' Jade told her.

‘Looking away is rude.’

Cole was the opposite. Quiet, small, given to staying in one exact spot for an extended length of time. Even though he was older, which puzzled Jade. She could understand this muted boy forming around the boisterousness of Ava, but instead it seemed she’d come and filled every space he left, and he left almost all of them.

Often, Ava’s friend, the neighbour, would come over. Tara. Tara could keep up with Ava for hours but was always gentler and smaller by the time she left.

Jade tried to level them out. She asked Cole questions. She gently reminded Ava to take breaths and be quiet, sometimes. But neither of them budged, and eventually Jade decided that it was more the parents’ problem than hers. She barely reached nanny status, and there was no need for her to try and drag this family’s water uphill.

Lucas was usually home first to relieve her. He worked in waste processing, at the plant not far from them. Marie worked in an office closer to the city.

Marie could craft energy out of nothing. Ava and Cole would probably be adults themselves before they realised life after fourteen is tiredness, constantly, ceaselessly, that there are no sandbars in the world to light upon and catch your breath. Their mother always had breath, the second she came in the door to when the children rushed off to find things to show her, and she’d come into the kitchen where Jade was washing up. They would look at each other, and Jade would see her exhaustion, and this seeing of it seemed to temper it somehow.

If Jade made the kids a fruit smoothie for afternoon tea, as she often did, then she would leave some in the fridge for Marie.

One day a week, Jade went into university, and otherwise she worked online.

Her apartment was a half hour drive from Lucas and Marie's place. Ava and Cole — Ava mostly — wanted to see where she lived. Jade recalled a similar curiosity from their age about the same thing, though she had lost touch with the rationale behind it. Perhaps now she felt that to see someone's living space would help her understand them, reveal them to her, but back then, it had been a chance to engorge a mystery, to prove that even the most mundane adults must be hiding something glorious and unknowable in the spaces they kept private from children.

She'd worked for the Petersons only two months or so when she got back home to find Dan, sitting in front of her building. She checked him over, slapped him with her eyes: no obvious cuts or bruises, eyebags manageable. He was too skinny, as usual. But he seemed more like himself. Jade couldn't place it, but she felt it, and it was enough to allow him to follow her when she opened the door.

He kept only about a foot between them up the stairs — too close, for someone who refused to shift and walk beside her. He didn't try and talk. Per always, it would be her who started this conversation, whatever it was going to be.

She let them into her apartment. She pushed her shoes off, and he did too, leaning one hand against the wall, as though his balance had been permanently shot. She made them tea.

He was doing well, he told her. Fresh out. Just needed somewhere to crash, for a bit, while he was working on getting himself a job and a place and all that, et cetera.

'I don't have a spare room.'

'I'm okay with the floor. You still have that air mattress, right? That I got you?'

She'd wondered several times over the past year whether it had been bought with stolen money, but was unsure what to do about that, even if it had been. It's not as though she'd know who to give the money to, even if she could secure a refund, and it wouldn't be much.

Jade drank her tea in small quick sips, blew on the surface, but Dan always held his in his hands until it was mostly cold, and then downed it.

'Are you doing well?' he asked, finally, twisting on her couch to look around her apartment more thoroughly. He stood and began picking up random objects. Some he must've recognised from her previous places; others were new. The small frog figurine on her shelf with the crack down its belly was from their overlaid childhood. His fingertips jumped over it, singed by the memory.

'More or less.'

Dan bobbed his head, continuing his silent inspection. For a moment, he reminded her of Cole, stretched large and grown up. But Cole wouldn't turn out like Dan, and he'd probably phase out of his violent shyness, the way Ava would probably learn, eventually, to read a room.

He turned back towards her, twisting himself into her with a look. Jade felt something in her chest swivel to face him. A longing.

'I'll go find that air mattress,' she said, hoping he'd smile. He did. She saw so much of Louise in him that the recognition hit her like a punch in the chest, or maybe it was the love that hit her, tangled all up in that.

Dan could be doing anything at her apartment. He might've sold her things. He'd done that once. In fairness: she'd done the same to him. A time or two. They'd always taken their desperation out on one another, because they always understood.

'Jade, can we make biscuits?' Ava pushed her small face forward, her elbows digging into Jade's thighs.

The world blinked and Jade said, 'Not today. We'd have to ask your mum. We don't want to make too many unhealthy snacks.'

It was like this whenever Dan came. Louise drifted out of wherever Jade kept her and remained, as if she might refuse to leave ever again. But she always did leave. Eventually. In some capacity.

Jade was careful to keep the television off and the news off while she minded the children. Ava and Cole knew enough without the details closing in. When had it stopped being possible to have a childhood that wasn't filled with knowing? Before the GFC? Before that? Had it ever been possible?

There had been a change. Jade's mother said these were the good old days where nothing happened, and nobody knew anything. But things had happened. They'd been everywhere. Every corner was filled with things that no one saw. And that seemed tragic but seeing was exhausting.

