



ROAD MARKINGS

An Anthropologist in the Antipodes

Michael Jackson

ROAD MARKINGS

An Anthropologist in the Antipodes

Michael Jackson



Published by Rosa Mira Books
January 2012

Copyright © Michael Jackson, 2012

The right of Michael Jackson to be identified as the author of this work
in terms of section 96 of the Copyright Act 1994 is hereby asserted.

Cover image by Heidi Jackson, cover design by Alex Huber and Caroline Jackson,
page design by Caroline Jackson.

All rights reserved. Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this
publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without prior written
permission of both Michael Jackson and Rosa Mira Books.

ISBN:978-0-9864694-3-5

Michael Jackson

Michael Jackson is internationally renowned for his work in the field of existential anthropology. He is a leading figure in contemporary philosophical anthropology and widely praised for his innovations in ethnographic writing. In New Zealand, he is best known for his poetry and creative non-fiction (*Latitudes of Exile* was awarded the Commonwealth Poetry Prize in 1976, and



Photo: Freya Jackson

Wall won the New Zealand Book Award for Poetry in 1981). Michael Jackson has done extensive fieldwork in Sierra Leone since 1969, and has carried out anthropological research in Aboriginal Australia, Europe, and New Zealand. He has taught in universities in New Zealand, Australia, the United States (where he was College Professor at Indiana University, Bloomington, 1988-1996), Denmark (as a Professor of Anthropology at the University of Copenhagen), and at Harvard Divinity School where he is currently Distinguished Visiting Professor of World Religions. His most recent books include *Being of Two Minds* (poetry) and *Life Within Limits: Well-Being in a World of Want* (anthropology), both published in 2011. His memoir, *The Accidental Anthropologist*, was published to critical acclaim in 2006.

Contents

First things first	5
Braided rivers	8
Against the grain	16
No direction home	32
Crossing Cook Strait	51
Metaphor of the table	67
Destruction and hope	78
Distance looks our way	87
The illusion of Corsica	93
Nothing to write home about	107
Return to the Manawatu	122
Death's secretary	136
Burned places	155
Revenant	162
Te Atiawa	170
Symbolic landscape	186
Two women	193
Guardians of the secret	206
The road to Karuna Falls	229
The lost child	244
Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?	251
Sleepless in Sydney	262
Taking a line for a walk	276
Notes	289
Acknowledgements	311

First things first

There are moments in life of which we later say, everything changed. Nothing was ever the same again. This is as true of our histories as of our lives. There is a before and an after; our world was turned upside down; we suffered the eclipse of all that we took to be tried and true. This eclipse may follow bereavement or falling in love. It can befall those who lose their homeland to an invader, or a traveler in an antique land. And it often brings us to rethink the meaning of first things, and to ask what hold our histories have over us and whether there is something about our first experiences in life that makes all that follows pale in comparison.

When I went back to my natal New Zealand in the fall of 2008, bent on pursuing these questions through conversations with old friends and visits to old haunts, I thought of my project as a Bildungsroman in reverse, for instead of moving toward a point where I came into my own, I was going back to the place from which I had started out. Yet my interest was not solely in my own roots, but

in how our individual stories are interwoven with social and historical events that carry us beyond ourselves and pose questions for which we may have no answers.

In Joseph Conrad's *Youth*, a retired merchant seaman tells the story of his first voyage to the East. Marlowe is twenty years old at the time. In the middle of the Indian Ocean, the *Judea's* cargo of coal catches fire. There is an explosion and the crew takes to the boats. Marlowe is in charge of the smallest boat. It is his first command. 'I did not know how good a man I was till then. I remember the drawn faces, the dejected figures of my two men, and I remember my youth and the feeling that will never come back any more – the feeling that I could last forever, outlast the sea, the earth, and all men.' Marlowe makes landfall somewhere on the coast of Java and this moment will remain with him forever: the feeling that his whole life stretches ahead of him, filled with boundless promise and possibility. 'But age slowly wears us down,' says the older Marlowe. 'Our faces lined, wrinkled ... marked by toil, deceptions, success, and love, even though our weary eyes continue to look anxiously for something out of life, that while it is expected is already gone – has passed unseen, in a sigh, in a flash – together with the youth, with the strength, with the romance of illusions.'

Memory, like a good storyteller, is an artful liar. It reworks the past in ways that make it easier for us to live in the present. And while it may be consoling to think that one's life, or the history of one's nation, has a beginning, middle and end, lived time does not unfold lineally or smoothly, or as a chain of cause and effect. In reality, our lives get bogged down and sidetracked; we go backwards,

stand still, get carried away, and lose the plot. Moreover, our lives are so tied up with the lives of others that it is impossible to disentangle a single strand and confidently identify it as ‘yours’ or ‘mine’. And though we sometimes evoke an original state from which our lives unfolded or fell away, making it fundamental to who we are and what we have become, the course of any life is so discontinuous that there often remains no ‘first spinning place’ for us to return to, except in the imagination.

But return I did, to New Zealand, driving a rental car around with an ad hoc itinerary and a handful of ideas that might never bear fruit.

This book is the result. Blending ethnography, history, and autobiography, it explores the presence of ‘firstness’ in the ways we recount our stories, narrate our national histories, assign value, allocate blame, determine cause, and attempt to fathom the mysterious relation between individual origins and all that prefigures them.

Braided rivers

Arriving in New Zealand by air, I am always struck by how exposed the landscape is to the elements. How buffeted by wind and rain. Crossing the South Westland coast, I caught glimpses of a fretful sea, black rocks and iron sand. And then, through scudding cloud, verdant hills, as if the greenness of the original forests, felled and burned to make way for English farms, had seeped into the denuded land like indelible ink, an ineradicable reminder of loss. Far below, the red roofs of farmhouses and shearing sheds appeared so random and solitary that I remembered my youth for its persistent sense of being in such a place on sufferance, of not belonging. At Christchurch airport, I passed people who looked as if they had mislaid valued possessions or missed their flights. Weather-beaten, anxious faces, hair tousled by the wind. And a curious reticence, as if voicing one's thoughts could only make matters worse.

I rented a car and drove north through squalls of rain. Near Amberley, the weather cleared, and I pulled over to the side of the road to check my map. To the west were windbreaks of eucalypt and

pine, with wind-combed grasses glistening in the sudden sun. How ironic that so many foreign species have flourished here – *pinus insignis* and *macrocarpa* from Monterey in California; brushtail possums and bluegums from Australia – while so many New Zealanders have felt the need to go abroad to find their niche. Ironic, too, that we still drive on the left-hand side of the road as if, in the antipodes, history has produced a society in which many things are, from a northern vantage point, back to front. And who could have foreseen that within two years the city I had just left would be in ruins and that I would read a press release in which a survivor spoke of cars ‘falling into holes and everything ... upside down’?

I was twenty-three when I saw the East for the first time, coming from the sea, like Marlowe, to a place of ‘danger and promise’ where ‘a stealthy Nemesis lay in wait’. I spent a day in Bombay, drifting around the city and getting lost in the labyrinthine red light district around Falkland Road, locally known as the Kamathipura. Street after street was lined with cages in which frail girls, like birds, sold into slavery for the price of a pair of shoes or a tin roof, whispered and fluttered. Pimps pursued me at every turn. ‘You want jiggajig, Sah?’ ‘Sahib, Sahib, Sahib, you like leetle girl?’ ‘Sah? Yes, Sahib, I can do, Sahib?’ To escape the wheedling and pestering, I walked into a cinema and bought a ticket. Ushered into an upstairs seat, I found myself watching a film of the great Persian epic, ‘Sohrab and Rustam’. I had never before seen an Indian film. Although I couldn’t understand Hindi or read the Urdu or Malayalam subtitles, I was captivated by the music, and for months after leaving India I tried to recall one song in particular, a lifeline to a place to which I fantasized

returning. Forty-five years later, having long forgotten the tune, I typed into YouTube the words ‘Sohrab and Rustam Hindi film’ on the off chance that the miracle of digital technology might help me retrieve what my mind had been unable to retain. I discovered that the vocal music for the movie had been pre-recorded by Lata Mangeshkar, perhaps the most famous playback singer in the history of Bollywood, and that the song that haunted me throughout the winter of 1963-1964 when I worked among the homeless in London, was called ‘Yeh Kaisi Ajab’. The song is banal, yet, watching the beautiful actress Suraiya lip-synch Lata Mangeshkar’s shrill and quavering vocals, I saw how this music and its setting could have enchanted me at twenty-three, much as Conrad’s Marlowe was enthralled when he first set eyes on the East. Music, more than any medium I know, has this power to carry one across space and time, reviving dormant memories, recovering lost connections. But memory is so notoriously mutable that it is never *the* past one returns to, but a version or illusion of it, and this sense that time is irreversible and the past irretrievable in its original form may either liberate us to live more completely in the present or drive us to despair.

On the winding road through Weka Pass, I was thinking of my first wife. At age fourteen, she was taken by ambulance to Christchurch Hospital over this road. Suspected of having rheumatic fever, she was hospitalized and placed under observation in a ward filled with senile or dying women. When her mother visited her five days later, Pauline was distraught. ‘Take me out of here, Mum,’ she cried, ‘take me out of here!’ Feverishly turning her head from side to

side and throwing back the bed sheets, she begged her mother not to leave her. Noellie took her daughter home to Waiau for ten weeks' bed rest. But something had changed. Pauline appeared to have lost any desire to go out into the world. She had been a champion swimmer; now she would not go near the baths. The previous summer, she had learned to drive. She now declared she had no interest in driving a car. She only wanted to see her horse, Rosie. With Rosie she felt in control.

Ten years after our marriage, when we were living in Palmerston North, Pauline began writing a children's novel that allegorized her experiences before and after hospitalization. On the surface, *Back of Beyond* is the story of two children who become involved in unraveling the mystery of an attempted murder. But Pauline intended her book to recount, albeit obliquely, far more personal experiences. She began writing two years after undergoing radiotherapy and chemotherapy for Hodgkin's disease. This devastating experience was a replay of the trauma she had suffered as a fourteen-year-old girl in Christchurch Hospital. Though in remission, she lived without certainty, as if at any moment the ground might give way beneath her feet. And this contrast between what it is like to take life for granted, as though one had all the time in the world, and what it is like to live as if every day might be one's last, finds expression in the two very different protagonists of the story – a gauche and timid English boy and a rough, high-spirited New Zealand girl, brought together one summer on a high country station. In the solution of the crime lies the resolution of an existential mystery – how we may live with a sense of our vulnerability while drawing on our strengths, neither

succumbing to our fear that the world is too much for us nor retrospectively seeing ourselves as heroic and virtuous, simply because we survive.

Beyond Waikari, the serrated and snow-streaked peaks of the Inland Kaikoura range became visible, and over the last few miles between Rotherham and Waiau, every bend in the road, every stand of pines, every farmhouse or fenceline was so familiar that by the time I approached 50 Leslie Street, where Pauline spent her childhood, I was beginning to imagine that she and her parents would be waiting for me there and wondering where in the world I had been for so long. I did not stop, but drove slowly past the timber mill that Pauline's father had once owned and on toward the Mason River bridge where I parked under some willows, scrambled down the embankment and picked my way across the graywacke stones of the riverbed until I located the spot near the wooden foundations of the old bridge where my daughter and I had scattered Pauline's ashes in the ice-cold water twenty-six years ago. I sat there with the sun on my face, inhaling the sweet smell of broom and the sour odor of dung in the cold air, the silence broken only by the trilling and lispings of a bird and an occasional passing car. Time hung fire. I was on my way back to Leslie Street after a long walk, and would return in time for lunch. Jack would be picking broad beans and digging spuds from his garden. Noellie would be slicing ham, setting the table, and pouring herself a home-brewed beer with lemonade. Pauline would be reading in her room ...

Memories are like rain clouds. Just as a mountain range is needed for clouds to fall as rain, so the mind needs a familiar landscape, a

piece of music, the smell of fennel, the taste of a petite Madeleine, if its hidden depths are to be revealed. So uncanny and surprising is this confluence of inner and outer worlds that we often have the impression that a landscape or valued object actually holds our past life in its hands, as insects are held in amber, or that past events remain perfectly preserved in our minds. But this flowing together of the debris of the past and what is now at hand is, like the confluence of two rivers, under constant revision. One day, it may seem as though the past is all we are, and that we merely echo events that have already occurred. Another day, it is as though there were nothing outside the present moment. Our entire existence, all that matters, is contained in the here and now.

I was watching the water, growing dizzy as it slipped by, the color of bottle glass, whorls where there were submerged boulders, an uprooted willow snagging the current. This image of a river took hold. I thought of the other rivers that flow into the Waiau – the Mason, the Doubtful, the Hope – and I recalled the Māori tradition according to which there were once two Waiau Rivers, their adjacent headwaters in the Spencer Mountains. One was female (the Waiau-uha), the other male (Waiau-toa), and they were lovers before they were rivers. When they were parted, they became turbulent water, forever clouded by tears.

A human life is like the course of a river – in this case, its snow-fed chalky water braided by shingle banks as it works its way toward the sea. But can one map a life as one maps a river? Can we identify sources or trace origins as easily? Can we liken the influences that shape our lives to tributary streams? Do we wind up in a place that

can be compared with an ocean? One might sketch such a map and outline a few contours, but the detail, the scale, is beyond the range of any cartographer. We cannot encompass all that makes us who we are, any more than we can fathom the extent of our freedom to refashion the raw material we begin with.

It must have been in 1933 or 1934, not long after he had gone into exile, that Walter Benjamin momentarily lost his immunity to involuntary memory. Sitting alone in the Café des Deux Magots in Paris, he suddenly glimpsed ‘with the force of an illumination’ the fateful links between his life and the lives of friends, comrades, chance acquaintances and lovers, as well as books and places. On a sheet of paper, Benjamin sketched a series of family trees or a labyrinth, bestowing a semblance of order on the ‘primal acquaintances’ that had revealed to him, over many years, new pathways and possibilities. Two or three years after his Paris epiphany, and having lost the scrap of paper on which he seemed to have found, like Theseus, a way through the labyrinth of his life, Benjamin was struck not only by the impact of others on his own life, but by the variousness of *their* destinies, and he wondered whether it would be possible to divine in such a disparate group any common thread or family resemblance.

Who has not, at some stage, contemplated the possibility of piecing together the story of his or her life, summing it up, as we say, as if, despite its twists and turns, its braided course, its oxbows and ancillary streams, a life can be recounted as a story? It is significant, I think, that Walter Benjamin lost the paper on which he drew a coherent diagram of his life, for this enabled him thereafter to

indulge the illusion that everything that had befallen him could be connected, like the dots in a child's puzzle book, disclosing a hitherto hidden form. I prefer a different image – suggested by the arcane term *paralipomena*. Strictly speaking, the Greek word *paraleipómena* designates things we leave behind, shelve or dismiss from mind, that yet accumulate as a kind of supplement or backlog to the stories we tell. Despite being unfinished and fragmentary, such deleted scenes, out-takes and afterthoughts capture moments when we see ourselves differently, as through the eyes of another. When we experience our past as if it were a previous incarnation. When we are visited by strange dreams, and imagine other lives – a road not taken, a rendezvous missed, a letter not answered, a stone left unturned. When we nurture the view that we have been thrown into this life by a quirk of fate, and that our true destiny will come later, or elsewhere, or with someone else. When we wait, harboring these unspoken thoughts, lost in a wilderness of vain conjecture and second guessing, asking ourselves over and over what would have happened had we gone down another road, if we had, to borrow Robert Frost's compelling line, taken the road less traveled by.

Against the grain

On the road to Parnassus, I encountered only one car. The setting sun glinted momentarily on its windscreen as it sped by, eclipsing the driver's face. And then I had the wilderness to myself again, tussock, gorse, and empty hills.

It was evening when I reached Kaikoura, the town buffeted by a stiff wind off the sea and squalls of rain. Yet despite the dusk and drizzle I felt the adversarial presence of the mountain range and the ocean – the township cast between them like a handful of poker dice. That night, in a backpackers', I began re-reading *Erewhon*, a book associated in my mind with Pauline's *Back of Beyond*. Just as her hidden valley was modeled on high country sheep stations she had known as a child, like Molesworth and Cloudy Range, Samuel Butler's pre-industrial paradise was born of his reveries at the Rangitata Forks where he bought a sheep run in 1860. These are the kinds of places where a hunted man can hide, where a youngster can test his mettle, and a troubled mind find sanctuary. As his title suggests, Butler's *Erewhon* turns the conventional world upside

down. In this antipodean world, churches are banks, money is God, invalids are criminals, and universities are Colleges of Unreason. Houses are built facing north for the sun, not south. East and west are reversed. Moreover, people are drawn through life backwards, their faces turned toward the past rather than the future. These reversals were anticipated by Butler's decision to migrate to the margins of the Empire, exchanging the gentility of bourgeois England for the wilds of New Zealand. The contradictory colony gave the young adventurer a great deal of narcissistic satisfaction. Animals, vegetables, and minerals called familiar identifications into question. In Canterbury, he could not decide whether the rocks were sandstone or slate, whether masters enjoyed a greater social advantage than their servants, or vice versa, and whether farmers were creatures of routines determined by the sheep they farmed. Butler's images of reversal suggest not only a contrarian disposition; they are evidence of his personal disorientation as he struggled to find his feet *down under* and to come to terms with a society in which the familiar and the foreign were juxtaposed as incongruously as the coinages that would pepper his fiction – Arowhena Nosnibor, for instance, and Kahabuka, also known as Chowbok – words spelled back to front, combinations of Māori and English phonemes, peculiar anagrams. Though the twenty-four-year-old Butler was exhilarated by the harsh light, the open horizons, and the prospect of living 'beyond the pale of civilization', he experienced moments of desolation, when he longed to see 'some signs of human care in the midst of the loneliness', some glimpse of Europe. Even more onerous was his intellectual isolation. New Zealand seemed 'far better adapted to

develop and maintain in health the physical than the intellectual nature. The fact is,' Butler wrote, 'people here are busy making money; that is the inducement which led them to come in the first instance, and they show their sense by devoting their energies to the work.' While admiring the shrewd, hardheaded intelligence of the settlers, and their freedom from the pretensions of the old country, he missed his Handel and Bach, and grew weary of conversations about sheep, horses, dogs, cattle, English grasses, paddocks, and bush. Isolated in his cob cottage at the Rangitata Forks, he found that the solitude was greater than he could bear. 'I felt increasing upon me that dreadful doubt as to my own identity – as to the continuity of my past and present existence – which is the first sign of that distraction which comes on those who have lost themselves in the bush. I had fought against this feeling hitherto, and had conquered it; but the intense silence and gloom of this rocky wilderness were too much for me, and I felt that my power of collecting myself was beginning to be impaired.' Eager to embrace the egalitarian ethos of the colony, Butler nonetheless felt 'totally debarred from the intellectual society of clever men', and this unresolved tension between the raw physicality and practicality of the settlers and the intellectual and artistic traditions of Europe would become a recurring motif in New Zealand art and literature.

When I finally closed *Erewhon* and set it down on my bedside table, I hesitated to turn off the light, for Butler's images had brought back to me the mixed emotions of ecstasy and emptiness one often feels in remote New Zealand.



After waking at first light, I packed my bag, paid my bill and drove to a café on the foreshore. My waitress presumed I was American, and gave me a tourist brochure to read while I waited for my muesli, toast, and coffee.

The Kaikoura coast was ‘a Mecca for marine mammals’, the brochure said. Fur seals and dolphins abounded in the inshore waters, and one could observe sperm whales further out, where nutrient-rich waters welled up from the Hikurangi Trench and sustained the grouper, shark, and squid on which the whales fed. ‘It is hard to imagine how full of life the oceans once were. Let’s hope we don’t find that due to our stupidity, imagination is all that we have left.’

When I’d finished my breakfast, I strolled along the seafront, sun on my face and a fresh breeze off the ocean. Someone had stapled flyers on the trunks of the big araucarias along the promenade. They advertised whale watching, fresh crayfish, pony treks and other healthy outdoor pursuits. But I was seeing the insubstantial and curiously childlike buildings of the township through Samuel Butler’s eyes, as though I had just disembarked from *The Roman Emperor* in January 1860, four months after leaving Gravesend. Perhaps, too, I was still under the influence of a recent trip to Mexico where I visited the great pyramids of the sun and moon at Teotihuacán. The pyramid builders had sited and designed them to echo the slopes of the distant hills, in keeping with a cosmivision that sought, in every aspect of everyday life, to bring human, divine and natural worlds into alignment, so ensuring that the life force of one flowed into the others in a cycle of life-sustaining exchange. By contrast, one sometimes gets the impression in New Zealand that the

invasive culture of Europe has found great difficulty in adjusting itself either to indigenous values or the physical environment. Everywhere, there is evidence of how awkwardly it relates to both. Paddocks come up against remnant stands of native bush, weatherboard houses are painted white and trimmed with colors that clash rather than harmonize with the surrounding land. Leaving Kaikoura, I passed a series of motels whose banal names – Norfolk Pine, Kaikoura Cottage, Clearwater, Blue Seas, Seaview, Anchor, Panorama, Kaikoura Gateway – suggested a reticence to come to terms with our history or to reimagine our sense of place.

Rising sheer from the sea – or so it seemed – the snow-clad Seaward Kaikouras took my breath away, setting me to wonder how one might adequately describe a scene that half the postcards on sale in the backpackers' had reduced to a photogenic backdrop to a sperm whale surfacing, or the name of a motel. *Erewhon* gives us an inkling of how the new settlers would conjure a sense of being in control of the landscapes that filled them with dread. They would fell and fire the forests, and recreate the hills of home. And in replicating England's green and pleasant land or cultivating their respectable enclaves, they would fool themselves into believing they could master the homesickness that oppressed them within and the intractable wildness of the world without.

I remembered the Matukituki Valley, hard under Mount Aspiring, the summer Pauline and I stayed with our friends Bryn and Isabelle Jones in the old Aspinall homestead. We heard stories of how difficult it had been, a hundred years ago, living in a sod hut and raising a family, with the unceasing sound of cataracts and glaciers

drowning one's voice, depressing one's spirits. Not far from the homestead was a small stream. We used to bathe in a pool that had been carved over the centuries by a waterfall plunging from the cirque high above. With snowmelt in the spring, the stream became a torrent. On such a day in 1899, Hugh McPherson was crossing the swollen stream on stepping-stones, his daughter behind him. The little girl slipped and fell into the swift water. Her mother, standing fifty yards away, saw what had happened and called out, but the roaring water overwhelmed her cries and by the time the father realized his daughter was being swept away he could do nothing to save her. In 1905, McPherson lost his own life. Returning from Wanaka with supplies, his dray struck a submerged shingle bank and overturned, trapping him beneath the water. The Duncan Macphersons, who built their homestead on the west branch of the river, fared no better. Though she dreaded the noise of the river, Mrs Macpherson traveled to Wanaka with her daughter to vote in the 1919 General Election. During the day, the river rose, and as she started across, the spring-cart overturned. Her thirteen-year-old daughter managed to cling to the harness, but Mrs Macpherson was unable to save herself. A year later, the surviving family left the valley for good.

It took time to get used
to how immense the mountains were

Some nights we could not sleep
for the sound of avalanches
above the cirque,
the grinding teeth

of the glacier

On New Year's Day
we walked to the river at first light –
two paradise ducks
flew away upstream
curuck caraark

Forded it hand in hand
the cold water flowing on
through us for hours afterward
our bodies made as one
with water and stone

I remember
the bewildering distances
that afternoon
how small you seemed
walking ahead with Isabelle and Bryn
while I hung back
to take notes:

Pines *hoorraharr*
a solitary bird
in a lost language like Aztec
tir ror ah tī ka

Now that you have gone
into that valley forever
I cling to names
like trefoil and sedge
sweet vernal, senecio

Crossing the river alone
to nowhere you are.

Just north of Māori Creek, at the beginning of Mangamaunu Bay, I stopped the car and got out. After crossing the rust-stained ballast of the narrow gauge railway line, I found a track through lupin, toitoi and wet marram grass that led to the beach. The snow-covered range was now on my right. On the river terraces and foothills, wind-stunted mānuka, karaka and ngaio had been laid low by the calloused hand of the wind.

At my feet, the sea scabbled and seethed, grinding the graywacke stones and leaving its fretwork on the sand. Though nothing now remains of the site of the old Flat Settlement, it was here that the Australian poet, Henry Lawson, spent several months teaching in a Native School in 1897. One might have expected his poems and journal entries from this time to be inspired by the coast, but whenever he got away from Mangamaunu he seems always to have headed into Kaikoura, seeking the comradeship of the pub. His most notable piece of writing from the time is an embittered story called *A Daughter of Māoriland*, in which an open-minded new teacher at a Māori school shows compassion to a lonely and ill-treated pupil only to have her family repay him with gossip and exploitation. His experience at Mangamaunu led Lawson to conclude that it was ‘sentimental rot’ and a sheer waste of time to extend human kindness to people who lacked the moral sophistication that would enable them to recognize and return it.

Lawson appears completely insensitive to the colonial context of his relationship with Māori. Like other Pākehā in positions of privilege and power, he assumed that Māori should be grateful for the religious enlightenment and secular education they stood to receive from their civilized betters, and not bite the hand that fed them. But in the years since Samuel Butler arrived in Christchurch, the indigenous Ngāi Tahu had sold most of their land for derisory sums, usually with little understanding of what such ‘sales’ entailed under British law. Although Kaikoura Māori had managed to retain a coastal strip twelve miles long and a mile deep, and had fish, shellfish, crayfish, karaka berries and birds aplenty, hunting and gathering alone could not provide for their needs, and many Māori men worked on whaleboats or in the Kaikoura try-works, or spent their summers shearing. Understandably, few felt much gratitude to the Pākehā who had, in a single generation, occupied their lands, visited upon them typhus, measles, tuberculosis, bronchitis and syphilis, and now refused to settle outstanding compensation claims for the lands and livelihoods Ngāi Tahu had lost.

Lawson accepted the paternalistic Victorian dogma that assimilation was the only way that ‘primitive’ people could overcome their natural inferiority. Yet when he and his wife arrived at Mangamaunu with only light hand-luggage and two cement casks containing a mattress, a kettle, some pots and pans, and a few groceries, they were warmly welcomed by local Māori and for several weeks were wholly dependent on the baskets of kumara, wild pork, rabbits, pigeon and kaka, paua, fish, and watercress that were brought to their door. The Lawsons reciprocated with what they had

to give. Berthe, a trained nurse, attended sick women in the kainga, and Henry expressed solidarity with Māori against local sheep owners who regarded ‘the nigs’ with ‘contempt or aggressive dislike’. After all, this was the poet who had built his reputation on an ethic of mateship, espousing empathy for individuals struggling against the powers that be. Whether Lawson was capable of extending these principles to people of color was another matter. His Achilles heel was his own sense of inferiority, born of a lonely and loveless childhood, and minimal schooling. ‘I was slow at arithmetic,’ Lawson confessed, ‘but I stuck to it. I was, I think, going into compound fractions when I left school.’ At Mangamaunu ‘I could scarcely add a column of figures. I had to practice nights and fake up sums with answers on the back of the board and bluff for all I was worth; for there was a Māori girl there, about 20, as big as I am and further advanced in arithmetic, and she’d watch me like a cat watches a mouse until she caught me in a mistake.’

The Māori girl who put her teacher on the spot, and became the bane of his life, was also the model for the ingrate in Lawson’s story, *A Daughter in Māoriland*. Her name was Mere Jacob, and her father had murdered her mother after a violent argument when Mere was six or seven. According to Lawson, Mere formed an unwanted attachment to him and his wife, haunting the school, even during the holidays, and hanging around Berthe ‘like a stray dog.’ He described her as morose and brooding, and became convinced that she had inherited her father’s violent disposition. Even before the Lawsons’ arrival in the settlement, Mere would take to the bush if punished at the school, allegedly sitting for hours and sometimes days in a tree,

withdrawn into morbid silence. ‘Poor girl,’ said Lawson, already betraying his fear of Mere Jacob, ‘but I shouldn’t care to punish her if there were knives handy.’

Berthe finally agreed to take Mere in as a boarder on the understanding that Mere work for the Lawsons as an unpaid domestic servant. Reflecting years later on her vexed months in Mangamaunu, Berthe would claim that Mere had been happy with this arrangement, but had inexplicably begun to pilfer groceries and neglect her housework. Outraged at her ingratitude, Henry described her as a cow, a pig, and a dog, bringing ‘a native smell’ into the house, and allowing herself to grow fat, lazy and dirty. Indeed he felt so disappointed and aggrieved that it did not occur to him that Mere might have felt justified in taking from the Lawsons what they owed her. After all, Mere was being treated as an unpaid menial, expected to be at the Lawsons’ beck and call at all times, and her relatives had given bountiful help to the Lawsons. Henry’s view came close to paranoia. Mere was spreading slanderous reports about the Lawsons and plotting with her relatives to do them harm. Not only was the girl not to be trusted, she possessed her father’s jealous temperament and it was only a matter of time before he and his wife would fall victim to her scheming. On September 28, 1897, after only four and a half months at Mangamaunu, Lawson tendered his resignation: ‘As the loneliness of this place is affecting Mrs Lawson’s health, I wish to resign my position at the end of October.’

I find it ironic that the teacher who spoke patronizingly of ‘my Māoris’, presuming to be their moral superior, and leaving Mangamaunu a disillusioned and ‘cruelly wronged’ man, would be

remembered by local Māori without rancor or resentment. Under conditions of radical inequalities of power and wealth, it is often the subalterns who preserve their humanity while those who lord it over them, and do terrible wrongs in the name of civilization and reason, lose their souls.



Having now walked the length of the beach, I decided to return along the railway line to my car.

Not far from where I had parked, I happened on a sign:

Mangamaunu Bay
Selling Now
Pure Living Inspired by Nature

Another irony! A corporation selling lifestyle blocks on the same bay where, only days before resigning his teaching post, Henry Lawson had written

... dark and lonely,
A wronged and broken man,
He crouched and sobbed as only
The strong heart broken can.

I sat in my car for some time, listening to the washboard sea on the shingle and pondering the manifold ways in which our first experiences of life cast their shadow over what comes after.

Lawson's penchant for self-pity may be traced back to his childhood in the 'miserable little hell' of New Pipeclay. Bullied at

school, ignored at home, and further isolated by partial deafness from the age of nine, he would describe himself as a ‘delicate, shabby, soul-starved and totally uneducated Bush Boy ... drought born and drought bred’, who found camaraderie in the pub but little fulfillment in home life or marriage. In Bill Pearson’s words, ‘Lawson was predisposed to see in Mangamaunu the ‘localism’ and the ‘ignorance’ to which he had been so hurtfully exposed as a boy in New Pipeclay.

But what of Bill Pearson himself, to whom we owe our most detailed account of Henry Lawson’s months in Mangamaunu?

When I took English 101 at the University of Auckland in 1958, Bill presented a memorable series of lectures on George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*. A small man with thinning hair, he gave the impression of having spent his entire life indoors, and I wondered what in the world he had in common with the great Victorian writer whom many contemporaries found, at first sight, ‘magnificently ugly’, but quickly succumbed to as ‘a most powerful beauty, a calm and sensuous soul’. Years later, when I learned that Bill had been born and raised in an isolated working-class town on the West Coast, a shy and sensitive boy who preferred academic study to sports, I began to see how George Eliot’s critique of English provincialism, and her sympathy with a young woman struggling to come into her own in a world of narrow, repressive values, might speak to his own beginnings. I could also understand why a young man with homosexual yearnings might learn to keep his head down and acquire the nervous, lopsided expression that made it seem as if Bill were about to be accused of some heinous crime. In re-reading

Middlemarch, I still find echoes of Bill. ‘There is no creature whose inward being is so strong that it is not greatly determined by what lies outside it, though at the same time every limit is a beginning as well as an ending.’

My cohorts and I habitually drank in the corner bar of the Central Hotel with Bill and his academic mates, as well as members of the University Māori Club with which Bill had been closely involved since 1956. But it wasn’t until after his death in 2002 that I discovered with what anguish Bill had wrestled with the question of whether to come out of the closet or to use the safer strategy in a homophobic society of keeping his identity to himself. This same preemptive and self-protective wariness is evident in the opening lines of his famous 1952 essay, ‘Fretful Sleepers: A Sketch of New Zealand Behaviour and its Implications for the Artist’, written in London when he was twenty-nine, for Bill Pearson was acutely aware that many of his compatriots were as defensive about their national identity as they were about their sexual orientation. Writing critically might easily be seen, in a parochial society, as traitorous. Though Bill was loath to risk vilification as a queer, he found another outsider role in associating with Māori whom he idealized for their ‘courtesy and considerateness to guests’, yet also regarded as victims. ‘I sometimes wonder whether I [was] trying to make up for some deficiency or loss within myself,’ Bill observed toward the end of his life.

With the resurgence of Māori activism in the 1970s, Bill began to realize that his promotion of Māori writing and his interest in Māori culture had been ‘naïve and unconsciously paternalistic’. In

sympathizing with people who have suffered social injustices, there is a danger that we see them one dimensionally as victims and cast ourselves in the role of protector or rescuer, thereby underplaying the capacity of the alleged victim to redress the injustices on his or own terms. Receiving no gratitude or recognition for his goodwill, and encountering angry Māori with little patience for liberal Pākehā, Bill experienced something of what Lawson experienced at Mangamaunu, which may explain why he was drawn to Lawson's story. 'I pulled out of the Māori Club at that time, I just felt I wasn't needed any more ... And of course, they had an expression for ... people that had shown an interest in Māori things and then dropped out, they would say, "He's swum back into the Pākehā sea." If anybody remembers me, that's how they would look on me now. Occasionally I run into people I haven't see for a long time, and they greet me, but I'm no longer considered of any importance in the kind of world I used to mix in.'

Bill's sorrowful sense of insignificance leads him to assume that the New Zealand he knew has passed away, rendering him and his work anachronistic. A student of local literature might take an interest in Coal Flat or 'Fretful Sleepers', but these works have largely been forgotten. It may be true that history is a series of radical ruptures and discontinuities, but it is also true that every new generation puts the past behind it and imagines that it may bring a new world into being. Our current rage for demolishing old buildings and raising glass towers in their stead may be a symptom of our collective embarrassment with the past, comparable to the way that adolescents are embarrassed to be seen in public with their parents.

And so, with a vague memory of the 'mud-brown' painting by Colin McCahon on the dust jacket of Bill Pearson's *Coal Flat*, I left Mangamaunu and drove on toward Nelson...

[Against the grain - notes](#)

No direction home

I reached Nelson late in the day, joining my brother Miles and my sister-in-law Margaret as they prepared to leave for the restaurant where they played guitar and violin every Sunday night. The chef was Italian, his wife from Germany, and the risotto and Rhenish wine I was served that night were equal to the music. Driving home, I congratulated Miles and Margaret for having achieved the kind of maturity and mastery that comes only after a lifetime of dedicated practice. I was also filled with admiration for the sanctuary, *Escondida*, they'd created among the regenerating bush.

Miles found it hard to imagine why one would chose any other life, and could not understand why I lived in a crowded and polluted city, devoting my energies to arcane intellectual pursuits and periodic forays into the third world. When he asked me what had brought me back to New Zealand, I was therefore hesitant to speak of my interest in firstness, and described instead something of Henry Lawson's experiences at Mangamaunu.

‘I’m mystified why Lawson was so uninspired by the Inland Kaikoura range or the wild coast that runs parallel to it.’

‘Actually,’ Miles said, ‘I’d find it depressing to live in the shadow of the range, the sun disappearing in mid afternoon, the coast so wind-racked and the sea so vicious. Besides, Kaikoura is a dump.’

I was unable to think of a response to this judgment so I told him about my reading of Samuel Butler.

‘I’ve been trying to get a sense of how the South Island appeared to the first European settlers. It seems that our Kiwi vernacular has been with us from the beginning. Some of the idioms that Butler noted in 1860 I heard yesterday in Kaikoura: “stuck up” for snobbish and “skiting” for showing off. I find it compelling that the vocabulary and preoccupations of mid-nineteenth century working-class migrants from Ireland, Scotland, and England have persisted here, despite our increasing affluence and education.’

‘That reminds me,’ Miles said, ‘I’ve got something to show you – something that will interest you very much. But for the time being I’ll keep it a secret.’



In the morning, Miles took me on a tour of *Escondida*. He particularly wanted to show me where his friend Larry had been planting bamboo. Each clump was surrounded by sacking in an attempt to stifle the old man’s beard. After feeding kitchen scraps to the hens, Miles pointed out some of the native trees he had planted among the gorse. The unwanted gorse provided perfect protection, albeit at great cost to itself, for as soon as the natives outgrew it, the

gorse died for want of sunlight. Whether Miles intended me to draw a moral from this, I did not know. I followed him down the road and uphill, past clay cuttings and stands of mānuka, before turning down a bush track that led to an ancient rimu – one of the few that had survived the fires with which the early settlers cleared the land. We then doubled back toward the house whose tiled roof brought home to me Miles's affection for all things Spanish.

Over coffee on the terrace, where thyme flourished between the flagstones, Margaret told me that only last week a flamenco group from Jerez de la Frontera in Spain had performed at the Nelson Arts Festival. After the group's final performance, Miles and Margaret invited the six visitors to a banquet of Spanish food at *Escondida*. Despite this hospitality, the gypsy singers and dancers appeared bored and impatient to leave. Perhaps they felt uncomfortable in a gadje (non-Gypsy) household. Perhaps they had been on the road too long, wearied by obligatory meetings with local musicians and interminable small talk in stilted English. When they had eaten, Miles encouraged the visiting guitarist, Jesus Alvarez, to play. Soon, Ana de los Reyes began singing with exhilarating passion, while the others clapped and chorused. Moved by the soniquete, Margaret decided to take a risk. Even though Jesus was playing in a difficult key, she found it and joined the voice of her violin to the voices of the gypsies. 'The rapport was immediate,' Margaret said. 'They played and sang with even greater enthusiasm, smiling in appreciation of my playing. Instead of returning to their hotel, they stayed for several hours. They told me that I possessed "instincto flamenco"'. They even invited me to join their tour.'

‘But it was the vibrancy of the music,’ Miles said, ‘that stirred me most. Its power to cross language barriers, age and gender lines, reaching beyond Andalusia, creating a conversation in which even Margaret and I could take part. It’s like falling in love.’

‘It was literally that for Francine,’ Margaret said, quickly adding, ‘Not your Francine, though she has the same love of life.’

Auckland-born Francine Sweet was one of the flamenco dancers who had organized the New Zealand tour, and Margaret and Miles took it in turns to recount her story, which in many respects echoed theirs. Although Francine Sweet took dancing lessons from age five, it was an encounter with flamenco when she was twenty-three that defined the subsequent course of her life. After participating in a flamenco workshop in Christchurch, she eloped to Canada with the touring group’s guitarist. Three years later she moved to Spain and trained under gypsy masters in Jerez. But remaking herself was an ordeal, and for many nights after her first performance she cried herself to sleep. ‘It was hard, very hard,’ Francine would tell a *Listener* interviewer. ‘It was in a tablao [a restaurant with a flamenco show]. I had to do it without any rehearsal, without knowing the common language or protocol of pure flamenco – nothing.’ Petite and dark, Francine translated her surname into her stage name, La Dulce. But the name was as misleading as her dulcet voice. ‘A will of iron is needed to learn gypsy flamenco, and the fire to dance it. I am increasingly passionate. I have to keep myself in the fire, close to the source of the art form.’



It sometimes occurs to me that a careless demiurge repeatedly scatters the souls of the unborn across the face of the earth without a second thought for where they might thrive or feel at home, so that many of us are fated to spend a good part of our lives looking for where we properly belong. Strictly speaking, Francine Sweet's first life was her New Zealand life; she was born in Auckland and many years passed before she left the country of her birth. And yet Andalusia is where she has always belonged, as if her struggle was not to break free of her family or birthplace, but to realize her kinship with ancestors to whom no genealogical connections could be traced. This paradox – that one's life's journey is sometimes toward rather than away from one's true home – is nicely captured by Bob Dylan who, in an interview with Martin Scorsese, spoke of his own sense of having been born far from home. 'I had ambitions to set out, like an Odyssey, going home somewhere. So I set out to find this home I'd left a while back, and I couldn't remember exactly where it was, but I was on my way there and encountering what I encountered on the way was how I envisioned it all.'

I have given up trying to finalize my own views in this matter. But since arriving in Christchurch I had felt such a deep familiarity with the places I passed through that I took this as evidence of an undeniable tie, both to the country and to my parentage, that transcended any ambivalence I might feel toward either. And yet, in writing emails to my wife and children on the other side of the world, I would be instantly transported *there*. Despite this disorienting oscillation from place to place, person to person, and period to period, or the strangeness that clung like a mist to the most familiar

things, I was constantly aware of a primordial attachment to the first places on which I had opened my eyes, the first people I had known, and I felt that these first experiences were foundational. How does one interpret this contradictory sense of being in a place that is both familiar and foreign? Is it a result of seeing the place simultaneously through the eyes of a younger self who once lived there and an older self whose life is now located somewhere else? As I pondered these confusions, I was reminded of the idea of ‘originals’ among the Mehinaku of the Upper Xingu in Amazonia.

For everything that exists, according to the Mehinaku, there is an archetypal, ‘true’ version of it that was created before the first dawn broke upon the world. However, what we actually see are replicas of these first things. We therefore live in a world of masks or second skins that obscure an original reality that we may glimpse but never completely grasp.



Toward noon, Miles drove me into Nelson where I had arranged to have lunch with Brigid Lowry. I once worked for Brigid’s father, Bob, as a letterpress machinist, and Brigid, then nine, would often visit us at the press. Brigid’s first published work was two poems that Bob printed for her, and one day, perhaps in appreciation of my support for her father, she presented me with a hat she had fashioned from a strip of cartridge paper stapled into a band. With Bob’s red mark-up pencil she had written on the hat, ‘I am a Mike in this My Kingdom’, eight words that were enough to convince me that she would one day become a successful writer.

Brigid answered my knock on her door, and rather than go inside we loitered on the path where I asked Brigid if she had cemented the shards of ceramic tile and crockery into the face of the steps that led up to the street. ‘One of my small labors of love,’ Brigid said. ‘I like to collect broken and discarded things, and find a place for them. I’m glad you like my handiwork.’