It was the start of the holidays. Jade had finished the semester, and now Ava and Cole were done too. The haze had set in, a little early this year, the winds blowing it in from up north; it thickened the air like cornflour in soup. She kept them inside, as instructed.

'When you were a toddler and Ava was a baby, you had to stay inside all the time,' Jade told them, when they complained. 'Before the vaccine.'

Ava asked if Cole remembered it and Cole insisted that he did. He squinted his little face and told her about watching television all the time and playing games until they fell asleep, whenever they wanted, night or day. They ate whatever they had. She clung to his words and every so often Cole would look to Jade, as if checking whether what he was saying was real, or perhaps checking that she knew it wasn't. That she was there to make sure he was making it up, and he couldn't make things true just by saying them, although she could see him start to believe.

Dan was cooking. Spaghetti. He said his shifts in the kitchen prepared him for almost exactly nothing; all the food came machine-prepped, arriving in vacuum-sealed bags.

'It's demoralising,' he told her, 'to eat reheated slop like that. You feel how little anyone cares about you when you can't name a single ingredient in anything you're eating.'

Jade had eaten at Louise's house enough times, when Jade's mother was asleep or her father was out, to remember those meals. Louise and her mother shifted and ground together like ill-fitting cogs, but they still spun. They would chop and peel and whisk. Louise would steal bits from Jade's pile — cucumber or tomato or chicken, always from Jade's and never her own. She knew Louise loved her. It would've been impossible not to know, standing like that, shoulder to shoulder, knives and fingers moving. If she closed her eyes and leaned against the counter, it was entirely possible that she didn't need to open them again, or that if she did, she'd be somewhere else.

She never was.

'I interviewed at the KFC today,' Dan told her.

'How was it?'

‘Fine.’ He shrugged. ‘Legal.’

‘You can bring home free chicken.’

‘They don’t give you free chicken.’

She stepped over Dan’s things on the living room floor on the way to the bathroom, which was still neat but with a forced neatness; Dan was naturally messy but also aware that he was here on goodwill. In previous years, that hadn’t mattered to him, but despite appearances, perhaps they’d both grown up a little.

He’d taken a deal. There’d been no trial to go to. Once, she’d driven up to the prison to see him, taken everything out of her pockets and walked through the scanner and thought the whole time about how strange life was, how it could fit so much into itself. All the terrible sense it made, so effortlessly, even with all the randomness. She’d been half convinced that he would refuse to show. She’d had no way to give him warning; he hadn’t even called her — forgotten her number or wanted to. Regardless.

She’d waited at the plastic table for a long time, wanting to leave. But Louise. If she went to stand, she thought of Louise, and the vast, imprecise bruise she’d dug into the whole of Jade’s life.

Around her were couples. Brothers. Babies. Jade noted who leaned back, arms folded, eyebrows arched in a demand to be soothed, to have something new told to them that would make the different joints ache less. Occasionally, someone relaxed. More often they left. Some people seemed happy, or close. Like it wasn’t so bad. Or they were used to it.

One man had a cat’s cradle threaded around his fingers. She watched a small girl slide her hand inside. She could only see the back of his bald head, but from the child’s expression, he must’ve smiled.

Dan did show, once she'd been there long enough to feel the thickness of the rickety air conditioning. He gave her the one short hug he was allowed, but he just felt like a body. It was only when they sat opposite each other and he took her hands, both of them, that she felt close to him.

'Tell me everything,' he said, and he meant about the world, not her. 'The news is shit in here.'

But she had found she didn't want to break the seal. For the first time in an age, there was something peaceful to him, even as he hunkered into his own anger and fear. All the noise was gone.

Ava and Cole used to run out to Lucas' car when he got home — Jade would open the door once the gate was closed and the engine was off — and he'd heft them into his arms. But with the haze now, he'd come in quickly, and they'd clamour in the hallway.

Ava was almost as tall as Cole now. From where Jade stood, they often seemed like twins. Lucas would drop to his knees and pull them both in, headlocks each, and kiss the tops of their heads. He brought gifts, sometimes — they were at that magpie age where a small cardboard box or a bulldog clip could hold their fascination for an afternoon.

Often, Jade left as soon as he arrived, wanting to give him time with his children without their nanny slash interloper slash babysitter overstaying. But sometimes he'd wave her back down, make them a seltzer or tonic water with lime, and ask for stories.

'They surprise me, you know?' he said. 'They'll say something, and I think, God, what a different scoop on the world, huh? It just takes me back a whole step. Their brains are so funny. Because we haven't shaped them yet, right? They're geniuses because of the things

they don't know.' He loosened his tie. The top two buttons of his shirt were already undone. He'd probably wanted to wander places; Jade could imagine him surfing somewhere, with his wide jaw and shaggy hair that he combed back. She could see the same jaw on Ava, the same hair on Cole. It made her like him, despite the relatively little time they'd spent together. 'I hate leaving them all day. All I can think is that they're getting older, and we're running out of surprising things, and I'll miss them. I mean, they'll always be lovely and interesting and different, and mine, but eventually they'll hit those ages that I remember being, and I'll understand them more. They'll confound me less.'

'You like being confounded?'

He grinned. 'I love it.' He charmed her. She felt herself be charmed. 'I'm making pizza, by the way. If you want to stay.'

'Things to get done.'

'Another time.'

'Of course.'

'And you can tell me about Athens.'

The grimace slowly drifted through her like falling paper. She couldn't quite tell whether he'd meant to unseat her. 'I'd rather not. No good way to talk about it.'

He waved her off. 'Honestly, just interested in the whole experience. I'm not here to judge you for your time. You did a damn sight better than I could've.'

'I know. That's why I was there.'

The grin was back. He had boyish eyes. She couldn't explain it — eyes didn't age — but there was something good about him. He was an ordinary man; she'd never met anyone like him. 'We'll leave it then,' he said. 'Regale me with something else.'

There wasn't much else to her. Her entire life had calcified around two moments, pushed into her skull like extra teeth, felt with every swallow.

The weather shifted into a swathe of heat, draped like muslin over everything, churned through the air. Even Ava deflated under the heft of it.

They didn't ask about the fires or the haze, after a while. It was like they forgot. Even when they got closer, they couldn't seem to remember in a way they'd express. Instead, they held onto her tighter. They wanted to play more games that involved holding hands. They asked her what being a grownup was like, as though it was a foreign country they'd never travel to. They wanted her close and faraway at once.

'I've sworn to them plenty of time to swim these holidays,' Marie told her. 'It was my compromise. Cole wanted to learn how to row, but that's less safe and more trouble.'

'To row?'

'He saw about the floods, up in Queensland.' Marie presses the heel of her palm to her temple. She smiles. 'It's funny what's insurmountable to them and what they think they can manage. He's not even scared. He figures swimming will be enough.'

'When are you taking them?'

'I thought you could,' Marie said. She took off her jacket and folded it in her arms. It was the first time in weeks that she'd been home first. It shifted something in Jade to see her;

she'd been around children and men too long without interruption. The sudden bloom of this feeling turned quickly into ache. She would go see a friend. 'Luc says you used to swim.'

'I don't anymore.'

'It'll be good for them to have that kind of enthusiasm, though, to get them started.'

She should've said no. Instead, she let Marie squeeze her shoulder. She gave her an update on Ava and Cole and Ava's new obsession with dropping things from various heights.

Marie slid a glass under the kitchen sinking, filling it and downing it before saying, 'You're not from here, are you, Jade?'

'No.'

'Whereabouts?'

'Ingham.'

'Ah. You know, The Veronicas were from there.'

'Yes.' They were both young enough to recognise them but not old enough to recall them on the radio. Jade was surprised that Marie even remembered.

'Well, I've lived here my whole life.' Marie leaned back against the counter, obedient and cursive in the way she moved. 'Bar a year on exchange in London, and a few months in the Californian Republic, not long after the separation. But I've been here ever since. About ten years ago, we had a fire go through here. Were you around then?'

In the other room, Ava was yelling at Cole. Marie and Jade quietened, but it seemed to resolve itself, or it had never been angered yelling to begin with.

'I wasn't.' Jade had probably watched it in seconds-long clips as she scrolled through her newsfeed, but it was from a time in her life that she barely remembered. Trying to reach

that part of her past was like sinking her hands into mud and feeling around; either she found nothing, or her blindness led her to touch something sharp.

But she didn't need to remember. Almost everything around here was new.

'I was staying with my parents, further out of town. Not far from the lake.' Marie's voice cut the world into triangles, no crust. Everything took a shape that made sense. 'We ran there. I wasn't a very strong swimmer, even then, even now. My father brought me a boogie board. From the yard. He picked it up as we ran. I remember lying on the board in the water, far enough from the flames that I was hardly hot, just floating there. And thinking that it was the opposite of the movie Titanic. I loved that movie when I was a kid. You would've seen it.'

'Of course.'

'I'll show it to the kids one day. It ages well. The CGI is still good, even with everything they have now,' she said. 'But that's funny, isn't it? How you can think of movies in moments like that? Like no matter how terrible something is, there's always room in your head to organise it and say it's like something else.'

Louise hadn't been like anything else, Jade wanted to say. But there had been moments where a skin grew over her grief, and she wondered whether she was doing it right, doing it enough, feeling the way it was supposed to feel, because some days she hadn't thought of her at all.

Marie sighed. With her blazer off, in her white blouse, she could've been one of the girls Jade went to school with. Would they have been friends at that age? Jade hadn't made friends. Girls had liked her. She was likeable, and pretty enough without being prettier. But there had never been the space between Jade and Louise needed for fitting another person, not up until the end. 'Anyway, it was supposed to be traumatic. I suppose it was. But at the

time, it's just what's happening, and what you're doing, and you just do the next thing, don't you?'