‘It’s why we write,’ I said, ‘to make a space for the broken things in our lives.’

Over lunch, I shared with Brigid a little about my research, alluding to my brother’s affinity for Spain, Margaret’s fascination with gypsies, and the strange affinity we sometimes feel for places and people far from the country in which we have been raised.

‘Asia has always been my other place,’ Brigid said. ‘I don’t know why. Or whether my Buddhism came first, then my attraction to East Asia. I think it’s karmic. We’ve been elsewhere in a previous life. The echoes and repetitions are so real.’

Twenty years ago I might have rejected the notion of karma out of hand. Now I was more tolerant of the images we use in accounting for the mysteries of our experience. What cannot be verified is not necessarily inadequate to the phenomena we are struggling to grasp.

Inevitably, we also talked about writing, and I asked Brigid how she had become a writer.

‘I enjoyed writing at school,’ she said, ‘but a literary career was not an option, even though my parents loved books, and our house was famous for literary parties. My mother was a frustrated poet with very little money, a husband who drank too much, and four strapping

daughters. But despite being too busy trying to make ends meet to write, she did all that she could to nourish our creativity.’

Brigid’s first job after leaving school was in a library. ‘Next I was a waitress and a bookshop assistant, before becoming a primary school teacher, for which I lacked the necessary patience. Life took some interesting twists and turns, and at the age of thirty-five I re-evaluated what I wanted to do. I had spent seven years living in a Buddhist community and was now a mother and second-time-around wife. I knew I loved books and writing so I did a BA at Curtin University, majoring in creative writing. The atmosphere was stimulating and supportive, and soon I was writing and publishing short fiction and poetry, mainly autobiographical.’

Like many writers, Brigid regarded the literary vocation as a curse and a blessing. ‘Sometimes it seems the most pleasurable job in the world, sometimes it seems the most difficult. At times the work comes easily, at times it is like reaching into the depths of nowhere and finding nothing. I often wish I worked in a café and produced easy things, like soup or cake. The lesson I am learning right now about writing is to take my time and to enjoy myself more. Writing from a tight place will not produce good work. You need discipline but you also need joy and ease and playfulness.’

I agreed with Brigid. I had never acquired the knack of writing research proposals or conforming to academic protocols. I preferred to carry a theme into the field, and allow adventitious events, encounters and conversations to flesh it out or transform it. ‘This time around,’ I told Brigid, ‘I have yielded even more radically to the road.’

‘I never had a formal plan for *Guitar Highway Rose*,’ Brigid said. ‘The first line reads, “I can't get started”, and that was pretty much the truth of it. I just followed my instincts along a dreamy road, led by a girl named Rosie who wanted a nose ring, and a boy named Asher who was dealing with a parental break-up. The collage format happened organically as well. The book just seemed to unfold, to write itself in that way. It gave me the freedom to begin wherever I felt like each day and to weave the story back and forth between characters and events, like a quilt, like life itself, which is never linear. Writing organically is a mystery journey, a process of joy and terror, and it doesn't always lead to a novel with a satisfactory structure, but with *Guitar Highway Rose* I was lucky.’

When Miles picked me up from Brigid's, he drove me to the Nelson waterfront where the names of the 1843 New Zealand Company ships, together with their passenger lists, were engraved on black marble uprights. This was the secret that he had wanted me to see, so I dutifully studied the graven images and names until I came across the *Phoebe*, which arrived in Nelson on the 29th of March 1843. Among the passengers was Benjamin Jackson, a shoemaker, with his wife Mary Ann and their nine children. The youngest, Samuel Wesley, then four, was our father's father's father. The trades of the older children were also listed – shoemakers, shoe binders, and one wheelwright.

‘Beginnings are not the same as origins,’ writes the philosopher Paul Ricoeur. ‘Finally after exteriority and superiority, one runs up against the enigma of anteriority: before the moral law, there is always a moral law, just as before Caesar, there is always another Caesar ... Here we find a sort of always-already-present, which causes any

effort to discover a dated beginning to fail as it encounters the perspective of the origin. It is as though there were a dialectic of the origin and the beginning: the beginning should be able to be dated in a chronology, but the origin always slips away, at the same time as it surges up in the present under the enigma of the always-already-there.’

We may trace and date the year our forebears first arrived in their country of adoption, or when we were born, without, however, touching upon the hidden genealogy that encompasses individuals, influences and transitions that cannot be identified with any certainty. Such was the genealogy that surfaced when Francine Sweet first encountered flamenco, or when Miles first visited Spain. This was the enigma of anteriority – when something was recognized that one’s known lineage could not explain.

Other things, of course, can be known. Like the strongly practical bent that Miles and I had inherited from our father. Though D’arcy worked as a bank clerk all his life, he once admitted, ‘I would much rather have gone in with my father as a carpenter-builder, but the Depression had started and the work wasn’t there. But I started woodwork just after I married. My first job was to make a bench. The only tools I had were a saw and a hammer and a screwdriver. Then I took a subscription to the monthly magazine *The Woodworker*. In those twelve volumes it shows you how to make every joint and how to use every tool. That was my working book.’

That afternoon, Miles showed me the old carpentry tools that had once belonged to our paternal grandfather, Lewis, the son of Benjamin the shoemaker. As Miles lovingly dusted off the wooden smoothing

planes, the gouger with its embossed metal frame, the bradawls and saws, I reminded him of the one item from our father's workshop that I requested when he died. Not only was this try square a link to my father, it was a souvenir of *my* beginnings, and a guide to the kind of writing I sought to achieve.

Lies on my office windowsill,
its rectangular hardwood handle
blotched with paint and bearing
my father's thumbprint;
brass inlay, three metal pins
secure the metal blade.

My father used it to inscribe
parallel lines where his tenon
saw would bite, or chisel
begin a mortice joint; it
played its part in making
our toys, our furniture.

Now, no day passes that I do not
measure my work against his,
asking whether the words
I use, the bright ideas,
the balanced sentences,
can equal what he built for us.

Each day I go home
to my own children
with unblemished hands,
no cut from the teeth of a tenon saw

or bruise from a claw hammer;
empty as he also felt

when away from his tools
serving time in a bank, balancing
ledgers, blotting the red
and black inked figures, attending
to customers. We both
have been at odds with ourselves,

wanting the touch of timber,
the satisfaction of building a letter box
or putting up a shelf
rather than bookish
things that don't add up,
in rooms without the smell

of rimu, linseed oil, and rain.
In a shuttered building
I keep in mind the things he made
in secrecy, without signature,
measuring my words
with my father's try square,
going against the grain.

Although New Zealand aspired in the late nineteenth century to be a classless society, the self-deprecating habits of the English working-class died hard. A suspicion remained that intellectual and artistic pursuits were indulgences, if not sins, that could not be compared with earning a modest income from an honest day's toil. So you hid your passion for these arcane pursuits, as if they implied a shameful

betrayal of your class and kind. You disparaged your craft even as you burned the midnight oil to perfect it; you put yourself down as if you could not possibly excel at anything. If you failed, as you inevitably did with such a negative self-image, you saw it as punishment for presuming to put yourself above the crowd, to fly so high. I suspected that Miles, like me, had never been able to overcome this appalling lack of confidence that had inhibited our father, and which we appeared to preserve out of respect for our humble beginnings. ‘Earlier this year,’ I told Miles, ‘I was in Scotland, doing some writing workshops with anthropology doctoral students. When the course was over, I went to St Andrews to spend a weekend with old friends. Nigel and Elizabeth took me on an excursion to a mansion at the Hill of Tarvit. The house was built by Frederick Bower Sharp, who had made a fortune in Dundee, manufacturing jute products, including the sackcloth used for sandbags in the American Civil War. When Sharp’s only surviving child died in 1948 at the age of thirty-nine, the estate passed into the hands of the National Trust of Scotland.

‘After lunch in what was once the kitchen, Nigel and Elizabeth invited me to tour the upper rooms of the house with them. But I was neither interested in Frederick Sharp’s acquisitions, nor inclined to pay the entry fee to the first floor. So while my friends toured the house, I wandered around the garden and discovered a laundry building that had been preserved, together with drying racks and cupboards, tubs and coppers, hand-cranked mangles, ironing boards and charcoal irons from the Sharp era. A notice explained that the laundry maids worked six days on laundry duties, starting at six in

the morning, with another half day cleaning the laundry room and its equipment.

‘I thought it ironic,’ I said to Miles, ‘that I should shy away from exploring the mansion and find my way to where the underlings spent their working lives, then rationalize my discomfort with Sharp’s ostentatious house by telling myself that the wealth of the Dundee jute barons was gained through the exploitation of tens of thousands of Bengali men, women and children who were paid a pittance because of the surplus of cheap labor in and around Calcutta in the first decades of the early twentieth century.’

Later, I had discovered that in 1911 almost 200,000 Bengalis were employed in the Calcutta jute mills, of whom 23,007 were children and 35,263 were women. Since most of the individuals whose labor and lives went into the building of the British Empire were illiterate, little of their experience remains, yet it is not untypical of people in such degraded circumstances, including Britain’s own poor and wretched citizenry who migrated to outposts of Empire like New Zealand, to see themselves as lacking the capacity to become masters in their own right, even regarding themselves as accursed, like Cain, for some ancestral error.

When Miles began sweeping wood shavings and sawdust from around his work bench and lathe, I went outside. I was thinking of a Macedonian gypsy myth that had always encapsulated, for me, the ironies of self-depreciation. Instead of the defiant and fiery spirit of flamenco, or the avoidance of gadje that is so characteristic of Romany throughout Europe, the Macedonian myth suggests a

preemptive and self-protective strategy of putting yourself down before you can be denigrated by others.

When the Roman jailers were given the person of Yeshua ben Miriam, whom the world would later call Jesus, that they should crucify him, two soldiers were given eighty kreutzer with which to go and buy four stout nails, but they first tarried at an inn and spent half the coppers drinking the sweet-sour wine that the Greeks sold in Jerusalem. It was late in the afternoon when they remembered the nails again, and they had to be back in their barracks by nightfall, for early the following morning they were to crucify Yeshua ben Miriam, the Jew who had talked ill of the Emperor of Rome. Every Jewish blacksmith whom the soldiers asked to forge the nails was unwilling to have a hand in the judicial murder of one his own people, an innocent man at that, and pleaded that it was impossible to forge four stout nails with the forty kreutzer they were being offered. The Romans killed every blacksmith who refused them.

That evening, exasperated and drunk, the soldiers found a gypsy blacksmith outside the walls of the city who agreed to forge the nails. The ghosts of the murdered Jewish smiths pleaded with the gypsy blacksmith to no avail, and the soldiers, now frightened by the falling night and the ghostly whispers around them, returned to the city with only three nails. The gypsy, however, forged the fourth nail and poured water on it to hasten the cooling process. The water sizzled off the iron. He kept trying to cool it with water, but the nail remained hot and glowing as if it were a living, bleeding body. The light from the nail now lit up a wide stretch of the desert. Terrified and trembling, the gypsy packed his tent onto his donkey and fled the

scene. At midnight, he pitched his tent again and tried to sleep, but the nail still glowed in the darkness. He threw sand over it. He doused it with water from a nearby well. But still it glowed. Crazed with fear, the gypsy traveled further and further into the desert. In an Arab village he patched a broken wheel hoop with the iron nail, but days later, in Damascus, a man brought him the hilt of a sword to repair, and when the gypsy lit his forge the hilt began to glow because it contained the iron of the nail. And that nail appears in the tents of the descendants of the man who forged the nails for the crucifixion of Yeshua ben Miriam. When the nail appears, the gypsies move. It is why they move from place to place. It is why Yeshua ben Miriam was crucified with only three nails, his two feet being drawn together and one nail piercing both. The fourth wanders from one end of the earth to the other.

I told this story that evening, over dinner, to Miles and Margaret and their friends Christie Carlson and Larry Rueter.

‘Maybe we’re under some kind of curse,’ Larry joked. ‘We’ve spent much of our lives traveling.’

‘I don’t know about a curse,’ Christie said, ‘but coming to New Zealand was like a blessing. I grew up in a small Swedish American town in Illinois. I felt like a fish out of water there and in all the other places in the US I moved to.’

Christie met Larry in Hawaii, where he was working as a botanist. His passion was bamboo, and his search for new varieties had taken him to every corner of East Asia.

‘He’s the Johnny Appleseed of bamboo,’ Christie said. ‘Everywhere he goes, he likes to plant bamboo, to spread the bamboo

gospel. When we met in Hawaii, I was making a living as an antique dealer, and knew a lot about bamboo furniture.’

‘So we had that in common,’ Larry said.

‘But what we didn’t have in common was a place where we both wanted to live,’ Christie said.

They had watched television coverage of the first place in the world where the new millennium would dawn. The East Cape of New Zealand looked like the very place they had been seeking, and they went there.

‘Gisborne was a disappointment. It was like landing in the Wild West,’ Christie said. ‘So we moved on until we found Nelson. I felt immediately at home here. I remember one morning, not long after we arrived, Larry roused me, wanting to show me something on the foreshore. I went along with him. I didn’t give it a moment’s thought. Hair undone, face unwashed, no make-up. It was only when I found myself among the crowd on the beach that I became conscious of myself, of how unprepared I was to meet the day. But suddenly, like an epiphany, I realized it didn’t matter what I looked like or how I dressed. I had been a model for many years. In that business you are never really yourself. But here you can be. It’s as simple as that.’

Miles spoke of the deep fulfillment of putting down roots. Planting thousands of trees, building one’s own house. He sang the praises of self-sufficiency, of his carpentry workshop, chicken run, compost, fruit trees and home garden from which Margaret had gathered the salad greens we were now eating. In Miles’s view, one was morally obliged to care for the land, to bring it back to what it

had once been, creating something not to sell or profit by but to pass on to one's children.

‘You have to seek your dream,’ Christie said.

‘But sometimes,’ I said, ‘we have to shelve our idea of what we want in order to do the work that may, if we are lucky, bring that idea to fruition. Myself, I work slowly, intuitively, without much idea of where I am headed. The goal is something I set aside in order to meet the demands of the task at hand.’

There was a long silence, as if I had broken a spell or spoiled the vision that everyone at the table shared except me. I had committed the indiscretion of seeming to devalue the worldview that Miles and Christie had given me to appreciate and possibly emulate.



Next morning, as I made to leave, I sensed a shadow that, for all our goodwill, we could not shuck off. Hugging my brother and sister-in-law, thanking them for their hospitality, and expressing the hope that it would not be long before we saw one another again, I felt that we had made our peace. But as I drove down the steep track and turned onto the main road, it crossed my mind that we had for too long assumed that blood is thicker than water and kin are of a kind. Family is foundational, to be sure, but the bonds of siblingship and filiation are fraught, and do not always last. If we pay lip service to the idea that such ties are binding, it may be because we need to believe that some relationships are irrevocable, just as certain rights are non-negotiable. Yet we continually come up against the paradox of human plurality: that we are at once similar and different. As

Larry had pointed out to us, all bamboos may look similar to the untrained eye, but the clumping kind (sympodial) stays put, while the running kind (monopodial) abandons its original roots and puts down new ones wherever it moves.

[No direction home - notes](#)

Crossing Cook Strait

High winds and rain had been forecast for the lower North Island, so I wasted no time in getting to Picton, not wanting to miss the late morning ferry and be forced to cross the strait later in the day, in the teeth of a gale.

Queen Charlotte Sound was calm enough, but as we left Tory Channel and plunged into the open sea the wind swung the bows of the *Awatere* around, leaving her, or so it seemed, temporarily disoriented. There was a strong sea running, tearing itself to shreds on the rocky heads. Smearred patches showed where the wind was veering. Elsewhere, white caps were flailed and flung aside as spume. From the taffrail, I looked back at the same coast James Cook sighted in January 1770, when he realized that a strait separated New Zealand into two islands. But social divisions in New Zealand ran as deep as geological faults, and I thought of James K. Baxter's poem, 'Crossing Cook Strait', in which the poet comes on deck on a clear 'night to stretch his legs, find perhaps gossip, a girl in green slacks at the rail,' only to encounter the figure of Janus, who reminds him of

the ‘angry poor ... policies made and broken behind locked doors’, and poets burning ‘with a wormwood brilliance’ but lacking empathy and love...

Battered, chilled and half blinded by the rain, I stumbled indoors and found a seat in the Fo’c’s’le Lounge. The host of a television show was marketing a range of ‘Māori products’ and leading a panel discussion on everyday problems that viewers had phoned in: a woman was finding it impossible to relate to her sister-in-law; an office assistant had been asked by a friend to cover for her so she could cheat on her husband who was ‘really nice’; a group of siblings needed a tactful way to persuade their father to replace his moth-eaten hairpiece. I tried to write in my journal, but the TV was a distraction and the ship was heeling unpredictably, its plates shuddering as the sea pounded and bumped, refusing its new heading.

When Pencarrow Lighthouse hove in view, I was back in Wellington on the morning of April 10, 1968, waking to radio reports of the inter-island ferry, *Wahine*, struggling to enter Wellington Harbor against wind gusts of almost 100 miles an hour. Despite the fact that the trees around our apartment were being torn apart in the same cyclone, my wife and I drove our Citroën Light 15 through the rain-swept streets of the city and along the coast road toward Island Bay. It was already a disaster zone. An army truck had been thrown onto its back, and two cars flung onto the beach near Owhiro Bay. Sheets of corrugated iron scraped and spun across the asphalt among a litter of broken tree limbs and foliage. Our car radio reported worsening conditions. At the mercy of immense waves and unable to

turn back to the relative safety of the strait, the *Wahine* foundered on Barrett Reef. Despite attempts by harbor tugs to tow the stricken vessel from the rocks, the tide and winds swung her around. With the *Wahine* taking water, listing badly and rudderless, the captain gave the order to abandon ship. Pauline and I waited in our car near Seatoun, watched a lifeboat come ashore and heard of passengers carried away by the strong seas to the westerly shore of the harbor, or drowned. In this worst recorded storm in New Zealand's history, fifty-three people lost their lives.



As I drove from the ferry terminal, it was as though a long-forgotten me had suddenly reappeared and taken the wheel. This person knew where he was going, even if I did not.

At Havelock Street, Brooklyn, I parked by the same flax bush where I parked in the past.

The door was open, and I walked in on Les and Mary Cleveland as they were finishing a late lunch. The room had not changed – Les's photographs of ghost towns in Arizona, abandoned diggings in Nevada and Westland, and derelict buildings whose original use could only be guessed at. Postcards from Las Vegas. The pot-bellied stove.

Les had an eclectic range of expertise. He was a self-taught builder, welder, motor mechanic, and electrician. A poet, song-writer and singer, journalist and political scientist. A mountaineer, master photographer and self-styled literary blacksmith. As with the classical bricoleur, everything was grist to his mill, and the past was

the raw material from which he hammered out prose that spoke to our present lives. His attitude toward our ancestry was compassionate. *I've always tended to look back, I've always been interested in leftovers and survivals...*

‘It seems like no time has passed since I was last here,’ I said.

‘None of us is getting any younger,’ Les said, and without a pause he went on to describe what had happened to him a couple of months ago. ‘I was lugging an armful of logs from below the house, up that fifteen-foot flight of concrete steps. On the top step I failed to shift my weight forward, and began falling backward. Something in me took over, as it invariably does in a crisis, so that I somehow turned completely, before landing face down with one arm clutching at the wall for support. I did not do this; my instincts did. Unfortunately it wasn’t enough to save me from a broken wrist and skull fracture.’

‘I thought he was dead,’ Mary said. ‘That’s what *my* instincts told me.’

Les was hospitalized only to discharge himself two days later, preferring to take care of himself and recover at home.

‘It was a reprieve,’ Les said. ‘We both thought, this is it. But there was no magic moment, my life replayed in a split second. No tunnel of light, any of that stuff. But in the days that followed, I kept thinking of a bizarre incident during the war when I almost lost my life.’

‘Well, before we get into that,’ Mary interrupted, ‘I suggest you two get yourselves comfortable while I put the kettle on.’

Les and I sat at the kitchen table. A large rain-streaked window overlooked a sodden sports field and the distant Orongorongos.

‘We were in Northern Italy,’ Les said. ‘Dug in around, as well as occupying, a large house. Under cover of darkness, the Germans brought up a fixed gun, and its first shell scored a direct hit on the house. I would normally have been with Podge Hoskins at a machine gun post at an upper floor window, but I’d been detailed to the kitchen and was frying up tinned bacon and egg powder when the shell hit. There was an ear-splitting explosion, splinters of wood, debris, dust. But in the midst of this maelstrom and the screams from the front room, I covered the frying pan with a tea towel and placed it carefully under the table. Only then did I go to the aid of the men in the other room. I had to kick down the door to get in. Almost everyone had been torn apart. Some were dead, others dying. The scene was as gruesome as any I had witnessed. Podge upstairs had been killed instantly. Yet I survived. And afterwards, what I could not get over was that moment with the frying pan. How I could go on as though nothing had happened. Was it denial of a reality I could not deal with? Was it my military training?’

As Les talked and the rain fell steadily outside, I felt somewhat like the main character in John Mulgan’s *Man Alone*, who encounters Johnson in a Breton fishing village and repairs with him to a local café where they eat prawns, drink cheap red wine and get to talking about the war.

In his Introduction to *The Iron Hand*, a compilation of New Zealand soldiers’ poems from World War Two, Les mentions a close friend, Ted Scherer, who died of shrapnel wounds during the last offensive of the Italian campaign. Scherer was only inches away from Les when he was hit.

Shrapnel-ripped and lifeless on the Santerno,
Helmet tilted back into the lacerated earth,
Face twisted up for one last
Regretful look at the murderous sky.

‘It was April the tenth, 1945,’ Les said. ‘That very morning, Scherer had looked north and commented, “When it’s over we’ll celebrate – we’ll climb the highest point in the Alps.” After recovering in hospital from my wounds, I went into training in the Dolomites by doing some rock climbing. But I could not persuade anyone in the battalion to accompany me on an expedition to Mont Blanc. By this time we were in bivouacs at Lake Trasimeno, near Rome. I set out from there on a goods train which took me to Milan, and I traveled by a variety of means through the mountains to Courmayeur where I was able to persuade a young Italian refugee to join me in the ascent. It was late in the season and the climb was arduous, particularly as our equipment was improvised and we suffered a good deal from inadequate food as well as from cold, exposure, and exhaustion. Every step of the way, I was thinking of Scherer and all the mountains we might have climbed together, and of all the other friends of friends, shuffling, legions of them, in long, suffering lines across the mortuary of Europe. What good being alive, when those who meant the world to you were dead? I was grateful to this young refugee, who had found sympathy and courage enough to march in a dead man’s steps. When he suddenly mumbled, “Kaput, guerra kaput!” what answer could this survivor give? “Jawohl,” I mumbled, “Guerra kaput!”

‘Six hours up an icefall on the south face, we encountered a line of fresh tracks that drew us across the mountain’s shoulder to a high-altitude, unlined metal hut. Inside, we found a party of German-speaking Swiss, laughing and talking over their experiences on the tourist route from Chamonix. The amiable holiday-makers were casually helping themselves to food from their rucksacks, innocent of the terror gnawing at their frontiers. In broken German, I enlightened them.’

We are climbers, British soldiers.
They look disbelievingly at our improvised gear –
Wehrmacht rucksacks, Alpini boots, Kaiapoi woolen
Jerseys, caps comforter, and old army socks for gloves.
What sort of army is this? Probably deserters
Or escaped prisoners; maybe dangerous too.
Offer them nothing.
So I pull the Luger on the fattest of the bunch –
No Alpine-fucking-club outing this,
Ich haben grossen hunger!
We grab a loaf of their bread and some fruit
And drain a bottle of wine.
Nobody speaks: only the autumn wind
Snickers and squirms in the doorway.
Before trying the peak I pick over their parkas
And trade the best one for my military gas cape,
Then we buckle on crampons, adjust the rope
And start up the summit ridge.

After the war, the Scherer family got in touch with Les. He had recently received a letter from Ted Scherer’s daughter asking if he

would write down for her everything he could remember of her father. ‘It’s a bit of a struggle,’ Les said. ‘It isn’t easy to write about war without including the gory details. The sort of things no one would want to hear about or read about if they were going to have a positive memory of their loved one.’

I was thinking: Les is eighty-seven. He has been returning to the war for sixty-three years, mostly to the experiences of others, including his recent translation of the notebook of Helmut Metzner, an obscure soldier in Rommel’s Afrika Korps, that contains occasional critiques of the Nazi regime and a crude poem in which he imagines himself having sex with Lili Marleen. When he mentioned this project to me, Les said, ‘I would very much like a chat with Helmut but we know for certain he is very kaput, kaput, kaput! Still, he lives on in my files along with Charles Smith and others.’ It was this remark that made me wonder whether the vital difference between Les’s forays into the past and the obsessive-compulsive replaying of harrowing experience that we call Post Traumatic Stress Disorder was Les’s ability to make his own experiences secondary to those of others, putting them first, sacrificing his story in order that theirs be told.

When I first got to know Les in 1964, I often wanted to press him for details of his war experiences. This was before I realized the oblique and very private way in which he had come to terms with that period in his life. ‘After the war,’ Les wrote, ‘I would make many more difficult and dangerous journeys in our own mountains, but never under such emotionally disturbed and isolated circumstances. The Mont Blanc affair was a therapeutic venture into

self-recovery and a wild leap into a new world of changed personal relationships; it also meant that a sense of bereavement and brooding anxiety could be thrown off in the exuberance of physical achievement.’

Nevertheless, Les had, by his own admission, been ‘neurotic’ when he returned to Christchurch in 1945 and tried to settle back into civilian life. ‘Fourteenth platoon suffered forty percent losses, almost as high as the Māori Battalion’s, and every soldier felt the burden of this. In Christchurch I would obsessively stare at the shoes of people walking in front of me, waiting for a mine to detonate. Any loud percussive noise and I would immediately be looking for somewhere to take cover. I had to leave the city and work in the Westland bush where the only sounds were tuis and falling water. It took me three years before I felt ready to return to city life.’

I had always been impressed by Les’s sense of proportion and practicality, and in talking with Sierra Leoneans in the aftermath of their war it was constantly brought home to me that recovery depends more on one’s ability to throw oneself into the tasks of everyday life – caring for a child, making a farm, putting food on the table, sharing with those in greater need – than in one’s success in seeking revenge or compensation, or wringing some meaning out of the arbitrary events that changed your life forever. Intellectual reflection has a place in our lives, to be sure, but unless it is connected to the exigencies of life in the here and now it risks becoming morbid and dissociated. David Brooks discovered something similar among the survivors of the earthquake that struck China’s Sichuan Province in May 2008. From the villagers he met,

Brooks concluded that the history of the province must have given these people ‘a stripped-down, pragmatic mentality. Move on or go crazy. Don’t dwell. Look to the positive. Fix what needs fixing. Work together.’ Perhaps this was why Les had steadfastly refused to participate in the writing of official history or to attend postwar ceremonies that extolled the heroic sacrifice of the fallen. Certainly, his healthy pragmatism underlay everything he had written on soldiers’ songs, poems and popular culture. ‘If I were to attempt an epic of our military experiences that tried faithfully to evoke the consciousness of the ordinary soldier, I would probably relegate the formal historical details to a chronology at the back of the work in order to concentrate on things that really matter, like a concern with food, cookhouses, liquor, sex, clothing, the weather, rates of pay, equipment, loot, amusements, recreation, morale, the techniques of deviancy, how to maintain one’s precious individuality and, above all, how to avoid becoming a grim statistic on one of our grisly war memorials ...’

In Les’s view, combat soldiers share with civilian workers in hazardous occupations a sense of powerlessness that can only be countermanded by organising collectively, fostering a sense of solidarity, and having recourse to gallows humor and dark laughter. You may not be able to buck authority, disobey orders, go on strike, or escape the nightmare of knowing that an organized army is bent on killing you, but you can preserve a sense of connectedness to a world where your individuality has some value and your actions matter by writing letters home, keeping a diary, or joining forces with your mates in ridiculing the situation in which you find yourself.

Mutiny or deserting are out of the question, but mocking the establishment, protesting one's lot, turning to sexual fantasy, and venting one's frustrations in obscene songs can sometimes help you feel that you are a protagonist and not a victim. To dwell on a tragedy is to risk drowning in it. To turn it into farce is to remain afloat, treading water as it were, even though you may be simply deferring the moment when, exhausted, you sink beneath the waves.

I was momentarily distracted by the rain, flung against the window like scattershot.

Les might have been reading my mind. 'This was what happened to many men,' he said. 'The psychological casualties who returned home, haunted by what they had seen and done, hoping that silence, time and compulsive routines would heal the hidden wounds. It simply isn't possible to come home as if nothing's happened and step back into the role of Mr Normal from Ashburton. There remains a part of you that is continuously preoccupied with questions like, How can I stop thinking about the bloke that got killed instead of me? Where is tomorrow's food coming from? Such sinister, unrelenting calculations. I visited a bloke on a farm in Taumarunui once. He had about a year's supply of baked beans, tinned vegetable stew and other stuff under the floorboards of his house, not to mention a vast quantity of wine. He'd been a prisoner of war and was determined he wasn't going to run out of food ever again. I looked on in amazement when he said, "I'll just get a couple of bottles of wine," and proceeded to pull up the floorboards. He had cases of the stuff down there. But he was still living inside that cocoon of deprivation and fear, and had to come to terms with it by doing things around the

farm. He was always supplying stuff to someone or other. He had some troubles with the local hardware people. So he bought a sawmill and set it up on the property and milled his own timber. Instead of bringing in a contractor to root up tree stumps and do a bit of earthmoving, he bought two bulldozers and had them sitting there in the shed. He was prepared for a siege. That's an extreme example of the POW mentality, but I think he had successfully coped with his experiences, even if his behavior was a bit odd.'

Of all the soldiers' poems Les has collected in the postwar years, perhaps the most moving is by Charles Smith, who was among the New Zealanders ordered to hold a pass near Katerini, northwest of Mt Olympus, in order to gain time for the rest of the Second NZ Expeditionary Force, retreating from the rapidly advancing Germans. Smith's poem first appeared in the *NZEF Times* in August 1942. It is simply called 'Greece'. It is about the bonds that were formed between the New Zealanders and Greek villagers during the tragic campaign of April-May 1941, in which the New Zealand force sustained 2,504 casualties before withdrawing to Crete where, in the course of its continuing retreat, 3,853 out of the remaining 7,702 were killed.

Out of the soil comes greatness of soul ...

These, shaped by old knowledge of their jealous sod
Take on unswerving courage. They belong
To trees and fields, and mountains; so to God.

So first we saw: and never bread so sweet
Nor gift so free, nor welcome waking so;

Kindness so laughing, quick and garlanded,
Nor carnival of fortitude so gay
As heart of Greece in spring, on Freedom's day.

So near the shadow!
Yet in dark retreat
Came dusty envy that they still could cry
'Kalimera, English!' and 'Goodbye!'
Hold fleeting friendship past the threat of death,
Give food and shelter: even understand
Our last desertion.
Do they know
How heart-remembered all their faces go?

These things are deathless, memory's cornerstone,
That rivulet that feeds the golden stream ...

Is Ag Demetrios still a mountain dream?
Storks on the roof and cobbles on the street,
White from Olympus faerying the pines
Where bitter snow and spring of promise meet
Thyme and wild daphne.

Does Kathrina wear
A soldier's badge still braided in her hair?

Some years ago, Les read this poem in the course of a radio talk. He mentioned that, despite his best efforts, he had been unable to trace the author and presumed him dead. Within a week, Les received an indignant letter from Charles Smith saying he was not dead. He was a farmer near Whangarei with a family, and very much alive.

So we are surprised by what survives from the past, and what does not. And how something we carry into the present can be so transformed that it ceases to possess what drew us to it in the first place, what persuaded us it was worth keeping.

When Les recounted his visit to the Taumaranui farmer who still hoarded as if the war had not ended, he went on to say that there were many such men who could not tolerate confinement, or bear to be shut up in a small space. ‘Who get out on their farms and go for long walks, and talk to dead companions or to God. Some carry a lot of grievances, but they keep these to themselves.’

I could not help but think of Les’s own retreat in South Westland, as remote from the madding crowd as one could wish for, and close to the mountains and bush that have been his very present help in trouble. But why do earth, stone, trees and the sea have this power to bring us calm in troubled times?

In the *Tao Te Ching* (XVI), stillness is identified with one’s roots, one’s infancy, and with the nothingness from which the teeming and myriad forms of both life and thought emerge, and to which in time they return. This original nature may be compared to a rough and unpolished stone. To contemplate it is to be returned to the pre-phenomenal ground of all being. But the manifold and changing forms of things are also worthy of contemplation, and I find it difficult to accept the fetishization of ‘firstness’ or the idea that foundations are necessarily more real than anything we have built on them. This is why stone implies, for me, not absolute constancy, but an *image* of constancy that helps one endure the vicissitudes of life, in which everything is sooner or later shattered, worn away, or

reshaped by the elements with which we have to contend. From this observation arises the question of art, and of what we make of life. While it is important to remember one's beginnings, to bear in mind from whence one came and to whom one owes one's life, one must also recognize the importance of new departures in which the original material is refashioned, as it were, in one's mind's eye or in one's own hands.

On the wooden terrace of his Wellington house, Les kept, for many years, numerous river stones and boulders that he had found on his excursions into the wilds of Westland. These stones had not only caught his eye; they had, in a sense, possessed him – some because of curious blemishes that he could not reconcile with processes of natural erosion, some, like greenstone, because of their geological rarity, and some because of their uncanny similarity to the contours of the human body. Les would lug these boulders down mountain gorges and through heavy bush, sometimes for days on end and often in a rucksack emptied of his personal supplies, before bringing his booty home to be burnished by rain, commented upon by friends, or made the occasion for a story. When I left Wellington to pursue my Ph.D. studies at Cambridge, I would often think of Les's collection of stones and it was with considerable dismay that I discovered, on my return to New Zealand after four years abroad, that in enlarging the living room of his house, Les had built, in the middle of it, a massive fireplace whose chimney consisted of these beautiful stones cemented together into something resembling a cairn.

But now, having known Les for forty-five years, and sat in front of his fireplace countless times, deep in conversation about our

various travels or current projects, I no longer think that the stones properly belong to the contexts from whence they came. They belong where they are. And at Harvard, I would discover in the course of long talks on early Chinese traditions with my friend Michael Puett that my thinking was not inconsistent with a Taoist view that sees the world as essentially (and demonically) chaotic, so that our human endeavors to create spaces of order are always transitory, and Les's river stones are destined to be once again a natural shambles on a hillside where no vestiges of his house or handiwork remain.

[Crossing Cook Straight - notes](#)

Metaphor of the table

In Wellington I stayed with old friends in Roseneath overlooking Evans Bay. Cedars and pōhutukawa framed a view of wind-abraded water and the hills beyond, scabrous with gorse and coprosma. Jennifer and I were sitting at a kauri table in the front room. Allan had bought the table many years ago at a garage sale, for twenty-five dollars. ‘We’ve considered it metaphorical that its four legs are two unmatching pairs,’ Jennifer said, ‘though I’m not sure what that’s a metaphor of.’

I suggested that, in some cases, it would make a good metaphor for parentage. ‘I mean, it may be impossible to decide which were the original legs, or which pair serve the table better.’

For some reason, I found myself describing to Jennifer a television documentary I had seen about the biggest Chinese restaurant in the world, where a staff of 1,000 served 5,000 tables. Although the proprietress was one of Changsha’s self-made millionaires and her story emblematic of the new China, what stuck in my memory was the deep sense of unworthiness she had carried

from her early childhood, and a scene in which she invited her parents to a great banquet in the restaurant to witness her success, to show them that she was not the insignificant person they assumed and almost doomed her to be. ‘It was not clear,’ I said, ‘if her elderly parents gave her the recognition they withheld from her as a child.’

‘Even if they did,’ Jennifer said, ‘would it have fully compensated her for that sense of being a maggot in the rice?’

‘It reminds me of those Westerns,’ I said, ‘where a small boy witnesses his parents’ murder and vows revenge. Years later, having finally tracked down and killed the last surviving member of the gang that murdered his parents, our vengeful hero feels neither relief nor satisfaction but a terrible emptiness, for his sole *raison d’être* was his dream of getting even, his belief that in redressing an old injustice he would finally be restored to life, and have a future. He ends up with the realization that the past was all he had, and that having extinguished it he has nothing left to live for. Perhaps we all carry in our memory an incident from childhood in which we were wronged or hurt, a wound that never heals. Perhaps such incidents reveal our childhood sense of being at the mercy of powers we cannot control or comprehend, that limit our freedom, preventing the full expression of our autonomy. Whether we were disparaged, bullied, tricked or subtly persuaded, our early efforts at self-expression were rebuffed or denied. In my case, this sense of the unfairness of life reached its apotheosis in the figure of my English master at Stratford Technical High School, “Chill” Blain. He seemed to have it in for me, ignoring me when I raised my hand in response to a question in class, putting me down whenever I did speak up. I was fourteen, and had

developed a passion for literature and a desire to try my hand at original writing, so when Blain assigned an essay, ‘Winter in Stratford’, I wrote an inspired if florid essay on winter in Inglewood, my hometown, from where I bussed to Stratford during my high school years. For ten days I waited for my essay to be returned and my hard work acknowledged. Blain handed it back without a word. It had not been marked. No comments appeared in the margins or at the end. My hand shot up. My heart was in my mouth. “Please sir, my essay has not been marked.” “Off the subject, Jackson. You did not write on the topic set.”

‘Nineteen years later, after several years in West Africa and the UK, I returned to New Zealand to take up a lecturership at Massey University. My wife and I, with our three-year-old daughter Heidi, were staying in a Palmerston North motel while looking for a house to rent or buy. One evening we walked into the Mark Twain café on the Square for dinner. As we waited for our order, I noticed an elderly couple at a table not far from ours. The man was conveying food to his mouth with a palsied hand, and having difficulty eating. From time to time his wife leaned over to help him cut up his meat, and to wipe his mouth with a paper napkin. It was Mr Blain. The man I had fantasized one day confronting, who had loomed so large in my memory, his dark eyebrows, ferocious eyes, and tyrannical manner, was reduced in a split second to a slobbering and pathetic old man with hunched shoulders, spilling food on his cardigan. All the hatred and vengefulness I had carried within me was transformed instantly into compassion. Yes, I felt sorry for the poor bugger. Deeply sorry.’

As we swapped stories about loss, it was as if we were trying to find an answer to the same question: whether a single traumatic event holds one in thrall forever, or whether it is simply a thumbnail sketch of a possible future to which our assent is required if it is to be realized.

‘You remind me of that story Barry Humphries tells in his memoir,’ Jennifer said. ‘*My Life as Me*.’

A child of parents with plebeian tastes, Barry Humphries managed to accumulate, by his early teens, a small and precious library that included Sunday School prizes (*Kidnapped*, *Bevis*, *Masterman Ready*) and a few rare, illustrated editions (*Arabian Nights* and *Mother Goose*). One day he returned from Camberwell Grammar to find that his books had disappeared from his room. On being asked by her breathless and distraught son what had become of his books, Barry’s mother casually replied, ‘Oh, those. You’ll be pleased to hear I gave them to the nice man from the Army. They’ll go to poor Protestant children who haven’t got any books.’

‘But they were my books,’ Barry protested, now in tears. His mother laughed. ‘But you’ve read them, Barry,’ she replied. And as she dried her son’s eyes with the corner of her handkerchief, she added: ‘I hope you’re not going to grow up to be a selfish little boy.’

To this early traumatic incident Barry Humphries would ‘attribute the occasional savage bouts of bibliomania’ that afflicted him all his life, making him scour out-of-the-way second hand bookshops and, more recently, the internet, for exact replicas of ‘those volumes confiscated by the Salvation Army, with [his] mother’s charitable contrivance.’

I then asked Jennifer a question that I had never been able to answer to my own satisfaction, perhaps because it was too general. ‘Do you think this endless search to reconnect with something or someone you have lost and that you feel is absolutely vital to your existence, is also characteristic of people who were enslaved or colonized, who had their lands confiscated, their language and customs denigrated, their rights denied? And being treated like shit, or shunned as second-class citizens, are they then driven to recover their roots, find their original parents, and angrily insist on being given back what they are missing, even as they mourn it, even as they pass on their grief generation after generation, until it becomes a way of life?’

One answer lay in front of us: a book that Jennifer had recently published to mark the sixtieth anniversary of the forced resettlement of the entire population of Banaba or Ocean Island to Rabi Island in Fiji in 1945. Jennifer’s book was largely made up of Banaban stories – their recollections of time-honored practices such as the catching and taming of frigate birds, of life under the colonial regime, and of the move to Rabi. Like Nauru to the west, the high atoll of Banaba consisted almost entirely of phosphate. No sooner had the British made this discovery in 1900 than they set local and indentured laborers to quarrying it for export as superphosphate. Despite the Banabans’ attempts to have mining restricted to certain sections of the island, to have the phosphate replaced with soil and trees replanted, the island became, by 1945, almost uninhabitable. Having endured the horrors of Japanese military occupation, the Banabans lost their homeland.

‘Banaba is our mother,’ said Nei Makin Corrie Tekenimatang. ‘She brought us up.’

Tears well up in the eyes of the old people as they recall the devastated landscape of their natal island, the contaminated water, the once-bountiful mango, papaya and coconut trees. They speak in the same breath of the homeland lost and the ‘second land’ they found. ‘We look on Rabi as synonymous with Banaba ... it’s becoming like that,’ said Taomati Teai. ‘A place we have come to call our own.’ Others speak less of the past than of the hardships of the present, explaining the loss of laughter and joy in terms of the struggle for a living wage, the difficulties of ‘putting food on the table every day’, and problems such as getting access to markets and health services.