Jade nodded.

'I've looked at the reports, the predictions. They don't try as much to pull punches now. They've got the resources to manage a panic. But I know what this air is like. I remember. There's nothing for us to do, except be ready.' Marie's gaze flicked towards the doorway. 'Which means getting them ready. Lucas and I'll sit them down tonight and get them to pack a bag of all their special things. Just in case. So that we can grab it and go.' She sighed. 'The swimming lessons are just to keep their minds off it. If we've got to go, we might go somewhere with a real beach. My sister lives near the coast.'

Marie offered for her to stay for dinner, but Jade declined.

'I'm sure it won't come to it,' Marie said, catching her hands and her gaze.

'Better to be more ready than not.'

Jade couldn't name a single thing in her life she'd ever been ready for, and she doubted Marie could either without it being at least part hindsight or lie.

She went to say goodbye to Ava and Cole. They hugged her legs, and when she crouched, they hugged her properly.

'We'll see you tomorrow?' Cole said.

'Tomorrow's the weekend. I'll see you Monday.'

Dan got a job at the shelter downtown. They had more rescues; more and more burned and wounded animals being rushed down from upstate. Everything was full. Creatures that could be found in other countries were turned away.

He came back to the apartment on his second day with a bandage up his arm. ‘It scratched me,’ he said. ‘Jemma warned me. But you look at them all helpless like that and you don’t think they’ll be able to hurt you.’

The dressing didn’t need changing yet but she couldn’t stop herself from unwrapping it, to see for herself. Not fearing the depth of the cut or infection, but wrought with a deep desire to assess it, and to hold him gently while she peered at the sliced skin and the echo of a claw.

‘It’s okay,’ he told her.

‘I know it is.’

Jade pressed her thumbs lightly into him. He was warm against her. She remembered him small, with his scraped knees. Louise and Jade, picking him up, only sometimes when they felt generous, otherwise leaving him be. He’d been a nuisance, then, but from the right angles and in the right light, Jade had loved him as much as Louise did.

‘I don’t get paid any extra, for damages.’

‘Not surprising.’

‘You’d think they’d give me a day off.’

‘You’ve barely started.’

Dan smiled. She could tell he’d stopped for a drink on his way home — the beer smell was still on him — but he hadn’t brought any into the house. A pulse of gratefulness and guilt

and envy, all cobbled together, ran through her. They'd picked each other up enough times, thrown together by their missing link.

They went out the next morning to get bandages. She had none at home. It had been a long time since she'd anyone to care for. Every so often, someone would stay over, but they always left. And Jade was careful, by nature. She had a body within its bounds.

She pushed the trolley. Dan had a habit of getting distracted and abandoning it for stretches at a time or leaving it in the general way. It was filled with shiny, sugary things, everything he'd wanted and not been allowed for the last few years.

'Cheese puffs. In. Nutella. In.'

'You don't need to narrate.'

'And yet.'

He stopped in front of the lollipops. He picked one out. 'Strawberry cream. That was your flavour, right?' He tilted his head. 'Do you still eat these?'

'No.'

'Never?'

'I didn't even really like them to begin with,' she pointed out.

'I know,' he said, as though he'd just remembered.

She waited for more, but he didn't turn back to her, just gazed down at the lollipop. It wasn't even his memory. She wanted to take it out of his hands.

'Are you alright?' she asked.

‘Ever?’

‘Now.’

‘I’m alright now,’ he promised.

She and Louise had taken him to the quarry once. Only once — he’d complained the whole walk there, slipped over, and whined the way back. He’d barely swum.

Dan was a big counter of things, when they were kids. Brands of toothpaste at the supermarket where Louise worked, books on a library shelf, moths by a lightbulb. He sat on the edge of the pool and counted the stars he could see reflected in the water, disturbed as the girls sloped through the shallows. Jade thought he could’ve counted them easier if only he looked up, but he didn’t.

She went to the medicine aisle. More Betadine.

Lucas picking up condoms was something unremarkable. That they were a different brand, even, to the wrappers she’d seen occasionally in the bins at their house, didn’t flag. It was his steadfast expression, no guile or humoured embarrassment or even boldness, but this perfect stillness like a child trying not to cry. As determined and as vulnerable as that.

A thick wad of chlorine was stuffed into the air, milking each breath. Jade held tightly to Ava and Cole. No running. No getting in without her watching. No anything that might risk either of them, although in Jade’s experience, it hadn’t ever been swimming that was the problem, at least not like that.

Ava’s eyes fluttered over everything. Cole watched the lifeguards. They both smelled like sunscreen. The bright patterned sleeves of their rashies reached their wrists; their legs

were small and white and moved quickly to keep pace with Jade. The fracturing of the space broke them both down to their parts; she hoped they couldn't sense it.

'Do we have to hold hands?'

'Yes.'

'I know not to drown. I won't go in without you,' Ava promised. Everything she said, she said like a promise. Perhaps another thing she'd grow out of one day.

'And there are lifeguards,' Cole added. 'And I'm too old. To be like this. I'm —'

'I know,' Jade said, and loosened her grip without letting go.

They dropped their towels and kicked off their thongs. Jade nestled her phone in the bundle, hidden. She stuffed hats on heads and snapped goggle straps and followed the two of them as they speed-walked to the lazy river. A narrow pool in the shape of a ring with a gentle current, so that you could drift all the way around without any effort at all. A high grotto in the middle of the ring meant that if they got too far from her, she wouldn't be able to see them. But the walls on either side were never far, and at a stretch, they could both touch the bottom.

She wasn't in swimmers. She could jump in if needed, if they were drowning, but she thought they'd be less likely to ask her to play if she didn't look the part. But they didn't need her after all; they just wanted to know that she could see them, and that if they stayed under for an especially long time, she'd notice. That if they spun around more than twice without needing a breath, she'd gasp. At this age, that was all they really needed. It was the only time in a person's life that simply being within reach was enough.

For a second, when they were already around the far side of the grotto and out of sight anyway, Jade closed her eyes. She breathed in. She didn't hear the roar of the crowd or the

jabbing voice of Tabish, the poke of his long stick between her shoulder blades, softened by a tennis ball jammed on the end of it. The smell brought back the feeling but none of the detail. It dredged up the things she didn't forget.

In the part of herself she kept for such things, a small woman staggered to the top of a hill and screamed longer than any person could scream without dying. She wanted all of it back. Unfairness could split you like an atom. She eviscerated herself and kept the evisceration tucked neatly in the pouch of her cheek, as she'd learned to do over the past two decades. You could have a breakdown in the space of a millimetre square, and you could have these over and over, every single day, and continue, and leave this anger and grief as a candle in one window of a wide town, and continue.

When they got home, Lucas was already waiting for them. He inspected them each for sunburn — none — then turned them upstairs for a shower. Jade went out onto the back deck to hang their wet towels over the railing.

Then Lucas was there, straightening Ava's, straight as it already was. 'Thanks for that. How did you go?'

'They were very good. Followed all the rules.'

'They like you. I don't think they'd follow my rules.' He bobbed his head, lacing his fingers together. 'But I'm happy to raise some little rebels.' A restlessness in his shoulders jumped, and then he was turning again, leaning back and facing her. 'I didn't mean them, though. I meant you. Good being back? Swimming again?'

'I didn't swim.'

'Want to talk about it?' He said it as though she'd be putting something down, not picking it up again for the hundred thousandth time.

‘The Olympics?’

‘Louise.’

Time seized around the two of them like a fist, then let go just as abruptly, unfreezing.

Lucas felt it. She felt him realise. ‘Sorry for bringing it up.’

‘That’s twice now.’

‘I just want to know you. A bit.’ He shrugged. ‘You look after my kids. It’s made a real difference to us. We were struggling.’

‘To manage them?’

‘With everything. Me and Marie.’

‘Oh.’

‘She’s a lot,’ he murmured. ‘I mean that in a good way. She’s amazing. She is. But I’m punching above my weight, and we both know it. And I kept on proving it to her.’

‘Lucas.’

‘Everyone thinks it’s blinding luck, bagging someone better than you. And I love her.’

‘You said.’

‘But it’s like I’m crawling under heavier and heavier stones, and they just press down on me, forever. Everywhere I move is another stone. She still loves me, and I’m just not on her level, and she still loves me, and it pisses me the fuck off, in this weird way. Like she’s an idiot, or she’s lying, and it’s one big long lie and sometimes all I want is for her to just say it out loud so that we don’t have to pretend I don’t know it. She’d have the decency to let me go.’

‘Lucas.’

He grabbed her hand, but missed, or was grabbing for her wrist all along — her wrist and her thumb. Tightly. As if trying to push a shape into her that he couldn’t make with words. ‘People do things without knowing why,’ he said. ‘Which you’d understand.’

‘I do understand,’ Jade told him. Her throat felt thin and bleached and alive on its own terms.

Whatever he wanted from her was more than that. It grew like vines around them both.

‘Marie doesn’t want to know,’ he said. ‘She’d know if she wanted to. Don’t hurt her.’

Later, as she was leaving, she passed the cluster of backpacks in the hallway. She wanted to crouch by these go-bags, unzip them, and check they’d taken enough. But she wouldn’t know their most important possessions, and these wouldn’t matter, anyway, if the fire came through. Everything else would still be gone, and everything else also mattered. If not more, than the same.

Dan came home. She watched the wedge of light from the door wink in and out. She stared at his feet, as they approached, and then his knees, as they sank, and finally his nose, as he lay down across from her on the living room floor. No carpet. She’d meant ages ago to buy that burnt orange rug from IKEA. Her hip was starting to hurt.