One story affected me more deeply than all the others. Kabunare Koura, who was eighty-three years old when interviewed in 1999, was the sole survivor of a Japanese massacre on 20 August 1945. On that day, some 150 Gilbert Islanders, who had been brought to the atoll to mine phosphate, were rounded up and taken to a cliff top high above the sea. Blindfolded and with their hands bound, they were then bayoneted and kicked from the cliff. Many died on the razor-sharp rocks below. Others were killed by the soldiers firing shots into the fallen bodies. Despite his wounds, Kabunare made his way to a sea cave and after 104 days in hiding presented himself to the Australians who now occupied the island. Fifty-four years later, he would explain how he could still cut toddy, but no longer from the highest coconut trees. ‘Life is good,’ he said, referring to his nine

children, twenty grandchildren and four great-grandchildren. ‘The past is gone.’



In the winter of 2011, I returned to Wellington. Allan had died of leukemia ten months earlier, and Jennifer was still struggling with the shock of bereavement, an empty house, and the tasks of archiving Allan’s papers and planning her own future. I sat at the table with the anomalous legs, gazing at the wind-bashed broadleaves beyond the eighteen-paned window, and the driven waters of the bay, feeling the cold weight of Allan’s absence.

Jennifer was upstairs, proof-reading Allan’s festschrift, and where, three years ago, her book on Banaba lay on the table, a recently-published history of New Zealand popular music now invited my attention.

I was soon engrossed by the story of Ruru Karaitiana, who composed ‘the first complete New Zealand pop song’, ‘Blue Smoke’ – which became internationally known and ‘marked the real birth of New Zealand’s indigenous recording industry.’

I had known Ruru, though not intimately. Appearing lost, even wounded, he used to hover on the edge of our drinking circle in the Duke of Edinburgh in 1967-68. In those days the pub was not a place for conversation; rather, it was a place to avoid it. The uproar of the bar, that reached its crescendo as six o’clock closing approached, made coherent exchanges impossible. So I never heard Ruru’s story from his own lips, and for many years knew only two snippets of information about him: that his wife had been my wife’s swimming

teacher, and that he had written 'Blue Smoke'. Now, however, Chris Bourke's research fleshed out the story.

Ruru was born in March 1909 at the Tahoraiti marae near Dannevirke and was raised by his maternal grandparents. Even as a child he was 'extremely shy', though he quickly discovered a talent for music and played piano in several local dance bands. He enlisted soon after the outbreak of war, trained with the 28th Māori Battalion, and in May 1940 sailed on the *Aquitania* for Suez. In 1949 he recalled that one day, 'halfway across the Indian Ocean', he was sunbathing on the deck when a sergeant came along, stopped beside him, and looked up. 'Look at that b-smoke,' he observed, pointing to the smoke trailing from the funnels. 'It's going the right way – back to New Zealand – and we're steaming farther from home!' 'These things are simply a matter of luck', Karaitiana said later. 'He put the song in my lap. It was a natural.' Within half an hour he had written the lyrics 'in his head' to a melody he had already composed, and two days later he sang it in a shipboard concert.

Blue smoke goes drifting by
into the deep blue sky,
and when I think of home I sadly sigh ...

It is possible, however, that the tune was in circulation in East Coast pubs in the late 1930s and Ruru may have unwittingly adapted the song or revised the lyrics. Certainly, it is rare that we create art, or our own lives, *ab nihilo*; rather, we take what is given to us, exploiting whatever is offered, and making it our own. I am not surprised, therefore, that the first verse of 'Blue Smoke', found on a

page of notepaper in the tunic pocket of Te Moananui-a-Kiwa Ngarimu, killed in action in Tunisia on March 27 1943 and awarded a posthumous Victoria Cross for gallantry, differed from the lines penned by Ruru Karaitiana.

Smoke is drifting away
into a blue sky
when I think of you
I heave a sigh.
I can see her standing there
with tears in her eyes
Mother – dear old mother
please don't cry.
We are off to our pals
to give them a hand
the greatest little band
from our Māori land.
Smoke is drifting away
into the blue sky
Mother – dear old mother
please don't cry.

That a composition whose subject is as commonplace as it is deeply personal will affect thousands of others whom the composer will never meet or would not perhaps recognize as kindred spirits is one of the most compelling mysteries of art. Even more poignant, perhaps, is that a popular song will continue to circulate and be sung though its composer be forgotten. For those of us who saw Ruru in the pub night after night, and knew of his singular achievement, treated him with indifference as if the song were the only reality and

he a superfluous and spectral footnote to it. Yet, the words of 'Blue Smoke' remind us not only of the devastating experience of seeing a loved one sail out to die; they reawaken us to Ruru's personal story. Wounded in battle and later discharged from the army as 'unfit for service', he returned home to the life of a drifter. Traumatized and plagued by nightmares, he intermittently played in bands, worked as a shearer or in the freezing works, recorded more 'slow sad waltzes', but shied away from the success 'Blue Smoke' had brought him. When he died in 1970, Jack Kelleher, editor of *The Dominion*, wrote, 'I don't know whether Ruru ever felt free to start [over]. He continued to drift about Wellington, always it seemed on his own, a short, stocky, hesitant figure, an island in a community with musical tastes which had no room either for his vintage of pop or for a Māori symphony.' Ruru said that the inspiration for 'Blue Smoke' was 'simply a matter of luck'. But what of his life? Was it governed by contingency, so that he could only hope that fortune would favor rather than ignore him? The glimpses that Chris Bourke gives us into Ruru's childhood habit of self-abasement (whakama), his difficulty adjusting to an aggressive Pākehā world, his self-education in psychology and poetry, his army record of disorderly conduct and gambling, and the battlefield traumas he could never excise from his memory, all suggest that luck was not on his side, and leave us with the question as to what determines the difference between a person succumbing to or surviving tragedy. Can we make our own luck?

Certainly, our chances of overcoming adversity are greater when friends and family are there for us in our hour of need. But there is something more – something that is laid down in early life, that

remains embedded at the heart of our very being like a stone, solid and inviolable, that comes from having been loved as a child, in an intimate world that was as safe and secure as the world around was not. When Ruru sang of being true to his loved ones while away at war, can we assume that they were awaiting him when he returned?

Smoke drifts above me
whispering I miss you
taking my thoughts back to you
across the sea.
I know that when
I sail home again
I'll find you waiting for me.

Destruction and hope

It seemed nothing short of a miracle when Keith met me at the door of his Thorndon cottage next day. When I had last seen Keith, eighteen months earlier, his marriage was on the rocks, his father had recently died, his university job gave him little satisfaction, and he was drinking a quarter of a bottle of whiskey a day as well as wine with meals, and smoking a lot of dope. I felt powerless to reach him, let alone help him get back on his feet, and I resigned myself to watching another dear friend dig himself an early grave. Now, looking his old self, Keith led me through the hallway and kitchen to a brick-paved backyard where he had laid out bowls of arugula salad, olives, pickled onions, avocados, capsicums, fresh French bread and a saucer of New Zealand olive oil from Kapiti Island.

‘I have an Italian red for you,’ he said, uncorking a wine called Menhir from Manduria. Keith, however, was on the wagon. ‘No alcohol, no meat, no joints. I’ve returned to Buddhism,’ he said. ‘I meditate every day and try to take care of myself.’ He then uncapped a bottle of non-alcoholic French beer called *La force c’est le goût*.

‘Then may the force be with you,’ I said, drinking to my friend’s good health, though not without a pang of disappointment that he and Judith were no longer together.

‘There’s a zen parable,’ Keith said, ‘about an adept who retires to a tower determined to find enlightenment. He makes himself indifferent to the outside world, sits in zazen for hours, deprives himself of sleep, eats only enough to keep himself alive, yet enlightenment evades him. He begins to sink into despair, convinced that his goal is unattainable. There seems nothing left to live for. Climbing the parapet, he is about to leap to his death when he sees clearly for the first time.’

‘So we have to sink to the bottom before we start to swim?’ I asked.

‘When do we know we’ve reached rock bottom?’ Keith replied.

‘When we kick off, I guess.’

For a split second I recalled the winter afternoon when I was three ... falling into a liquid manure sump on a Taranaki farm ... sinking fourteen feet through acrid and cloying cow shit until I hit bottom ... pushing instinctively with my feet ... surfacing, flailing ... finding the concrete edge of the pit and pulling myself out ...

As we ate the good food, I asked Keith if he had any plans.

‘I have come back to myself,’ Keith said. ‘I’ve returned to my guitar. To tramping in the Tararuas. To food. To books. To life.’

It sometimes happens that when things fall apart we revert to an earlier time, imagining ourselves starting out again, though on a different path. Just as Keith seemed to have returned to his student years in Wellington, so, when Pauline died, I regressed to the time

before we met. And it was Keith and Judith who helped me onto my new path. Although their relationship was new and they had only just moved into a house together, they invited me and my daughter to live with them. It was an extraordinary act of generosity and compassion. Their music, their books, their food, and their appetite for life, helped me see, in that dark time, that there were pleasures and possibilities yet in store; *my* world may have crumbled, but *the* world was without end.

After lunch, Keith suggested a walk in the nearby Botanical Gardens.

It was a windless day, and as we negotiated a narrow track above the playground, I told Keith of my conversations with Les the day before. ‘Not long before the end of hostilities,’ I said, ‘when Les was still in Italy, the New Zealand troops were shown American film footage of the liberation of Buchenwald, bodies “piled like logs”, as Les put it, “bewildered, skeletal survivors”. The film changed him. He felt then, and still feels, that more should have been done to prevent the Holocaust. After seeing the film, none of the soldiers knew what to say or do. Les said they didn’t have the vocabulary for such experiences.’

Keith was prompted to tell me about his father, who fought with the Special Air Service Regiment in World War Two.

On April 15, 1945, Duncan Ridler was driving along a sandy track through a dense pine forest northeast of Hannover when his unit came upon some figures dressed in strange orange-brown uniforms. They were lined up on either side of the road, as far as the eye could see. Dunc asked them who they were and what they were doing.

They were Hungarians. They said there had been an outbreak of typhus or typhoid in the camp, and their job was to prevent anyone leaving. The convoy drove on to a road junction in the forest. Dunc was impressed by the spotless concrete curbs, the raked gravel, the military signposts. But there was something else, a stench that was almost overpowering in its awfulness. Instead of finding a camp where they might liberate some British prisoners of war, they had come upon Belsen. It was deathly quiet, with shuttered huts and no sound from the watchtowers. At first, the few German guards seemed unperturbed by the British jeeps, but then Dunc spotted a pile of rotten potato peelings, about six feet high, with what looked like filthy, animated skeletons feasting on the putrid leftovers. At that moment, a German leant out of the cookhouse window and shot one of the emaciated figures.

Though hardened by combat, the SAS men gagged on what they saw. Creatures who were once human, starved, utterly filthy, eyes staring out of slate-gray faces, wounds vilely infected, the stench insufferable. Then the soldiers came upon the pit. One took photos so that the world would know what had happened there. Another stumbled away from the discarded, unburied corpses, grabbed the nearest guard and beat him to death. The SAS didn't stay long in Belsen, but Dunc remained as interpreter for the officer in command of the 63rd Anti-Tank Regiment, Royal Artillery, who took over the camp and accepted the formal surrender of Josef Kramer, Belsen's commandant.

I had recently read a biography of Martha Gellhorn, and remembered the shame and disenchantment that overcame her at

Dachau and, soon after, at Belsen. ‘It is as if I walked into Dachau and there fell over a cliff,’ she wrote, ‘and suffered a lifelong concussion, without recognizing it.’ Twenty-five years after the war, she confessed that, ‘looking back, I know I have never again felt that lovely, easy, lively hope in life which I knew before, not in life, not in our species, not in our future on earth.’

Perhaps Dunc felt something similar. ‘After the war,’ Keith said, ‘he was looking for a new beginning, though several years passed before he found it.’

Keith was born in Italy. He was seven when his parents separated. Dunc, with his ‘staggeringly beautiful’, twenty-year-old ‘housekeeper’, Grec, migrated to New Zealand. Keith remembers the glaring light, caused by the high levels of ultra-violet radiation in the southern atmosphere, the treeless landscapes, the absence of substantial buildings, and the gorse-infested hill where Dunc rented a bungalow. Dunc and Grec were in love. No longer did they have to pretend they were married. It was Dunc’s new lease of life. As for Keith, he was happy with his wild and windswept surroundings, though even at seven he still felt Italy was home.

As we trudged through a grove of pōhutukawa trees, looking for the great Mediterranean pines that surrounded the children’s play area, Keith said that he retained, from his earliest years in Rome, an affinity for all things Italian. A love of food, books, wine and adventure. ‘New Zealanders still strike me as strange,’ he said.

‘Yet I’ve always thought of you as the consummate Kiwi,’ I retorted. ‘Climbing mountains, white-water rafting, striking out into the wilderness.’

‘I mean the Anglo heritage. The repressed and cautious side of us. The tendency to share resentments rather than show compassion. Point the finger rather than cultivate conviviality. Despite embracing ethnic food, espresso coffee, European fashions, we remain awkward in our skins, preoccupied by tidiness, boundaries and security.’

‘This may be true,’ I said. ‘I also abhor that uptightness you speak of, but I feel at home here in a way I don’t elsewhere. This is where I have a right to be, even if I don’t always feel like exercising that right.’

‘I feel like that in Italy,’ Keith said.

‘Not here?’

‘My thoughts wander between the two. One minute I can be thinking ahead to a weekend trip to the Tararuas with Pablo, the next I am thinking of that other green valley, eight thousand miles away, at the foot of the Brenta massif.’

Keith had been returning to the Trentino in northern Italy for twenty-five years, doing anthropological fieldwork in an alpine village. His descriptions of his friends in Caderzone, and their everyday lives, are among the most ethnographically luminous I know. Pier Paolo the salami-maker, and the smell of his salumeria – a pungent mixture of salted meat, garlic, spilled wine, and the damp pine sawdust on the stone floor. Augusto, who owned the land where Keith stayed, and shared with the young ethnographer details of village history, the workings of the transhumant system and life in the high Alps. ‘His sense of continuity was powerful,’ Keith said, ‘rooted in his own daily work as a contadino (peasant), a word he used with pride. He told me once, as we were haymaking together,

that he had used the same scythe for more than sixty summers: “The blades have changed,” he said, “but it’s always been the same handle.”

‘Isn’t this what every expatriate feels?’ I asked Keith. ‘That the blades have changed, but not the handle?’

When I said goodbye to Keith that afternoon, I urged him to keep in touch, and to publish more of his Caderzone material. To write about the professore who cut his own firewood with a chainsaw, and had the same appreciation of practical know-how and traditional food as the locals. But perhaps the moment had passed, and Keith would find something very different to devote his energies to.

As I crossed the city to visit Judith, it occurred to me how remote now was the Pohangina Valley where she and Keith had lived, where their three children had come into the world and where I had, so often, enjoyed the bounty of their table, long walks into the hills and exhilarating conversations about books and writing. How distant, too, seemed the summer night when I brought Francine to meet Keith and Judith for the first time. After a lavish meal of seafood, washed down by chilled white wine, we walked arm in arm along a moonlit road with the dark furred poplars on either side, and I realized how misguided people had been to tell me that Francine looked exactly like Pauline, as though I had to be awoken from a spell that could only bring me disappointment.

It was evening by the time I got back to Roseneath, and Barack Obama was just beginning his acceptance speech in Chicago. With Jennifer and Allan and my cousin Louisa, we watched the event on TV as daylight faded outside, and the hills across Evans Bay

disappeared into the darkness of the eastern sky. Emotions overwhelmed me and millions of others around the world – Americans, Asians, Africans, Antipodeans – as we watched Barack Obama declare that we had reached a defining moment in our history, that we could change the world.

It is a cliché, I know, but the thing about hope is that it *does* spring eternal. We are knocked to the ground, but clamber to our feet and go on. We cut our losses and start over. We persevere, or do our best to. Observe us at play. We stake all on a game of chance, though the odds are stacked against us and we are, in the long run, bound to lose. Still, we return to the table as if every new deal is the first. Life may not give us a second chance, but a game can *always* be replayed. Moreover, writes Paul Myerscough, editor at the *London Review of Books*, ‘while you are at the table, the world falls away and the game is all that remains.’ Politics occupies a curious position between the reality of life and the irreality of games. Sometimes, the world of politics seems to be beyond us. Yet when we vote, protest or petition, we believe for a moment that old habits can be broken, the old order overturned, years of injustice redeemed with the stroke of pen. Isn’t the mantra, *Yes we can*, the same one we silently cite as we roll the dice one more time, make our new year resolutions, or vow never again to hurt the ones we love? Yet none of this crossed my mind as I listened to Obama’s speech and watched Jesse Jackson’s tear-streaked face, Oprah Winfrey half lost in the crowd, or the wide-eyed youth placing their trust in the messiah. I was not thinking at all; I was choking on the nameless emotions that welled up from deep

within me, filling my eyes with tears, the slate swept clean, a new day dawning, the past eclipsed.

Destruction and hope - notes

Distance looks our way

If anyone could identify with my theme of firstness it was my cousin Louisa, whom I'd met for the first time earlier that year when she stayed with Francine and me in Boston, en route to South America. I warmed to her at once, and her ambivalence about where she belonged echoed my own. On Louisa's second night with us, I took her for a walk in the nearby woods. Our family dog, Clover, came along for the exercise. Unleashed, she followed her nose deep into the woods, occasionally returning, then running off again.

'It's strange how life can be so fragmented,' Louisa said. 'Sometimes I feel as if I've lived the lives of about four different people and it's hard to reconcile them all together into this one person. Have you experienced that, with all your different life phases, and moving between so many different worlds?' Of course I had, and I told her so, which prompted Louisa to declare, 'I still can't imagine living permanently anywhere other than New Zealand. I feel a real sense of belonging there, even though the culture and politics can be incredibly frustrating and insular. The land feeds my soul in

an indescribable way: the smell of the air, the sight of the sky, the blossom on the pōhutukawa trees, the sense of infinite space and potential.’

Perhaps Louisa needed this Edenic vision as an antidote to the ecological disasters she would soon document in Ecuador, though her early life had also been something of a disaster zone.

‘I don’t usually feel rapport with family members,’ she confessed.

Yet I was already astonished at how much we seemed to have in common.

‘I was always the strange, intense one,’ Louisa said. ‘For as long as I can remember, I felt like an outsider. I could not handle school. My questions were treated with derision, dismissed as cheeky or seen as challenges to the teacher’s authority.’

Rebuffed, she closed herself off to those from whom she had expected support, understanding and encouragement. Her mother, a social worker, seemed incapable of understanding that her daughter’s self-destructive and dissatisfied behavior was a cry for help. Her father was a loner who never held a job for long, could not manage money, and showed his daughter little affection. Unhappy and rebellious, Louisa quit school at fifteen and left home. For several years she lived in seedy flats or on the street, drawing the dole, enrolling in various courses only to drop out, smoking methamphetamines. Following a run-in with the police, a woman lawyer offered Louisa a job in her legal office – a magnanimous gesture that inspired Louisa ‘to get back into control of my situation’. In changing the spelling of her name from Louisa to Luisa, she sought to separate herself from her father’s mother, Betty Louisa,

who had committed suicide, and in whose memory Louisa had been named. ‘I was determined to escape the Jackson curse,’ she said.

At twenty-three, she set out on a journey around the world, fetching up in July 2007 in the town of Besease, southern Ghana, where she worked as a volunteer in an orphanage.

It was only when I began reading Louisa’s blogs that I fully appreciated the parallels between her life and mine, for at twenty-three I had also worked as a volunteer in Africa, teaching in an orphanage in the Congo. What I hesitated to tell Louisa, however, when we began exchanging emails, was that her grandmother, Betty Louisa, who was a trained nurse, revered Albert Schweitzer whose philosophy anticipated the ecology movement that Louisa so passionately embraced. Schweitzer’s dismay at the rapid deforestation along the Ogooué River by European timber companies may have entered into his thoughts as he prepared his Nobel acceptance speech in 1952, in which he noted that ‘the most flagrant violation of historical rights, and indeed of human rights, consists in depriving certain peoples of their right to the land on which they live, thus forcing them to move to other territories.’

After travels in Burkino Faso, Benin, Togo, and Morocco, Louisa visited Israel, Nepal, and Bhutan before passing through Boston on her way to Ecuador, Bolivia, Peru, and Chile. If Bhutan represented the best in environmental protection policies, Ecuador’s northern Oriente was the worst. In one of the most biodiverse regions of the Amazon, Texaco had extracted crude oil for fifty years with scant regard for the environment. Louisa found a toxic wasteland. By the time Texaco left the area in 1992, forty-five billion liters of

poisonous waste had been dumped into the fragile ecosystem, seeping into streams that the 30,000 local inhabitants used for drinking, washing, and fishing. Louisa would compare the devastation to Chernobyl and call the northern Oriente the largest environmental disaster in the world. In her blog, she wrote: ‘I watched, in anguish, a woman who stood waist deep in this river, scrubbing clothes on a rock, toxic water [presumably] being gently absorbed by her internal soft tissue as she labored for her family, and downstream her children played by the river’s edge next to an old Texaco oil drum. Near the notoriously lawless oil town of Shushufindi, I visited a family whose house had been constructed directly next to an abandoned waste pit where after some thirty years vegetation had grown over the surface. The elderly campesino who lived there greeted me warmly and led me to the rear of his property where he had attempted to grow some fruit and coffee trees. He broke pieces of soil with his work-roughened hands: thick black crude literally oozed from the center and the smell of the oil was overpowering. The trees here don’t produce any fruit, and the ground water is so contaminated that this man was losing his eyesight and his wife lay ill inside their house, dying of cancer.’ Although petroleum hydrocarbon contamination is thousands of times higher than legal limits in the U.S., people could neither move away nor prevail on their government to decontaminate the environment.

In September 2008, after two years away, Louisa returned to New Zealand to study environmental law and actively contribute to the protection of the country’s biodiversity. ‘A society is defined not only by what it creates,’ she wrote, citing John Sawhill, ‘but by what it

refuses to destroy.’ But Louisa’s commitment to the environment was also born of a deep nostalgia for the place where she had grown up. In August, on a beach in Chile, with the Pacific at her feet, she wrote of the prospect of coming home. ‘Aotearoa New Zealand represents who I am. I want wild salty waves that crash against black rocks, whipping winds and white sea spray, I want sea animals with their round soft bodies and leathery skin, give me pelicans and albatrosses, crying seagulls and hardened sands that crunch under foot. Give me trees, wild and green, their trunks warped by wild ocean winds, give me green mountains, and skies peppered with clouds ... arouse in me emotions of home as I walk this final road.’

Like a soldier coming home after a war, the traveler may find it difficult to share her experiences with those who have not been stretched to the limit or journeyed to the ends of the earth. In her hometown in the Bay of Plenty, Louisa found the preoccupations of her old friends juvenile and irrelevant. ‘I loved being home,’ Louisa told me in Wellington. ‘This *is* my home. But in some ways I am no longer at home here.’

‘It was the same for me,’ I said, ‘returning from the Congo in 1964. I withdrew. I wrote about Africa. But all the while I was aware that this could be a road to madness, this dwelling on memories, disconnected from the world around me. When a colleague circulated the rumor that I was a confidence trickster who had not been in the Congo at all, I realized how preposterous my stories must seem, and how difficult it would be to find a publisher for them. Yet they were all I had. They were the soil in which my poetry had already begun to take root.’

I think it helped Louisa to know that I had traveled the same road, though I was cautious not to give the impression that because I had encountered these difficulties before her I was an authority on how to deal with them.

We are born into a world we did not make, but in the course of our lives we bring into being a new world (te ao hou). The world we come to call our own departs from the world we encountered at birth, though it bears the imprint of that world. We may suffer the consequences of our parents' acts or feel the burden of our history as a dead weight. Yet what really matters is the distance we put between ourselves and the past: the small departures that prevent the passing on of an accursed inheritance or that open up new possibilities for those who will follow us. We all have to blaze our own trails through the wilderness of this world. And each generation will hopefully open its eyes on that quasi-mythical land of the long white cloud, apparently uninhabited, never before glimpsed, holding out the promise of a new beginning.

The illusion of Corsica

It was a walk I had done countless times before, in happiness and in despair. After descending the steps from Roseneath to Balaena Bay, I set out along the foreshore road to Oriental Bay. Locating the steps beside the bus shelter, I climbed through a grove of pōhutukawa, found a clay track through the pines, and made my way to the heights of Mt Victoria. From time to time I stopped to catch my breath and scribble some notes on the sudden silence in the pines or the fragments of windswept sky and blue water visible beyond the cathedraled trees. The path was crisscrossed with roots and strewn with pine straw, the city a distant murmur. In the past, I would imagine myself back on the Saronic Gulf where the pines are tapped for retsina, or remember Ernest Shepard's drawings of the 'Six Pine Trees in the Hundred Acre Wood', or bring to mind Cézanne's views of Mont Sainte Victoire, pine boughs creaking in the mistral. Today, however, I was thinking of the Mediterranean pines outside the railway station at Garavan in the south of France. Perhaps this was because I had been reading Gregory O'Brien's recently published

memoir of his year in Menton – notes that ‘oscillate between France and New Zealand and comprise a kind of free-floating meditation on Europe and the Antipodes’. Greg’s work suggests that an interesting history might be read between the lines of the journals, poems, and fiction of New Zealand authors who, since 1970, have sojourned in Menton on writing fellowships, working within cooe of the villa where Katherine Mansfield lived in 1920, battling illness, her ambivalence toward her natal country unresolved. Such a history would reveal our awkward relationship with Europe, O’Brien suggests, for despite our reading knowledge of French or German, our admiration for old-world traditions and our indebtedness to certain European writers, this metropolitan culture remains foreign to us, partly because we were not raised in it, partly because we inherit a very different history, blighted by Europe’s imperialist designs and violent appropriations. In his memoir, Gregory O’Brien makes this tension a leitmotif. Though entranced by the adopted country of Blaise Cendrars and Le Corbusier, he nurses an unassuaged anger at France’s 1985 bombing of Greenpeace’s flagship, *Rainbow Warrior*, in Auckland harbor.

A few weeks later, after returning to the U.S., I would leaf through my notebooks from my own year in Menton, wondering whether they might also contain a ‘free-floating meditation on Europe and the Antipodes’. To my surprise, I discovered that my Menton preoccupations had been very different. I worried about where I belonged and where I wanted to live. I was oppressed by dreams of Sierra Leone, in which I was hauled over the coals by Kuranko friends for not being with them. I anguished over Pauline’s failing

health. I doubted that fiction was my forte. As with all questions couched in either-or terms, life admits no answer, unless we learn the art of living in the here and now. So I find it salutary that the very pages in which these impossible questions appear are filled with accounts of the people Pauline and I befriended during our months in Menton, as if I instinctively knew that absorption in the detail of everyday life would save me from the excesses of thought.

Simone Mortureux de Faudoas, who insisted we call her ‘Aunt Simone’, took us under her wing when we first arrived, helping us find an apartment, introducing us to ‘suitable’ people, and even suggesting what I should write about. From the outset, I was struck by the odd mixture of hauteur and worldliness in her. She gave the impression of having lived among aristocrats but fallen on hard times. Unable to afford the appurtenances of her true class, she had had recourse to disdain as a way of reminding people of her pedigree. As it turned out, my guesswork was wide of the mark.

On a rainy November afternoon she took Pauline and me to meet an English friend who lived in the Riviera Palace – a hotel built at the turn of the century for royals and aristocrats. Simone explained that their entourages would occupy several floors. Victoria stayed there, and the Czar of Russia, who booked all the rooms on the upper floors so that no one but God would be above him.

The hotel, now downgraded to ‘résidence’, had seen better days. Its parquet floors were in poor repair, plaster was flaking from the walls, and the friezes of pastel-blue lilies and pink carnations were badly faded. We climbed the marble stairs with their Italian

balustrades. In poorly lit corridors, the ugly red vinyl made a sickly squelching sound underfoot.

It took some time after Simone had rung the bell before her friend opened the door. Mrs Johnson's artificially blond hair had the shape of a beehive. Her eyebrows were penciled lines, her cheeks savagely rouged. She spoke almost immediately of the desolation of being alone. 'It is something you never get used to,' she told us. 'And now this terrible tragedy of Grace's death.'

'We passed a lot of people in the Avenue Verdun,' I said, 'watching the funeral on television sets in shop windows. The newspapers are issuing color supplements with banner headlines: Last Kiss Between Rainier and Grace.'

'They are saying that her daughter was at the wheel, that the brakes failed, or that she was arguing with Stephanie and took her eyes off the road,' Mrs Johnson said.

'The newspapers are unforgivable,' Aunt Simone added. 'The way they probe and probe. Always looking for the truth. Things should be allowed to rest. What matter how the Princess died?'

Mrs Johnson did not respond. Perhaps it was her deafness, or her concern to usher us into the living room. Crippled with arthritis, she inched forward with the aid of two walking sticks, clearly in pain. 'A nurse and a maid come daily to the apartment,' she explained, 'but they are not companions. Not like Johnny. I lost my husband last year,' she added, looking poignantly at me. 'Dear Johnny, without him I don't know where I am.'

Over tea, we discovered that Mrs. Johnson had once been a notable stage actress. Now confined to her apartment, she spent

much of the day sorting through old letters and photographs, or looking out the window at a sea of olives and the limestone bluffs beyond.

After our visit to Mrs Johnson, who appeared to have no other life than the one she remembered, clung to, and talked about with relentless sadness, I became curious about Simone's past and why she volunteered not a scrap of information about where she came from, whom she had married, and whether she had children. When I did inquire, she told me that when you are very old, you don't have a lot to look forward to, so your mind goes back to the past. 'But I try to keep myself focused on what is in between,' she said. 'I take life one day at a time. Visiting friends, doing what I can to help. I would rather die than become like Mrs Johnson.'

Even when Simone did recount her story, it was with the proviso that I not regard her as someone who looks back, who has regrets.

'I do not hanker after things I cannot have. But you are a writer. You want to know the secrets of everyone you meet. I have no secrets. But I suppose I have a story, like everyone else. You are welcome to make of it what you will. I lay no claim to my own insignificant history. Others lived through the times I lived through and did not survive. Others had a much harder life than mine.'

She was born in the Basque country, 'where boys were adored and girls ignored.' That's the way she put it. 'Like in China.' She was nothing to her mother, who didn't care if her daughter existed or not. But she was close to her father, until he was killed in northern France during the Great War. No longer obliged to keep up even the pretense

of liking her daughter, her mother sent her to live with her grandparents. Simone was seventeen.

Her grandmother happened to be the model for Pierre Loti's *Le Roman d'un Enfant* because her mother had been a close friend of Loti's. Unfortunately, this made no difference to Simone's situation. Her grandmother took no more interest in her than her mother had. When finally she married – a poor army officer – her grandmother told her, 'Your husband will run off with another woman in a year or two. When that happens, don't come here looking for money or sympathy.' 'In fact,' Simone said, 'I would rather have died than take anything from my grandparents, even though Pierre Loti once pressured them to buy me a piano.'

At the outbreak of World War Two, Simone and her husband were in Romania. He'd been seconded there from the French army as a weapons expert. No sooner had they returned to France in 1939 than he was sent to the front. Days before the fall of France, he was invalided back to Paris with shell shock.

Simone heard rumors that her husband and other French prisoners were to be transported to Germany. Fluent in German, she 'more or less told the Bavarian brute of a doctor' in charge of the hospital to release her husband into her care. It took a week of badgering before the doctor relented. He'd never known a French woman speak such excellent German, he told her, or show such courage.

After installing her husband in a villa (he had to remain in Paris and report to the commissariat once a week), Simone went south to the bas-Pyrénées. She did not see her sons for four years. Her eldest spent the war in a German labor camp; a younger son went into

hiding. As for Simone, she lived alone in a village between Pau and Bayonne, growing and selling vegetables to make ends meet. With great delight, she recounted how she secretly got horse manure from the German officers billeted in the village by bribing them with baskets of cherries from her allotment.

After the war, her husband received a government pension and on a forty-hectare lot bequeathed by her grandfather she and her husband grew grapes, cherries and maize for fifteen years.

In all the time I knew her, Simone only once raised her voice in anger. It was to castigate the Americans for their casual attitude to war. ‘They don’t know what it is,’ she said. ‘They read about it in the newspapers over breakfast, but understand nothing. Such people are dangerous. These are the people who will make another war.’

Simone’s remark immediately brought to mind George Santayana’s observation that those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it. But Simone was making a somewhat different point: that life is a struggle not to be *consumed* by what happened in the past, and that we must at all costs live affirmatively in the here and now.

It was through Simone that I met Mlle Picard, who lived in a small apartment on the seafront, a short walk from the Garavan Palace. I cannot remember how she became my French tutor, but every Wednesday afternoon, after completing my daily stint of writing, I would join her for tea and conversation.

Mlle Picard had been an English teacher until her retirement, so it was a very English tea she served – with Staffordshire china, water biscuits, and Dundee shortcake. She was eighty-five, passionate and

intelligent, though her body was frail. Once, I ventured to ask her why she had never married. 'I was born old,' she said, 'as well as crippled. Who would be attracted to such a person?' 'I would,' I said gallantly. She smiled. 'You are very kind. But you must remember, I have not been without a family. My family is my students. They are my children. Even now they still write to me.' And she showed me several unopened airmail letters that she had received that week, postmarked Canada, France, Germany, and Russia.

Of her childhood, she said nothing for many months. Then, one afternoon, with rain falling steadily in the courtyard outside, she shared her story with me.

Her mother had fallen down a flight of cellar steps in the sixth month of her pregnancy, and as a result gave birth to her daughter twelve weeks before term. The baby weighed less than a kilo. In 1897, such an infant would not be expected to live. Incredibly, she survived, though she was four before she took her first ungainly steps, and fourteen before she could run. That she walked at all, Mlle Picard said, was entirely due to the devotion of her parents. Her grandfather had read a newspaper article about a Belgian doctor who specialized in treating children crippled from the effects of premature birth, and though her parents were too poor to afford specialist care, they traveled by train to Brussels with their daughter and found the doctor's house. Like pilgrims, then, they stood on the sidewalk outside, not knowing what they might do, hoping for some kind of miracle. After keeping vigil for several hours, they were rewarded with a glimpse of their savior. The doctor, top-hatted, red-bearded, carrying a cane and black bag, descended the steps from his front

door. The family watched in awe and shame as the doctor passed through the gate and onto the street. Then, to their surprise and mortification, the famous specialist came up to them, and asked about the crippled child the father was holding in his arms. A few minutes later the doctor was pulling up the little girl's chemise to examine her. Outraged, she grabbed the doctor's long red beard and pulled it as hard as she could. 'With that kind of spirit, and your parents' love,' the doctor declared, 'you will one day most certainly walk.'

The cure was banal. Back in Paris, the father began a routine of waking at four in the morning and walking across the city to Les Halles to get salt from the fish trays that came in overnight from the Brittany coast. Every other day he made the rounds of the wine markets to get lees from the large jars of wine that were brought up from Burgundy and the Rhône for decanting into labeled bottles. It was in this improbable mixture of fish-tainted rock salt and red wine sediment that the child was bathed every morning. The routine went on for more than two years, until the day she walked.



There was something about Aunt Simone and Mlle Picard that moved me profoundly and made them unforgettable. Maybe it had something to do with their being very old, and having lived through so much history that biography had become transmuted into myth. It's not one's own story any more, but the story of something wider, more universal. I have pondered this often, this gap between our little lives and Life itself – the something greater that surrounds us,

extends beyond us, but does not, for all its force, diminish us. But the question remains, whether the story of a life bears more than an incidental relationship to that life as it was actually lived, and whether, in our eagerness to give coherence to our experience, we betray it. The people, places, books, and ideas to which I have felt most deeply connected exist – despite the seriousness and passion with which I have engaged with them – beyond my reach. Would Aunt Simone recognize herself in my account of her? Does it really matter? In our encounters with others we momentarily lose sight of ourselves. We are eclipsed. And it is from these encounters that we return to ourselves, changed. As Theseus found in the Cretan labyrinth, the thread we unwind transforms possible impasses into paths. But paths may be lost as quickly as they are found, just as a ship's wake marks a channel or sea route for only a few minutes before the ocean returns to its natural ambiguity and inscrutability. For Lawrence Durrell, stories bring a temporary semblance of order to what is in its very nature 'a fractured and fragmented world'. In his view, 'The solace of such work lies in this – that only there, in the silences of the painter or the writer can reality be reordered, reworked and made to show its significant side.' But I do not agree with Durrell when he speaks of art as a 'joyous compromise' in which the imagination makes good the disappointments and defeats of our quotidian life, for stories must, despite our rage for order, retain a strong sense of the fiery furnace in which they are forged, and avoid giving the impression that the patterns we hammer out in art reveal an order that lies within life itself. As Virginia Woolf reminds us, 'Every day includes much more non-being than being.'

That I turned my hand to writing a novel during my year in Menton had as much to do with the fact that fiction was my first love as with my belief that it was a superior art form. This made the writing hard going, postponing the day when I would wise up to the fact that fiction was not my strong suit. A biography of Norman Lewis finally helped me understand where my own talent lay. Lewis wrote fifteen novels, all now out of print, though his travel writing is still read and widely admired. But his failure to write great fiction worried Lewis throughout his career, and he appeared unable to fully admit that his powers of invention required ‘the pollinating gift of facts’. Paradoxically, Lewis was never more of a novelist ‘than when faced with a road drenched in the mire of actuality or a room beset with real horrors faced by real human beings’, and he was at his best when confronted by an actual place or person that pulsed ‘with the perfect reality of an invented thing’.

Had I realized the personal relevance of these remarks in 1982, I could have saved myself a lot of trouble. Lines scribbled in the dead of night that would not survive the dawn. Screwed-up paper littering the floor. Long walks into the landscape to collect my thoughts.

How many mornings did I walk out of my studio, glance up at the limestone bluffs of Ormea, and take the old mule track that led from the coast to Baousset, the rain-rinsed air resinous with pines? When I looked back, Menton was far below – the cubist roofs of the old town clustered around St Michel, the sea plowed by a stiff wind racing away to Italy, and the promontories of Cap Martin, Monaco and Cabbé clearer than yesterday. If only my writing could do justice to what was so freely given!

Bypassing Castellar, I took a track through broom, brambles, stunted pines and untended olives, hoping to reach Granges St Paul and thence one of the old smugglers' paths along the border with Italy. The air was fragrant with juniper, lantana, and fermenting figs, and not for the first time I found myself contemplating the labor that had gone into building the drystone walls and the terraces crumbling now beneath olives and holm oaks. So many lives vanished from the earth. So many untold stories.

Above me, against a deep blue sky, were the crags of Berceau. After clambering up the scree below the col, I plunged into knee-deep snow and silent pinewoods, marveling at how instantaneously it was possible to pass, in effect, from one season to another, one's mind following suit with fresh sensations and images.

It was mid afternoon by the time I got back to Menton, too late to do any writing, too early to return home. I bought an espresso at Le Narval and sat at a sidewalk table, facing the boat harbor. A stiff wind was rattling the halyards of moored craft – a loud tinkling of metal against aluminum masts, like the chime and chatter of a Buddhist monastery.

Occasionally, on clear mid-winter mornings, Corsica would be visible on the horizon. Houses along the coast, dark smudges of forest. 'Trompe l'oeil,' my friend Roland Gheresi called it, pointing out that the island was too far away to be directly visible. 'Density and temperature differences in the lower layers of the atmosphere tend to bend the light rays from Corsica, creating the semblance of a mirage and sharpening the visibility of the island.' When I explained this to my twelve-year-old daughter, dipping a pencil in a glass of

water and showing her how it appeared bent, Heidi rejected the analogy of pencils in water and islands in the sea. She wanted the substantiality of images. Perhaps this is why it took me so long to realize that fiction is as unfaithful to life as an academic treatise, and that memory is a misnomer – a shadow cast across the conscious mind, a hypnopompic delusion on the threshold of waking. We speak of memory as though there is something solid to which our minds return, something in store that is retrieved. But what if the past were merely an eddy or backwater in the stream of our present lives and not, as we sometimes believe, another country? We sometimes cling to the idea of firstness as a shipwrecked mariner might cling to a rock. Perhaps we need such points of anchorage to negotiate a changeable and uncertain world. But while some psychologists find evidence for the permanence of some memory traces, others cast doubt on the idea of immutable memory, reminding us that we undergo perpetual metamorphoses in the course of a lifetime, each decade overlaying what went before much as a palimpsest of tidal debris collects on a beach.

And yet there are moments when I do not have the shadow of a doubt about the recurrence of long ago events – of rain gusting over a tin roof, of my grandfather regaling me in his potting shed with stories about his youth and early adulthood in New Zealand, or of tasting bush humus and foliage in my throat as I dived into a river swimming hole. It is often from such fragments that we construct our life stories, creating the artificial forms of closure and completeness without which our existence would appear meaningless. We writers take it upon ourselves to make good the deficiencies of life, says

Henry James, 'to see people not only as they are but as they might be. In truth,' James says, 'everyone, in life, is incomplete, and it is [in] the work of art that in reproducing them one feels the desire to fill them out, to justify them, as it were.' Perhaps it isn't that art enables one to complete these mysterious others; rather that we round out *ourselves* in writing about them. In his Author's Note to *Victory*, Joseph Conrad recalls the origins of his four main characters. Axel Heyst was a mysterious Swede whose paths crossed Conrad's for only a few days. Though Heyst left no trace of his past or his purposes, he provided Conrad with an unforgettable image of resolute detachment. And Conrad met Lena, whose love for Heyst would stir him so fatefully, in a café in the South of France. In a room filled with tobacco smoke, the rattling of dominos and the music of a traveling group of musicians, Lena moved silently and somnolently among the tables, collecting money. When Conrad plots to have Lena meet Heyst, he wants her to be 'heroically equal to every demand of the risky and uncertain future'. Indeed, he ensures that this is so, and in view of her triumphant end asks if he could have done any more for her rehabilitation and happiness. But Conrad does not broach the question as to whether, or to what extent, his stories of Lord Jim, Kurtz, Marlowe and Axel Heyst were means whereby he sought *to rehabilitate himself*. Nor does he ask whether our narrative plots, our moral conclusions, and our belief in the power of first impressions might be dispensed with, the better to accept the largely fragmented yet intriguing nature of life as lived.