‘Did you drink anything?’ he asked, in a tone that spoke equally, and said that he’d already forgiven her.

‘No.’

‘Good girl.’

It should’ve been weird. He was once infinitely younger than them. A piece of paper folded in half and in half again. If not weird, then patronising. Instead, it made her start to cry. It soothed her, the way crying did.

‘My arm is feeling better.’

‘That’s good.’

‘That koala has chlamydia.’

‘Really?’

‘They all do.’ He huffed. ‘End of the fucking world, and koalas are getting laid more than you or me.’

She laughed. The quiet afterwards lasted a long time.

They didn’t overlap like this often, her and Dan, but for once they were both mostly alright. She’d missed him, too.

Into the floorboards, she admitted, ‘I’m back at school.’

He kissed her shoulder. Not familial or romantic. Just coexistence in whatever state it was they shared, a wavelength of understanding, that they’d go back, each of them. They’d give everything up.

‘You’ll design beautiful buildings,’ he told her.

Chapter 5
REFLECTIONS & CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter, I reflect on my experience using the heightened form of chiasmus as constraint. I explore the process that led me to developing negotiation as an approach, and how negotiation affected both my practice and my novella. Considering how I came to develop negotiation is significant as it allows me to situate negotiation within the practitioner's experience; that is, the issues which negotiation addresses. Recounting how I incorporated negotiation into my own practice is also essential to this thesis, as I intend negotiation as a tool for practitioners. I discuss how negotiation made chiasmus more accessible to me, and further, facilitated the construction of new themes and ideas. As I demonstrated through my case studies, the particulars of negotiation vary from author to author and text to text; my negotiation with chiasmus serves as another — and more detailed — point of reference in depicting the diversity and usefulness of negotiation.

5.1 Developing Negotiation

When I first began this project, I perceived chiasmus as a kind of goal: I would take any steps necessary to create it. The clearest step was planning: I felt that mapping out my novella would be the most effective way to ensure symmetry within the narrative. This would mean that I wouldn't get halfway through the narrative, only to realise I was stuck, unable to counter my initial choices with realistic oppositions in the latter half of the story. Thus, I wrote out the structure of macrochiasmus on my whiteboard and set about coming up with A and then A', B and then B'. I noticed a marked improvement in my creative process. I tend to write more interesting stories than I can imagine in the abstract; if left to generate ideas in the

abstract, I flounder, and often cycle conventional plot points. Chiasmus demands oppositions, however, and constantly turning to opposites helped me overcome this tendency. At each point, I would question the assumptions I had made. Was I simply repeating the familiar? What would it look like if I reversed this action or inverted this relationship? Often, these oppositions were not necessarily ideal for the plot either, but they exposed new, different possibilities.

Once I had a full plan for my novella, I began writing. Here, problems immediately arose. In having the entire story already charted out for me, I felt confined and restricted. I lost curiosity in my work because my work was not surprising me. The unexpected details that arose as I wrote no longer led me in interesting new directions, because I had to stick to my plan, lest symmetry, and thus chiasmus, be lost. I tried multiple drafts with different stories, but the outcomes were the same; it was not just that my first idea had not suited chiasmus, but that *I* did not suit chiasmus.

However, I had a thesis to write, and so I did not have the luxury of abandoning chiasmus and returning to my usual practice. I was trapped between the commitment I had made to write with the form, and the fact that I *could not* write with the form. This left me with one option: I would have to 'cheat', loosening the constraints to allow some of my old approach to writing back in. It would not be chiasmus as I had intended to use it, but some chiasmus was better than no chiasmus. Thus, my task was to figure out what modification to chiasmus would offer me the most creative freedom while having the least impact on the function of the form.

5.2 Negotiating with Chiasmus

I realised that I would have far more flexibility in developing thematic opposites and positioning them structurally opposite one another if these opposites did not have to be connected by an ongoing plot. Therefore, rather than have my novella be a continuous narrative, I separated it into five self-contained but interlocking stories. This way, I could consider each pair (A and A', B and B', and so on) in isolation. Although I had no name for this process yet, this was my first negotiation with chiasmus as a form. More negotiation soon followed: segmenting the narrative in this way also allowed me to easily introduce polyphony and liberated me from linearity; I could have multiple narrators and arrange them in whatever order I wished. I still wanted to create a novella rather than a story collection, however, so it was important that the stories were linked by more than shared themes; I wanted the stories to share characters, as in *Goon Squad* and *How to be Both*.

However, even with these modifications made, I still struggled. I planned out the five stories to ensure the form of chiasmus and arranged them in a zigzag through time. I had carefully outlined a meticulous series of echoes and worked out how I could reveal certain pieces of information along this complex timeline; I felt that I was making better use of chiasmus, and I appreciated the additional freedom of the modifications. Yet when I began writing, I encountered the same sense of restriction as before. It was not only chiasmus, but the *way* I was approaching using chiasmus, that was stifling me. Planning in such detail did not work for me, but I feared that letting go of planning would make it impossible to create the symmetry required.