Nothing to write home about

When I met my old friend, Vincent O’Sullivan, in Wellington, he put my own thoughts into words. ‘A cliché, but the years drop away as soon as we start talking again.’ On my previous visit to Wellington, I had gone up to the Wairarapa to visit Vincent and his wife Helen in their house near Carterton. And I thought then, as I think now, that nothing brings home the power of firstness with greater force than being reunited with a close friend after many years apart. You have lived very different lives, in very different parts of the world, and it may be difficult, initially, to close the gap or find common ground. You fall back upon a shared past, acquaintances whose names might not otherwise cross your mind, events that might not ordinarily bear retelling, as you scrape the bottom of memory’s barrel for confirmation of a bond that has remained inviolable despite your divergent lives. Then, as sometimes happens, you leave the past behind as if it were a mere idea, and enter the present as if it were all there were.

Vincent was a year or two ahead of me at Auckland University, and we did not meet until after I'd published a poem in a student magazine called *Outline*, whereupon Vince got in touch and generously invited me to show him some of my work in progress. Il miglior fabbro, he not only provided me with meticulous critiques – pointing out an image that did not ring true, muddled syntax, and slipshod prosody – he gave me the kind of encouragement that makes all the difference when one is writing blind. What satisfaction did Vincent get out of mentoring me? I suppose it was the same sense of relief that I felt, realizing that I was not laboring alone in what Dylan Thomas called one's 'craft and sullen art'. Slowly, we warmed toward each other as persons, not just poets, and became fast friends. I was a fool for his mordant wit and irreverent humor, and envied him his fund of stories and literary wisecracks culled from Oscar Wilde, Sydney Smith (the Smith of Smiths), and from his own run-ins with bullshit artists.

The same year my first poem appeared in print, I went south to a University of New Zealand arts festival in Dunedin. Among the many bohemians, beatniks and luminaries I met that winter was a Greek-New Zealand poet, Antigone Kefala (Antigone went on to study French literature at Victoria University of Wellington before moving to Australia in 1960, where she published several books of poetry and a poignant memoir of her Wellington childhood called *Alexia: A Tale of Two Cultures*). Mindful of Vincent's classical background and affection for all things Greek, I lost no time in telling him about Antigone. Entranced by the name, as I fully expected him to be, Vincent wrote a poem in which he conjures his

own Antigone, a synthesis of the classical figure and a woman entirely of his own imagining.

In Dunedin I also met Charles Brasch, the editor of the literary quarterly, *Landfall*. Brasch showed an interest in my poetry, and invited me to send him some of my work. When one of my poems was accepted for publication, I urged Vincent to submit something of his, hoping we could make our *Landfall* debuts together. So it was that his 'Antigone' and my 'To Be Hanged by the Neck' appeared in the same December 1959 issue, our first significant forays into print.

Even at this early stage, Vincent had found his voice. In 'Antigone', one can pick up the vernacular ellipses and idioms of New Zealand speech, a measure of Vincent's commitment not only to unpretentiousness but to the ways in which the miraculous finds expression within the mundane. His poems are epiphanies, life constantly taking him by surprise – 'a woman folding curtains as she leaves / a man, forever' and 'The smile that opens simply as a dove's wings / and what is in flight is everything, is everything.' This recognition of the exotic in the quotidian is part of what drew Vincent to John Mulgan, in whom, however, the struggle between an educated sensibility and a strong identification with the common man was never fully resolved. In Vincent's biography of Mulgan, he remarks that Mulgan was 'at home among men who earned their living with their hands, and with women who were straightforward and practical. He liked playing darts and cards with country people, and drawing out old soldiers to tell him how it was before the peace they fought for. He was not bothered by hierarchies or status or intellectual attainments. Directness, the importance of not posturing,

taking people on their own terms, were coming to define for him the good side of being a New Zealander.’

This description of Mulgan also applied to Vincent and me. Like Mulgan, we struggled to reconcile a strong identification with our homeland with an equally strong sense of being a part of a European tradition of thought, literature, and political critique that, for all its importance to us, was paradoxically not a part of our upbringing but something we adopted and made our own. Sometimes this tension found expression in geographically disparate images, as in Vincent’s Central America poems, his numerous poems about Greece, both modern and classical, his sonnet sequence on Charles Meryon, the famous French etcher who lived for a while in Akaroa, or his play about Japanese prisoners-of-war in the Wairarapa; sometimes it showed as a tension between the colloquial banter of, say, Butcher and Baldy, and the ‘sweet high figure / inside every butcher’ that is momentarily illuminated as a redneck lights a cigarette against the wind, ‘his hands cupping a match / like a yellow stone’. Vincent visits Yeats’s grave on the day a bomb destroys an innocent boy. He takes a fatally wounded thrush from the mouth of his cat. Plato appears among the cockatoos. These incongruities are grist for the poet’s mill. But the poet does not seek any moral resolution, for the sparks that fly from these juxtapositions are what make poetry both necessary and illuminating. ‘There is something like the glint of a hook, / there is something, love, in that shimmering / vault, trolling too fast to speak of.’



It was the legendary Haunui-a-Nanaia who gave the Wairarapa its name. At the end of an epic journey in pursuit of his runaway wife, Wairaka, he glimpsed from the ridge of the Rimutakas the glint of sunlight on the waters of the lake. I too was searching for something at this time – something that had gotten away from me, and without which my life felt tenuous and unresolved. Was it nostalgia for the place in which I had lived my first and formative years? Not exactly, because it was not the past I pined for. If anything, I wanted to live in two places at once – New Zealand and Elsewhere – much as some men want both a wife and a mistress. But despite the bumper sticker injunction – think globally, act locally – it is simply not possible to *live* both locally and globally. We cannot be somewhere and everywhere at the same time, though we can, I imagine, think of ourselves as being someone and everyone at the same time.

Vincent had just published his Mulgan biography, and I had been inspired to reread *Report on Experience*. In this book, Mulgan speaks of New Zealand in ways that were immediately familiar to me. He says that we New Zealanders – which is to say Pākehā New Zealanders – have always been too few and far between to have had the confidence needed to make the country truly and deeply our own. And so we are restive, and live as strangers, he says, and go abroad, ‘looking not for adventure but for satisfaction’. When he took his own life in Cairo in April 1945, only twelve days before the peace, Mulgan seems to have felt that it would be as impossible for him to find satisfaction in the New Zealand he had known as a young man as it would be to find it in the Oxford he had known before the war. In no-man’s land, oppressed by the contradictions of his war

experiences in Greece, where every successful partisan raid had meant immediate German reprisals against the very villagers who had sheltered and befriended his men, and where, even as he wrote his last messages, a brutal civil war, abetted by England, was tearing Greece apart, he chose oblivion. As Mulgan's fate suggests, the question as to where one belongs is clearly, and painfully, related to the question of to whom one is beholden. In common with his friends and contemporaries, Jim Bertram, Geoffrey Cox, Ian Milner and Jack Bennett, he found it not enough to be a New Zealander; one was inescapably part of a wider world in which one had to take a stand, in which one was obliged to act. Vincent observes of these men of Mulgan's generation: 'The sense of contending pressures could generate a peculiar malaise of its own. As Thomas Norrington, an Englishman who knew and worked closely with several of them, concluded in retrospect, there seemed an innate melancholy in the New Zealanders he knew.'

That day at Vincent and Helen's house, we were in an ebullient mood, sharing reminiscences at a table shaded by fruit trees with Vincent's son Dominic. It was very hot. The hills were like loaves of bread dusted with flour, the sky deep cobalt, with curious tufts of unmoving cloud, as if painted by a hyperrealist. Vincent and I were piecing together details of a weekend in late 1965 when he and his first wife, Tui, drove up from Wellington with Les and Mary Cleveland, and stayed with me in the Wairarapa. I was teaching at Kuranui College at the time, and toward the end of that year had rented a schoolhouse in Featherston so that Pauline, who was completing her finals at Victoria University of Wellington, could join

me for the summer. I recounted to Vincent, Helen, and Dominic, how, in order to get this house, I had had to pretend to have just got married; the result was an embarrassing ceremony in the staffroom one morning at which I was presented with His and Hers bath towels and toiletries, and given the loan of a car so that my new 'wife' and I could explore the Wairarapa. I remembered us drinking ouzo at the Morrison's Bush hotel; Vincent remembered us in the pub at Lake Ferry one day, and a trip to the Pinnacles...

Perhaps it is not in the gap between now and then that longing begins, but in the gap between here and elsewhere. It was this gap that bothered Vincent as much as it did me, and led us to draw comparisons between ourselves and men like John Mulgan and Dan Davin. The impossibility of keeping the home fires burning while one kindled and tended a fire in another hemisphere. 'What is so living and graspable and immediately there in front of you,' Vincent writes in his exquisite essay on longing, 'and what is quite as real but you will never touch – the Seven Swans of Glendalough or whatever the other stories are that you hear; and that place the grown-ups talked of, the enchanted distance where they were young, that you so desperately want to know as well. That gap where for many of us longing begins.'

What is this sense of belonging to 'one dear perpetual place', this sense of *tūrangawaewae* that binds one to one's native soil, no matter how many other places one has worked and lived, experienced joy and sorrow, formed lasting friendships, and also come to call home? And how is it possible to reconcile this craving for anchorage, for firstness, and the equally imperative longing to get away, to uproot

oneself, to venture beyond the narrow horizons of the world in which one was raised, and stake everything on another life elsewhere? Perhaps the problem is that we all too often see home and the world as horns of a dilemma, and think we have to make a choice between polar opposites.

This was certainly true of Yorkie – Mrs York – with whom I boarded during my year at Kuranui College. One day she said she would be happy to drive me anywhere as long as it wasn't too far from Greytown. I asked if she would take me to Pāpāwai Marae, where, in the early 1860s, Hoani Te Whatahoro Jury recorded from the tohunga Nepia Pohuhu the Ngāti Kahungunu traditions and genealogies that would form the basis of Percy Smith's conjectural history of the settlement of Aotearoa. Though I said nothing of my specific interest in Pāpāwai, Yorkie seemed taken aback by my request, as if there were far better places to go sightseeing than a Māori pā, but she dutifully drove me there, and I strolled around the urupā with her, making small talk as we went along. But when I stopped in front of the monument and attempted to translate aloud the Māori inscriptions on the marble, it was all too much for her, and she astonished me by providing a fluent, if exasperated, translation before suggesting we return to Greytown for tea and cake. Yorkie was Māori. She never acknowledged it, and I never broached the subject with her. But she too was caught between Scylla and Charybdis. In the provincial town where she lived, you had to be one thing or the other, and given the stigma that attached to being Māori, she had chosen to pass for Pākehā.

Is it possible to escape the double binds into which identity thinking leads us? Is it possible to move from either/or to both/and? Like globalization, biculturalism is a compelling idea. But living it is another matter.

That day in the Wairarapa, talking with Vincent and Helen over a risotto and chardonnay at Martinborough, then driving home through a landscape of olives and vineyards – themselves reminders of how foreign the familiar could become, and how familiar the foreign – as well as over the next few days in Wellington, meeting other old friends and wandering around the city I so loved, I was brought back to these questions of roots and horizons, as though every conversation, every event, was feeding an inner monologue, and pressing for some kind of resolution.

First were my experiences of growing up in a rural backwater, and longing to move away – so much so that I seized on whatever evidence came to hand of the mysterious elsewhere where I imagined I might come into my own. Allan Thomas provides a telling example in his book on music in the small Taranaki town of Hawera, 1946, the final page proofs of which he was reading during the week I stayed with him and his wife, Jennifer Shennan, in Wellington. When Margaret Buist first heard Mahler's 'Songs of a Wayfarer' on a gramophone record, she resolved to enter the song in the competitions, determined, as she put it, to 'show these Hawera people' what she could do.

'I learnt the German from the record. Maurice Clare played the accompaniment for me. Well, the judge placed me first but she said

in her comments that she'd like to talk to me because she'd also been learning German and hers seemed different to mine!'

I liked this anecdote, not only because it captured the tension between one's experience of the everyday, parochial world in which one lives and the remote, metropolitan world of which one can only dream, but because of Margaret Buist's candor and comic self-deprecation, for at the very moment she encounters this outside world, with all its magic and promise, she is brought up against the cultural, financial, and linguistic limitations that will prevent her ever entering fully into it. But perhaps an awkward and unconsummated relationship with the metropolitan world is more comfortable than knowing it in depth.

And here I think of my father, who – apart from a couple of years in the Australian outback when he was a boy, his mother having decreed that the family needed to be closer to a potential inheritance – lived in New Zealand all his life, and never expressed any desire to journey elsewhere. And yet the outside world impinged on him, as it impinged on Margaret Buist, for he was a radio ham and spent long hours in his shack calling into the ether: 'This is ZL2PL calling. This is ZL2PL. Do you read me? Come in if you read me. Over ...' and receiving responses from places as far away as California, Canada, Britain, Fiji and Tanganyika. Call signs were exchanged, as well as wavelengths, frequencies, contact dates and times, and sometimes some trivial domestic detail added to the technical remarks on the QSL card he would mail, presumably to be pinned on the wall of another shack, exactly like his, tens of thousands of miles away.

But when I was a boy, eavesdropping on these cryptic messages through the sizzle and surge of ghostly oceans, the paradox never occurred to me that though my father made contact with all these exotic places, his exchanges were as minimal as they were banal. QSO (quality of transmission) was an ironic thing; he could as well have been calling his Radio Club pals across town.

This is not to suggest that journeys have to be to the four corners of the world – for the journey to the corner store is, for some, tantamount to climbing Everest. Dublin, for Bloom, was as challenging as the Eastern Mediterranean was for Odysseus. Nor is it to imply that people who are happiest close to home are insecure or unfulfilled – that Penelope was not capable of undertaking her husband's voyages. It is simply to suggest that those who never venture out into the world will tend to feel more insecure in their relation to that world than those who have risked getting to know it firsthand. And while the voyager will, over time, abandon the idea of a fixed identity, and take on attributes of all the places he or she has lived, the homebody will cling to the idea that there is no place like home, and worry it to death.

National identity is a Manichean idea; a matter of either/or, rather than both/and. It therefore generates non-negotiable symbolic oppositions between self and other, the first invariably good and true, the second evil and false, the first to be defended, the second to be expunged. In this Tolkienesque world, people live under continual siege, imagining themselves menaced by foreign entities whose names are legion. Witches. The Yellow Peril. Blacks. Jews. Communists. Terrorists. Foreigners. Asylum Seekers. While the

voyager seeks to broaden her horizons, opening herself up to the outside world, the homebody builds walls and fences, making forays out into the world only to do battle with the minatory other, but always hoping to return home to a hero's welcome, holding high the trophy won, her sense of unique identity safeguarded and reaffirmed. To be sure, the homebody sometimes ventures abroad as a tourist, but with a well-defined itinerary, the company of like-minded friends and plenty of places to provide home comforts so she need have no fear of encountering in the other that side of herself she has never explored. By contrast, the voyager is like the insignificant pine, *Pinus insignia*, or the Monterey pine, the *macrocarpa*, which, when transplanted from their original habitats in North America took root in New Zealand and grew like weeds, as if to show God that even He had misjudged the ability of a native not only to flourish in a foreign place but to make that place its own.

What is anthropology, but a systematic implementation of this impulse to open up face-to-face dialogue with others – to call into question the parochial view that one's own world is *the* world, and all others a diminished version or demonic corruption of it? A way of making a science of the age-old Odyssean impulse to wander off the beaten track, to encounter the strange, and to see whether, beyond the fears and fantasies of the homebodies, there is something one may call common ground or common humanity. A realization of Novalis's romantic vision of being at home everywhere.

Among the New Zealand books I bought and read that summer in Wellington was Caroline Daley's *Leisure and Pleasure*. In the introduction to her history of how the modern body was revealed,

shaped, and marketed between 1900 and 1960, Daley cautions us from thinking that our own histories are unique. ‘We have become so accustomed to history books telling national stories that we often forget to place those tales in their international contexts,’ she begins. ‘If New Zealand historians were less intent on trying to crack the code of New Zealand’s uniqueness, and not so obsessed with quests for national identity, they might notice that many of the supposedly particular characteristics of this society are really not so particular after all.’

These remarks are equally pertinent for anthropology, which has all too often described what is different about human kinship systems, modes of inheritance and succession, beliefs and rituals – inventing arcane vocabularies for distinguishing them – that it has created the impression that every local moral world is a world unto itself, a bounded and insular entity, possessing its own essence, its own identity, even its own nature. But what defines the human condition is that everyone is both identical *and* different – that underlying our manifest diversity are identical modes of experience that betray the effects of millions of years of shared evolution, not to mention the historical movements of people, ideas, stories, and commodities that have globalized us for eons before the term was coined. As long as we regard ourselves as isolated and unique we risk throwing up stereotypes of the other that bear no relation to reality. And yet, paradoxically, we can only reach an understanding of what is held in common by entering deeply into another local moral world, living in it, speaking its language, sustaining a conversation with it over time.

In the years that followed the end of civil war in Sierra Leone, I revisited the country that had long been my home away from home, and wrote about my experiences in a book called *In Sierra Leone*. One thing that struck me, working and talking with displaced Kuranko villagers, was the absence of vengefulness, the stoic acceptance of loss as a precondition for creating a new life, for moving on. Although Western governments obliged Sierra Leone to undergo a truth and reconciliation process, with alleged war criminals arraigned before a Special Court, and the endless recounting of traumatic stories, everyone I spoke to in the Freetown refugee camps saw no point in raking over old coals. Enjoined to recount the past, these people saw it as more expedient to forget it, in order to build something new. A trivial comparison perhaps, but one that comes to mind: Billy Collins's poem about walking in the woods one day without a pen, and nothing to write on anyway, but suddenly finding the lines of a poem in his head, described later as 'six or eight exhalations, / the braided rope of the syntax, / the jazz of the timing, / with the little insight at the end / wagging like the short tail / of a perfectly obedient spaniel, / sitting by the door' – lines he lost, because the call of the clear morning in the woods was greater than the call to return home to write. No regrets. Which is why I like to imagine that the little insight at the end might have had something to do with letting go, and with opening oneself up to new possibilities, of seeing the world not as one thing, or one place, that has primary value, but as many possibilities, many places, all potentially as illuminating as the next, so that in going out into the world there is

not a loss of one's natal home, but a creative transformation of one's relationship with it.

Nothing to write home about - notes

Return to the Manawatu

The morning headlines read ‘New Dawn’. But as I drove toward Palmerston North, clouds were being bundled across a leaden sky, trees and ferns flailing, herds of cattle huddling under storm-assailed macrocarpas.

I parked near the art gallery. Having lived for many years in this windblown city, I knew my way around. But I was now a stranger, and walked the streets of a ghost town, anonymous and unremarked. In Bruce McKenzie’s bookshop I asked the assistant if she had any books on settler life in the Manawatu. I was hoping to compare the experiences of early immigrants in the region with those of adopted children, so bringing together, as I had done in my novel *Rainshadow*, the historical loss of a homeland and the personal loss of one’s parents. Though several books on Scandinavian immigration came to light, I was disappointed to find the raw experience of these early settlers reduced to bare names and dates, and the books informed by a heroic view of history in which intrepid individuals overcome adversity, create something from nothing, and bequeath a

worthy heritage to their descendants. Only occasionally could I glimpse the tragic ironies of 19th century colonialism, whose after-effects are still felt. For example, Danes, having lost forty percent of their land to Prussia in the 1864 war, escaped the suppression of their language, culture, and nationality by migrating to a country where, albeit unwittingly, they occupied land alienated from local Māori.

In a letter home, Emilie Monrad seems blind to her invidious situation. ‘A cherry tree, full of red cherries that we looked forward to eating, has been picked clean by a Māori woman, not as a theft, but because, since her father planted the tree, she felt she had the right to it. That the land with everything on it had been sold didn’t affect her. To make sure that the same thing did not happen to our apple tree, Johannes picked all the apples at once and decided to make an apple dessert. However, in spite of all his work, he could only manage a mediocre stew because the apples were not ripe, but “the Colony” approved.’

In truth, though the land *had* been sold, many Māori regarded such transactions as giving Pākehā usufruct rights, not ownership of natural resources or authority over the tenure and management of the land (*tino rangatiratanga*). These arguments over which rights were retained by Māori and which were transferred to the British Crown in the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi have to this day been only partially resolved.

After leaving the bookshop, I drove to Terrace End where Pauline and I lived between 1973 and 1981, and where our daughter, Heidi, spent her formative years. In a 1939 photograph, reprinted in one of the local histories I had just purchased, you can see the gravel pit that

adjoined our house, with the flank of the Rimutaka Range in the distance.

On May 9 1879, thirty-eight-year-old Laurits Hans Gulbrandsen, who had emigrated from Norway in 1869, narrowly escaped death in the gravel pit. ‘He and his companions had just resumed filling railway wagons with metal, after their lunch break, when the top of the pit-face collapsed; those struck by the metal were Laurits, Hans Petersen, and a Mr Rowlands. Petersen was badly bruised and Rowlands received a serious leg injury. Laurits was struck from behind and crushed between the avalanche of metal and the ballast engine that, in turn, caused a “frightful gash” on his head. His skull was forced open by the pressure of the metal against his body – and his brain was seen to protrude. Immediately after he was extracted, the locomotive driver got up steam and raced up out of the pit to get medical assistance. Once freed, Laurits was kept conscious by a “strong stimulant” and was taken to his home by train. There Doctor Akers sewed the wound and bandaged his head. Surprisingly, apart from a few bruises, he had no other injuries.’ Indeed, Laurits lived to the ripe old age of seventy-seven.

Laurits’s story set me thinking about the arbitrariness of fate and led me to recall the retired couple who lived opposite us – their white stucco bungalow, standard roses, and immaculate lawns a studied riposte to our own unruly section, which was dominated by an immense phoenix palm and numerous native shrubs that I had planted without much thought to how high they might grow. One winter afternoon we were visited by one of my wife’s old university friends. Possibly following some tactless remark of mine about our

neighbors' garden or their extreme reticence, Carol told us that these people were her parents. Her birth parents, however, lived over the range in Woodville. Because Carol's mother already had several children when Carol was born, she gave the newborn infant to her childless sister. Throughout her childhood, Carol said, her adoptive parents would take her on Sunday and Christmas visits to Woodville. These were the happiest days of her life: playing with her 'cousins' on their small farm, swimming in the river hole by the Balance Bridge, exploring the bush. When she learned that she had been adopted, everything changed. She now knew that the family she secretly wished she had been born into was, in fact, her real family, and that the dour couple with whom she lived, and who forbade her from opening the china cabinet or disturbing the peace of the house in any way, were relative strangers. From that moment, whenever she was with her natal family, she would seek some sign of recognition. An especially warm hug. A kiss. A comment that acknowledged the true nature of the relationship between them, and that revoked, if such a thing were possible, her mother's decision to give her away. Her birth parents, not wishing to compromise Carol's relationship with her adoptive parents, were careful not to show the love their daughter desired, and with their feigned indifference, Carol felt more heart-broken than in the face of her other parents' coldness.

For some reason, Carol's story weighed on my mind, and as I drove along Fitzherbert Avenue to take a last look at the street along which I once cycled to and from work, I began to see how Carol's unconsummated relationship with her birth parents dovetailed with our nation's search for a way of reconciling tangata whenua and

manuhiri – the indigenous people of the land and those who had been welcomed as guests but stayed as usurpers – as well as with the struggle of the people of the four winds, who, having lost touch with their home marae, had to renegotiate a sense of what it meant to be Māori.

I knew many moving stories of children, adopted at birth, who had been subsequently reunited with their biological parents or siblings. There was often disappointment. No sense of connection. Or an outright repudiation of the idea of a common bond. But sometimes it was as if the adopted child had been lost and living in a wilderness, and had now come home. My uncle Harold, whom we often called Mick, was haunted by this dream of reunion. He felt that he could never be completely himself unless he was rejoined with the couple that had brought him into the world only to give him up for adoption. ‘He felt rejected,’ my cousin Helen once told me. ‘He felt he had never been really loved.’

According to Helen, her parents had taken good care of Harold’s elderly and incontinent father during his last years. Her mother had washed her father-in-law’s soiled sheets every day, prepared his favorite food, waited on him hand and foot. Harold was forty-two when his father died and he discovered that no provision had been made for him or for his family in his father’s will. For all their pains, they received nothing. For Harold, it was the rejection that hurt most, the revelation that, in his father’s eyes, he had always been the black sheep of the family, inferior to his siblings, and somehow responsible for his own illegitimate origins.

At first I thought Helen was implying that her father had never, until that moment, been told that he was adopted. But she made it clear that what he was never told, and now would never know (because he was suffering from Alzheimers), was that his sister Noel was his biological mother.

‘I thought that was just a malicious rumor,’ I said.

‘Not at all,’ Helen said. ‘All the evidence points to it being true.’ She went on to describe how Harold had always been emotionally distant. Preoccupied by his own narcissistic wounds, he seldom showed affection to his children, and probably gave little support to his wife Betty in her hours of need.

Betty Louisa Woswo hailed from Rahotu. Her grandfather had emigrated from Schleswig-Holstein in the 1870s, settling on land that had been confiscated from Taranaki Māori following the infamous invasion of Parihaka. Betty’s father installed the first herringbone milking shed in Taranaki. ‘But he was an ogre,’ Helen said, ‘and my mother’s life was hell. Life on the farm was cows, cows, cows. My mother hated them, especially the milking. Before school and after school, and every day of the week. She was the only one of her nine siblings to complete high school, and she longed for a life beyond Rahotu and dairy farming. The only way out was nursing, which is what she did. When she married my father, she probably thought she would have a home of her own, a family, and be happy. But he was conscripted, and she spent the war years in New Plymouth, working as a nurse for a local doctor. I don’t think she ever found what she was looking for. She loved the piano, loved music. She was smart as a tack. But look where she wound up. Worn out looking after my

father. Cooking, cleaning house, all without enough money. Harold bought all kinds of electronic gadgets for himself, but Mum did not even have a washing machine! And on top of everything else, she was doing her charity work. Red Cross visiting, Plunket, National Council for Women, and taking care of Māori babies when their mothers were ill. I don't recall ever having my bedroom without an extra cot in it and a wee Māori baby to feed in the night.'

Helen blamed her father for her mother's suffering. 'Men snare women,' she said. 'They put them to work for them, keeping house, satisfying their desires, catering to their whims, caring for their kids, and every call for greater fairness is met with, "Who pays the bills? Who's the breadwinner here?"

'My mother was ground down,' Helen said. 'Worn away to nothing.'

Six years after Harold's father's death, on a weekend when Harold and his younger daughter were away (the older children had already left home), Betty went to the local pharmacy with Harold's prescription for a repeat of his medication, returned home and took a lethal overdose of his pills. No one had any inkling of her intentions, and she left no explanation.

Helen's grim narrative made me think back, for the first time in many years, to the holidays I spent in New Plymouth with my favorite aunt and uncle. If Helen found her father wanting, he was, in my eyes, an affable and eccentric hero. I adored his radio transmitters and vintage cars, our visits to the Speedway on Saturday nights, and our foraging at low tide for paua. In retrospect, however, I remembered how care-worn my Auntie Betty often seemed. The

cloth diapers laboriously hung out to dry in the blustery Taranaki wind or, in winter, strung over lines in the basement and draped over a drying rack in front of an electric radiator. Porridge boiling over on the stove. A crying child. The endless difficulty – as she put it – ‘of making ends meet’. And though she must have been exasperated by my ceaseless questions – why this, why that? – she indulged and cared for me. ‘You were her favorite,’ Helen said. ‘She would have done anything for you.’

‘So what of Noel?’ I asked Helen, mystified as to why she believed that her father’s sister was also his mother.

‘She left home at seventeen, eighteen, and went to Wellington,’ Helen said. ‘Trained for a while as a nurse, but hated it and dropped out. She went to Auckland and found work as a legal secretary to Sidney Fitzherbert, a senior partner in the family firm. The father was Sir William Fitzherbert, who came out to New Zealand from England and made his mark. That bridge across the Manawatu River in Palmerston North is named for him, as well as Fitzherbert Avenue. Anyway, Sidney Fitzherbert falls for Noel. He’s married, but so what? He gets her pregnant, and she has the baby in the Fitzherberts’ home at 4 Shelly Beach Road in Herne Bay. I know the address well; the Fitzherberts later bequeathed their home to the Justice Department who turned it into a home for Māori girls in trouble [guilty of petty larceny or pregnant out of wedlock]. Poetic justice, eh! The Fitzherberts looked after Noel for eighteen months, helping her with the baby, working out how best to deal with the situation. There’s a photo of Harold from this time. He’s decked out in a sailor suit. Everything immaculate. You can see how well looked after he

is. Then Sidney Fitzherbert and Noel's dad, Lewis Jackson, come to an agreement. The Jacksons will adopt the baby, the Fitzherberts will make regular payments to cover its upkeep and education, but nothing of this will be made public. So the Jacksons' neighbors in New Plymouth now see Noel pushing a pram around the streets with an eighteen-month child that is supposed to have been born to Eva [Noel's mother, who is past child-bearing age]! Naturally, everyone jumps to the conclusion that Noel is the mother, though the finger of local suspicion also falls on Eileen [Noel's sister]. I think this is why Eileen bought a one-way ticket to the US and left home. Eva died not long afterward. Even Noel got out as soon as she could, leaving the baby to be raised by who? – our grandfather and your father. She never let giving away her baby ruin her life, though it was probably always a stone in her gut. Anna [Noel's elder daughter from her first marriage] told me that Noel made the only reference to her true relationship with Harold on her deathbed. "Poor Harold," she said. "The trouble with Harold is that his mother gave him away."

Helen was convinced that this early abandonment and lack of mothering explained why Harold had been unable to relate to his own children. She recalled being dragged or driven around the city with him. Sitting for hours in his car while he talked to a customer about a radio repair or, more likely, chewed the fat or talked stock cars. 'Once,' she said, 'I deliberately wet my pants to get noticed. Not that it worked, not that it made any difference to him.'

I was taken aback by Helen's remarks, for during my visits to New Plymouth I had also gone the rounds of the New Plymouth shops with Harold, sitting for long periods in one of his old Riley,

Wolseley or Citroën cars, the sun making the seats too hot to sit on, and the interior filling with a smell of varnished wood, leather upholstery, solder and my uncle's sweat. I considered it part of the adventure, this idiosyncratic way in which my uncle conducted his business. Even when I learned that he had alienated yet another business partner or gone bankrupt, I did not think to blame him, but only the small-minded world that failed to appreciate his soft-spoken manner, his sensitivity, his tall stories.

‘How do you feel,’ I asked Helen, ‘about your aunt being your grandmother?’

‘Doesn't bother me, doesn't make any difference.’

Not long after my conversation with Helen, I consulted the government registry of births, deaths and marriages. Harold's biological father was indeed Sidney Wyndam Fitzherbert, but his birth mother was Madeleine Young who lived only 500 meters from the Cargen Private Hotel in Eden Crescent where Sidney lived in 1918.

I also dug out some old photographs of the four siblings, Harold, Eileen, Noel and my father, D'arcy.

Eileen (sunglasses in hand) is on a return visit to New Zealand. She migrated to the U.S. at the age of twenty-one. Having trained as a dental technician, she worked in dentistry in California before marrying and settling in Los Gatos, where she became an American citizen. Eileen had two grown-up sons, and this was her first trip home in twenty-five years. She has linked arms with Harold and Noel, pulling them close, drawing them together. Noel seems to have mixed feelings about the camera and the occasion. She rests her hand



in the crook of D'arcy's arm, as though she feels more secure with him. D'arcy's left arm juts out at an angle, as though offering support to an invisible other in the space beside him. Look closely and you will notice that everyone's hands are closed or clenched.

It is the summer of 1956, the lawn close-mown and rock hard. Harold, the youngest sibling, is thirty-eight. D'arcy is forty-five, Eileen fifty-three, and Noel, the first-born, is fifty-four. I am the family photographer. My camera is an Agfa Record that I purchased the year before with money earned working for a milk deliveryman and a local greengrocer. But at age sixteen, I have yet to learn that nothing in life is as it appears. I am focused on reading my Weston light meter, holding it close to the faces of my subjects, calculating the correct shutter speed and aperture. I want everyone to smile for the dicky bird.

I look at another photo – of Harold and Betty. Only now do I see how awkward they are together. They stand side-by-side, dutiful and stiff; Harold's hands are behind his back and he is scowling. Betty's arms are folded, and her smile, I suspect, is for me alone, or simply the brave face she puts on, hiding her unhappiness. She is wearing her English Horrocks frock and her Queen Mother shoes – her outfit for a special occasion.

While it is evident from Harold's physical appearance that he is a Jackson in name only, his sense of being marginal is not entirely explained by this, nor by his adoption or the circumstances of his upbringing. Perhaps no narrative can do justice to the complexity and mystery of a life. As Helen put it, 'You never know what you're in for. If you knew what you were getting yourself in for you'd probably never do it.'

Harold remained obsessed by his origins for as long as he lived, haunted by the rumor that his sister was his mother and by the way his adoptive parents had treated him as second best, as a

disappointment, and passed him over in their last will and testament. Perhaps he also felt guilty about the love he had withheld from his own family.

Although our lives may not transcend our origins, we seem to need to believe that this is possible, as in the myth of Maui who sought to return to the womb and be born again. But is the past ever really preserved in the present or is it simply an idea we invoke – the primordial, the primary or the prior – in order to authorize what we decide in the here and now? Looking at my photographs, taken half a century ago, I realize how difficult it is to retrieve the lived experience we like to believe that film can capture. For when we photograph a place or person, or render an account of an event in writing, we inadvertently create a screen that will prevent us ever recovering what Walter Benjamin calls ‘the unique existence’, or the ‘aura’ of the original. Ironically, therefore, our attempts to preserve ‘moments of being’, or ‘traces of the first’ hasten their loss. Even with photos and documents, details of our lives get weeded out or blurred, and the ambience of mood and emotion that made an event memorable is dulled. There is no such thing as perfect recall. And because we are social creatures, continually engaging with new people and new situations, we must jettison what is no longer relevant, revising our versions of the past to create a space for the present. It is not only our faltering steps or forgetfulness that make it difficult to return to where we have been; our brains draw a curtain on the past in order to prepare us for the road ahead. I have – or think I have – a vivid memory of reading Thomas Wolfe’s novels when I was nineteen, and sharing with my mother my passion for Wolfe’s

writing. But it was Thomas Wolfe who famously said, ‘You can’t go home again ... You can’t go back to your family, back home to your childhood, back home to romantic love, back home to a young man’s dreams of glory and of fame.’ And it was Thomas Wolfe who, at the end of his life, turned this lamentable truth into a credo. ‘To lose the earth you know, for greater knowing; to lose the life you have, for greater life; to leave the friends you loved, for greater loving; to find a land more kind than home, more large than earth – Whereon the pillars of this earth are founded, toward which the conscience of the world is tending – the wind is rising, and the rivers flow.’

[Return to the Manawatu - notes](#)

Death's secretary

It would take me well out of my way, but I wanted to drive north from Palmerston North, through the Pohangina Valley, and into the high country around Utuwai and Apiti. I wanted to stand on a windswept bend in the road, with the broken landscape stretching away toward the sea, the skyline crimped and scalloped, blue-gray bluffs of papa clay catching the light. And so it was that I came down through the Oroua Valley to Kimbolton, traveling the road I had taken so many times when researching the life and times of Joe Pawelka.

My research had begun in archives and libraries, because I thought of my project as wholly historical. But it brought me into contact with Pawelka's living relatives and reminded me of the fatalistic overtones of the Biblical observation that the iniquities of the fathers are sometimes visited upon the children unto the third and fourth generation.

My search for Joe Pawelka also implicated my own story. For in trying to flesh out the story of this notorious renegade I began to

come to terms with my own small-town New Zealand upbringing, and rethink my own New Zealandness in the light of my increasingly attenuated relationship with the country I still called home.

In 1910, twenty-two-year-old John Joseph Thomas (Joe) Pawelka was arrested in the Manawatu and remanded on charges of housebreaking, arson, and theft. His escape from police custody triggered the most intense manhunt in New Zealand since the military pursuit in the late 1860s of the Māori resistance leader Te Kooti. During the weeks that Pawelka was on the run, two men were shot dead, buildings were set on fire, shops and homes burgled, and panic engulfed a province. Recaptured and brought to trial, Joe Pawelka got twenty-one years' hard labor, a sentence many considered vengeful and unjust, and on the wintry August day in 1911 when Pawelka escaped from The Terrace jail in Wellington, never to be heard of again, there was widespread feeling that poetic justice had been done.

The story first emerges in newspapers of the time, with journalists making the most of the dramatic events taking place in a region where the commonest crimes were riding a bicycle at night without a lamp, being drunk and disorderly, rigging scales and using false weights, playing hooky, and allowing stock to stray onto a public thoroughfare. But within a year of Pawelka's escape, the story is retold by a Wellington newspaperman, Albert William Organ, and for seventy years – until another Wellington journalist, Des Swain, recasts the Pawelka story in a quasi-fictional way, celebrating Joe as a hard-done-by romantic hero – Organ's *True Life Story of Joseph John Pawelka: His Crimes, Sentences, Prison Career, and Final*

Escape (1912) remains the account on which encyclopaedia articles, TV scripts, and the Pawelka legend are based. In part the story of *Man Alone*, it belongs to the diffuse and dimly lit world of New Zealand's collective imagination, blurring with countless other popular stories, pub yarns, and anecdotes, and resembling a kind of national self-portrait on which New Zealanders work tirelessly, albeit without much sense of the finished picture.

I first heard of Joe Pawelka from my grandfather, who was a policeman in Levin in 1910 and among the police reinforcements brought to the nearby Manawatu region for the Pawelka manhunt. An immigrant himself, with working-class roots in the north of England, he had a lot of sympathy for Joe Pawelka. Sharing his reminiscences with me, his young grandson, was one way in which he revisited, in his retirement, questions of social justice and human dignity that had preoccupied him all his life.

Stories have a habit of generating stories. They come to nest, one inside the other, like Chinese boxes, each a window onto another's world. When I went to live in the Manawatu in 1973, I became acquainted with places where Joe Pawelka lived, worked, and took refuge. In a poem published in 1977, I alluded to some of the ways in which my story and Joe Pawelka's were beginning to come together in my imagination:

This poem has been written before;
it has been written by men and women
who never read a line of poetry all their lives;
it has been said and imagined many times;
it is the poem of the labyrinth,

of the other way, of forgotten roads
and of the wheel of chance
and today, traveling the Pahiatua track
to Scarborough, I think of Joe Pawelka
and what went wrong for him,
of my grandfather's story of a hunted man
who vanished from the cells
in which he was condemned
for burning down a school,
housebreaking and escape,
for bothering his wife when the magistrate
ordered their separation,
who scrawled a note with the lead of a bullet
and signed it 'a man against the world.'



Though I'd always wanted to find out 'what went wrong' for Joe Pawelka, it wasn't until the winter of 1994 that I set about the task. In the National Library and Archives I retraced the steps of other researchers who had tried to identify the childhood experiences that may have set Joe Pawelka on his tragic path. A picture emerged of a close-knit family of working-class Catholic Moravian migrants struggling to make a living in the predominantly Protestant and Anglo settlement of Kimbolton a hundred years ago. Joe was the first-born, a 'smart boy', but given to 'morose moods'. Pampered by his mother and at odds with his quick-tempered father, he felt bitter and bereft when obliged to leave school at thirteen and become a butcher's apprentice. A letter to his mother, written in the winter of 1905, gives us a glimpse into his life at this time.

My Dear Mother

I suppose you are wondering where in the world I have got here in a place a little smaller than Palmerston Since I came here I have got a job butchering in the town and intend to stick to it if I dont have a row with the boss This place is not so bad to live in and since I have been here I have met Cruden and his missus the Richardsons and the Gensons who are all living here Cruden is as big a skiter as ever he was his Mrs has grown like her mother about as broad as she is long Well Mother how have you been getting on I hope you are quite happy and well and am not working too hard I suppose the kid [Pawelka's younger sister, Florence Helen] gives you enough bother though Oh Mother what about the Photo you promised me I should like to have a separate one of the lot of you Agnes Jack and yourself ... Dear Mother you always complained about Kimbolton being a cold place but I believe this is worse here I do not know if it is always like this but the weather is something terrible since I have been here I have seen three snow falls all ready ... How are all the people getting on around you now I expect if I were to go back I should find nearly all strangers in the town and all the young fellows married by what I have heard on occasions The fools are mad and don't know what they are doing never mind we have all got to go through the mill once they find women out as well as I have they wont trouble their heads about them How is Agnes getting on with the tailoring it is a good thing for her to learn something in that line it is far easier than going out to service Well Mother it is getting dark and I cant see very well to write I would like to tell you a little more but I cant see so I think I shall close this little letter I hope to hear from you as soon as possible so write immediately and let it be a long letter with any amount of news in it Good by Dear Mother my best love to you and Agnes and Jack

from

Your loving Son

J Pawelka

Written five weeks before he turned eighteen, the letter is from a solitary young man with little joy in his life. He feels rejected, displaced, alone. His father does not figure in his affections. His unhappiness has embittered him, making him judgmental and cynical. He has the habit of getting into arguments with his employers, and changes jobs often. He has been wounded in love. The world is a cold and inhospitable place.

On his twenty-first birthday Joe is admitted to Palmerston Public Hospital with typhoid fever, and barely survives the operation on his lungs. After convalescing under his mother's care, he takes work with a Palmerston butcher, only to be sacked because of his habitual lying. Ten days after losing his job he steals some meat and a steel from another butcher, and three weeks later burgles the house of a Palmerston lawyer. Then, after a brief courtship, he marries Hannah Elizabeth Wilson. The marriage lasts only two months. Possibly Lizzie fears her husband's mood swings, his histrionic threats against those who have crossed him, and the revolver he has hidden in the house. Though pregnant, she files a court application for 'summary separation' and goes back to live with her widowed mother in Ashhurst. In an attempt to win back Lizzie's love, Joe tries to drown himself in the Manawatu River, but all he gets for his pains is a fine and a court order to pay his estranged wife maintenance. Unable to imagine or endure life without Lizzie, Joe now begins to fill their vacant house with stolen furniture and furnishings. It is as if the empty dwelling embodies his loss and serves as a sore reminder of the bourgeois world in which he has failed to find a place. As if he imagines that by filling the house with things taken from the family

homes of others, his stolen happiness will be magically restored. In fact, Joe loses everything. Charged with numerous thefts of furniture and furnishings from houses in Palmerston, he is remanded in custody. Two weeks later he escapes and makes it back to Kimbolton only to be rearrested the following day and taken to Wellington for trial. Again he escapes, and returns to the Manawatu. Breaking through police cordons, he tries to see his wife, and one windswept night leaves a note in a milk can in Ashhurst protesting his innocence of the crimes that the papers are daily attributing to him. Scrawled with the lead of a bullet, the note is signed: 'J Powelka, a man against the world.'

The rest is history. Arrested in a hay barn outside Ashhurst where he has taken shelter from torrential rain, he rails against false accusations and then, in custody, defeated and weeping, begs to see Lizzie. When told she will not come he asks to be given poison to finish himself off. At his trial in Wellington he is charged with a string of break-ins and burglaries, with burning down a furniture store and a high school, with escape, and with the murder of a policeman. Though found not guilty of murder, he gets the maximum sentence the law allows. But within six months, after four unsuccessful attempts, he breaks out of Wellington's maximum security prison on The Terrace with the help of other prisoners, and is never recaptured.



At this point, the subject of my research was snared by the stereotypes and stories that had gathered around him and taken on a

life of their own. One such stereotype is immediately recognizable in the photo on the 1910 police poster that still shapes our image of him. The rigid mugshot, with the formal placement of the hands, and the prisoner literally up against a wall, evokes an image of a body in death. Made over as a criminal type, Pawelka suffers our gaze and our judgment. His name, his history, his background, his thoughts, his voice are invalidated. The frozen image has taken him over. He is trapped inside the frame as in a cage, and even today we find it hard to see him otherwise.

To know another person's soul, to read another person's mind, one must find that person within oneself. One has to locate in one's own experience something that corresponds roughly to the other person's experience. This is why, from the outset of my research, I found myself digressing into my own life. But a second strategy for finding one's way into another's life is to trace the ways in which that life has impinged upon and shaped the lives of others.

Having finished my archival research in Wellington, I went back to the remote Aboriginal settlement in North Queensland, Australia, where my wife Francine and I had been living since the previous year. But the Pawelka story had me in thrall, and in January 1995 I returned to Wellington to pursue the story further.

Contrary to the expectations I had had at the beginning of my research, I began to realize that the full story and its conclusion were not facts of history, finalized years ago, but events still in the making – events that included me. As I moved from archives into the world of the living, I came to see that Joe Pawelka's story was as much the

story of his family over several generations as his own, and as much that family's shameful secret as part of the nation's mythology.

My first step was to visit Ray Carter, a retired senior constable who had interviewed members of the Pawelka family when researching his history of the Palmerston North police district. Ray had met Joe's sister Agnes in 1985, a few months before she died, and Agnes had not disguised her contempt for journalists. Sensitive to her hurt, Ray did not even broach the subject of her brother's fate. 'It was the same with my interview with Jack Hansen,' Ray told me. 'I began to interview him, but never followed it up.'

Jack Hansen was Agnes's son and Joe's nephew. He had run a store in Kimbolton, established by his father in 1891, but was now retired and living in the back of the shop.

One of the leads I was following was a photograph. Apparently, some time during the First World War, Joe's parents received a photo of a group of about thirty soldiers in a desert, clipped from a newspaper. Around one of the soldiers in the back row a circle had been drawn. The family were unable to decipher the postmark on the envelope, and there was no letter to indicate who had sent the photo or why.

When I met Jack, I mentioned the photo Ray had described to me. Jack said he remembered the photo, but had no idea what had become of it. 'It was actually a photo Joe's mother Louisa had clipped from a newspaper – of a group of American or Canadian soldiers in France.' Louisa was convinced that one of the soldiers in the photo was Joe, but Jack was inclined to think this was wishful thinking, something for her to hang on to. That Joe had never

contacted his mother, that he had broken his promise to write her and broken her heart was something Jack could never forgive.

I asked if Joe's family ever spoke of him.

'Seldom, if ever,' Jack said. It was only when he was in his twenties and asked outright that he was told anything. The family kept its own counsel. Partly it was fear of prosecution for having aided and abetted the fugitive. Partly it was shame – because of the ill repute Joe brought upon them. 'It was hard,' Jack said. 'It was always hard for the mother.'

Jack explained how the family sheltered Joe during the six months that followed his escape from The Terrace Gaol in August 1911. Apparently, Jack's father, Willie Hansen, who was married to Joe's sister Agnes, organized everything. Joe's mother cooked meals. Willie smuggled them to an old grain store across the road from his shop where Joe was in hiding. But the entire community was complicit. When, years later, the Kiwitea County Council bought the old grain store to convert it into a garage, some musty old prison clothes were discovered under the floor boards. Supposing them to have belonged to Joe Pawelka, the Council presented them to Willie as a souvenir.

'When and how did Joe leave Kimbolton?'

According to Jack, Willie again planned everything. He got a friend, a local farmer, to buy train tickets to Auckland and a boat ticket to Vancouver. 'The Pawelkas, the Hansens, and Willie Hansen's friend scraped up the money for the fare and arranged for help from their farm worker, Ted Lawrence. Joe's father took Joe to Mangaweka on February the fifteenth, 1912, hidden under grain

sacks in a dray, while Ted traveled separately on horseback. The two men boarded the train for Auckland the following evening. Next day, Ted and Joe had only a short walk from the Auckland railway station to the new Queen Street wharf where Joe was to board a ship for Canada. Having got Joe onto the boat, Ted went ashore. But when he returned to say goodbye not long before the boat sailed, he couldn't find Joe anywhere. So there was no certainty that Joe had actually sailed.'

After my conversation with Jack Hansen, I went back to the National Archives in Wellington. I figured that since Joe Pawelka would not risk sailing under his own name, his assumed name might contain some small clue as to his true identity. So I began combing shipping lists.

At five in the afternoon of 16 February, 1912 – the day Ted Lawrence and Joe Pawelka reached Auckland – the R.M.S. *Makura* (4920 tons) sailed for Vancouver, via Suva and Honolulu. Arriving early that same morning from Sydney, the *Makura* loaded a large consignment of butter and hides for Vancouver, as well as ten tons of general cargo for Suva and Honolulu. She carried 246 passengers, 149 of whom had embarked in Sydney. In Auckland that day the wind was fresh and from the south. The afternoon air temperature was 70° F.

My heart was pounding as I scanned the names. On the strength of what Jack had told me about scraping together the fare, I assumed Joe would not have had a saloon or second-class ticket, so paid closest attention to the steerage passengers, fifteen of whom had boarded in Auckland. In the lists, they were designated 'laborers and

domestics'. Of the twelve men, one was traveling with his wife. The destination of another, Mr Peterson, was Honolulu. The ten remaining names, written in longhand and difficult to decipher, suggested nothing.

Despite drawing a blank, I decided to photocopy the *Makura* passenger lists, and those for the *Morea* that sailed from Auckland for Sydney and London the same day. Unfortunately, I was told, there was a 'blanket restriction' on photocopying shipping lists.

I asked if I could speak with the archivist.

I was told it would be a long wait.

The delay proved fortuitous. With time to kill, I went back to the Shipping Indexes. When was the next sailing from Auckland?

The *Makura* sailed on Friday. The next sailing was on Monday, February 19th. The S.S. *Wimmera* (1871 tons) crossed the Tasman twice a month. I worked my way through the steerage list. Seventy-six were men. One was a Mr J. Wilson.

I was sure I had tracked him down. I told myself he must have had recourse to his second name, John. That he might assume Lizzie's maiden name had already occurred to me. But what really seemed to clinch the matter was my discovery, next day, in the shipping advertisements of *The New Zealand Herald* for February 1912, that tickets purchased for sailings on Union Steamship Company boats were interchangeable with Huddart Parker – the company that owned the *Wimmera*.

Was it possible that Joe Pawelka had not sailed for Canada after all? Keeping his plans to himself, had he decided to cover his tracks, cut off all ties with his past, and never look back? When he gave Ted

Lawrence the slip in Auckland, was it his intention that no one, not even his family, would know where he was going? As an escaped and hunted criminal, there was no future for him in New Zealand. His wife had washed her hands of him. His family had been obliged to farewell him forever. Under these circumstances, did he choose to die to the life that was now dead to him? Did he turn against the world that seemed to have turned against him, in an act of symbolic suicide? Equally an act of spite and an act of survival?

Many of the men who crossed the Tasman in steerage each summer were shearers. Joe Pawelka could have fallen in with them, disembarked in Sydney, and gone inland. When war was declared, he may have enlisted. There was a real possibility that he numbered among the thousands of ANZAC casualties at Gallipoli.

However, nothing would come of this line of inquiry, despite my extensive searches in Australian war archives and registers of Births, Deaths and Marriages. I tell myself now that it doesn't matter. But I did not want to bring my story to an end, as others had done, by imagining what happened.

Yet was I not a writer, a storyteller, and don't all stories demand closure?



It was almost a year before my story found its ending. It happened in Kimbolton, where Joe began, and where I had returned to see Jack Hansen one more time.

During my year away in the U.S. I had written a draft of my book and sent copies to Jack, as well as to Anne Harris, Joe's

granddaughter, whom I had met in Wellington during a previous visit. I told them there were pieces missing from the mosaic, and that these pieces belonged not to the past but to the present. I was already aware that the most compelling thing about Joe Pawelka's story, the thing I wanted to convey, was the way his story had become transmuted into others. The real story was about the people who had survived Joe's disappearance, who had had to deal with the stigma of loss, humiliation, and disgrace: Louisa, who, in Jack's words, 'took to her garden and rosary beads'; Joseph senior, who 'took to the grog'; Lizzie who bore his child and tried to erase his name; Agnes, Jack and Helen, Joe's siblings, who bore the brunt of gibes and gossip in their turn. Their stories were the way I would bring mine to an end.

In August 1995, I returned to Kimbolton and a 'round table conference' Jack had arranged to solve the remaining pieces of the puzzle.

It was the weekend of the America's Cup, and when I saw the Marque Vue sparkling wine in Jack's fridge I thought our conference would be overshadowed by that event. But no, the champagne was to celebrate what Jack called the family reunion. This would be the first time all of Joe's living descendants had come together. Anne drove up from Wellington, and John and Fay – Helen's children – came from Wellington and Wanganui with their spouses. Everyone had files and boxes of photos, genealogies, and family memorabilia. There was even a revolver Joe had made when he was a boy – a sawn-off .22 rifle, with the patent mark of H. Pieper's, Liège, Belgium engraved on the beveled barrel.

Though my research had been the catalyst for our meeting, Joe Pawelka did not dominate it. For Joe's nephews and niece, clearing up the mystery of his disappearance eighty-three years ago was far less urgent than affirming their survival as a family. As John, Fay, Jack, and Anne began to share their stories, photos, and memorabilia, the talk was less of Joe than of his sisters, Agnes and Helen, who had struggled to escape his shadow.

Fay recalled some of her mother Helen's memories: of when Helen was eight and came home from school at lunchtime with a friend one day to find her brother Joe in the kitchen with Louisa; of the police poking pitchforks into the haystack behind the house, but too afraid to go into the hay shed lest Joe was hiding there.

But mostly Helen said nothing of her brother.

'Any time I mentioned the name Pawelka, the walls came up,' John said.

'She felt shame,' John's wife, Maria, added. 'It ruined her life. You can't imagine what it was like back then. Joe's brother Jack never married because he carried the Pawelka name. He didn't want his children to be stigmatized by having to carry it too.'

'We were never allowed to mention his name,' Fay said. 'Mum didn't keep some of the things she got from Louisa. She destroyed a lot of things that had to do with Joe. She was ashamed of the memory.'

When she was eighty-seven, Agnes wrote to her nephew about a television film that was being made about her brother: 'When Joe disgraced us, we lost touch with everyone, thinking they would not want to have anything more to do with us. I suppose we were too

sensitive; and now it's all going to be dragged up again in a film. I wish to God I was dead and out of it. There is no doubt about the innocent having to suffer for the guilty unto the third or fourth generation. People are so cruel...'

Joe's *guilt* had become metamorphosed into the family's *shame*.

Despite everything, Louisa kept a faithful record of every rite of passage in the life of the family, and when Fay showed me Louisa's prayer book it was like being given a glimpse into the family's soul.

The small, battered Catholic missal measured about three inches by five. The boards were covered in purple cloth. There was a tarnished metal cross on the front cover. The binding was broken. I had to turn the dog-eared, age-blotched, brittle pages with care.

In several pages in the front and back of the book, Louisa had, over the years, written details of births, deaths and marriages. Here was the date of her arrival in New Zealand, and of her marriage to Joe senior when she still called herself Louise König. Here were the birthdays of her sons, Joseph John Thomas (Joe) and John Alfred (Jack), and of her daughters Agnes and Florence Helen. Here also were the dates on which her children left home.

One page arrested me. Though the right hand edge of the page was tattered, making it impossible to decipher two of the dates, here, at last, was confirmation of the date of Joe's final leave-taking. His name, Joseph John Thomas, was reduced to initials, possibly to disguise a potentially incriminating fact: 'J.J.T left home 15th Feb 1912'. A later entry read: 'Joe left home 15th Feb 1912'.

'She wrote him out of her life,' Jack said.



Walter Benjamin observes that 'death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death.' In a similar vein, John Berger explains that 'any story drawn from life begins, for the storyteller, with its end.' Most stories, he goes on to say, 'begin with the death of the principal protagonist. It is in this sense that one can say that storytellers are Death's secretaries. It is Death who hands them the file.'

In the case of Joe Pawelka, it was a disappearance, not a death, that set the story in motion and I was death's secretary.

At Jack's 'round table' in Kimbolton I felt like a ghostly eavesdropper, registering a story that at times brought tears, at other times laughter. But though I was privy to these unrehearsed recollections and shared memories, I was an outsider. Almost a voyeur.

What had brought us together? And why now?

Our meeting had little to do with vindicating Joe. If anything, it was a celebration of being free of his legacy. Greater than any sense of his presence was the sense of Helen's absence. She had passed away only a few years before. If shame is a kind of perpetual grieving, then the family, working through their grief over Helen's death, had at last begun to unburden itself of the shame it had shared with her.

Helen had been the last of Joe's generation. 'An afterthought,' Fay said. Much younger than the others, she was the last to have known Joe in life. Though Jack liked to tell me that if Helen had been alive my research would have been easier, I knew that it would have been harder, because I, like the others, would have been bound by the

same taboo against talking about the past – the sole defense Helen and the others had against further hurt. The generosity with which John and Fay showed me Helen's heirlooms, and confided to me what they remembered of her and Joe, expressed their freedom from an old constraint.

But this was only my guess. For Jack and the others, our original meeting had been a mystery. 'It's strange that after all these years everything is coming together,' he told me, and he mentioned how one of the South Island Pavelkas got in touch at the very same time I began work on the story.

But as soon as we tried to clear up the mystery, we found ourselves again standing in Joe's long shadow.

Anne was convinced that Joe's spirit had brought us together. John's wife, Maria, agreed. Joe's spirit had presided over our meeting. It was Joe who inspired Barbara Blyth (nee Pavelka) to contact the others last year. And it had been Joe who had moved me to write my book.

In some ways, these spiritualistic suggestions come close to the truth.

No life is sufficient unto itself. A person is singular only in the sense in which astronomers use the term: a relative point in space and time where invisible forces become fleetingly visible. Our lives belong to others as well as to ourselves. Just as the stars at night are set in imperceptible galaxies, so our lives flicker and fail in the dark streams of history, fate, and genealogy. One might say that we are each given three lives. First is our conscious incarnation, occupying most of the space between our birth and death. Second is our

existence in the hearts and minds of others – a life that precedes the moment of our birth and extends beyond our death for as long as we are remembered. Finally there is our afterlife as a barely remembered name, a persona, an element in myth. And this existence begins with the death of the last person who knew us in life.

[Death's secretary - notes](#)

Burned places

North of Wanganui, a cloudburst made it difficult for me to see the road ahead, so I pulled over and waited for the squall to pass. As rain lashed and smeared the windows, I scribbled notes, asking myself why we should cleave to the view that the prior is necessarily primary. Why do we pay lip service to the seriality of the seven ages of man, the succession of BC and AD or cause and effect, attributing to the first term a generative or greater power? Why is it so difficult for us to make the present the axis mundi, the measure of all things, the place where past and future come into being, the sole reality we recognize?

My metaphysical ruminations were brought to a close by the rain easing, and pale sunlight suddenly illuminating the drenched hills.

Descending the road into Patea, I glimpsed the sea. Sandhills around the river mouth. The derelict buildings of the old freezing works.

Seventy-five years ago, a thousand workers were employed here during the peak season, but when the meat processing industry

collapsed in the early 1980s, the works were closed. All that remained were rain-stained concrete wharves along the river, splintered timber, broken windows, rust and decay. The site wasn't just ugly; it was toxic – riddled with asbestos cladding and insulation, heavy metals, chemicals, boiler ash dumps, and rusting fuel storage tanks. It was also a hangout for locals with nowhere to go and nothing much to do. Earlier in the year, arsonists had tried to destroy the buildings, perhaps in the hope that they would magically reverse the misfortunes that had befallen the town – a declining population, falling property values and high unemployment.

Among the men who worked summers at the Patea Freezing Works in the 1940s was the writer Ronald Hugh Morrieson. Morrieson's biographer, Julia Millen, writes that, 'He and a friend Bill Webb would go across the bridge over the Patea River to the "Eagle", as the men called the network of roads and ramps and loading bays, workers' huts, storage sheds, stockyards, the wharf, cranes, freight wagons, and the great slaughterhouse itself with its towering chimney. Morrieson worked from four in the morning until midnight, trudging up and down slippery stairs from one of the freezing chambers to the cavernous cool rooms, standing all day with sacking known as "sneakers" wrapped around his boots on cold wet concrete, stacking carcasses, tossing cartons of export meat on to conveyor belts, heaving and shoving the still-twitching carcasses along the chain.'

In my own hometown forty miles away, and still a child, I would lie awake at night hearing the pitiful baying of bobby calves in packed cattle trucks or railway wagons, awaiting the last day of their

lives, so that when I later learned that Morrieson felt revolted by hearing and watching lambs and calves going to their deaths I felt an affinity for him, and not for the first time wondered whether I could ever settle in my hometown, drawing on my familiarity with its dark side to write fiction, rather than seek out remote villages on the other side of the world. Conservative and respectable though these Taranaki towns seemed, Morrieson knew, exploited, and celebrated their gothic face – the lonely and unloved; the sly grog sellers, whores, bookies, drunks, crooks, delinquents, idiots, and perverts who haunted their margins. In doing so he left a bitter legacy. Like Rabelais, Morrieson took a perverse delight in turning the world upside down, revealing its underbelly, showing up its pretensions. In medieval Europe such antinomian excess could be tolerated on ritually prescribed occasions, but not every day. The same was true of Hawera where, in 1946, the local Savage Club staged a revue called ‘Topsy Turvy’, in which Pākehā men performed Māori haka and ‘classique ballets’. As opportunities for ‘a bit of hoo-ha’, these role reversals were hardly invitations to cross-dressing, let alone racial integration, for by demonstrating the impossibility of men passing for women or Māori becoming Pākehā, they paradoxically served to entrench the very social divisions they momentarily and ineptly transgressed.

In the 1940s and 1950s, Māori lived in the small settlement of Taiporohenui on the outskirts of town. A few found employment in Hawera, but social and sporting contacts with Pākehā were rare. Undoubtedly, many knew of the destruction of the great meeting house, Taiporohenui, by British forces under the command of Major-

General Trevor Chute in January 1866, and the occupation of the settlement by colonial troops in pursuit of the guerilla fighter Titokowaru. And all nursed grievances over 19th century land seizures, government duplicity, unequal opportunity, and racial prejudice. Pākehā, on the other hand, saw Māori in the same light as they saw Rodney Hugh Morrieson, or Patea saw its derelict freezing works – problems they prayed would quickly go away. In the postwar years, the steps of Hawera’s National Bank, where Māori shoppers waited for their bus, were known as the Taiporohenui Grandstand. Pākehā complained about the Māori who ate fish and chips and drank soft drinks on the steps of the bank, or loitered there after leaving the pub across the road. In his historical ethnography of Hawera, Allan Thomas cites one local who averred that ‘business people proceeding to transact business at the Bank have considerable difficulty in gaining access to the premises. The whole set-up presents an eyesore.’

Morrieson died in 1972 at the age of fifty in the house in which he was born, depressed and destroyed by years of alcohol abuse and heart disease. His home became an aluminum factory. Twenty years later, 1 Regent Street came up for resale. When a multinational fast food chain showed an interest in the site, a fiery debate began over whether Morrieson’s home should be preserved as a literary museum or demolished. Predictably, conservative voices prevailed, citing Morrieson’s spiteful vision and dissolute life, and arguing that the town’s pastoral image had to be restored. Besides, if Hawera did not get the Kentucky Fried Chicken franchise, Patea would.

As I made my way along the main street I noticed many shop fronts boarded up, state houses going to rack and ruin, Māori kids in hoodies slouching to a local dairy that advertised lotto tickets and ice cream. Te Hawera means burned place in Māori. The Titahi of Whareroa insulted a Ngāti Okahu person of rank, who then sought utu. The avenging taua carried bundles of dried fern by night to the Titahi encampment. After killing the sentinels, they placed fern bundles around the enemy's sleeping-house and set it on fire. Is it possible that such ancient associations still infiltrate the thoughts of the living, accounting for the fire that destroyed what remained of the Patea Freezing Works, not to mention the blaze at 1 Regent Street that Morrieson used in *The Scarecrow* published in 1963, not long before I left New Zealand for the first time?

The only thing that had prevented my leaving sooner was a flagging love affair, and Hawera was the scene of my final foolhardy bid to revive it.

One afternoon of the summer before, in a Wellington pub, the archaeologist Les Groube let it be known that he had a truck for sale; was anyone interested? I said I was. If I had wheels my girlfriend and I could spend the summer driving around the country and camping on remote beaches. So I paid Les his derisory asking price and hitchhiked to Hawera, where Les's wife Rosemary was visiting her parents. That afternoon, Rosemary drove me to the outskirts of town and taught me the rudiments of driving. Boosted by my newfound mobility, my enlarged sense of self, and the certainty that this battered Ford flatbed was the answer to my romantic vicissitudes, I

dropped an anxious Rosemary back in town and headed north, my knuckles white with tension, my heart in my mouth.

That I made it to New Plymouth astonishes me to this day. I drove into the driveway of my uncle Harold's house, and staggered from my new possession as from a wreck. Nerve-racked and knowing that I would never have the guts to continue my journey, even if I did learn how to engage reverse and back out of the driveway, I stayed overnight with my aunt and uncle, sold the truck to a wrecker's yard in the morning, and hitched to Auckland, resigned to losing my girlfriend.

How invincible and hopeful one is at twenty-one!

Now, forty-five years later, I drove with trepidation, for every five minutes, or so it seemed, another blue and silver Fonterra milk tanker sped by, heading to South Gate Hawera, and slamming a wall of compressed air against my car. Later, when I checked out its website, I discovered that Fonterra was New Zealand's largest multinational company and the sixth largest dairy company in the world. Cooperatively owned by over 11,000 farmers, its revenue exceeded \$17 billion. Its ideology, however, was still steeped in the language that pervaded my Taranaki childhood, and a fetishism of dairy products that dates back to our Neolithic beginnings in the Ancient Near East. 'We believe dairy is a gift of nature from our rich soil, fresh grass and clean water. It is a gift to be shared with the world so others can enjoy the building blocks of a vital and healthy life that comes from dairy.' Every small town I drove through had its dairy with a Tip-Top ice cream sign outside, 'Real Ice-creamier', and a defunct cooperative dairy factory that had been converted into a

studio, honey shop or storage shed. In lush paddocks, Jersey and Frisian herds waited for yet another milking. And beyond this landscape of green acres and boxthorn hedges, the mountain resembled an inverted ice cream cone or a petrified breast, shawled in cloud.

[Burned places - notes](#)

Revenant

Continuing north, I was amazed at how quickly the Taranaki towns sped past, as though I were stationary and the landscape was fast-forwarding like a film. When I was a boy, time dragged. The bus from Inglewood to New Plymouth seemed to take the best part of a day to make its ten-mile journey. The daily commute to my high school in Stratford, with its detours and frequent stops, was a depressing prelude to the ordeal of getting through the day. My life itself was lived as a long wait for some indefinable transfiguration.

I spent fifteen years in Inglewood, longer than I have resided anywhere else in my life. Inglewood was the locus of my first memories, my first lessons in life, my first love. But it was the last place I would have chosen to spend my formative years had it been possible to preordain such matters. Nevertheless, the closer I came to my hometown, the more aware I became that one's sense of belonging to a place (or a person) is less the outcome of some natural compatibility than of having weathered the ups and downs of life there over many years. The resulting sense of fateful familiarity

transcends considerations as to whether or not the relationship is fulfilling or even deeply felt. Milk may be a potent symbol of the primary bond, but milk is not some essence that makes this bond inevitable, or even viable. The bond is the breast, the landscape of the maternal body, the place that nurtures one's first dreams and one's earliest nightmares.

In a poem to another of Taranaki's sons, I once wrote that we shared 'the breast-fed Taranaki sky', invoking the image of the mountain as a nurturing source. However, the place itself did not shape us but our struggles in that place – to find ourselves, to give birth to what lay dormant within us. Were I to write that poem to Toss Woollaston today, it would be the quiescent volcano I invoked, not the milk of human kindness.

The closer I came to Inglewood, the sharper these connotations became.

At the corner of Dudley Road I stopped the car. During my boyhood, this was the local golf club. Players had to share the fairways with sheep, and the natural hazards were not sand traps and trees but a stony river, drainage ditches, barberry hedges, and sheep shit. There was now no trace of the clubhouse or the course, something that would not have surprised or bothered me were it not for a promise I had made myself four months earlier to play the same nine holes my father played year in and year out without significantly decreasing his handicap and, as far as I could tell, without finding much fulfillment in the game. Indeed, it may have been his losing struggle, not only to play well but to gain the respect of his peers, that kept me from taking up golf until the summer of 2008. I simply

could not forget or forgive the local burghers who would rib my father for his dearth of scatological stories or his refusal to compromise his teetotalism. But when my seventeen-year-old son, Joshua, developed a passion for golf and encouraged me to play with him, I overcame my resistance.

Through dedicated practice, Joshua quickly outstripped me in skill and confidence. However, the pleasure of his company compensated for my ineptitude until, one afternoon, my game fell apart so badly that I did not play the final two holes, not wanting to drive the ball out of bounds again, duff another iron, or miss another easy putt. I felt sick in the stomach, enervated and furious at myself that I lacked even the skill to make contact with the ball, and I nursed this wounded feeling for the rest of the day. Firstness, I realized, was often synonymous with winning. To come first implied superiority. By contrast, secondness suggested failure. Being the runner-up.

The night of the failed golf game, I could not sleep for replaying the round in my mind, retracing my steps, rehearsing every botched shot. ‘That’s the bad part about golf, that memory bank,’ Johnny Miller observed as Retief Goosen prepared to hit a putt similar to one he had missed a few years before, almost losing the U.S. Open as a result. ‘If he loses he’ll think about this one all night.’ This is what happened to me. It was as if some demon had taken over my mind, forcing me to revisit the scene of my failure as an infernal punishment. This unhappy experience bore such a resemblance to trauma that I wondered how I might shift the demon from my back, forget my bad round, and move on. At the same time I was strongly reminded of how people often perform spontaneous postmortems on

lost games and missed opportunities, as if their mistakes can be made good in memory. Then, it occurred to me: why not, during my planned trip to New Zealand, play a round, however poorly, on the old Inglewood golf course? I would be with my father. In a sense I would become him. My limitations would affirm our kinship. And in retracing his steps over that accursed ground, my understanding of his struggles would be revived; by entering fully into the tribulations of another, I would, in effect, transcend my own.



The idea is as old as the hills: if memory can return us so vividly to the past, surely it is but a short step to actually travel backward in time. That we seldom pursue this idea with much seriousness is not because it is unrealistic, but because art provides the vehicle with which we cross this bridge from where we are to where we would like to be. Through music, stories and ritual acts we replay events that have befallen us, reshaping them in a different image. In these simulations of what occurred some time ago, we make coherent that which was chaotic, make straight that which was crooked, and make right that which was wrong. The course of life, like true love, never runs smooth, but art makes it appear otherwise. In art we allow ourselves the last word on events that left us speechless. By interpreting events that baffled us, we give the impression that we understand the workings of the world. In reality, we are often at the mercy of events, ignorant of their import. But in the stories we tell, we redeem ourselves, wise after the event, and appear to be the authors of our own lives.



In Inglewood, I left my car in a back street and wandered through the town like a revenant. It was like confronting a ten thousand-piece jigsaw puzzle with so many pieces missing that you could not be sure what the puzzle depicted. The old brick and stone post office had disappeared without a trace, the municipal chambers had been transformed into a library, where I was pleased to see every section labeled in both English and Māori, and many shelves devoted to Māori language readers. In a town that Māori had long avoided, there was now a marae.

Though I knew no one now, I nonetheless amused myself with the thought that if I stayed a few days I would encounter avatars of the individuals that inhabited my childhood world. And it was as a child that I retraced my steps along familiar streets, coming at last to the house where I grew up.



I am wearing sandals. The clay track bears traces of a hopscotch game. In the palm of my hand I can feel the sand-filled tobacco tin that I will throw into the numbered squares. It lands with a thud and skids on the clay. It is quarter past six in the evening, and Mr Eva is lurching along the footpath, blind drunk and mouthing curses at the hedge. I cross the street to Ethel Hastie's house, my hand fumbling with the loop of number eight wire that holds her gate shut. The path along the sunless side of her house is covered with moss. At her back door I stand on the rumpled superphosphate sack that serves as a doormat. Mrs Hastie emerges like a figure in a photographic

darkroom, asking if I have come for eggs. From the doorway, I watch as she selects the eggs from a large ceramic bowl and places them in a brown paper bag. The shelves of her pantry are filled with preserved fruit in Agee jars. Marmalade simmers in a large pan on her coal range.

My errand done, I return to the street, now passing the Fabishes' cottage. The garden is filled with chrysanthemums that Mrs Fabish will distribute among her Catholic neighbors on All-Soul's Eve. Her husband Mate is in his sixties, yet as strong as an ox. Twice a year he trims our gnarled and unruly holly hedge with a long-handled slasher while I rake up the leaves and cart them in a wheelbarrow to my father's compost bin. A ramshackle and unpainted garage, housing an ancient Oldsmobile, separates the Fabishes' from the Murrays' cottage where my childhood self hesitates, wondering if Eddie is home and whether he will allow me to read the latest issues of his American comics (which my mother prefers me not to read, arguing that English comics are more 'wholesome'). With somnambulant slowness I move past the Barrys' house, a bungalow that for all its modesty is superior to the rundown cottages of the council workers and war widows, with their narrow hallways running from front to back, floorboards covered with broken linoleum, dingy bedrooms lined with sagging scrim and peeling wallpaper. Mr Barry owns a shoe shop in town. He returns home for lunch every day, striding down the middle of the street, bristling with optimism and whistling the tune of 'You are my sunshine'.

You are my sunshine,
My only sunshine.

You make me happy
When skies are gray.
You'll never know, dear,
How much I love you;
Please don't take my sunshine away.

As a child you see only appearances. You are unaware that Mr Eva lost his wife to cancer and is trying to drown his sorrows. You do not connect Mrs Hastie with Gordon Hastie, the idiot boy who lives with his slatternly mother in a former butcher shop and pushes a battered pram up and down Rata Street all day. Years will pass before you are told that Gordon was not an idiot at all; belatedly, he completed his schooling and went on to train as a teacher. Nor do you know that Eddie Murray's father abandoned his mother, and that Eddie will never succeed in tracking him down. And how could you possibly know that Mr Barry is singing of unrequited love?

You told me once, dear,
You really loved me
And no one else could come between,
But now you've left me
And love another;
You have shattered all my dreams.

What shattered dreams drove Stanley Reid Amies Wood to take refuge in Inglewood one can only guess at. He lived behind barred windows and locked doors in a brick building opposite the school playgrounds, venturing forth only to borrow books from the local library or buy bread and meat. I would often pass him in the street,

wary of his military bearing and swagger stick. Whatever the weather, he wore khaki shorts, a blue shirt, red necktie, sandshoes, and black stockings pulled over his knees. We knew him as Dicky Wood, and were taught to give him a wide berth. When he died in 1962, aged 83, he left a curious inheritance that included a life interest in his estate to a young woman with whom he had been infatuated for several years. His will also specified that on her death, money from this estate should be given to the Church of England for the purchase of carillon bells on which the girl's name would be engraved. Investigations showed that Rae Lowe, née Lamb, was only one in a string of goddess wives that Dicky Woods had married in his imagination, depositing gifts at their homes and sending them endearing letters. Little of his past came to light, except that he was born in England, was estranged from his English kin, had worked in Burma for the telegraphic service until 1920, when he came to New Zealand. He also had considerable investments in the London stock market.

Sometimes we tell stories to make good the gaps in our knowledge, to put flesh on the bare bones that remain at the end of a life. Sometimes we tell stories to repair what was broken, to rectify the mistakes we made. Sometimes, however, we tell stories in order to marvel at the discontinuities and anachronisms that fill our lives – the gap between our lives as children and as adults, the private truths hidden behind public dramas, the traumatic events whose shadows are still discernible, in certain light, in our otherwise green and pleasant land.

Te Atiawa

I stayed that night in a local motel, improbably called ‘White Eagle’, and left early next morning with the intention of driving to Waitara via back roads I thought I knew by heart. When I was in my teens, scarcely a weekend passed that I did not cycle into the hills, pushing myself to the limit in an effort to break out of the wilderness in which I felt confined. The asphalt was covered with red lichen. Wild hydrangeas and tree ferns sprouted from roadside embankments. And when I stopped to catch my breath, I would look back at Mount Taranaki, then called Egmont, as if it was the hub of a wheel from which I was finally spinning away.

At Pukerangiora Historic Reserve, punga, tī, tawa and rangiora now grew in the space that had been, when I biked here as a boy, covered by bracken fern or overshadowed by pines that creaked in the wind and filled the collapsed fosses with broken branches, pine straw and cones. But the shriek of a blackbird and the ghostly wind in the trees were disturbingly the same, as was the vertigo I felt standing at the cliff’s edge, looking down at the Waitara River 330

feet below the ancient pā. Though a picnic table offered support, nothing could calm my troubled thoughts of what transpired here in 1831, less than a generation after first contact between Māori and Pākehā in the far north.

By the early 1820s, Northland Māori had diversified their agriculture to include pig breeding, as well as growing imported crops such as turnips, parsnips, carrots, cabbages and peas, and by 1830 most chiefs had Europeans living among them, mediating trade relations with the outside world. Profits from the sale of flax and other produce were used to acquire muskets, gunpowder and iron tools. But in settling old scores, capturing slaves to grow flax, and collecting tattooed heads to trade with itinerant Europeans, the northerners wreaked havoc wherever they went. Throughout the 1820s and 1830s, musket warfare disrupted the fragile balance of power among iwi, and thousands of displaced people sought refuge in mountainous areas further south, safety in new alliances, and revenge for remembered wrongs. At the same time, epidemic illness decimated Māori. Not only was the tapu system of controlling food production and conserving resources undermined by the market economy, pigs ravaged gardens, and villagers often starved or worked themselves to exhaustion in an effort to produce goods for Europeans.

All these tragic repercussions were felt in Taranaki well before the arrival of the first Pākehā settlers.

In 1821, a war party (taua) of Waikato and Ngāti Maniapoto fell foul of Te Atiawa in northern Taranaki. Following this skirmish, many of the invaders took refuge at Pukerangiora Pā, only to be

besieged by Te Atiawa who erected a palisade around the southern end of the Pā, penning the enemy in what became known as Raihe Poaka – The Pigsty. When word of this degradation reached the Waikato chief Potatau Te Wherowhero, he led a taua south for revenge, but was defeated by Te Atiawa and Ngāti Toa under Te Rauparaha at the northern Taranaki pā of Te Motunui where Potatau lost several hundred men.

Ten years later, Potatau Te Wherowhero returned to Taranaki with a vengeance. After a surprise night attack on Pohokura pā on the north bank of the Urenui River, hundreds of Te Atiawa fled to the overcrowded fighting pā at Pukerangiora. In their panic, none thought to gather the valuable food crops – maize, potatoes, kumara, taro, melons, pumpkins – from gardens on the river flats to the southeast. After a siege lasting three months, the morale of the starving defenders was broken, and during an attempt to evacuate the pā in broad daylight 1200 people lost their lives, many throwing themselves from the cliff-top to avoid capture. The invaders showed no mercy. Potatau himself killed 150 prisoners with his greenstone mere, Whakarewa.

I walked back to my car with an image in mind of the old earthworks thrown into relief by early morning shadows, and the sunlit Waitara River catching the light – source of life, bourn of ancestral spirits, waterway to the sea.

It is all too easy to write history in European terms, as a noble battle between civilization and barbarism. Deploying such antinomies, we either see ourselves as bringing enlightenment to a primitive people, or adopt the late 20th century view that we were

tragically mistaken, and were ourselves the barbarians. In the 19th century, we wanted indigenous people to repent their savage and sinful customs by converting to our way of life; a hundred years later, it is *our* arrogance and greed that we must atone for. But colonialism is never a simple relationship between oppressors and oppressed, the first unequivocally evil (because they wield greater power), the second heroically good (since victims are always seen as virtuous). Between the abstract poles of dominance and subordination lies a gray zone where power finds expression as coercion or persuasion, and those without power collaborate or resist (violently or passively). The history of relations between Māori and Pākehā is replete with figures that both exemplify these strategies and blur the line between them.

But there may be little profit in judging who was right and who was wrong, since we are never the sole authors of our actions, and whatever we do – whether virtuous or vicious – will have ramifications we cannot foresee. The simple fact, Hannah Arendt observes, is that – practically or intellectually – we can grasp neither the manifold influences that bear upon us, nor the fateful implications of what we do. This is not to reduce human existence to contingency, for our lives would be unthinkable without at least the *ideas* of agency and design. Arendt wants to emphasize that human action always involves more than a singular subject; it occurs within fields of *interaction* that she calls the ‘subjective in-between’. Accordingly, whatever anyone does or says is immediately outstripped by what others do or say in return. Every action calls out a reaction that ‘strikes out on its own and affects others’. Obvious

ethical questions are entailed by this view. If one can never know exactly the extent to which one's actions make a difference, or the extent to which one is responsible for what one does, it becomes difficult to decide, for example, where precisely to lay blame or praise.

While it may be impossible to understand every antecedent cause or contingent factor that bears upon our actions, Arendt does not take the view that we are thereby in thrall to the past. We may, through *forgiveness*, find release from the consequences of our past actions, or the effect of the actions of others upon us. Through the *promise* we make to ourselves and others, we may find redemption from 'the chaotic uncertainty of the future'. These strategies, she says, reflect the fact of 'natality' – the power of action to bring the new into being.

Forgiveness and the promise, like storytelling and redressive ritual, offer the perennial possibility of redemption, suggesting that we are responsible for our actions, and can change our course and put the past behind us. However, Hannah Arendt avoids the question of whether such strategies are merely magical means of transforming our perception of the world, or real means of changing the way things are. Perhaps this question is beside the point for, in Aotearoa New Zealand, we are obliged to continue addressing Māori grievances, recognizing indigenous rights to resources, and compensating iwi for confiscated land, lost mana and stolen cultural property, even if this fails in the long term to create the bicultural society many of us see as our best possible future. We therefore

struggle to live as creatively as we can with the destructive reality of our history, focusing on what is conducive to life rather than death.

Such a view finds compelling expression in Māori thought. Life is a constant struggle between progression and regression. In this tension between the processes of tupu (unfolding, growing, strengthening) and mate (weakening, dwindling, dying), an individual or a kin group will seek whatever will augment rather than diminish its being. Sometimes this will demand being welcoming and open to the outside world; sometimes it will demand closure and opposition. Hence the saying, ‘Ko Tu ki te awatea, ko Tahu ki te po’ (‘Tu in the daytime, Tahu in the evening’). Tu is the god of war and his spirit Mauri Tu governs the space in front of a meeting house where visitors are met with aggressive displays; tahu (to light) symbolizes the ‘milder and quieter reception within the lighted house at night’.

What matters, however, is life – life that produces life. As my friend Te Pakaka Tawhai put it, ‘ancient explanations and ancestral wisdom (kōrero tahito) are invaluable, not because they hold the key to understanding every epoch or every existential quandary that human beings face, but because they are flexible and adaptable, able to accommodate the capacity of the narrator to render them more relevant to the issues of the day.’

We might agree with William Faulkner when he writes that the past is never dead, it is not even past, but it is surely *what we do with the past* in creating a just society here and now that is the burning issue. Writes Judith Binney, ‘For Māori, the past is seen as that which lies before one, “nga ra o mua” (the days in front).’



In Waitara, I was looking for a shop that sold pens and notebooks. Two Māori men in the main street, whose Taranaki accents were so pronounced I had difficulty understanding them, directed me to the New World supermarket.

After buying what I needed, together with some fruit and muesli bars, I headed toward the bridge. Incredibly, many of the street names still honored men who played major roles in the alienation of Te Atiawa land, including the chief crown purchasing agent Donald McLean, Land Purchase Commissioner Robert Parris, Governor Thomas Gore Browne, and military officers Charles Emilius Gold and Peter Cracroft. Indeed, I would later read, in submissions to the Waitangi Tribunal at Waitara, of how deeply offensive these names were to local Māori whose own leaders remained uncelebrated and whose grievances were still unresolved.

In 1860, the spurious and self-serving arguments for the alienation of Māori land included the following: that it was within the law to confiscate the land of hostile tribes, including the land of those that gave them moral support; that it was reasonable to seize land and property to defray the costs of the war; that many Māori had signed away their land; that Māori had never made full use of the land; that Māori society was lawless; that, in the case of Te Atiawa, rights to the land had been lost when they migrated south to escape the predations of northern invaders.