For the next draft, I did very little planning. I instead focused on chiasmus as a form, and tried to arrive at a single, simple concept that the form evoked. I came to focus on the idea of the Olympian. As I outlined in my literature review, chiasmus lends itself to stories of

highs and lows. I was fascinated not by success or failure at the Olympics — what would conventionally be imagined as the highs and lows of an athlete's life — but outside of the arena. What happens to someone whose entire life is working towards a single point of acute pressure, after that point has passed? In addition, the two-part structure of chiasmus invited me to think about dynamics, rather than individuals. Instead of centring the story on an Olympian, I considered who they might have relationships with, and how these relationships might shape their drive. From this, Jade and Louise's teenage friendship was born, and became the genesis of the first chapter, in which I knew I wanted to focus on Louise.

I began writing with only this dynamic in mind, and no sense of how I might balance it later, only that I wanted to catch up with Jade at a future point. I quickly decided that Louise would disappear, but I had no desire to write that moment or its aftermath; I was most curious about attempting to craft intense relationships long severed, when one person has continued to grow and change, but the other is static, frozen in memory. To me, Jade's effortless abandonment of Louise soon after the pool owner recognises her abilities belied a sense of quiet superiority, and once again using chiasmus as my starting point, I pivoted to think about that sense, reversed: Jade, feeling that she had let Louise down. Yet as an Olympian, Jade would have extraordinary determination and resilience; I sought not to focus on a low point, but on her recovery, and her world in the wake of both the Olympics and Louise, and so I rediscovered her in her late thirties, newly sober, and returning to university. I wrote Jade's story as the counterpoint to Louise's, where Jade's circumstances have inverted, and rather than Jade slowly dissipating from Louise's life, Louise is lingering in Jade's mind. From this story emerged another family of characters with whom Jade interacts, and these characters became the starting point for the third story.

I wondered what a more stable family unit might look like when an additional character was introduced. In the place of Jade, a person working to support the fragile family, I instead wanted a character who would be disruptive, and thus arrived at the polyamorous entanglement of Beth, Opal, and Rick. With this third story, a pattern began to emerge. I realised that in using chiasmus in this way, the stories were not less connected than when I planned them out, but more — I felt that themes were carrying across naturally and compounding when I simply followed the form without forcing connections. In Jade's story, I perceive the adults as letting down the children, unsure how to prepare them for the disaster of destruction — of their marriage and the planet — and in Beth's story, she similarly fails to support Louise in the aftermath of her father's departure. As I reread the stories, considering them in the context of one another, I found that the turtles at the end of the story evoke Jade and Louise; Louise does not make it, but Jade does, and despite everything, continues to survive. Less directly, I now imagine that the turtles evoke all the characters in the novella; from Eamon to Sylvia, Lucas to Jemma, I discovered that the characters can all be sorted, however predictably or unexpectedly, into characters who in some way make it or in some way, don't.

Across these stories, the thematic idea of struggling to make connections continued to arise as I worked. This was not the thematic focus that I initially planned for, but it emerged organically from the negotiated form. In its original form, chiasmus invites the reader to make connections between separate parts; I regard the modification of polyphony as extending this invitation to be not only between parts, but characters. Many of these connections are only possible because the reader has access to the interiority of several narrators; as a reader, I feel that this emphasises how the characters, with their limited perspectives, cannot replicate these connections themselves. For example, Louise feels undervalued by Jade; due to the limitations of her perspective as a narrator, she never knows

that Jade is haunted by her disappearance for decades, but as both a writer constructing and a reader following the novella, I was able to experience the impact that Louise has on Jade's life. I came to understand the form as playing out the connections that the characters long to create.

Within this theme, I focused on sex as a key site that demonstrates the failure of connection. In the physical closeness achieved through sex, I wanted to expose the emotional distance between the characters: Louise discovers that she is angry with Merissa; Ryan feels that Amy won't let him love her completely; the five girls perceive sex as a disappointing aspect of adulthood that reveals Eamon's pathetic nature, and while attempting to seduce him, they find themselves at their most separate from one another — the girls try to imagine themselves into Duchess, but cannot. Sex catalyses the realisation that connection has failed. If the two characters are taken as the two opposite points of chiasmus, then sex illuminates the impossibility of synthesis. This was not a thematic thread I set out to create, and yet I found myself drawn to it over and over again as the form echoed it back; its pointed recurrence became legible to me only when I later reread the text as a whole.

As I discussed in my literature review, chiasmus has previously been used to bind opposites to create a sense of balance — for example, joy countered with sorrow, and sorrow with joy (Niles, 1979). The central thematic idea of failed connection is sorrowful, and I wanted to balance that out with more hopeful elements. Thus, across the novella, I have paired loss with recovery: after Louise's disappearance, Jade struggles with alcoholism, but by the end, she is recovering and building a future for herself; the car crash in Ryan's story pushes him into consciousness of his own strength and capability; the loss of the babies allows the girls to escape a trauma they do not comprehend. In some of these cases, the loss is tempered within the story itself, but in other cases, it is through the links between the stories

that loss is bound to recovery: Jade's arc is charted across multiple chapters, and Jemma is mentioned again in the final story, healthy and doing well.

These links between the stories were made possible and more generative through negotiation. A function of chiasmus as a form is to invite readers to make connections between parts of a narrative; in arranging separate stories nonlinearly, links take on the additional function of building a picture of what is otherwise absent from the text. For example, "Small Matter" reveals that Louise has vanished; the girls know of Louise, and they meet Jade, but only the reader, who has already read "The Smooth Place", knows of their connection. Ryan's reflections on Amy's body image issues in "Soft Impact" are echoed in Mina's eating disorder in "Small Matter", but this is not something that is explicitly linked in either story; the ability to make meaning from these doublings can only arise from reading both stories separately and considering them together. The desire to create these links often led me to new and interesting ideas; I would wonder which character from a previous story might be able to fit into the current story, and this would invite me to imagine where the characters would have been at this point in time. I did not always end up incorporating them into the story, but this regularly gave me further ideas to explore in subsequent chapters.

5.3 Conclusions

In contemporary literature, narratives with heightened forms, while gaining more traction, are still far from commonplace. A minority of writers make use of heightened form in their creative practice, and even fewer use that form to shape their practice; that is, using form as constraint. I attribute this reluctance to use form to two main factors: firstly, the fear that heightened form is merely a display of writerly cleverness that will come across as artificial to readers; and secondly, the fear that form as constraint will severely restrict the writer's

creative freedom. Yet in eschewing heightened forms, writers are forfeiting a tool that allows meaning to be constructed in new ways, and new kinds of stories to be told. Thus, in this project, I sought to develop an approach that would make heightened form accessible to writers by mediating the main concerns surrounding form as constraint — ensuring that the use of form is authentic, and that as a constraint, the form is generative rather than restrictive.

Throughout this thesis, I have argued for an approach I have termed 'negotiation' as such a means of making form more accessible. Negotiation describes an ongoing, cyclical process of the writer both using form to generate narrative, and in turn modifying form to accommodate the organic development of that narrative. Modifying the form includes both making adjustments to the form itself, but also adjusting how the form is incorporated into practice. Form is a tool for constructing meaning, and so as the meaning of a narrative evolves, the form must evolve with it. Focusing on this relationship between form and narrative means that form is not artificial, but essential, and regarding form not as an objective, but a tool, means that it supports practice rather than imposing on it. As a result, heightened form can also be incorporated more sustainably into creative practice.

While my initial objective was to ensure that heightened form as constraint was facilitating rather than disrupting practice, I discovered that negotiation has another purpose: negotiation is itself a creative practice that reveals new potential in form, and how it can make meaning in narrative. Modifying form to accommodate the narrative involves introducing new features or setting aside other features, and these changes affect the way form shapes interpretation. In negotiating throughout the creative process, the writer maximises the usefulness of form in both writing practice and narrative.

I developed negotiation through my own experience with chiasmus. Through my literature review, I explored the history of chiasmus, and how the form has evolved across

disciplines to have different effects. With this background reading as context for my own practice, I began using the form myself, but to ensure that I achieved the symmetry of the form, I radically altered my practice, and in doing so, lost much of what I enjoy about writing. I found myself feeling restricted and stifled by the heightened form. This frustration drew me to negotiation by necessity. At first, I perceived myself as failing — I was not creative or skilled enough to work with form as constraint, and so I had to 'cheat' by adjusting it. Writing a symmetrical plot had been too limiting, as the first half dictated the second half, so instead, I separated the novella from one ongoing narrative into five separate but interlinked stories. This modification not only made chiasmus as constraint far more generative and enabled me to use it in a way that better suited my practice but opened my eyes to new possibilities. I subsequently incorporated polyphony and nonlinearity, and these features, in turn, proved exciting and generative. Form is essential to the themes I constructed in my novella, but not chiasmus as I began using it — rather, the negotiated form of chiasmus. If I had not negotiated with the form, my practice would have suffered and chiasmus would have been imposed on the novella, rather than central to its construction of meaning.

Negotiation has made the use of heightened form in my creative practice not only possible, but exciting and sustainable. Following this project, I seek to use new heightened forms — beyond chiasmus — as constraint. I no longer perceive form as constraint as a task that must be completed in order to arrive at a particular effect; instead, negotiation allows me to approach form as constraint as a means of developing new, unexpected ideas, and writing narratives that fascinate and intrigue me. In beginning this project, I was eager to incorporate form into my practice, but throughout the initial phases of my research, I came to fear that using form as constraint interfered too much with my work. As I conclude this thesis, I am

starting new projects in which I am using form as constraint, and I am excited to see where negotiating these forms will take me.

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