In 1848, the Te Atiawa chief Wiremu Kingi returned from exile at Waikanae. Almost 600 men, women, and children accompanied him,

some driving stock along the coast, some traveling on horseback, some in canoes. Governor George Gray had proposed preventing the migration, destroying the canoes, and persuading Kingi to give up his claims to land south of the Waitara River. But Kingi was resolute. ‘I will not agree to our bedroom being sold (I mean Waitara here), for this bed belongs to all of us; and do not you be in haste to give the money. If you give the money secretly, you will get no land for it. You may insist, but I will never agree to it ... All I have to say to you, O Governor, is that none of this land will be given to you, never, never, till I die.’

Though lacking the authority to do so, some Māori did sell – for mercenary gain, to curry favor with the Government, to redeem lost status – allowing the Government to claim, in 1859, nearly all Te Atiawa land south of the Waitara River. Consultation with tribal authorities like Wiremu Kingi or respect for Māori customary law were simply not in the Pākehā interest.

On the eve of the declaration of martial law in February 1860, Wiremu Kingi sought a peaceful resolution to the conflict. ‘Friend, Colonel Murray, salutation to you in the love of our Lord Jesus Christ. You say that we have been found guilty of rebellion against the Queen, but we consider we have not, because the Governor has said he will not entertain offers of land which are disputed. The Governor has also said that it is not right for one man to sell the land to the Europeans, but that all the people should consent. You are now disregarding the good law of the Governor, and adopting a bad law. This is my word to you. I have no desire for evil but, on the contrary, have great love for the Europeans and the Māori. Listen: my love is

this, that you and Parris put a stop to your proceedings, that your love for the Europeans and the Māori may be true. I have heard that you are coming to Waitara with soldiers, and therefore I know that you are angry with me. Is this your love, to bring soldiers to Waitara? This is not love, it is anger. I do not wish for anger; all that I want is the land. All the Governors and the Europeans have heard my word, which is that I will hold the land. That is all. Write to me. Peace be with you.’

The European declaration of martial law effectively paved the way for a military assault against Te Atiawa. In 1863, the army, now vastly outnumbering Māori and using heavy artillery, adopted a scorched earth policy, attacking undefended villages, destroying stores, stock and crops, laying waste to buildings and cultivations, driving people from their land. ‘As the troops advanced, the Government built an expanding line of redoubts, behind which settlers built homes and developed farms. The effect was a creeping confiscation of almost a million acres of land, with little distinction between the land of loyal or rebel Māori owners.’

It is not difficult to imagine the demoralization and panic of Māori, displaced from ancestral lands, their livelihoods destroyed. But I find it harder to come to terms with the self-righteousness and loathing that many of the destroyers felt. Consider the comments of Richard Brown, a New Plymouth merchant and land agent and captain of a Native Contingent, jotted down after a raid on Warea, a Māori settlement that had prospered by supplying New Plymouth with potatoes, pig meat, and flour, but whose fighting men had joined Wiremu Kingi in defense of Waitara. ‘I hitch up my horse and pass to

the front. The nigger's [sic] have taken to the scent on the other side of the river, and it is deemed prudent to follow them. Move on with Captn. Seymour to the mill the door of which he coolly kicks open, we enter and find it unoccupied but 3 sacks of wheat in it and a barrel of tar. Up comes the party and smash go the cog's and every breakable portion of the machinery ... Several sacks of wheat and 60 sacks of oats found in one of the houses are claimed by Mr Parris but doomed by the chief [Colonel Gold] to destruction and scattered about under the impression the sea is too rough to allow for their shipment. Orders are passed to pull down the houses, demolish the pā and destroy everything destroyable.' It is not simply Brown's mindless violence that I find disturbing. Nor am I surprised by the evidence of plunder as a motive for sacking a defenseless town, for Māori had been successful, from the earliest years of contact, in transforming their economy along European lines. What troubles me is the depth of Pākehā ignorance of Māori, and the fear born of that ignorance, if not of an unacknowledged guilt – that Pākehā had no right to be in that place, that they were common thieves and trespassers, and that the place would overwhelm them and exact on them and their children a crippling tithes.

At Owae Marae, overlooking the Waitara River and the lost lands, I paid my respects to Wiremu Kingi Te Rangitaake and Sir Maui Pomare. I had come here as a boy, photographed the statue of Sir Maui, and meditated on a history whose moral complexity I was struggling to understand. Pomare's Sicilian marble statue was unveiled in June 1936 at the same hui that inaugurated the carved house, Te Ikaroa a Maui. The tekoteko figure atop the painted

bargeboards is Maui-tikitiki-a-Taranga, the trickster hero who fished up the North Island from the sea. Below him is the stylized head of Sir Maui, who pushed the Government to set up a Royal Commission in 1927 to inquire into Māori grievances relating to the confiscation of Taranaki lands. Wiremu Kingi Te Rangitaake stands at the base of the pole.

Even before the end of the second Taranaki War in 1869, two prophetic Te Atiawa leaders and close kin, Te Whiti-o-Rongomaia and Tohu Kakahi, had established a community at Parihaka and declared their intention of negotiating a peace with Pākehā based on the principal of coexistence. Europeans could remain on the land they now occupied, but there were to be no further encroachments on Māori land and no freehold titles, since chieftancy (tino rangatiratanga) of the land remained with the people of the land (tangata whenua) and was inalienable. In 1878, despite Māori petitions and protests, the Government began surveying Central Taranaki, determined to open it up to European settlers. Te Whiti and Tohu, now leaders of the largest and most prosperous Māori settlement in New Zealand, led a campaign of passive resistance – fencing and plowing occupied farmland, pulling up survey pegs and escorting surveyors from the land still under their control. Though hundreds of these plowmen and fencers were arrested and imprisoned, others took their place. Settlers feared that the resistance campaign was a prelude to renewed armed conflict, and under pressure from Native Minister John Bryce, whose hatred of Māori was no secret, the Government ordered Parihaka to be shut down. At first light on 5 November 1881, 1600 troops stormed the town, only

to be met by 200 skipping and singing children, offering them bread. Maui Pomare was one of these children. He was five at the time, and lost his big toe after a trooper's horse stamped on it. The soldiers then rushed the singing children and seated women, calling them bloody black niggers and threatening to cut off their heads. Te Whiti and Tohu were arrested and jailed for sixteen months. Sixteen hundred Parihaka inhabitants were expelled and dispersed throughout Taranaki without food or shelter, and the remaining 600 were issued with government passes to control their movement.

One hundred and fifteen years after the destruction of Parihaka, the Waitangi Tribunal noted that 'it cannot be assumed that grievance dissipates with time. Witness after witness described the numerous respects in which they, in their view, have been marginalized as a people and how the burden of the war is still with them and their dispossession has preoccupied their thinking. When a grievance of this magnitude is left unaddressed, it compounds with time and expands, as do generations, in geometric progression.'

There is a tragic irreversibility about colonial violence. While one welcomes gestures toward reconciliation – such as the 1999 Heads of Agreement, involving a public apology for land confiscations in Taranaki, recognition of cultural associations with sacred geographical landmarks and land areas, restoration of tribal access to traditional food gathering areas, monetary compensation totaling NZ \$34 million and commercial redress for economic loss due to land confiscation – some losses cannot be made good, some wounds cannot be healed. Moreover, every slight and injustice in the present will be referred back to the past, fuel for a fire that might otherwise

die. Indeed, the hold of our history over us is so great that I sometimes think that, despite the need to redress old injustices and promote a bicultural future, we are deluded in believing that we can sink our differences and unite on equal terms. And for all the rhetoric of reconciliation, the apologies and payments, the status quo remains unaltered – the poor get poorer, Māori youth languish in prisons, Māori health and education statistics show little sign of improvement.

We all have our way of imagining how the weight of past generations can be borne. In his memoir, *Being Pākehā Now*, Michael King argues that firstness does not confer primary rights. ‘The fact that one group has been here longer than others does not make its members more New Zealand than later arrivals... As far as I am concerned, my own people, descendants in the main of displaced Irish, had as much moral and legal right to be here as Māori. Like the ancestors of the Māori, they came as immigrants; like Māori too, we became indigenous at the point where our focus of identity and commitment shifted to this country and away from our countries and cultures of origin.’ But pointing out that all New Zealanders are immigrants is not a helpful response to the claims of tangata whenua (‘people of the land’ – connoting ‘those who were here first’) who regard the second comer as guest (manuhiri) or ‘angry friend’ (hoariri), and it ignores the aspiration of many Māori to be Māori first and New Zealanders second. On my flight from Los Angeles I had watched a documentary about James Cook in which the English explorer was depicted as a humanitarian, ahead of his time, whose commitment to communicating and cooperating with

indigenous people proved ineffective against the expansionist interests of those who funded his voyages. But for the Ngāti Oneone of Poverty Bay, whose ancestors had been shot by Cook's men when their bellicose displays were misread as mortal threats, there was no forgiveness. In a whareniui, a descendant regaled a group of children with a narrative of the violent encounter, exhorting them never to forget it. There is, therefore, both authority and authenticity in firstness. To continually evoke an event that marked a tragic and irreversible moment in one's history or one's life is, in effect, to endow that event with such power that there can be no possibility of transcending it. But for the powerless, the invocation of firstness may be their only way of flagging their identity and finding their moorings. This is the allure of cultural fundamentalism – the notion that one shares with one's *own* people a unique essence that, when nurtured and shared, will fortify one against the depredations of a more numerous and more powerful other. It is absurd to argue against this trope of firstness on the grounds that it is epistemologically false when, for those who invoke it, there are few other options for laying claim to social justice or countering the sense that they have been historically reduced to the status of second-class citizens, denizens of the third world.

Can one draw strength and sustenance from one's history without being consumed by it? In Sydney, I would buy a copy of *The First Australians*, edited by Rachel Perkins and Marcia Langton. Although Rachel and Marcia recount the colonization of Australia from an Aboriginal perspective, they take great pains to contextualize both indigenous and settler worldviews, and show that enlightenment is

always compromised by prejudices and interests born of one's historical situation. Though no one, black or white, may have been in a position to alter the course of colonial history, everyone was free, to some extent, to resist its dehumanizing and demonizing excesses, to refuse the language of otherness that it deployed. In my novel *Rainshadow* I wrote as if I were part-Māori, a child of opposing worlds. Obligated to choose between them, I chose neither. In the real world, however, claiming to be a citizen of the world may be as unrealistic as living, like Diogenes, in a barrel. Nevertheless, I am convinced that even though racism underwrote the colonial violence whose scars we now bear as guilt or grievance, it is imperative that we deracialize our *discourse* about the past, ridding ourselves of the notion that any one race is intrinsically more or less human than another. Not only those who claim to be autochthonous – have born from the soil – been guilty of displacing others. All human beings tend to make the same kinds of arguments for strengthening their claims to the places they call their own. We would do well, therefore, to adopt the stoic dictum of Terence, that being human, nothing human is alien to us (*humani nil a me alienum puto*), which is to say that we accept the possibility that, under certain circumstances, each one of us is capable of evil as well as good, that no genealogy exists that does not include persecutors and victims, and that the price of harboring notions of ur-belonging is often the violent exclusion of those who allegedly do not belong.

From Waitara I drove through a darkening and seemingly deserted landscape, stopping only at the Te Rangi Hiroa Memorial near Urenui – a canoe prow thrusting from an overgrown hillside toward

the sea. Born of an Irish father and Māori mother, Te Rangi Hiroa (Sir Peter Buck) remained attached to his roots although his first language was English. His stepmother's mother was his tutor. She taught him his whakapapa and history. When Kapuakore (Cloudless) died in 1908 when Te Rangi was twenty-eight, he went to her sleeping hut and found the canoe paddle the old woman had used when ferrying him across the Urenui River. The paddle remained in his possession for as long as he lived, mounted on the wall of his office at the Bernice Bishop Museum in Honolulu. 'It hangs on the wall of my study as my most precious family heirloom. I have studied under learned professors in stately halls of learning. But as I look at that paddle, I know that the teacher who laid the foundation of my understanding of my own people, and the Polynesian stock to which we belong, was a dear old lady with a tattooed face in a humble hut walled with tree-fern slabs.'

Looking toward the sea, which was now indistinguishable from the sky, I wondered why men like Maui Pomare and Te Rangi Hiroa had been my role models as a boy. Even though I loved my grandfather, I could never identify with the Methodist values he espoused, nor feel anything but claustrophobia for the cult of respectability to which, in deference to his wife, he paid lip service. Though my growing identification with Māori was misplaced and sentimental, it nonetheless gave me a way of protesting an ethos for which I felt no affinity, and glimpsing a world in which one's humanity came first, and one's particular citizenship, ethnicity, age or gender was a secondary consideration.

Symbolic landscape

It had been a long day. North of Mount Messenger, the landscape was emptier than I remembered – dark green hills descending to the sea in great terraces, and the horizon so low that the ocean appeared to have drained away. Not far from the Tongaporutu River mouth, I spotted a sign for a Bed and Breakfast. After climbing over a padlocked gate, I picked my way down a gravel driveway and knocked at the door of an unpainted house. The ocean was a stone's throw away, its torn crochet flung on the iron sand, flax bushes flayed by the wind. I could taste the spume.

No one answered my knocking. I peered through an uncurtained window into a room littered with children's toys before walking away, spooked by the isolation and the ransacking wind.

By the time I reached Mokau, dusk was falling. But I found a room in 'the last motel for 75 kilometers' and a nearby café that advertised fresh whitebait.

Mokau was 'the whitebait capital of the North Island', but the inanga (*Galaxias maculatus*) I was served at The Whitebait Inn had

been deep-fried in rancid oil, killing the subtle taste of the fish. I ate without appetite, the only diner in a shed-like space that was filled with tubular steel furniture, outdated fly-speckled calendars, Pepsi signs, and a rust-streaked deep freeze. In a brochure I read that the Mokau estuary was one of the last viable spawning habitats for inanga. Many local pensioners supplemented their incomes by netting whitebait in the spring, and people made annual pilgrimages to their baches and jealously guarded stands along the riverbank, patiently taking their quota of the silvery galaxiids that every year had become scarcer as farms encroached on the forest, cattle trampled the riverbanks, and fertilizer polluted the streams.

‘Did you enjoy your meal?’ the girl asked when I paid at the counter. ‘It was fine,’ I said, not wanting to give offense. But our brief exchange triggered memories of other encounters on the road, when I felt that people were asking for my assurance, as children sometimes do, endearingly assuming that the world is run by adults and that they are always in jeopardy of being in the wrong. At Waitara, I had asked the checkout girl at the New World supermarket if she knew of any motels on the road north. She was sorry, she didn’t know of any, but would ask. Within a minute, three assistants were standing in front of me, searching their minds for an answer to my offhand question, and collectively apologizing for not being able to help. I was particularly touched, as I made to leave, when an older woman followed me to the door, a look of deep concern on her face.

‘You be all right, de-ar?’ she asked, as if I was venturing into the unknown. And because she was Māori, I wondered later if she was unconsciously expressing a sense of the historic tragedy that had

unfolded along that littoral, and that the southern ocean had not yet erased.

Not wanting to return immediately to my concrete-block motel, I went for a long walk along the estuary. The river flats were covered with rushes. Every few yards along the riverbank was a small corrugated iron shed and jetty. The gaunt inland hills were already lost to the night. Nearer the sea, I could hear waves battering the beach. The wind was filled with grit. A stench of decaying kelp filled my nostrils.

I had not planned to spend a night in Mokau. But as I trudged back to my motel, I thought it inevitable that I should return to the place where my uncle Harold sought refuge after Betty committed suicide in 1966, aged forty-seven. It was as far from New Plymouth as it was possible to go without leaving Taranaki. Here, in a ramshackle house behind the local tearooms, he muddled through the next forty-two years of his life until Alzheimers obliged him to move to a retirement home in New Plymouth. My cousin Helen described his place as a pigsty. When she helped sort through his possessions after he died, several truckloads of junk had to be carted away. When I asked Helen how her father had occupied himself at Mokau, she responded curtly: 'He collected junk.' In a kinder vein, my cousin Peter said Harold was a beachcomber and dog-walker, a finder of objects that he thought could be repaired and one day given a new life.

'After Betty, there was no other woman in his life,' Helen told me. 'He kept her piano in his living room for as long as he lived at

Mokau. Everything else was rubbish. He collected useless gadgets. I don't think he had much use for people.'

After a shower, I lay on the counterpane of my motel bed, writing up notes. The wind moaned and whined in the ill-fitting ranch-sliders as if my uncle's ghost was locked out in the cold, and I thought of his unhappy life, his doomed marriage, and his inability to find in his family the same satisfaction he found in a valve radio, an electrical device, a jet boat trip upriver, or the flotsam and jetsam blown ashore on that wild North Taranaki coast.

I stuffed paper in the cracks in the door, but the ghostly moaning continued, and I fell asleep in my clothes, the light still burning, until the small hours of the morning when I woke from a dream of kerosene tins brimful of whitebait, and a pair of hands slipping into the slithering, silver catch before making me a cupped offering...

A cold dawn light was breaking when I paid for my night's lodging and drove past the boarded-up tearooms on the main street and on to the river road that would hopefully take me to Tauwhare.

When I lived in Wellington in 1998, one of the first new friends I made was Geoff Park, a writer and research scientist with the Department of Conservation. In *Nga Uruora: The Groves of Life*, Geoff describes one of the last surviving stands of lowland forest in New Zealand. Dominated by kahikatea and teeming with native birds, Tauwhare is almost an island, the Mokau River enclosing it protectively, and preserving its extraordinary biodiversity. That it had escaped the predatory expansion of European settlement in the 19th century and become a 'Native Reserve' may have had something to

do with the powerful tapu of the place – its association with the dead, or with forest spirits – or sheer happenstance.

As an avid sea-kayaker, it had been only natural for Geoff to approach Tauwhare from the river. ‘From low on the water, the big kahikatea seem to guard the head of the estuary. Their forest is the last of its kind in the North Island, but there was a time when trees like them stood on the tidal flats of almost every river. Other than the ravaged hills and the fact that most of the bleached, stranded logs littering the river are willows, the scene is as close as you are going to get today to what was seen by the first canoe-load of people to come out of the waves and up an estuary.’

I tried to walk in to Tauwhare from the road, but it was so muddy underfoot and the forest so dense and drenched that I soon retreated to my car.

I was about to leave Taranaki. By no stretch of the imagination had my visit been a homecoming. Rather, I had found myself looking past the accident of my being raised in the shadow of the mountain to a history of which I had known next to nothing as a boy yet which was the actual shadow under which I had grown up – the dark presence of dispossession, ignorance and violence, a presence that still seeped into our lives, so that even my uncle Harold’s fruitless search for his birth parents, his true identity, or for love, seemed genealogically related to the cosmic injustice that had been done in that province years before he was born.

Though Geoff Park writes that ‘the relentless overwhelming’ of the natural landscape by settler culture cannot be reversed, I had seen how readily mānuka, hebe, karamū and punga reclaimed the land,

and how Māori had regained land rights in the nation that had marginalized and almost destroyed them. Firstness implies a tenacity that may put all successive events in the shade. It is as though there existed, like the original ecology, a natural justice that reasserts itself in the face of our feeble efforts to impose our will on a place that has, so to speak, a mind of its own.

As I drove on, I began to see that our return to the past is not always morbid; it is a means of repossessing our lives. Every morning, while shaving, my grandfather would recite Rudyard Kipling's 'If'. Perhaps this was his way of beginning every day as though it were the first, and of perpetually redeeming the day before. Perhaps the poem took him back to the day he began his new life in New Zealand, exchanging the old country for the new in the hope that he might help build a Fabian utopia. 'If you can watch the things you gave your life to, broken, / And stoop and build 'em up with worn-out tools: / If you can make one heap of all your winnings / And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss, / And lose, and start again at your beginnings / And never breathe a word about your loss ...' But might not such small rituals also be, as Walter Benjamin suggests, the expatriate's attempt to inoculate himself against a nostalgia that continuously threatens to overwhelm him? Given that we can never forget our most formative years, is it true that as we approach old age, bewildered by a world that is changing too rapidly for us to keep pace, we search for the foundations beneath the rubble of what we have become, returning to our beginnings for a last loving look at a world that was once entirely ours? Perhaps, as Vincent O'Sullivan writes:

Two women

After reaching Hamilton, it took me a while to find an internet café where I could send an email to my wife and children. It also took me time to reorient myself to the hoardings and signs, the loud colors and cacophony of the city made even more overwhelming by the unforgiving light and the domesticated landscape. It was as though my experiences in Taranaki, including my night on the Mokau River, belonged to a remote time, more imagined than real, and that I had now entered an artificial and childlike place, constructed with a child's garishly-painted building blocks.

The Korean owner assigned me a terminal under a malfunctioning fluorescent light. When I leaned back in my black vinyl chair, I hit a stroller in which a small child was licking an ice cream while her mother searched the worldwide web. Unable to see my keyboard, I asked for another terminal nearer the door where the light was better. Then I rattled off my email, with a sketch of where I had been and what I had been doing, and a final few lines of affection for my

family who, while never far from my thoughts, were in a place that seemed to bear no relationship with anywhere I had been.

This disturbing sense of separation from my real life was only increased when I left the internet café and tried to find my way to Hamilton East. Driving down broad streets where the grass was closely mown, shrubs trimmed, houses spick and span, and cars kept scrupulously clean, my old aversion to the obsessive tidiness and respectable veneer of bourgeois life suddenly made it hard to breathe, and I felt like fleeing back to Taranaki and taking the Forgotten World Highway, as I had earlier planned, into the rough-hewn back country between Tarata and Whangamomona.

In an email, Carrie had instructed me to look for a scruffy old house at the end of a driveway between two posh new houses. It was the sort of no-nonsense comment that had drawn me to her ten years ago when we were both living in Wellington.

Carrie met me at the door.

‘Park your car in the driveway behind my ute,’ she said. ‘I bought it as a kind of salute to my late father. He loved his four-wheel drive.’ It was clear that Carrie still marched to her own drum. As she led me into the kitchen, she added, ‘There’s the influence of the past for you!’

‘You haven’t changed,’ I said. ‘If anything you seem younger.’

‘It’s just an illusion,’ Carrie said. ‘I keep fit by cycling daily around Bleakley Park, but my regime’s been interrupted by a mysterious knee injury so I’m hobbling about with a cane and take industrial strength painkillers. Go on through to the sitting room. I’ll make us a pot of tea. Or do you prefer coffee?’

‘Tea’s fine. Herbal if you have it.’

Beyond the window was the apple tree Carrie had described in one of her emails, ‘its white petals fluttering across the sunny lawn, exactly the same light, slightly sideways motion as snowflakes.’ And on the coffee table were several books relating to her work on the politics of science. David Nye’s *Narratives and Spaces: Technology and the Construction of American Culture*, Bruno Latour’s *Aramis, or the Love of Technology*.

Over the last few years, Carrie had given me invaluable help in my research on Māori reactions to genetic engineering. She had been working in Wellington on the controversial politics of GM – particularly the risks of using genetic technologies to control the introduced plant and animal species that threatened New Zealand’s ecology and agriculture. The Australian brushtail possum, for instance, the country’s most rapacious vertebrate pest, consumed thousands of tonnes of native vegetation each night, spreading tuberculosis to cattle and deer herds, and costing the nation sixty million dollars annually. While some scientists were in favor of genetic technologies, several Māori submissions to the 2000 Royal Commission on Genetic Modification argued that this would constitute a dangerous and unprecedented intervention in the natural order of things. Like mixing waters from different catchments or sources, transferring genetic material across species boundaries violated tikanga Māori (the Māori way of doing things), disrupted the whakapapa (genealogy) and mauri (life essence) of those species, and destroyed a primordial balance between Ranginui (sky/father) and Papatūānuku (earth/mother). Underlying these anxieties was a

collective memory of other violent intrusions in which Māori had lost their lands, livelihood and sovereignty. As I wrote at the time, ‘Our wariness of new technologies must be seen in the light of our ambivalence toward the strange. Our attitudes toward both strangers and strange technologies will depend upon the degree to which we feel in control of them, as well as the degree to which such innovations are felt to augment rather than diminish our own sense of well-being.’

As Carrie served tea, she talked about her current research on social responses to radical technological innovations. I responded by telling her of a friend in England who was mystified by the snail’s pace with which human beings realize the potential of new technologies. Although computers offer us marvelous resources for independent research, enabling us to be more creative in finding knowledge relevant to 21st century life, Gerard argues that in the UK, schools and curricula continue to be designed for an industrial age when pupils were gathered in a single classroom, physically separated from one another, talked at by a teacher, who then required them to read from a textbook or write in a copybook.

‘But there’s so much comfort in the familiar, isn’t there?’ Carrie said.

‘I don’t want to prejudge conservatism as a sign of a closed mind,’ I said. ‘I think we have to understand why we sometimes feel compelled to cleave to the past, preferring the tried and true even when it has played us false.’ And we quickly agreed on the irony of how, after industrialization, the new urbanites began to romanticize the pastoral life that had offered them so little, railing against

England's 'dark satanic mills'. I also told Carrie about Samuel Butler's letter in *The Press* of Christchurch on 13 June 1863, inspired by his recent reading of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species*, in which he expressed the alarming view that 'we are ourselves creating our own successors' in the form of ever more sophisticated, self-regulating machines. 'Day by day the machines are gaining ground upon us; day by day we are becoming more subservient to them, and the time will come when the machines will hold the real supremacy over the world.'

Musing on Darwin's theory of evolution, and how easily his original ideas had been misapplied, I reminded Carrie of my fascination with the aura of firstness in human experience, whether this found expression in indigenous people claiming special rights on the basis of first settlement, adopted children yearning to reconnect with their birth parents, migrants nostalgic for a lost homeland, or the bereaved unable to get over the death of a loved one.

'When I received your last email,' Carrie said, 'I was halfway through Michael Ondaatje's *Divisadero*. After thinking about your thoughts on the past in the present, I picked up the Ondaatje where I'd bookmarked it the previous night. Serendipitously, it was the section called "The person formerly known as Anna". Here, I've left it marked to show you.'

'All my life I have loved traveling at night, with a companion, each of us discussing and sharing the known and familiar behavior of the other. It's like a villanelle, this inclination of going back to events in our past, the way the villanelle's form refuses to move forward in linear development, circling instead at those familiar moments of

emotion. Only the rereading counts, Nabokov said ... For we live with those retrievals from childhood that coalesce and echo throughout our lives, the way shattered pieces of glass in a kaleidoscope reappear in new forms and are songlike in their refrains and rhymes, making up a single monologue. We live permanently in the recurrence of our own stories, whatever story we tell.'

'I love the image of the villanelle,' I said.

'But there's something else,' Carrie said, 'and that's the part we play in bringing back to life what is already behind us, and the question of what aspects of our ancestry we choose to dwell on.' Carrie told me about two close friends who habitually invoked the past in accounting for their present circumstances. 'But anyone's past contains good and bad aspects,' Carrie said, 'and it is up to us which aspect we dwell on. My friends seem determined to zero in on the negative side of their histories, the parents who let them down, the misfortunes they suffered in early life. This then becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, a ticket to victimhood. Yet both these people have talent and intelligence. One is musically gifted, but despite a wonderful opportunity to play in a hot little band here in Hamilton, he found – or created – reasons to diss the whole thing before he really got into it. The other is constantly in siege mode, waging some battle or another against the world. She gave up on relationships years ago after some ratbag broke her heart. This disaster, and a cold Catholic childhood, convinced her that things were stacked against her.'

'Did you ever think this way?' I asked. 'Did you ever see yourself as a victim?'

‘I had to struggle not to,’ Carrie admitted. ‘Grievance mode can be very seductive. But I always had a classic example right in front of me of how futile and unproductive it can be. My mother saw herself in that way. Doomed to disappointment, trapped in a life so much less than what she’d wanted. Her solution was to make the most of her unhappiness, her sense of deprivation, by using it to manipulate everyone around her and constantly be the center of attention. And of course, everything was always someone else’s fault.’

‘I remember you talking to me about this once. This sense of victimhood as a prolonged grieving. One has lost something, or it has been taken away, and you cannot have a good life unless this mysterious and absent property is returned to you. But in your own case, what made the difference, what turned things around?’

‘The role models of my two grandmothers,’ Carrie said.

But Carrie was also at pains to point out that she had been fortunate to be born in the 1950s, with the wider opportunities and experiences that feminism made possible throughout the next two decades.

‘My father’s mother was really feisty, really classy,’ Carrie said, grinning broadly. ‘She was part-Māori, though I doubt this ever figured in her sense of who she was. She died the same week I was born, so I never knew her face to face. But it’s as though she is me. I am her in another life. I have her voice, her looks, her walk. When I was a teenager, my father and aunt were sometimes quite spooked by it. She loved stylish clothes, color, design, lots of books and pictures

around her. This room we're sitting in, these book-lined walls, the photographs and flowers, it's all hers as much as mine.'

'When did you first feel this identification?'

'It's always been there. Trouble is, my parents saw it in a negative light because she was a wild one. When I did things that were judged inappropriate or unladylike, they'd sigh, "You're just like your grandmother." And that was a put-down. But I came to see it as something entirely positive. I share her sense of music. Not polite classical music, the Mozart and Bach that my mother made me learn, but party music, dance music, good shit-kicking stuff that you can't help but beat your heels to. Remember how I've always sung and played in bands, years of doing rock gigs in rough pubs, and now having fun with the cowboy stuff here, country rock, Western swing? Every time I go out to the mike on stage, my grandmother's right beside me with a big smile, getting right into it.'

Carrie's parents expected their daughter to find a nice anaesthetist or lawyer, raise children and live in an up-market villa in Epsom or Remuera. But for Carrie, this mantra of bourgeois respectability rang false. 'My childhood was a long wait for a chance to get away and make my own kind of reality. Biding my time, I hid in books. Years later, when I studied medieval poetry at Victoria, "The Wanderer" was a revelation. "Who liveth alone longeth for mercy, Maker's mercy. Though he must traverse tracts of sea, sick at heart, trouble with oars and ice-cold waters, the ways of exile – Wyrd is set fast." It sharpened my sense that I could never conform to any kind of conventional, externally-imposed code. I had to make my own way in the world, no matter how incomprehensible, bizarre, or downright

unrespectable it would seem in the eyes of my family. So my mother and father were seriously disappointed when I left home at sixteen and became a rebel. Sex, drugs and rock'n'roll. It was the early seventies, what can I say? They didn't speak to me for many years.'

'Tell me more about your grandmother.'

'She was a Northland farmer's wife. This was in the twenties and thirties. A very buttoned-down era. But what a great, crazy time she had! Lots of affairs. On VJ night she danced on the bar of the biggest pub in Whangarei in her bra and knickers. That was New Zealand in those days. Wild versus respectable. Like each side of the Iron Curtain. There was no middle ground, you were either one or the other.'



Over breakfast next morning I thanked Carrie for sharing her stories with me. I had been on the road too long, my mind freewheeling. With no one to talk to, I had momentarily forgotten that in the absence of others, one readily falls prey to the dangers of unchecked memory and a fertile imagination.

'What of your other grandmother?' I asked. 'You said she was also an inspiration to you.'

'She was even more outrageously defiant and reckless than my father's mother. She was the daughter of a Hungarian count, a cavalry officer, at the height of the Hapsburg Empire. The family owned a large estate in northeast Hungary, and she had all the ultra-refined upbringing of a young woman of her class and era. But she fell head over heels in love at the age of seventeen with a thoroughly

inappropriate man much older than her, a part-Jewish gambler, the son of a shopkeeper. Parental opposition didn't daunt her, and she ran off with him, which meant complete disowning, never seeing her family again. Anyway, after some time, his debts – and we suspect also other darker events – caused him in turn to have to do a runner. With his creditors and adversaries hot on his heels, he left her with three littlies to support, fled to Hamburg and got on the first ship out of there. He thought he was on his way to America, but ended up in Napier with a party of Scandinavians bound for what became Norsewood. He got a small farm at a place called Kumeroa just east of Woodville, and a few years later she and the kids followed him out via London. The farm was not a success, just a two-room cottage, very basic, and four years and two more children later she died of pneumonia. She's buried in the old graveyard there, high on a bluff looking out over the Manawatu River. It's a lovely place, part of someone's farm now, very peaceful with wind through a pine plantation and hawks wheeling. Anyway, the resonances of her life have had a huge effect on me – the way she gave up everything, walking away from all that was expected of her, all that was predictable and comfortable, leaving her whole life and identity to follow her heart. And she did it not just once but twice!

‘I admire the way you bring your grandmothers back to life,’ I said, ‘not only in your telling but in your life choices. Somewhere, Borges writes that “every writer creates his own precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future.” But it isn't only writers who resuscitate the past, is it? We all do, whether we know it or not.’

‘But the important thing is that we actively retrieve the positive,’ Carrie insisted, ‘and not get tangled up in the inevitable negatives. That we understand the point of listening to the past, to the truths that continue to sing in us and through us with our ancestors’ voices, the gifts they offer us to help make our time here more rewarding. We may not be able to avoid their legacies, but we can at least take the best out of it. Rather than reiterating the hostile, mean-spirited judgments of others, or dwelling on the tragic aspects of their stories, it seems much healthier to be proud of my grandmothers, their passion and optimism, their eccentricities and sheer gutsiness. And it gives me some kind of reassurance, trying to navigate the erratic course of my own life.’



It was almost noon when I said goodbye to Carrie and found the road toward Te Aroha. Though I was sad not to have been able to spend more time with Carrie, I was glad to leave the dank and level suburbs of Hamilton behind.

Once clear of the city, my thoughts turned to my great-grandfather, William McKeever, an Irish emigrant who fought against Māori in the Waikato and was decorated for his service and valor. Who was he to me? Does genealogy imply identity, or are we free to include or exclude at will those with whom we feel no kinship? In Carrie’s view, our ancestry offers itself up to us and is, as it were, there for the taking. But the past is not like a road or mountain range, linear in the early November light. It is elusive, sinuous and vague – a multitude of unrealized possibilities that only

take shape when we conjure them, when we have a use for them in the here and now. I had been moved by Carrie's account of her two grandmothers, her wild exemplars. Carrie had reminded me that our lives are never entirely our own. They incorporate the many places we have lived, the many people we have known. Nor is this all, for we carry in our genes an unfathomable ancestry, as well as traits whose origins we can never trace to a single source. Above all, however, Carrie had reminded me of the extent to which we can rearrange the furniture of our past and reorganise the figures in its landscapes, pushing some into the background, bringing others to the fore, denying some a place in our lives while honoring others as role models and allies. Just as we befriend and unfriend individuals on Facebook, so we reshuffle elements of our past to create a workable sense of self, a viable community.

But do we really choose such figures in the past as guides or guardians, or does our life come to mirror theirs more gradually, more imperceptibly, until in midlife, looking back, we imagine them as avatars of ourselves, embodying what we have become? Given such a narrative, it is all too easy to conclude that we hold our ancestors' destinies in our hands, consummating in our own lives what they left unfinished in theirs.

In any event, I took comfort in the thought of Carrie's maternal grandmother, who not only lost her Hapsburg heritage but also her name and her fortune. Did she regret the strange turn of events that brought her to a backwater rural settlement in the North Island of New Zealand? Did she glimpse the possibility that one of her granddaughters would create a life that wove together the best

aspects of the sophisticated world into which she had been born and the pragmatic values acquired on the impoverished farm where she ended her days – a happy accommodation, like Carrie's anomalous bungalow, filled with books and music and sheltered by unruly trees, on a back section in Hamilton's most exclusive neighborhood?

[Two women - notes](#)

Guardians of the secret

I phoned Anne from Te Aroha, to make sure she was still expecting me and that it was all right if I arrived mid afternoon. She said I would be welcome any time.

‘Is there anything I can bring?’

‘Goodness me, Mike, you’re not a stranger! Just bring yourself.’

I said I would be in Paeroa in half an hour.

Anne’s brother Roland had been a close friend of mine at university. Indeed, he was the first intellectual friend I ever made. But like so many intellectuals, Roland Noonan gave the impression of being far more at home with ideas than people.

We sometimes speak of people we cannot place. Regardless of whether it is their appearance or accent, we feel uneasy until we have determined where they are from. Sometimes, however, they do not want the ambiguity resolved. They prefer to hide behind the mask of indeterminate origins, and keep us guessing. Roland was such a person. In our Moral Philosophy class, he not only looked foreign; he seemed quite happy in this role. As if he’d walked off a Panamanian

freighter, found his way to the university, and enrolled – though could call it quits at any time, sign on the articles of another boat, and continue his Jobian voyage.

Despite my initial suspicions, he was one of us – born and raised in the Bay of Plenty. He had a twin brother who drowned in Lake Waikaremoana when he was twelve. Roland suffered from what we glibly call survivor guilt. ‘A sole, but not a soul, survivor,’ as he put it. He felt a profound obligation to his brother – to live at his behest, to give him back the life that had been taken from him.

This anxious sense that his life was not his own, but borrowed or stolen from someone to whom he was now indebted, was exacerbated by his father’s sudden desertion of Roland’s mother.

It happened the summer before Roland started university. Almost immediately, his distraught mother went into decline. After caring for her at home for two years, Roland’s elder sister placed the prematurely senile woman in Westlake Village from where she would write her children demented letters, accusing Roland’s sister of implanting listening devices in her neck, informing Roland that he and his brother had been adopted. ‘We picked you out of the gutter,’ she told him. ‘Your brother might have turned out all right, but you, the gutter is where you belong.’ Unsure what credence to give his mother’s malign messages, Roland was torn between severing all ties and maintaining contact in the hope that in a moment of lucidity or honesty she would tell him who he really was.

Roland shared these preoccupations when he was drunk. Sober, he kept his anguish to himself. For several months, he disappeared from the campus. I would see him in the pub, or on the waterfront where

we both seagulled, but could not get a word out of him. One afternoon, however, drinking whiskeys and beer chasers at The Shakespeare, Roland spoke without inhibition, and I thought he was losing his mind. 'I am not adopted,' he told me. 'I am from Atlantis. My birth parents were Greek. Don't I look Greek? Isn't it obvious? The olive skin. The black curly hair. The aquiline nose. I am a refugee from the old world. I've always known it. Deep down, I've never had the slightest doubt. How else explain my attraction to the Pre-Socratics? Why else, when I was fifteen, would I pin Anaximander's fragment on my wall rather than a photo of the All Blacks?'

The following year I went to Australia. I wanted to wipe the slate clean. New Zealand was my first life. My real life would be elsewhere. In a notebook I bought to signal this new incarnation, I copied some lines culled from a newspaper article about human origins. 'Through the miracle of natural genetic recombination, each child, with the sole exception of an identical twin, is conceived as a unique being. Even the atmosphere of the womb works its subtle changes, and by the time we emerge into the light, we are our own persons. Knowing every single ancestor, therefore, will never solve the deeper mystery, which of course is the dreadful question of who we become.'

I not only lost touch with Roland; I almost forgot about him.

Three years passed. I was living in London and working in a homeless shelter near Charing Cross Station. I would spend my lunch breaks at the National Gallery or, in fine weather, sit on a bench along the Thames Embankment, reading a book. Occasionally, I

would walk to Haymarket and read the newspapers in New Zealand House. I jokingly told my friends that this ritual made me immune to homesickness. It was from an article in *The New Zealand Herald* that I discovered that Roland Noonan had won a scholarship to Oxford to read philosophy.

After an exchange of postcards, Roland paid me a visit in London. At the time, I had a bedsit at Hammersmith, and was always penniless. Seeing Roland reminded me how far I had drifted from the academic world in which he seemed to have found a niche. But to my surprise, Roland said he envied me. He had allowed his guilt over his twin brother's death to eclipse his own life. 'Oxford was for *him*,' he said. 'Not for me.'

I felt it would be insensitive to ask what destiny he envisaged for himself.

A few days before Easter, Roland phoned me at work. His mother had passed away, and his sister had come to England to visit him. Anne wanted to see Paris, but did not want to travel alone. Would I like to accompany them? Money was no object. Anne had been designated sole heir in her mother's will, but was determined to give Roland his rightful share.

We arrived in a city overrun with visitors, no vacancies in any pension, at least not in the Latin Quarter where we wanted to be, and we walked for hours through anonymous neighborhoods, down boulevards and blind alleys, until we were hopelessly lost. When it came on to rain, we took shelter in a corner café, shared a carafe of wine and some french fries, and weighed our options. Since we weren't going to find anywhere to stay in Paris, we decided to head

out to the suburbs, or beyond. Surely it would be a simple matter to take a train to some small town where there were no tourists, and find a hotel? Despondently, we made our way to the Gare d'Ouest, none of us on speaking terms, each of us silently blaming the others for our plight.

We found that the last trains had departed and there was no way of leaving Paris until morning. Our only option now was to spend a night in the station. After locating the waiting room, we tried to organize ourselves for sleep. But the place was filled with clochards, and there was only space for one more person on the wooden benches. Roland and I decided that Anne should have the seat while we slept on the floor, using our rucksacks for pillows. But I did not sleep. I spent five days of the week among derelicts, and here I was, my first trip away, spending a night among them! Worse, they gave off a suffocating, sickly-sweet odour that I imagined to be the odour of leprosy or gangrene. Disgusted, Roland said he was going for a walk. 'I may be some time,' he said. Anne was not amused. She crossed her arms, let her head fall forward, and feigned sleep. I punched my rucksack and threw myself down as if Morpheus could be bullied into possessing me.

It was dawn when Roland returned. Anne was dead to the world, her body rigid as a board, her head tilted back and mouth open. Roland crouched beside me, and confessed his sins. He had found his way to Pigalle. Badly in need of a drink, he ordered a Pernod in the first bar he came to. After downing it, he ordered another. The oppression of the night began to lift. He watched the whores coming and going, the gawking tourists, the local touts, had a third Pernod,

and began to feel that Anne and I no longer existed, that he had passed into another world on which the miserable day would never dawn and from which he would never have to return. In a blur of neon and noise, he bought the girl who approached him a beer, and blithely accepted her offer and her price. ‘I don’t know what possessed me,’ Roland said. ‘I’ve never done anything like this before. And the worst of it is that Anne entrusted her money to me, and I shelled it out without a second thought, buying a bottle of champagne, paying for the room the fille de joie took me to, giving her what she demanded.’

I was about to remind Roland that it was *his* money, too, but didn’t want to start a complicated conversation. Besides, I was too weary and pissed off to give a damn. When we were sitting in the station café with croissants and bowls of coffee, Anne seemed to regard Roland’s ill-considered actions as no more than an unsurprising confirmation of how doomed our trip had been from the start. She was ready to go back to London anyway, she said. She wanted a hot bath, and some time to herself. Roland accused her of being a party-pooper, and asked her to reconsider. ‘Find me somewhere I can have a hot bath and I will,’ she said.

We decided to split up for an hour. While I bought tickets for the ten o’clock train to Rouen, Anne went looking for a public bathroom and Roland set off to buy a *Herald Tribune*. We would rendezvous back at the café.

None of us had anticipated the labyrinthine vastness of the station. After buying the tickets, I couldn’t find my way back to the café. Anne’s search for a bathroom took her out of the station, and she did

not return for more than an hour. Only Roland found his way back to our rendezvous at the right time, but neither Anne nor I was there. I was frantically wandering down long tiled tunnels, trying to get my bearings from the echoing chords of an accordioniste or from the exit signs. I kept anxiously checking my watch. Ten o'clock came and went. Would our tickets be valid for a later train?

Roland got fed up waiting at the café and went wandering around the same labyrinth, hoping to bump into one of us. We later reckoned we were all in the station for about an hour, passing one another like ships in the night, cursing one another and in half a mind to abandon the search. Except that I had no money, and Roland, still guilty about his night at Pigalle, was determined not to give Anne a reason for hating him more than she already did.

Anne went back to London. Roland and I went to Rouen and checked into the first hotel we found after leaving the railway station. We took turns to shower, and then we slept. It was early afternoon by the time we went out to find a place to eat. A narrow street, rue Guy de Maupassant. A small café where the plat du jour was country ham, petits pois and frites. The proprietor's wife wished us bon appetit, then busied herself clearing the adjacent tables and setting out clean ashtrays. Her husband stood behind the bar, polishing glasses, observing us with an air of great satisfaction. He asked if we were from England. 'La Nouvelle-Zélande', I said. I explained how we had come to Paris for Easter, but could not find a hotel room. Madame assured us we could have done worse than come to Rouen. This was the birthplace of Corneille and Boieldieu, not to mention Flaubert. And did we know that Jeanne d'Arc was burned as a witch

in the market square? When I expressed an interest in all this, the proprietor said he would be pleased to draw a map for us, so we could make a small tour.

So we took in the tower and the cathedral, with its shrapnel-scarred masonry and windows of plain glass, and stood at the spot where Joan of Arc was incinerated, and walked down long avenues of pollarded plane trees in the blustery spring afternoon.

Roland was lagging a few yards behind me.

I heard a small cry. When I turned, I saw him crumple like a deflated bag on the sandy path.

‘What is it? What’s wrong?’

His face was contorted with pain. ‘My guts,’ he gasped.

‘What happened?’

‘I think it’s my ulcer.’

‘What ulcer?’

He couldn’t talk. I bent down, got my arm behind his back and asked if he could make it to the nearby bench. He seized my coat and struggled to get to his feet, but his legs buckled and he fell back onto the path.

I looked around in desperation. Miraculously a bus was drawing into the curb only yards away.

I waved wildly at the driver, and urged Roland to stand up.

This time he succeeded. Dragging one leg, he let me half carry him onto the bus where he collapsed into a seat for ‘femmes enceintes, aveugles, personnes agés and les mutilés de la guerre’.

I was confused and out of breath. ‘Do you go anywhere near the hospital?’ I asked the driver.

‘C’est tout près,’ he said, assuring me he would let me know when we were there.

I sat beside Roland, who was bent double, holding his guts and moaning.

The other passengers, I noticed, were looking away.

In the emergency room, two orderlies got Roland onto a gurney. A doctor bent over him with a clipboard. He had a checklist of diagnostic terms in four European languages. Using a one-word method of interrogation, he established the source and possible cause of Roland’s distress.

As he gently prodded at Roland’s abdomen, he turned to me and asked questions in French. Had my friend been drinking heavily? Was he married? Where did his parents live?

I waited a couple of hours after Roland was wheeled away. Then a nurse came and said my friend’s condition was serious but stable. He had suffered the rupture of a gastric ulcer. They were operating at that very moment.

I did not see Roland until the following morning. He was dressed in a green gown, propped up on a heap of pillows, his face deathly pale. He relayed to me what the doctors had told him. He would have to remain under observation for a week. ‘If I were you I would go back to Paris or London,’ he said. ‘I’ll be fine. In a way I’m glad this happened. It’s been on the cards for a long time. I know that now. I won’t go back to Oxford, I’m sure of that. I don’t know what I’ll do, but I won’t be going back to Oxford.’

I returned to Paris, and with the money Roland had given me (and Anne had given him) I bought a notebook and several Livre de Poche editions of Blaise Cendrars' novels. In London, I expected to hear from him, but many weeks passed before I did.

It was a postcard from Athens. 'All's well. Letter following. Roland.' I left for the Congo a couple of weeks later, and two months passed before his promised letter was forwarded from London.

In Rouen he had arranged for his scholarship money to be transferred from Oxford to Paris. He then went to Greece by train, arriving in Athens on what he called 'the morning of the first day of my life'. He gave all his money away to beggars in Omonoia Square – 'to burn my bridges'. In a second letter he described his life, teaching English to college students, learning Greek, falling in love – though with a place, not a person.

'Every morning I walk up to the Byzantine Chapel on Lykavittós,' Roland wrote. 'From the top of the hill I am above the city, which is smothered in smog. The Parthenon emerges from this sea of mist and murk, catching the light. Sometimes I go into the chapel, light a candle, and pray. Not asking for anything. Not even believing in the God to whom I address my thoughts. More to acknowledge the fates that brought me here. How often in your life do you realize you are happy at the very moment you are, instead of later, looking back, when what you thought of as happiness was probably an illusion? It's incredible how our lives unfold. We think we are masters of our fate, but in fact very few people actually determine the course of their lives. We never take the reins between our hands, never really control the horses; we let them, and the road, decide our destiny and

destination. Liberation is seldom a heroic act; it usually begins in cowardice, as we abnegate responsibility for ourselves, and allow happenstance to carry us along. I suppose this explains why certain things in Athens struck me with such force. The peddlers on every street corner, with lottery tickets lodged in slotted sticks. The blind banjo player on the steps of the Plaka, whose monotonous songs have been passed down, or so I imagine, through generations of seers, perhaps from Tiresias himself.'

Roland's life was so absorbed in augury and myth, that from my vantage point in the Congo I found it difficult to relate to his Mediterranean meditations. It is only now, forty-five years on, that I can see that it was not the distance between Greece and the Congo that prevented me sharing his happiness but, rather, the fact that I had still not reached the point where I could say, as Roland did, 'I have found my path.'

One letter in particular haunts me, partly because it was written only days before the military coup d'état of April 1967.

'Curiously enough,' Roland wrote, 'in the three years I have lived in Athens I have visited the Acropolis only once. I returned there yesterday. Starting up the familiar streets of the Plaka, skirting the ancient agora and making my way toward the Beule Gate, I remembered vividly the day I first came here. The sky was cloudless, a stiff wind blowing, the air redolent with the odours of cedars and diesel fumes, and the place already swarming with tourists, picking their way over the broken ground, talking in a score of languages, and so relentlessly photographing everything in sight that I had to conclude that they saw nothing with their own eyes and that these

images were, ironically, needed as proofs to themselves and to others at a later date that they had indeed been there! I tried to avoid them, and find somewhere relatively undisturbed where I could close my eyes and listen to whatever it was that still infused that place with power and beauty. It was then, a few paces from the Erechtheion, that I experienced my epiphany (I don't know what else to call it). There was a tourist party at the site. A French-speaking guide was conducting a small group of visitors past the temple where Poseidon left his trident marks in the stone and, centuries later, a Turkish commander accommodated his harem during the war of independence. As the tourist party moved on, it was blissfully quiet for a while, and I stepped back from the temple to take in the caryatids that supported the architrave. The figure at the left-hand end of the porch fascinated me. I could not take my eyes off her. Her arms and feet had been amputated, perhaps when a Turkish shell almost destroyed the building in 1827. Her face was ruined. But the erosion that had scarred her nose and upper lip had imparted to her a beauty more compelling than had she remained perfectly unblemished – her supple shoulders, her relaxed stance, the left knee slightly bent, breasts and belly sensuous beneath the folds of an Ionian tunic. Her marmoreal loveliness transcended the rubble at her feet, which is why, I suppose, I fell in love with her.

‘A further irony you might enjoy: I discovered that my experience at the Erechtheion had a literary precedent. This is from Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room*:

Jacob strolled over to the Erechtheum and looked rather furtively at the goddess on the left-hand side holding the roof on her head.

She reminded him of Sandra Wentworth Williams. He looked at her, then looked away. He was extraordinarily moved, and with the battered Greek nose in his head, off he started to walk right up to the top of Mount Hymettus, alone, in the heat.

‘I’ve often wondered whether Virginia Woolf was writing about an event that actually occurred. Which in turn has made me wonder whether it is art that imitates life, or life that aspires ineptly to the example of art. What do you think?’



When the colonels came to power in Greece in 1967, I thought that Roland’s indifference to politics would either immunize him or place him at grave risk. The first news of his situation reached me in Cambridge, not long after I had begun my Ph.D. there – mirroring Roland at Oxford four years earlier. At that time I never dreamed that I would pursue an academic career, or that Roland would drop out. We had, as it were, traded places. And his letter made me realize that I had lost touch with the gritty reality of the world, while Roland, of all people, now found himself in the thick of it.

‘Almost everyone I knew despised the junta,’ Roland wrote, ‘though I don’t think any were active in the resistance. In fact, for all the whispers about police informers, pre-dawn raids, arrests and torture, my life was remarkably unchanged. Even though most of my students were from wealthy homes, and probably sympathetic to the junta, we never discussed politics in class. Then one day, as I was crossing a street near Kolonaki, a police officer accosted me and demanded to see my ID. I explained as politely as I could that I was a

foreigner, and not obliged to carry an identity card. For some reason this infuriated the police officer, who then demanded to see my passport. I told him I did not have it with me. I must have phrased my answer clumsily and given the impression that I was questioning his right to see my papers. Enraged, he shouted the word *why* at me, spitting it out in my face. “Why? You ask why?” And then he said, “There is no why in Greece!” Minutes later I was bundled into a car and taken to the Plaka police station. I foolishly presumed that I would have to sign some kind of document, then be sent or taken back to my apartment to get my passport. But when I asked the police officer who had first detained me whether it would not be easier for us to pass by my apartment so I could pick up my passport, he sneered and said, “No why!”

‘The police station was crowded with women in black, sitting in silence with downcast eyes, their hands upturned on their laps. Were they waiting for news of a loved one, arrested in the night and disappeared? I began to fear for my own safety. For the first time since coming to Greece I understood how quickly, and with what terrible finality, a person can pass from the light of day into darkness, and be swallowed up. I was taken to an interrogation room, where I sat for what must have been one or two hours, waiting for someone to come. I cannot remember the thoughts that went through my head, only that I was increasingly prey to my worst fears, too frightened to feel hunger or thirst, or even wonder what my students would think or do when I did not turn up for my evening class. When a police officer, in plain clothes, did finally come into the room, it was not to

ask me questions but to take me down to the basement and lock me in an isolation cell.

‘The following morning I was led upstairs. My passport had been brought from my apartment (I would later find it ransacked, though nothing stolen), and stamped with an expulsion order. The coup took place a day later. Still shaken by my experience with the police, and unsure whether the expulsion order was now binding, I spent that afternoon and evening with friends at Kifisiá, drinking retzina and listening to Mikis Theodorakis’s “O Kaímós”, which would be soon banned. As for the junta’s bureaucrats, still at their desks, I do not think it was them I feared. The expulsion order bore their signature, but it had found an echo in my own unconscious. It had, I think, brought home to me that despite the depth of my feeling for Greece I was not Greek. The evening was warm and still. I could smell the resin from the pines around us, and in the wine. Why should I leave such happiness? Was I a stranger to that place? And why should these thoughts oppress me on this day of all days? There is no why in Greece. Perhaps, for me, it would have been better thus.

‘Early next day I boarded a bus for Delphi. I wanted to visit the Castalian Spring. It emerges from a fissure in the red rock, and trickles down into an ancient cistern, pissed in by recent visitors and reeking of urine. I looked up at the cliffs behind me, and the dark cypresses standing there – the shades, I thought, of others who had made this pilgrimage, and had their pleas answered. I thought of Aesop, thrown to his death from the heights above me. I thought of all those who had come, like me, to slake their thirst and hear the sybil’s wild utterances, telling them what they should do. And then I

heard it. This voice, clear as a bell. Out of thin air. *You must go by the way that you have come, into the valley of the river that is your home.*

‘But what river? What valley? I had no idea. Yet I returned to Athens as though I did. A few days later I sent a telegram to Anne, asking her to wire me the money for my airfare home. I wound things up at the English-Hellenic Institute. I used the expulsion order as my excuse. I was in bad faith. I knew it. But alone, I do not think I would ever have brought myself to get on that plane...’



Paeroa was billed the ‘antique capital of New Zealand’. How odd, I thought, that after his Odyssean travels, Roland should return to a place that celebrated secondhand furniture, chipped crockery, tarnished silverware, dog-eared thrillers and household junk. Nor was this the first portent of the day. A lame duck was crossing the road in front of me. I swerved to avoid it. One hundred meters on was a sign for Jackson Road, No Exit.

Anne’s house was not far from the Karangahake Gorge, at the head of a narrow valley. A stream flowed parallel to the metal road, hidden from sight by rainforest. When I stopped the car, a tui was clicking and chiming in the cold air.

Anne came from the house, shielding her eyes from the sun. Tall, white-haired and ungainly, she seemed anxious about her hands, which she rammed into the pockets of her jeans or hid by folding her arms tightly. She had been in the garden all morning, she explained, cutting lantana. ‘The work is endless, keeping a balance between

wilderness and cultivated plants, but the devil makes work for idle hands.’ She was full of such hackneyed phrases. She used them as though every word conveyed exactly what she felt.

‘We could do with some rain,’ she said, as we climbed the steps to the front door of the house. ‘Everyone says it’s a no-no, but I reckon it’ll come.’

‘There’s been nothing but rain down the island,’ I said.

‘Look,’ she said. ‘Recognize this?’

The drystone wall was Roland’s handiwork. Anne had mentioned it in a letter, and sent photographs. ‘And the paths. He did all the paths. He loved to work with stone, you know. Concrete he hated. But stone he loved.’

‘You must miss him a lot.’

‘I do. But I walk on his paths every day, and sit by his wall. And Old Bob keeps me company. Don’tcha Bob.’ She patted the overweight Labrador that stood panting and drooling beside her. ‘But come on in, Mike, you must be parched.’

No one had called me Mike in a long time. I followed her through the house to a gloomy kitchen. ‘What’ll it be?’ Anne asked. ‘Cold or hot?’

‘Something cold,’ I said.

‘Well, sun’s not over the yardarm, but it would be if it was winter, so what d’ya say to a beer?’

‘Beer’s fine.’

We talked about Roland. His *struggle* with prostate cancer, which Anne described in heroic terms, as though the meaning of Roland’s life had been consummated in this final epic battle. But when I

suggested that it was a shame that Roland had not found fulfillment in life, she protested. ‘That’s simply not true. If that’s what you think, it shows how little you knew my brother. Sure, he may not have made much of a splash in his life, but he wasn’t ambitious. He didn’t want wealth or fame. He said to me once, “Anne, I think you should change the name of your place from Mountain Retreat. It’s not a retreat. It’s a home.” This was so typical of Roland. He didn’t retreat from the world. He didn’t shrink from it. He lived in it more deeply than anyone I’ve ever known. He was completely open to the world. But on his own terms. That was his secret. He never wore his philosophy on his sleeve. He lived it. He loved the coast. If you saw it, you’d understand.’

I muttered my apology and said that I hoped to do just that – to see the place where he had made his home. What I could not bring myself to say was that I felt that, in some oddly synchronistic way, I owed my life to Roland.

It was now Anne’s turn to apologize. ‘I was always over-protective of him. Ever since we were kids. Sometimes I go too far. I know you were close. He spoke of you often. If it’s all right with you I’d love to take you to where he lived, and show you the places he loved.’

‘I would like that.’

‘Then that’s that!’ And she announced that I would stay for dinner (she had a fresh-caught terakihi in the fridge), and stay the night. We would drive to the coast in the morning.

That night I had trouble sleeping. I had drunk too much beer, and kept having to find my way to the toilet to pee. Shrieks from the bush

made me think of Sierra Leone. Finally, as sleep began to overcome me, I heard the distant, eerie and melancholy sounds of an electronic organ. It must have been Anne, somewhere on the other side of the house, behind closed doors. She was playing a medley of songs from another epoch – ‘Love Letters in the Sand’, ‘Love me Tender’, ‘Some Day my Prince will Come’, ‘Heart of my Heart’, ‘Cherry Pink and Apple Blossom White’. They brought back memories of Inglewood when I was a boy. The dulling and lulling effects of some undisclosed grief. Was it the war, I used to wonder, that had taken something from people that could never be recovered? Or was it marriages, inexorably falling prey to money worries and routine? *I’m going to sit right down and write myself a letter, and make believe it came from you.* Perhaps Anne wasn’t playing at all. Perhaps the organ was programed to play these songs, in the same order forever, and she was simply listening. Drinking and listening. Or falling asleep to these lullabies of unrequited love. *Have you ever been lonely, have you ever been blue?*

When I woke next morning my first thought was that I had been privy to something I could neither understand nor speak of, and if Anne, whom I found in the kitchen, had not been ‘up with the lark’, as she put it, and ‘jollyng herself along’, I would have found her company awkward if not impossible. But her homely ebullience dispelled the images of the night, just as the warmth of the new day dispersed the dark clouds that moved through my mind when I thought of Roland.

We had coffee on the terrace, under a sun umbrella. I listened to the intermittent intensity of the cicadas as they collectively drew

breath before lapsing suddenly into silence. A million miniature rattles, like seedpods in the trees, urgent, indefatigable and vibrant.

Then nothing. Except perhaps the chortle of an invisible bird, or the hush of tyres as a vehicle moved down the road...

I asked Anne if she had ever married. She said Mister Right had never come along. But then she confided that she had never forgiven her parents for their indifference to Roland and his twin brother. 'I never trusted myself, I suppose. I never knew for sure whether I would turn out like them. So I've got Old Bob, and the garden, and my memories of Roland.'

'It's strange how rarely our paths crossed,' I said. 'When he came back from Greece I was gone; when I left New Zealand after Pauline died, he returned.'

'You wrote though,' Anne said. 'You two were always great letter writers. He kept all your letters. I should have asked, d'you want copies of them? You could make copies while you're here, if you wanted.'



We decided to take our own cars, and so, for an hour or more I followed Anne's Holden down the winding road to the coast, through lush farmland and cool bush-clad gullies. I was thinking how strange it was to meet Roland's sister and yet fail to see anything of Roland in her. Perhaps Roland *was* adopted.

At first, I had heard Anne's voice as a garbled snarl and whine. But then I had seen the innocent roughness in the readiness with which she leapt to her brother's defense, or, at breakfast, when she

reproached me for speaking of New Zealand as an uncut diamond. ‘I don’t know about you, Mike, but diamonds have never seduced me. All that careful artifice and advertising. I would sooner pick a stone up off the beach.’

Finally she turned off the highway, and I followed her along the coast road. We stopped by a brick toilet block. Nearby were some two-storeyed beach houses with araucarias on the front lawns.

Anne came around her car to where I was surveying the scene.

‘This is it,’ she said.

We headed along a sandy path through the trees, and I could glimpse the green unraveling ocean and hear the soft thump and hiss of the surf.

‘Is this where Roland had his caravan?’ I asked.

‘It’s further down the beach. I’ll show ya.’

We walked on the seaweed-strewn, buff-colored sand, the din of the sea in our ears, and a succession of forested headlands disappearing into the blue. ‘I can see how someone could be happy here,’ I said.

‘Don’t get me wrong, Mike. I don’t think Roland was the happiest man alive. But he made his peace with the world. Isn’t this the most any of us can hope to do?’

At the end of the beach we followed a dirt road to the caravan park, and I suddenly found myself standing beside Roland’s one-time home.

‘It seems unoccupied.’

‘It is. I haven’t got round to renting it yet. I will. But not yet.’

Attached to the aluminum caravan was an enclosed lean-to. Roland's handiwork perhaps. Agapanthus, wisteria and flax bushes gave the patio some privacy. The barbecue was rusty, the outdoor furniture weathered and cracked. I could not imagine living here, and turned my face again to the sea – the water turquoise and clear inshore, shadowy where there were underwater rocks or weed, cobalt far out, flecked by wind.

'You wanna see inside?' Anne asked.

She wrestled with the lock, then wrenched the door open. The room stank of moldy carpet and old books.

I gave the titles a cursory glance. They were mostly about birds, insects and plants. But among them was a copy of Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson*.

'He was a big reader, as you know,' Anne said. 'He'd get stuff on interloan through the local lib'ry. I reckon he pretty much kept them in business.'

I had seen enough. I had seen nothing. I was ready to go. But I wanted to say something to Anne. Something affirmative. Something that did not offend her idea of her brother.

I said: 'Roland made a great deal of difference to my life. At a time when I needed someone to show me the way, he appeared. I only wish I could have given him something in return.'

'You did. You encouraged him to write.'

'I don't think it made much difference. Not from what he told me in his letters.'

‘I will send you the book he wrote,’ Anne said. ‘He called it *Anaximander Annotated*. How’s that for a title? You might be able to tell me what it’s all about.’

‘I would like to see it. Perhaps – ’

‘For your eyes only, Mike. He didn’t want it published, if that’s what you were thinking.’

The road to Karuna Falls

I took the tortuous coastal road north from Thames, clay embankments on one side, gnarled pōhutukawa trees on the other and the gulf beyond. I had asked Alan to email me directions to Karuna Falls, but by the time I reached the metal road that led from Waikawau Bay toward the commune, the landmarks were familiar.

Thirty years ago, Alan had sold his panel-beating business in Feilding and moved to the Coromandel Peninsula. The family lived in a caravan while Alan built a house with kauri, matai, rimu, and vintage lead-lighting salvaged from the demolition of a hotel and the St John's Ambulance depot in Auckland. I had always envied Alan's abilities as a builder, fitter and turner, motor mechanic, electrician, gardener, fisherman, and hunter, convinced, as are many New Zealanders, that practical skills are more important than intellectual or verbal gifts. Alan, however, had never shared this view, and so we found common ground.

The house was half hidden by regenerating bush, at the top of some river stone steps. Cabbage tree leaves littered the ground. On

the deck was one of Alan's unique crayfish pots, that he made and sold to supplement his pension.

I peered through the open door. It took a while before my eyes grew accustomed to the gloom. Alan was kneading bread on the dining table.

'Giddyay, Mike,' he said, as if I had been away only a day.

Though our talk immediately turned to the years we had lived in the Manawatu, we soon went on to exchange news of our children and grandchildren, marveling at how quickly one generation succeeds another. Alan was also curious to know how far I had driven that day and what had brought me back to New Zealand.

I told him a little about Roland, and my overnight stay with Anne. 'It bothers me,' I said, 'that some of us seem to come unscathed through life while others, with just as much promise and talent, fall by the wayside. Is it simply luck that some of us survive, and even thrive, while others don't?'

We talked of mutual friends who had died young, or had failed to escape unhappy childhoods, and I asked Alan if the trick was to reinvent oneself, as he had, leaving one life behind, embarking on another.

Alan placed his tins of bread dough on a shelf above the coal range and covered them with a tea towel. Then he stoked the range and asked if I wanted a cup of tea. Only when we were seated outside on the deck, where a tui was feeding on an orange impaled on a nail, did he address the question I had broached.

Born out of wedlock to a woman in the military and immediately given up for adoption, Alan never knew either of his birth parents. It

was only after their death that he traced his mother, met his half siblings, and gleaned from them a sketchy knowledge of the woman who brought him into the world. But a conspiracy of silence prevented him from learning the name of his father. ‘But I had a happy childhood,’ Alan said, ‘despite the fact that Mum and Dad never told me I’d been adopted. I’d be taunted at school sometimes, because back then antisocial behaviour was considered a sure sign of illegitimacy, but my parents never broke their vow to keep my origins from me.

‘But that’s all water under the bridge,’ Alan said. ‘It’s like my decision to come up here. I started my real life here. What happened before didn’t matter. I left all that behind. I decided this was where my life was going to start.’

I told Alan that his story reminded me of Alistair Campbell, whose memoir I had read in Wellington. ‘You share the same surname,’ I said, ‘but you also share the same lack of bitterness about your early life, when so much that happened to you was utterly beyond your knowledge and control.’

One of New Zealand’s best known poets and playwrights, Alistair was born on Penryn Island in 1925, the third child of a gregarious New Zealand trader and a Penryn woman. When his mother, Teu, died in 1932, Alistair’s father, Jock, felt that he could not manage four children on his own, so he sent the two eldest to New Zealand, to be cared for by relatives. Jock did not recover from the loss of his beloved Teu. Increasingly ‘distant and listless, and engrossed with cares that had nothing to do with’ his children, he died in a Papeete hospital fourteen months after the death of his wife.

Despite the wishes of Teu's family that the children remain on Penryn, Alistair and his younger brother Billy were also sent to New Zealand, where they arrived in May 1933 with luggage labels attached to their lapels. And like luggage they were despatched by New Zealand Railways to the address of their father's mother, care of the Post Office, Waihi. There, the orphans were reunited with their elder siblings, Margaret and Stuart.

Within a year they moved to Dunedin where their frail grandmother, unable to cope, negotiated for the children to be admitted to an orphanage. It was here that Alistair learned English and discovered an aptitude for reading and writing and, later, a love of literature. His childhood on Penryn became a disconnected set of hazy images – of playing or quarreling with his siblings, of tropical storms, and of the night his nanny woke him, crying softly, and he watched, confused, as his father was carried on a stretcher down the steep path to the sea to begin his final journey.

It was not until 1974, when he was forty-nine, that Alistair recovered his lost link with Penryn.

Early that year, two young Penryn girls came to Wellington and began a search for their cousins, 'the Campbell children who had been "lost across the sea".' After working through all the A. Campbells in the telephone directory, and being rebuffed by mystified or irritated responses, Rima and Pauline finally located their cousin. 'At long last,' Alistair would later write, 'my grandfather's wish had been fulfilled. It was a fairy tale ending – or should I say, a beginning.'

In the following weeks he met most of his Penryn kin living in New Zealand, and two years later – forty years after leaving the island – he made his ‘pilgrimage’ to Penryn and began piecing together the lives of his parents and the aristocratic lineage to which he belonged.

I had always been moved by Alistair’s belated but passionate embrace of his Polynesian heritage, and the poems inspired by his journeys back to Penryn. No hint here of a postcolonial narrative of historical wrongs, no cry for recompense, no talk of trauma, victimhood or grievance. Like Alan, Alistair relates his story of separation and loss as one in which every ending is a prelude to a new beginning, rough seas assigned no greater significance than calm, a life recounted without acrimony, blame or the need for redemption.

Yet, as a child, Alistair was the butt of racial taunts and bullying. He was aware of being anomalous in the eyes of his peers, and felt guilty that he could sometimes pass for white. His elder brother Stuart was killed in the Second World War. Alistair suffered periods of ‘mental illness’. And he would always regret the loss of Penryn Māori, his ‘mother tongue’. For isn’t it true that one’s first language is fundamental to one’s identity, and to lose this language or, worse, be punished for speaking it – as many Māori and Pacific Islanders were in New Zealand – is to lose your sense of self worth as well as your relationship with the most pivotal people in your life?

Alistair always projected an air of imperturbability. But he drank heavily, and one heard rumors of his violent temper, and of domestic

mayhem. Perhaps it is only in art that we come to terms with our inner demons.



That night I slept soundly, waking to the pallid daylight infiltrating my room and momentarily bewildered as to where in the world I was. At the main house, Ngaere and Alan were already up and about. We breakfasted together. Oatmeal porridge and yoghurt. Toasted homemade bread, and honey from a local hive. ‘The yields are worse each year,’ Alan said. ‘Wasps and viruses are killing off the bees.’

After breakfast, Alan suggested that since the weather was so good we should perhaps take the boat out and catch some fish. I said I would go with him as far as the bay, but would prefer to spend the morning on the beach.

‘No worries,’ Alan said. And I believed him. Here one went about one’s business without too much negotiation, and no apologies. Ngaere would repair to her studio up the hill and work on her art projects. Alan would locate the offshore areas where snapper and kingfish were most likely to be found. I would take refuge in my thoughts.

After driving to the south end of the bay, Alan reversed the trailer into the water and quickly unshackled the boat. I threw my boots off and waded in, holding the boat against the incoming tide as Alan drove the Land Cruiser back to a parking spot along the track.

The sea was warmer than I’d expected. The boat knocked gently against the breaking wavelets. Alan wasted no time in clambering into the boat, starting the outboard and moving to full throttle. As if

eager to go, the boat churned the water and rapidly disappeared into the shining metal of the sea.

I set out along the beach. Oyster catchers and dotterels skittered away across the sea-ribbed sand. Underfoot were tangles of seaweed and intact mussel, pipi and cockle shells.

I sat down on the tideline and slipped the rucksack from my shoulders. I felt the sun on my face, heard the slipshod sound of the sea and the distracted cry of a nesting dotterel. My mind drifted. I was thinking of the gap between the inspiration I drew from places like Waikawau Bay and the satisfaction I had found in America, Europe and West Africa. With every return home, the expatriate is reborn. It is not simply because you are returned to the landscapes of your early life; it is because the quotidian, momentarily bathed in a new light, appears exotic. And so you marvel that this place you could not live in because of its emptiness and insularity still has the power to remind you of who you really are. I scribbled in my notebook, ‘How can my being-here seem so completely natural, and the other places in my life, including the place I left only two weeks ago, seem so distant now, as if it were a previous incarnation? Yet, within days of leaving this place *it* will become quiescent again, like a dream.’

After walking the length of the beach I found the track through the dunes that led to the coastal road.

How often have I walked
this coastal road alone
my soul laid bare
to these unfinished hills

the sour odor of cow dung
in the autumn air
the buzz of flies
a distant barking dog
and the sense of being
somewhere and nowhere
at the same time,
in a region I cannot share,
a world we have largely
left behind, caring more
for the electronic cities
where everything and nothing
can be had
for love or money
so that we turn away
from these elemental sounds
in the intervals of the wind
the creak of bamboo
the melodic syllables of a bird
the unscripted sayings
of the sea,
the pure land to which
all the unmade roads
inevitably lead.



That afternoon, Alan came home with enough snapper to make a meal. Candles were lit. The honeyed woodwork glowed. Alan's son Richard turned up, and a little later his wife Kate arrived with their small children.

Over dinner, Kate played to my preoccupation with origins by telling me how the human immune system hones its ability to combat disease by reacting to pathogens in early childhood. If a child is not exposed to pollens, animal hair, and germs, it will be less likely to develop resistance to them. Both polluted and antiseptic environments make us susceptible to autoimmune disorders in later life.

A medical doctor and passionate advocate of breast-feeding and good nutrition as well as the use of herbal remedies, Kate covered the north of the Coromandel Peninsula, which required her to make often grueling journeys to reach her clients. She knew them both medically and personally, taking time to listen to their stories and attend to their needs, many of which were not so much physiological as existential. As she described the disastrous effects of junk food, pesticides and pharmaceuticals on human health, and the relatively straightforward ways in which we can prevent disease, I was moved by the pragmatism of Alan, Ngaere, Richard and Kate. In the subdued light of the living room, it was easy to see them as pioneers. It was not only the surroundings that reinforced this impression – the wood-burning stove, the ironware, the tins of homemade bread, the bucket of local honey, the organic fruit from the commune orchard. It was their very appearance: their serviceable clothing from Kathmandu or Swannndri, their lack of cosmetic pretension, their ability to make do with basic amenities, their rough and ready language. Here you discussed fitting a wider diameter pipe to a stove, improvising a chimney cowel from a scrap of hammered tin, or replacing a worn wheel bearing on a Land Cruiser with the same intensity and

ingenuity with which a group of Harvard professors might debate the ethics of intervention in a foreign state. If you rarely touched on or inquired into the life of another mind, or a school of thought, or the nature of experience, it was not because these things were irrelevant; rather, time did not permit such departures from the mundane and the never-ending problems of getting by. As for social life, relationships were mediated more by doing things together than by sharing intimacies.

Kate was a mine of useful information. After preparing an infusion of kumarahou tea, she explained that the native plant was so named because its flowering presaged the kumara planting season. ‘It can also be used as a decongestant,’ Kate added, ‘the leaves to make an ointment or home brew, and the flowers crushed to make soap.’

When I remarked that there was lots of kumarahou growing among the mānuka, Kate told me that the plant preferred poor soils, hence its nickname, ‘Poverty Weed’.

‘Kumarahou, mānuka, kawakawa, horopito – these are plants that first appear on depleted soils. The same plants that heal the land, heal us. They transform the clay into earth that can support more life.’

Kate’s insights into the deep ecology that linked human well-being to the well-being of the environment prompted me to ask her a question that had bothered me from my first years of fieldwork in West Africa – whether there was any natural limit to the capacity of the earth to sustain human life. ‘If, as you say, longevity does not imply health, and that we live longer in modern societies only because of constant and costly medical interventions, is it perhaps counterproductive in the long run to intervene in the poor world to

lower infant mortality and save lives when the costs of sustaining those lives over the long term are beyond the means of Third World governments, even when they are supported with foreign aid?’

Kate said this was a dilemma we had to live with. ‘Not to intervene is impossible. It would be too much like Hitler, getting rid of some people so that the lives of others will flourish. But the fact remains that we have so magnified the value of individual lives that we have lost any sense of ourselves as part of the stream of life itself. That stream is greater than any of us. And in that stream all the elements that comprise life on earth are constantly combining and permuting. It’s like a paintbox – a finite set of colors whose recombinations create, over time, almost infinite varieties of forms or figures. It is hard for us to give up on the idea of ourselves as unique and irreplaceable. But some kind of balance has to be found between self-preservation and the preservation of life in the wider sense.’

Kate’s remarks transformed the way I had been thinking about my relationship to New Zealand, and to the past. I had started out with the image of a human life as a river. Its course marked by a series of events *in time*. Now I saw it as a constellation. A skylight above my bed gave onto the star-filled night. Gazing into deep space, I realized how unproductive it was to see life lineally – as cause and effect, or as sequences and series – before and after, beginning, middle and end. Just as some stars are visible at certain times of the year and invisible at others, or some constellations are momentarily hidden behind cloud while others swim clearly into view, so different aspects of our lives emerge or disappear in relation to the changing environments of which we are a part. This metaphysical view is

nicely summarized by Carole Hungerford, whose work had inspired Kate. Hungerford suggests that our lives may be compared with a coral reef. ‘Startling though the image may be, it is a way of saying that we provide a habitat for the many microorganisms which live on and within us, and in turn we depend on them for health. Just as we see ourselves as a species within a larger ecosystem, so another species may live within us, our bodies constituting their habitat ... Even more confronting than sharing our bodies with gut and other bacteria is the fact that the very cells of our body, our DNA, host the remnants of the viruses that once invaded our ancestors and are now part of our own genetic makeup. Infinity stretches outwards and inwards in space, forwards and backwards in time.’



When I left Karuna Falls, Alan apologized for the rough conditions, but preempted my response by observing that I was probably used to worse in West Africa. Indeed, the eroded clay roads that not even a four-wheel-drive vehicle could negotiate after heavy rain, and the lack of urban amenities, had reminded me strongly of my sojourns in northern Sierra Leone, my clothing smelling of woodsmoke, hands engrained with dirt, hair uncombed.

‘It’s been great to see you,’ I said. ‘Let’s not wait for another generation to pass before we get together again!’

I knew that my feelings were reciprocated, that connections can be recovered after long separations, the gap between past and present closed as a ship’s wake is healed by the overwhelming ocean.

Just south of Coromandel, I stopped to take a last look at the sea.

It frets at my feet,
insists it write
instead of me,
erasing the line
I draw between
before and after.

Its white scroll
will be the lintel
of my sepulcher,
its marbled surface
my only grave,
its hymnal
all I want to hear
when we give praise.

Bare footed we go down to it.
With shells we return.
A father bends to shovel sand
into the pail
his daughter holds;
his son's hands delve
into the wrack
before he scuttles back
to safety by the stream.

They build a castle
for the tide to obliterate,
the leveling sea
coming into its own again,
their own day's labor stilled

in an undated
photograph
without their names.

All life is held in these
split seconds
as other waves
turn the pages
of the sea's illuminated
manuscript.



Crossing the Hauraki Plains, I regretted with every passing mile the wilderness I was leaving. On either side of the road were mud-splattered herds in hoof-pocked paddocks, wooden batons on the fences awry, like an alien musical score. I passed through typical tinpot towns that advertised fish and chips, pies, and Tip-Top ice cream. Low, close-cropped hawthorn hedges were a constant reminder of the hysteria with which our Anglo pioneers sought to subjugate the land, separating themselves from the very wilderness in which I had momentarily rediscovered the accidented landscape of myself. Recalling my conversation with Kate, I imagined my life as a sheet of paper on which every experience had left a trace. I had only to screw this paper into a ball for those traces to be entirely reconfigured. Events that on the flattened paper were poles apart were now brought into close conjunction. Marks that had been in the foreground only moments ago, were now lost without a trace. Other marks, faded by sun or rain, were now legible. All that had befallen me was ever present. If it was not in the forefront of my mind, it was

nevertheless there, in potentia, and I had only to travel a few thousand miles for what had been in abeyance to enter my consciousness anew. This sense that my experiences were only ever displaced, not supplanted, was nothing short of liberating.

[The road to Karuna Falls - notes](#)

The lost child

My brother-in-law was proof-reading *On the Origin of Stories*, his new book for Harvard University Press, when my sister Bronwen suggested that she and I drive out of Auckland to Karekare Beach. I was only too happy to get away from the city, inhale the odors of ozone and iron sand, and recapture the experience of Coromandel.

Bronwen parked the car near a cliff of black conglomerate. There was a waterfall wedded to the rock, a stream flowing through a glade of pōhutukawa, and a track through dunes to the sea.

A woman was calling her child. Her voice was shrill and panicked. On seeing us, she explained that her little girl was lost, and begged us to help find her. While Bronwen tried to comfort the frantic mother, I stumbled through the marram and lupin toward higher ground. In the distance I could see the father running hither and thither, also calling the name of his daughter at the top of his lungs. I shouted to Bronwen to go to the stream in case the child had gone down there. It was the only place of danger I could see. Then, as suddenly as she had disappeared, the child reappeared, walking

oblivious out of the sandhills in a red sunhat. I called to the father, who was still running around like a headless chicken. ‘She’s here! She’s been found!’ The mother enfolded her daughter in her arms, speaking her name over and over, sotto voce, as if to calm herself, while the child, innocent of the distress she had caused, asked for an ice cream.

Bronwen and I went on to the beach, and walked barefoot over the wet iron sand. The headland was ghosted with spume. Picnickers and surfies strolled to or from the ocean. The sun was hot.

Perhaps unconsciously returning to the incident in the sandhills, Bronwen told me the tragic story of David Wright, who had been a colleague and exact age-mate of her husband Brian at the University of Auckland. Internationally known and well regarded for his monographs on Yeats’s myth of self and Joyce’s sense of irony, David had also written a book on the unsolved mystery of the M.V. *Joyita*, a 69-foot wooden fishing boat that vanished on a voyage between Apia, Western Samoa, and Fakaofu in the Tokelau Islands in October 1955 when he was three.

Joyita: Solving the Mystery was published in 2002, six years before David Wright’s suicide at the age of fifty-six. From the very first page of this book, one is struck by the uncanny parallelism between the doomed ship and the author’s own troubled life. ‘It is debatable,’ Wright says, ‘whether some ships are ill-fated, but for much of its life the *Joyita* was certainly associated with more than its share of trouble and sadness; joy was a quality seldom attached to it.’

In the Preface to *Joyita*, David Wright explains that his interest in the fate of the *Joyita*’s passengers and crew began with his parents’

speculations about the fate of his mother's first cousin, Roger Pearlless, who was one of the disappeared. Pearlless was a district officer in the Tokelau Islands in 1955, though based in Apia. 'It was largely at his urging that the voyage took place.'

In the late 1990s, David Wright began intensive archival research in the hope of tracing relatives and descendants of some of the disappeared. Because his professional focus was Irish literature, he became fascinated by Alfred Denis Parsons, an Irish physician who had been traveling to Tokelau to perform an emergency amputation on a patient there.

At about the time he began his research, David happened to read a newspaper story about the Irish novelist Julie Parsons who was visiting New Zealand for the first time in thirty-six years. Julie was Alfred Parsons's daughter.

David wrote to Julie, now back in Dublin, explaining his interest in the *Joyita* and initiating an exchange of letters in which they discussed the mystery and shared their stories. A month later, he met Julie's brother Simon, also on a visit to New Zealand, and in January 2000 he wrote to Julie's sister Gay Johnson, another Dubliner, 'to see if she had any further thoughts on the case. Gay offered some detailed personal recollections of the time of the disaster, and of her childhood in Samoa. She vividly recalled farewelling her father when he left on the voyage, and the moment when her family was first notified that the boat had become overdue.'

After 'a prolific email correspondence', in which David and Julie 'felt moved to talk about many other matters', they discovered intriguing coincidences that David was tempted to interpret as

auguries: the fact, for instance, that Gay lived almost within sight of Joyce's tower, which he knew well but had never visited, and that their families had lived in the same suburb of Torbay in the 1950s. 'It was clear that we were becoming fond of one another. We made phone calls and exchanged photographs, then arranged to meet in San Francisco in April 2000.'

Another meeting followed in Ireland that June, and they visited Joyce's tower together. With their marriage later that year, Gay sensed that her life had come full circle, and David expressed the view that there was 'something remarkable about all these circuitously patterned events' and the way they disclosed 'a sense of the quirky possibilities of fate'. He then concludes: 'It does seem that a happy ending has been fashioned at last from one strand of an old tragedy. And after loving Ireland and Irish literature for the past two decades, it seems wonderfully strange that I should finally marry an Irishwoman solely because I happened to begin investigating a boat whose people vanished forever in a remote corner of the Pacific Ocean more than 45 years ago.'

But for someone like David Wright, attentive and sensitive to the quiriness of fate, his newfound happiness could not eclipse the dark mystery that still haunted his life, hovering on the margins, eating away at his soul. Indeed, the checkered history of the *Joyita* reads like an allegory of David's own life. 'The boat began its life in Los Angeles in 1931 as a luxury yacht, and a number of movie stars sailed on it. One of them, Thelma Todd, died in suspicious circumstances, and it has even been alleged that she was murdered by the *Joyita*'s first owner, Roland West, who was her lover at the

time. Later the *Joyita* served with the United States Navy in Hawaii as a patrol boat during the Second World War, traveled to many remote Pacific Islands, spent several years in Samoa as a fishing vessel and in Fiji as a copra ship, ran aground three times altogether and was briefly owned by Robin Maugham, whose quest to end its ill luck by exorcism went all the way to the Archbishop of Canterbury.’

In the end, thanks largely to David Wright’s painstaking research, there proved no great mystery to the disappearance of the crew and passengers of the *Joyita*, merely a tragic set of circumstances born of negligence, bad luck and panic. The poorly maintained marine engines broke down, a serious leak caused the boat to list, an SOS transmission failed because of a disconnected aerial, and the crew and passengers abandoned ship in darkness, omitting to tether their Carley floats to the drifting vessel. By dawn they would have lost sight of the ship, which did not sink, and they perished through dehydration, exposure, exhaustion and, in all probability, shark attacks. ‘It is distressing to imagine what thoughts went through their minds during their final hours,’ writes David Wright. But ‘they must have had enough time to come to the sad realization that nobody would ever know just what had happened to them.’



Is firstness another word for fate? Does the past determine who we are and what we can become, or does everything depend on whether or not *we* give the past this kind of power over us? Was David Wright’s death by drowning the apotheosis of a series of events that included his mother’s cousin’s death in the Pacific? And did David

Wright read his own fate into *The Wasteland* ('Phlebas the Phoenecian a fortnight dead'), or Virginia Woolf's suicide in 1941, permitting us to find in Virginia's last note to her husband something of what David experienced in his last hours? 'Dearest, I feel certain I am going mad again. I feel we can't go through another of those terrible times. And I shan't recover this time. I begin to hear voices, and I can't concentrate. So I am doing what seems the best thing to do. You have given me the greatest possible happiness. You have been in every way all that anyone could be. I don't think two people could have been happier till this terrible disease came. I can't fight any longer. I know that I am spoiling your life, that without me you could work. And you will I know. You see I can't even write this properly. I can't read. What I want to say is I owe all the happiness of my life to you. You have been entirely patient with me and incredibly good. I want to say that – everybody knows it. If anybody could have saved me it would have been you. Everything has gone from me but the certainty of your goodness. I can't go on spoiling your life any longer.'

Each human life shades into others. There is no finite point at which one ends and another begins, no way of working out who is who in the distorting mirrors of genealogical time. But there is a world of difference between saying that our lives are products of the past and saying that each life echoes what has gone before without ever being completely explained by it. That David Wright so assiduously researched the mystery of the *Joyita* suggests the possibility of an allegorical link between his story and the story of the doomed ship. But none of us is ever in a position to identify the

source of his or her fate; all we can do is tell our story obliquely through the lives of others; our own preoccupations are revealed in theirs.

[The lost child - notes](#)

Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?

My sister Bronwen's garden in Auckland sometimes reminded me of the exotic vegetation that forms the backdrop to many of Paul Gauguin's Tahitian and Marquesan canvases. Bronwen had favored bromeliads, distantly related to the pineapple family, whose thick, waxy, multi-colored leaves hold water for days. Elsewhere she had planted New Zealand native grasses and several varieties of hebe. A small grove of bamboo stood outside the front door, Abyssinian palms shaded a sundeck, and tree ferns formed a palisade along the western wall.

Some years ago, in the course of researching her book on Gauguin, Bronwen discovered that the French painter had visited the Auckland Art Gallery and Auckland Museum during a ten-day stopover in the city in August 1895. Gauguin was particularly intrigued by a wooden Māori bowl (kumete), the work of Patoromu Tamatea of Rotorua. The intricately carved kumete is flanked by two

clasping figures, while the lid is surmounted by a handle that comprises two entangled figures. Gauguin made no sketch of the vessel, though his notebooks contain numerous other drawings of Māori carvings. He may, however, have acquired a photograph of it, which would help explain the fidelity with which he reproduced it six years later in a series of still lifes. In these paintings, European sunflowers are placed in the carved bowl, while mangoes lie on the table around it – signifying the fusion of two very different worlds. A year earlier, in ‘Te Rerioa’ (‘The Dream’), Gauguin referenced the bowl as part of an infant’s cradle. ‘The child sleeps beneath a headboard which is the profile of an observing face whose head has hair which, on closer inspection, turns out to contain a number of figures in a configuration that comes directly from the Tamatea bowl. Likewise, the foot of the cradle is shaped into the form of a crouching figure which echoes the sleeping figure and is perhaps related to the two in the lid of a different Māori bowl.’

In making a garden or painting a picture we have recourse to a fund of objects, plants, and images whose places of origin are eclipsed by the context we assign the borrowing and the meaning they take on for us. For Gauguin, all religions and cultures were essentially similar; they stemmed from a single primeval source. This was why he could juxtapose, with no sense of travesty, Christian iconography, Italian quattrocento painting, Māori carved art, and elements taken from Buddhist temples such as Borobudur. All pointed to an aboriginal source of all traditions.

Contemporary Māori writers resist these unauthorized appropriations, questioning the right of ‘this French bohemian’ to

Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?

drag ‘Māori imagery into a primitivist mythology and iconography of his own imagining ... his placement of Māori imagery within exotic, tropical pictorial settings painted in sweet, high-key color harmonies entirely at odds with the more earthy coloration of taonga Māori.’

One cannot declare that cultural mixing is a creative act when the terms on which this syncretism has occurred have been determined, historically, by one party, leaving the voice of the other muffled or mute. It is no good evoking equality and mutuality in the exchange of traditions when one tradition has always been dominant, and when the powerless have seen the very wherewithal of their being stolen, derided, and destroyed over 150 years of colonial history. But one can, perhaps, make a plea for an understanding of Gauguin that sees him not as a typical colonizer, with disdainful views of the primitive Polynesians he made into objets d’art, but as a man oppressed by a longing that he could never assuage.

He was born in Peru in 1848, the first child of a liberal Parisian journalist who fled France with his wife and children after the failure of the 1848 revolution. His father died at Port Famine before the family even reached Peru, and for seven years Gauguin, with his mother and sister, lived in Lima in the home of a maternal uncle, Don Pio de Tristan Moscoso. ‘Don Pio had remarried at eighty and had several children from this new marriage, among others Etchenique, who for years was President of Peru.’

Writing in Atuona, Marquesas, only five months before his death, Gauguin remembered his Lima childhood with vividness and affection. That he had found fulfillment in the South Seas was because its luxuriant, Edenic and sensual nature echoed the South

Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?

American world in which he first came to consciousness. Indeed, one of his first Tahitian paintings included a portrait of his part-Peruvian mother as Eve in paradise.

Of those days in Lima, that delicious country where it never rained, Gauguin recalls with poignant acuity the large family of which he was a part, the lunatic who was kept chained on the terrace, the carved dome of a nearby church, a little negro girl who carried the family's prayer rug to church, a Chinese servant who did the household laundry, an earthquake, and a picture of a traveler, with his stick and bundle over his shoulder, that inspired the nine-year-old child to leave home – the first of many radical departures.

To speak of firstness is also to broach the question of nostalgia – a longing for a lost home that may also imply a longing for a primal and more perfect state of being.

While in Auckland, I had lunch with my sister Juliet in a Ponsonby café. Juliet spoke of our maternal grandmother, Amy Tempest, who left the safety and security of her home in West Yorkshire and traveled to the other side of the world to marry the brother of her closest friend, who had emigrated to New Zealand in 1906. She never got over her loss of England. In the Taranaki town in which she spent most of her life, she named her house 'Shibden' for the green valley she pined for. The furnishings of her house echoed the home in which she had been raised. Her brother's watercolors of the dales and moors hung in every room. And when, in her last years, she suffered a nervous breakdown, it was as if the cumulative effect of years of struggling to adjust to a place that had failed her test of respectability and gentility, finally proved too much for her to bear.

‘She suffered post-partum depression after the birth of each of her four children,’ Juliet said. ‘Jack’s [her eldest son’s] suicide may have been the last straw.’

I remembered Amy’s diary, written during her voyage out in 1908, and the letter she wrote her mother on the eve of her wedding, describing what she was going to wear – ‘everything white and cream except my garters which will be pale blue, and a pale blue ribbon through my camisole’ – and ending with her articles of faith: ‘I often think about the talks we had together, Mother, about purity in woman. It is the greatest treasure she can hold. I must say I have found to my disappointment that some of the New Zealanders are lacking in home love and home influences. Home is their last consideration. They look upon it as a place to go when their pleasures are over. But ours is going to be an English home.’

I asked Juliet what she knew of Amy’s friend Emily, the sister of the man she married, whose story echoed Amy’s.

Emily was a year younger than Amy, and her family, the Longbottoms, were poorer and less genteel than the Tempests. But Amy and Emily were both teachers. ‘This was the beginning of the friendship,’ Juliet said. Emily had been an exceptional pupil at Shelf Board School. When she completed her schooling at age thirteen, she stayed on as a pupil teacher, and attended night school at Halifax Technical College. It was an hour’s walk from her home to Halifax, and she would often study late into the night, drinking black coffee prepared by her young sister Alice, to stay awake. ‘This grueling schedule may have been the cause of a series of breakdowns she suffered,’ Juliet said, ‘though the earliest episode may date from the

Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?

time she was teaching away from home, in Burnley in Wharfedale, where she was sexually assaulted.’ She suffered another breakdown in her forties, and retired on a pension. After her next collapse, when she was sixty-six, she was admitted to a psychiatric hospital in Huddersfield, where she died two years later, in 1948.

It was as though Amy and Emily were two sides of a single coin. Their destinies were entwined, despite their different backgrounds, the geographical distance between them, and the fact that one married and the other did not. That Amy never ceased to honor this affinity was evident when she named her first-born daughter (my mother), after her friend.

I tried to conceive of what it was like for Amy during the periods she spent in Tokanui Psychiatric Hospital in the mid 1950s, far from home, falling asleep in a dorm room filled with the damned, daily subjected to electroconvulsive therapy, and no doubt wondering whether this was a place of healing or horror and whether her prayers, her faith, could save her.

The hospital was built in 1912 and closed in 1998. The buildings are now derelict. Dead leaves fill the swimming pool. Dead vines cling to the brick walls. Broken windows are boarded up. Rats, mice, birds and possums live in the ceiling spaces, shuffling and squealing like the ghostly reincarnations of the tens of thousands of human beings who inhabited the day rooms and locked dormitories.

After leaving Juliet, I returned to Bronwen’s house where she brought out a box of photos and letters that documented the lives of our grandparents. Bronwen was particularly keen for me to see a photo of Amy’s brother, Walter. She said I resembled him. I

Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?

wondered what such a resemblance might portend, and whether we can read our own fates out of the detritus left in the wake of our forebears' lives. And my eyes filled with tears as I read the letters our grandfather, Fred, had written Amy, expressing the loving hope that she would be home soon.



I spent my last day in New Zealand walking on the Whangaparaoa Peninsula. Again, I was struck by the juxtaposition of indigenous and imported flora – banks of hydrangeas growing alongside tree ferns and nikau palms; kniphofia, agapanthus and nasturtium among native toitoi, flax and kawakawa. Nothing suggested that some species were foreign, intrusive or out of place. Indeed, a postcard image of a New Zealand beach would be incomplete without wild pōhutukawa *and* introduced araucarias framing the ocean.

Nor, I reminded myself, were the native birds of New Zealand really autochthonous. Originating in Gondwanaland or flying from Australia millennia ago, they made landfall on these islands and found themselves in paradise. Without mammalian predators to contend with, they no longer needed wings, and in due course many species lost the ability to fly. With the coming of the Māori 1000 years ago, and Europeans 800 years later, the defenseless birds quickly succumbed. Hunters drove the moa to extinction. Rats, cats, and mustelids decimated other species. And with the felling and burning of the lowland forests, others soon perished. Only in the vastness of Fiordland did the flightless takahē and kākāpō hold out, their numbers pitifully small, their future in the wild as yet uncertain.

Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?

Could I, without the means of flying from these islands, have flourished or found fulfillment? And what predators would have threatened my survival?

As I picked my way across a paddock of kikuyu grass to the sea, these questions nagged at me. The landscape was so utterly familiar, and yet I felt emotionally disengaged, a mere visitant. I had felt this way before, of course, most intensely in Taranaki. In fact, so strong was the sense that I had become a stranger to myself that I compared my experience to the Capgras Delusion, often associated with schizophrenia, in which one becomes convinced that a loved one has been taken over by an alien being. Despite the outward familiarity of the other, one cannot engage emotionally with him since one believes that he has been mysteriously replaced by a malevolent double. The delusion occurs in children, but fleetingly. You imagine you have been adopted, or accidentally exchanged for another child at birth. You struggle to reconcile your emergent identity with the identity that others thrust upon you. You are never seen for what you are, for what you aspire to be, but as someone others want you to be, for the sake of appearances, for *their* peace of mind. You feel existentially half-caste, connected by birth to one world yet by disposition to another.

This sense of being divided against myself quickly passed as I approached the sea.

The shoreline consisted of a series of collapsed sandstone slabs. The edges of the layered rock had been bitten into by the ocean and resembled petrified stacks of pancakes. I found one that had been worn smooth. With the flat of my hand, I cleared the gnarled

Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?

pōhutukawa bark and leaf litter from it, then sat and watched gulls diving for fish in the ultramarine water. One flew low in front of me, scooping its prey from just below the surface. I could hear the slap slap slap of wet wings as it made off with its catch.



My rental car was grimy from the back roads I'd traveled, streaked with mud and speckled with tar. Rather than risk incurring a penalty when I returned it to the depot, I decided to give the car a quick clean at the service station where I filled the petrol tank. With no one waiting at the pump and plenty of sudsy water at my disposal, I was able to give the car a thorough going over. But as I worked, some Māori garage hands exchanged comments, loud enough for me to hear, and when I'd finished, one called, laughing, 'Heh, mate, you missed a bit underneath!' This made me marvel at my audacity, and ask myself why I had felt free to do something I would never have dared do in the U.S. The answer was unsettling. The only person who might have reprimanded me was the cashier at the service station, but he was Indian. I had assumed a right for myself that I had withheld from him. I had behaved as if there were a difference between being a citizen of a place where you were born and raised, and being a second-class citizen – a migrant or stranger. How else could I explain the alacrity with which I'd used the soapy water and squeegee to clean my car, not just the windows, with so little regard for the Indian cashier who, for all I knew, had been watching me and wondering whether to intervene? And what of the men whose disapproving remarks I had dismissed as good-natured banter? Were we united as tricksters, as jokers, whose power lay in bucking authority, getting

Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?

around the law, going against the grain? Whatever the case, I had learned that one's sense of belonging had a shadow side, namely a sense that certain others did not *really* belong and that you could, if you wished, ride roughshod over them.



The young Punjabi cab driver who drove me to Auckland airport the following day betrayed no such qualms. Kamilji said that he had dreamed of New Zealand from as long ago as he could remember. In his imagination, it was a place of rain, greenness and social tranquility.

I was reminded of images I had recently seen on TV, of a bombed-out Taliban training school in Waziristan. On the plaster walls were naïve paintings of verdant landscapes, swans on placid lakes, houris and lotus flowers. Through suicide, the young fighters imagined they would exchange their barren hills, mud-walled houses and poverty stricken villages for Paradise.

After graduating, Kamilji applied for residence. 'My wife loves this country even more passionately than I do,' he said. 'I will go home from time to time, to help my brother with his internet marketing business, but that's all. Here is where my wife and I want to raise our children. As far from the Punjab as we can get.'

How ironic, I thought, that I should have grown up in the very rain-drenched Pacific utopia that Kamilji had dreamed of, but had left it in search of deserts, and that he had found through migration what many of his compatriots now hoped to attain through heroic self-immolation.

Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?

Later, when I was airborne and scribbling these thoughts into my notebook, I wondered whether New Zealand remained the bedrock of my life not because it was the place where I first opened my eyes on the world, but because of the place I had assigned it in my imagination. *I had seized upon its emptiness and remoteness as a symbol of my own estrangement.*

Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going? - notes

Sleepless in Sydney

On my first night in Sydney, I woke at three. Unable to get back to sleep, I reread those passages in *The Rings of Saturn* where W. G. Sebald describes becoming waylaid in a labyrinth on Dunwich Heath before finding his way to the house of his friend Michael Hamburger on the outskirts of Middleton. Sebald is overwhelmed by a sense that he once inhabited the house that his friend now occupies. The poet's untidy study reminds him of his own. He is convinced that the spectacles, letters, and writing materials on the desk have once been his. And this déjà vu leads Sebald to further imagine that Hamburger's years of exile, in which his German childhood was reduced to disconnected fragments, no less haunting because they were incoherent, corresponded to his own. Sebald brings his reflections to a close by remarking his friend's uncanny relationship with Hölderlin, whom Hamburger has translated into English, and how such elective affinities transcend time and space, so that one is sometimes drawn to certain historical figures as though they were kinsmen. 'How it is that one perceives oneself in another human

being, or, if not oneself, then one's own precursor?' Marking these pages with a slip of paper, I placed *The Rings of Saturn* on my bedside table and drifted off to sleep for a couple of hours, waking just before first light to the staccato of an unidentifiable bird, which I took for a moment to be a decipherable code. Then the incessant tapping attained a higher pitch, answered by the equally urgent syllables of its mate. I lay in the darkness listening, but with the first murmuring of traffic on King Street and the gray light infiltrating the sky, the birdsong ceased.



I had begun reading Martin Edmond's *Chronicle of the Unsung* on my flight from Auckland. When I finished it in Sydney, I found myself particularly moved by the closing chapter in which Martin describes returning to the small central North Island town where he spent the first ten years of his life. It took me a while to fathom why these pages made such an impression on me, but I think it was because of the way Martin interleaves memories of his happy childhood in Ohakune with references to the history of the region – ancient forests of black matai, rimu and maire 'destroyed in a paroxysm of rage or greed', to be replaced by desolate paddocks littered with bleached logs, barbed wire fences, miserable houses and ruined sawmills whose machinery now lies rusting in the scrub. Is it possible, Martin asks, that these ravaged landscapes and violent transformations had cast a shadow over his family, presaging his father's depression and his sister's suicide? Or was the fate of his family rooted in sibling and Oedipal rivalries rather than history?

Late in 1962, Martin's father Trevor took up an appointment at Kuranui College in Greytown, and the family left Ohakune. Around the same time, I returned to New Zealand from the Congo and landed a relief teaching position in the same school where Trevor was assistant principal and Martin a third form student.

Our paths had crossed over the next forty years, but not often, so I was happy to be able to meet Martin for lunch in Sydney and reminisce.

'Not long ago,' I told Martin, 'I received a letter from an old friend who grew up in Horopito, not far from your hometown. Mike said he had been reading a history of Ohakune and district, written by a woman who had lived next door to his family in the early 1950s. According to Mike, this self-published local history was filled with tedious agricultural statistics, lists of names, and factual errors, one of which concerned the crash of a National Airways Lockheed Electra on Mount Ruapehu in October 1948. Mike's father Evan had been working in the bush that day and heard the aircraft pass overhead, which he considered unusual. Evan helped run a tramway between Horopito and the snowline, bringing split posts of silver pine down to Cowern's mill on horse-drawn bogies. Given his local knowledge and bushcraft, Evan was asked to lead the search party up the tramway to the mountain. When Mike read Merylyn George's 1990 account of the search for the Electra and found no mention of Evan Grogan, he was dismayed. When he discovered that Mrs George had credited *her* father, Jim Moule (who worked the lower section of the tramway), with leading the search party to the crash site, he felt an injustice had been done. But this was not willful

misrepresentation, for Evan Grogan had deliberately avoided being in the photos taken that day. Reticent to a fault, he had been responsible for effacing himself from the record. Though the first to the crash scene, he would be remembered for this only by his son, who in telling me the story added that for many years his father kept a twisted piece of duralumin metal from the lost aircraft as a souvenir.

‘It is ironic that we antipodeans shun the limelight,’ I told Martin, ‘only to belatedly regret that we fail to get the recognition we deserve!’

Martin and I began to recall friends who had fallen by the wayside, or whose work had been unjustifiably forgotten or ignored. I discovered that Dave Mitchell, whose *Pipe Dreams in Ponsonby* Martin and I admired, had succumbed to a debilitating neurological illness that robbed him of the power of speech. He was presently living in care at Bronte, visited regularly by his two daughters. As a poet, however, he had been forgotten. In turn, I mentioned Herman Gladwin whose eccentric poetry inspired me in my twenties. When Herman died, his son Jim enlisted my help in publishing a selection of Herman’s poems. To the sheaf of poems that I had diligently copied or salvaged over many years, Jim added perhaps a hundred more. Unfortunately, the best made a slimmer volume than I had expected and my attempts to interest a publisher in a dead performance poet came to nothing. Martin had heard of Herman; he reminded him of Johnny Bear, a semi-literate bard and bricklayer he had known some years ago. A brilliant raconteur and oral poet, Bear died five years after contracting an untreatable viral infection. During

his years of declining health he became preoccupied by the question: ‘Why is it that I am prevented from saying what is in me to say? Why must I go unheard into the dark?’

I mentioned to Martin one of our contemporaries who did have a life after death. A couple of years ago I recorded some of my poems in Auckland for the Aotearoa New Zealand Sound Archive. Following the recording session, Michele Leggott showed me some of the CDs that had already been produced. One was of the poet Mark Young. I told Michele that I had known Mark when we were both students at Victoria University of Wellington. Rumor had it that Mark had gone to Sydney where he died of a heroin overdose in a basement in Woolloomooloo. Michele smiled. She knew the rumor. But Mark was not dead; he was very much alive, and writing prolifically.

Martin completed the story, for he knew Mark well and had interviewed him for the CD in question. Michele Leggott and her colleagues were editing a selection of poems from the 70s and wanted to include some of Mark Young’s work. They tracked him down in Western Sydney, where he was completing a Bachelor of Applied Science in Operations Research. His wife Lauren studied marsupials and monotremes. Mark sent Michele some of his work, and this reconnection with the world of poetry triggered a burst of creative writing and the publication of numerous poems on his blog. ‘But it was Lauren who saved his life,’ Martin said, ‘because at the time they met, Mark was a junkie and headed for an early grave. Moreover, as if fate contrived to bless this rebirth, Mark and Lauren won a million-dollar lottery not long after they met.’

As we mused on the unpredictable course of human lives, Martin said he had been puzzled by a passage in my memoir where I confess to having never felt at home in the town where I was raised. His own experience was very different. ‘I felt completely at home in Ohakune,’ he said. ‘I belonged there and nowhere else. I still feel this way about the place. On one trip home I went into the local pub. There was a beautiful woman behind the bar. A woman in her thirties, with light golden skin and freckles, kind brown eyes. Like me, she’d left Ohakune, but could not forget it, and had returned. She did not want to live anywhere else.’

‘But you write about Ohakune,’ I said, ‘not as a place to live in but as a place you go back to, searching for something you have lost. In fact, you have spent much of your life journeying, in books, altered states of consciousness, physical travels. And in *Luca Antara*, you speak of a ‘peculiar obsession with primacy’, as if your determination to establish whether the Portuguese were the first Europeans to make landfall in Australia is an expression of some more diffuse drive to understand your own origins. Where did this interest in early explorers of the Pacific come from?’

‘I’m not sure,’ Martin said, ‘but it may have had something to do with my father mentioning exotic names like Guadalcanal and Espiritu Santo from his war years.’

But Martin had already, in a sense, answered my question in *Luca Antara*, where he addresses his preoccupation with origins, and what it means to find a point of origin where everything ‘has its own antecedent, which itself is preceded by some other event in time, making of the past an infinite regression.’ To all our questions as to

what was before, only imaginary solutions can be found. ‘Nevertheless, this obsession has not left me. I am always trying to find a point earlier than the supposed point, whether for the origin of the species *Homo* (two million years BP?), the entry of early humans into Australia (half a million, perhaps, not 40,000 or 50,000 years ago?), the first non-Aboriginal incursions onto the continent (5000 BC, with dingo aboard or trotting behind?), the European discovery (1520s, by the Portuguese?).’ To understand our origins aright, Martin argues, is to give ourselves a different present and a different future.

‘Is this the allure of the Great South Land?’ I asked. ‘Is it like the Great White Whale for Melville? Or the notion of *toi whenua* for Māori? Something more than meets the eye, more than we can know, or put into words? And is your fascination with this myth a reflection of a yearning we both felt for something beyond the world in which we grew up, something that might transcend its limitations and redeem its history?’

After lunch, we repaired to Campos for espressos. I told Martin that the question of origins held the same fascination for me as it did for him, and that my recent wanderings around New Zealand had been prompted by Paul Ricoeur’s idea that while beginnings can be dated and determined, origins cannot. What we take to be first and foundational is foreshadowed by other events we have either forgotten or that have metamorphosed into myth. And I mentioned how captivated I was, years ago, by Borges’s essay on Coleridge in which he alludes to Shelley’s idea that all the poems ever written or that ever will be written are but episodes of a single infinite poem

whose complete form always eludes us. Borges goes on to say that the dream that drove a thirteenth-century Mongolian emperor to build ‘a stately pleasure dome’ in Xanadu and the dream which inspired an English poet on a summer’s day in 1797 were one and the same dream. ‘Perhaps,’ I said to Martin, ‘our elegies for Herman Gladwin, Johnny Bear and Dave Mitchell are misplaced, because they, like us, and millions unknown to us, flounder in the same sea of discourse, creatures of identical aspirations and limitations.’



A hot wind was blowing out of the drought-stricken interior, and the sun was hot on my back as I trudged through Woolloomooloo on my way to Susan Norrie’s studio in McElhone Street. Climbing the McElhone Stairs from Cowper Wharf Road, ginger brick apartment buildings above the great sandstone cliff continued the vertical into a cloudless sky, reminding me of Dogon dwellings along the Bandiagara escarpment in Mali. The cliff also marks the old Sydney foreshore, echoing Martin Edmond’s remarks on the last page of *Luca Antara* that every modern city ‘carries traces of the first city’, and as I approached Susan’s studio above an Italian barbershop I was mindful that this neighborhood was where many human casualties washed up, limping like the grizzled wreck of a man in front of me, his stained Salvation Army clothes, heelless shoes and unkempt hair seeming to single him out as another species, though any one of us might fall on hard times and drift into the same Sargasso. Indeed, I had read in the paper only that morning, following Remembrance Day, that forty percent of Australians aged between eighteen and forty-four enlisted in World War I, and that many of the survivors

were so physically damaged by gas and wounds, or psychological trauma, that they never became loving fathers, successful workers, or adequate husbands. Shadows of their former selves, these shell-shocked men transmitted to their children more misery, perhaps, than the war itself.

Susan also lived in the shadow of a family tragedy. Her elder brother Richard died of a fractured skull following an epileptic seizure. Richard's oldest child, then twelve, was the one who found him dead. The son grew up to be a wealthy and successful banker, like his father, only to quit his job in early middle age. 'Richard's death destroyed our parents,' Susan said. 'And it cast a pall over my life and my brother's life, because nothing was ever said, voiced, or worked through, so complete was our parents' embargo on referring to what had happened.' When I told Susan about the piece I had read in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, entitled 'Soldiering on in silence with the scars of battle', she said that Australia was founded in violence, and that it had taken almost 200 years for people to confront the tragedy that had befallen the first Australians.

Many of these preoccupations were evident in Susan's work, the most recent being an installation at the 2007 Venice Biennale. Susan played a DVD of 'Havoc' for me, in which the Palazzo and Grand Canal are visible beyond the windows of the room in which the images are screened, reinforcing a sense that east is east and west is west and never the twain shall meet.

In May 2006, a blow-out of hydrogen sulfide gas at an exploration rig operated by PT Lapindo Brantas near Surabaya, Java, caused an unstoppable mud flow around the gas well. Escaping gas

sprayed into the sky, and upwelling mud engulfed paddy fields, fish farms, homes, schools and roads. Within a month, 7000 people were homeless. But the hot toxic mud continued to erupt from deep within the earth. After seeing a photograph of the disaster area in a Sydney newspaper, Susan made the first of three trips to Java with a filmmaker, David MacKenzie, to record the impact of the mud volcano on the local Tenggerese people. Susan explained that havoc means broken in Indonesian. 'I hadn't realized that until after the fact,' Susan said.

Among the videos Susan included in her installation at the Venice Biennale were images of the Kasada festival at the crater rim of Mount Bromo. Traditionally, the Kasada festival lasts about a month, during which time the deity of Mount Bromo is offered rice, fruit, vegetables and livestock in return for blessings. The festival dates from the 15th century when, following the collapse of the Hindu Majapahit kingdom, the king (Jaka Seger) and queen (Roro Anteng), with their people, sought refuge in the Tengger mountains.

The royal couple was childless, and in desperation begged the god of the volcano for help. The god promised them children on condition they sacrifice their last-born to the volcano.

'Now men toil in mud up to their armpits, fill plastic bags with stones, and sacrifice animals in their attempts to stem the mud tide,' Susan explained. 'There are already 50,000 refugees, but their hopes are fading that they will ever reclaim their lands and livelihoods from the polluted earth.'

Watching the DVD in stunned silence, I understood the anguish Susan felt at her powerlessness to act in the face of this tragedy.

‘The life of an artist is insane,’ Susan said. ‘You are always running ahead of yourself. Wanting to go beyond what you are able to do, politically or artistically. Sometimes I think that bearing witness is what is important. At other times I think it’s only the art work that matters.’

I told Susan that we are like the young man cradling a white goat in his arms and standing at the crater rim of Mount Bromo. Nothing may come of his actions, whether he throws the animal into the gas vent or not, whether he keeps it alive for its milk, or slaughters it for its meat. But what matters, I said, is that the Tenggerese act as if the mountain will answer their petitions, as if it is a moral being. And so, in dance and trance, young men chew on hot coals and light bulbs, inflicting pain upon themselves rather than endure passively the pain and injustice of the world. As with ritual, our creative work may not mitigate social injustices or turn back any tide, but it constitutes a mode of action nonetheless, and our lives are made more bearable because of it.

By the time I left Susan’s studio I was, however, unconvinced by my initial response to the questions posed by Susan’s work, and I walked across the city in a daze, stopping only to jot down my disconnected thoughts or to sit in a coffee bar staring out the window with little sense of my whereabouts or even the time of day.

In *Genesis*, Cain is a tiller of the ground, Abel a keeper of sheep. Cain offers a portion of his harvest to God; Abel offers the firstlings of his flock and the fat thereof. God accepts Abel’s sacrifice but ignores Cain’s. In a fit of jealousy, Cain kills his brother. To God’s question, ‘Where is thy brother Abel?’ Cain responds, ‘Am I my

brother's keeper?' Thus is broached one of humanity's first existential dilemmas: do we have a responsibility to care for and protect others? And where, if anywhere, do we draw the line between those we are obliged to look after and those we are not?

There are times when we are so disturbed by our inability to alleviate the suffering of others that we visit suffering upon ourselves in a blind gesture at narrowing the gap between our own fortunate life and theirs. But Susan's preparedness to inhale toxic fumes, or endure disorientation and exhaustion, in order to document the plight of the Tenggerese was not merely a magical tactic to lessen her own distress. Her actions fused biographical *and* political purposes. Thus, Susan's profound sense that the untimely death of her brother may have been preventable was linked to her equally strong sense of outrage at inequalities and injustices in the poor world – concomitants of global capitalism, and the rapacious exploitation by the first world of the raw resources to be found in the third world – oil, natural gas, lumber, precious stones, minerals and cheap labor. Susan has made art not only a vehicle for expressing her political emotions, but a metaphor for all miscarriages of justice, in which silent assent, studied indifference or ignorance enable the well-heeled beneficiaries of distant atrocities to justify business as usual.



My wanderings finally brought me to Blackwattle Bay where I ordered fish and chips and sat at a wooden table on the quayside, shaded by a blue umbrella. Seagulls waited for crumbs. Young Korean men, wearing white rubber boots and rubber aprons, sluiced

plastic bins from which fish had been unloaded from the boats that now rocked gently at their moorings among private launches and cruise boats with such names as *Capricorn Queen*, *Kemo-Sabe*, *Blue Moon* and *Bella Vista*. There was even an Aboriginal boat, the *Deerubbun*, which offered ‘Cultural Cruises and Tribal Warriors’.

The water in the bay was murky. Oil slicked the surface. Dead jellyfish and eucalypt leaves floated in the shallows. This detritus brought me to reflect on the history of the bay, and ask myself whether this history could still be read in the polluted water, the sludge on the harbor floor, and the surviving factories on the foreshore. Were the potsherds, fragments of bottle glass and broken bricks, now dimly discernible among the submerged slabs of sandstone, evidence of the kilns and glassworks that once lined the bay, or had the past become invisible and irrecoverable?

After lunch, I crossed Bridge Road in order to walk in the shade of the Morton Bay Figs that fringed Wentworth Park. It was hard to imagine that this reclaimed land, now divided between a grayhound racing stadium and an open field used for rugby matches, carnivals, art shows and antique auctions had, 150 years ago, been a swampy no man’s land where the low-life of Sydney congregated for rat baiting, prize fighting, whoring and trading stolen goods. Kauri Point brought a less distant past to mind, for Martin Edmond had spent several memorable years in this neighborhood, bestowing on it in retrospect an almost mythical aura.

Art shares with capitalism a capacity for transforming banal and profitless experience into something of value, and I was struck by how the once outlawed neighborhood of the Blackwattle Swamp

precinct, 'notorious for its disregard for God and disrespect for order' had metamorphosed into prime real estate, with landscaped parks, paved walkways and pricey apartment buildings among groves of casuarinas. An escarpment may lay bare the successive layers of sedimentary rock from which we can deduce the geological history of an entire region. An archaeological midden, carefully excavated, provides a glimpse into our cultural past, each epoch defined by the pottery that was made, the food that was consumed, the catastrophes to which people had to adapt or die. But sometimes it is simply impossible to fathom our origins. Even if one is able to delve deep enough, the fragments of shell, pottery, bone or jewelry that come to light do not permit us to know the experience of those who once inhabited that site. And so we are left with our present selves, aware we are a part of this blurred history yet powerless to complete the genealogy or identify the precursors that would, we suspect, appear to us as in a hall of distorting mirrors where we rush about desperately seeking a single affirming image, a single abiding form.

Taking a line for a walk

When I checked into my hotel in San Francisco, I discovered that the balance on my credit card was insufficient to cover the costs of my five-day stay *as well as* the Additional Charges Deposit. After talking to the manager at the front desk, I managed to have the \$500 deposit waived. But I had to give an assurance that I would not incur any extra charges by using the mini-bar, gym, telephone, room or laundry service, ordering a massage or watching pornographic movies. I had brought muesli, fruit, soymilk and orange juice with me, and so I moved the bottles and cans in the mini-bar to make room for my supplies. Minutes later I received a call to ask if I had, contrary to my stated intention, used the mini-bar. I explained that I had not realized that moving a bottle in the mini-bar would register downstairs and my account be charged automatically. Obliging, the caller told me that a small refrigerator would be delivered to my room at no extra charge, to accommodate my orange juice. The mini-bar was then locked by remote control, with my bunch of bananas still inside. I felt too foolish to ask for the bar to be reopened. It occurred to me

that my sense of disorientation had less to do with jet lag than a reluctance to readjust to being in a social space where the profit motive underpinned so many interactions. Perhaps this is why I called to ask if I could watch the television without any extra charge, and whether I was free to use the soap, shampoo and conditioner in the bathroom without penalty. ‘This is all complimentary, Mr Jackson,’ I was told. ‘We hope your stay will be a pleasant one. Please do not hesitate to ask if we can be of any further assistance.’

That night, I felt cut off from the world. I lay in semi-darkness in my anonymous cubicle, twenty floors above ground, counting the hours until dawn. I heard only the soft unvarying rush of air through a vent as I surveyed my room – the brass light fittings, pink and oyster shell walls, paintings of cherry blossoms, ceramic jars and a tree outside a Parisian mansion. I walked to the window, drew back the curtains, and peered into the night. High-rise, mist-swathed buildings. Traffic moving in endless though interrupted procession in the street below.



With a day to kill before the anthropological conference began, I visited the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art where I became immediately entranced by the paintings and etchings of Paul Klee. His work reconnected me with my antipodean journey, and gave me the idea of using the titles of his paintings for some of the chapter headings in my book. Klee’s ‘Fata Morgana at Sea’, for example, brought me back to the illusion of Corsica – an image of the imaginary yet necessary nature of art, creating simulacra of the real

that make it possible for us to address experiences that might otherwise defeat us. Several other works conspired to reinforce this idea: Diego Rivera's 'The Flower Carrier', in which a woman helps an overburdened man to his feet, taking the weight of his load; Pablo Picasso's 'The Coffee Pot', painted in Paris during World War II, the cup suggesting a female form, the phallic spout of the coffee pot opposing it, as fascism opposed the free and sensuous expression of life.

I spent the rest of the day exploring a city I had long wanted to visit. It did not disappoint. Perhaps it was the strange juxtaposition of Australasian and North American flora that made me feel at home – the eucalypts, figs, phoenix palms, pines and cedars. Perhaps it was the nonchalant and affable way strangers answered my questions about how to get to Chinatown or the Golden Gate Bridge. Perhaps it was the steep hills, and the surreal, fogbound landscape in which buildings, trees, water and traffic were partially submerged.

I walked for miles, hoping for a glimpse of the bridge. I guessed it to be out there somewhere in the bay, and I was hoping the mist would lift. A foghorn sounded morosely across the veiled water. When I asked a jogger if the fog was likely to burn off, he said, 'It's not going to get hot enough. At least not today.'

I never got to see the bridge. But I was content to drift, as I had in New Zealand, and see what happened. In a grocery store at Nob Hill, I overheard a woman telling her companion that her brother had committed suicide seventeen years ago to the day. 'I turned the corner this summer,' she said, 'which makes me think I'm now ready to write a book about it.' On a street corner at Russian Hill, I passed a

woman pushing a friend in a wheelchair. The woman said, ‘Well, he didn’t fit in with the kids.’ To which the woman in the wheelchair replied, ‘But you didn’t fit in either.’

Thus does the world hand us stories on a plate. And as if in confirmation I found myself in a street gridlocked with fire trucks and filled with the noise of generators. A three-storeyed, bay-windowed house had been gutted by fire. The façade was blackened, the windows smashed, and water was still draining from the upper floor where a fireman picked his way through charred furniture and overturned lamps. Thirty or more firemen, some with pikestaffs, all with helmets and flameproof clothing, were standing in the road. Some slaked their thirst with Gatorade. Others talked. The drama was over, though the street was awash with water and snarled with hoses.

‘Was anyone hurt?’ I asked one of the firemen.

‘An elderly woman died. Her husband’s been hospitalized for smoke inhalation.’

‘What started the fire?’

‘We’re looking now.’



That afternoon, the fog thickened and the daylight faded early. In my hotel room, I wrote up the notes I had taken during my rambles. I kept coming back to the image of the bridge. How could I cross the narrows between my recent antipodean travels and the dominant discourse of the conference at which I been invited to present a paper? How could I retain, in my writing, a strong sense of primary experience, unclouded by the secondary elaborations with which

scholars purport to explain the world? Could I, for instance, assign to firstness the same irreducible value that Charles Sanders Peirce gave it, citing for comparison words like redness and hardness that conjure some intrinsic, natural property that remains stable over time? Or had my research thrown up a set of variations on a theme, refusing any final conclusion, any definitive knowledge?

I thought of Klee's wonderful image of taking a line for a walk.

But what line could I begin with?

Having dismissed Peirce, I thought of exploring some of the research summarized in a recent issue of *Psychology Today* whose cover showed a cracked white candied heart with the words 'First Love, First Loss' written in lipstick across it. The feature article spoke learnedly of 'the primacy effect', of 'the early-life memory bump', and of the 'transference' of feelings developed in primary relationships (notably with one's parents) to all subsequent relationships. I found this model of the life course as simplistic as the metaphor of life as a narrative or journey. That a human life unfolds lineally is as much a fiction as the idea that lives are like libraries, able to be labeled and classified, book-ended by Birth and Death. These are ways we retrospectively bestow on life a semblance of order, or the appearance of purpose and design. The same is true of the experience of firstness, which bears a family resemblance to Hannah Arendt's notion of natality – the perennial surprise of being in the world, new experiences continually befalling us whether we seek them or not. 'This character of startling unexpectedness is inherent in all beginnings and in all origins,' Arendt writes. But is

there really any finite moment to which we can we assign such terms as 'first' or 'final'?

This train of thought led me back to Paul's Ricoeur's phrase, 'the enigma of anteriority', and his allusions to the gap between an identifiable beginning (for instance, the date of one's birth, or the day James Cook made landfall in New Zealand) and all that prefigures such biographical and historical moments. Perhaps only poetry can do justice to the sense of mystery that pervades our relationship to the past, the 'haunted bay' from which 'the godwits vanish toward another summer', or the half-light of our 'diffident glory' in which 'the sailor lives, and stands beside us, paying out into our time's wave the stain of blood that writes an island story.'

We are shaped as much by our ancestry and our circumstances, as by our own will, and we are, to paraphrase John Donne, inescapably a part of all mankind. We may think of ourselves as islands, but these are islands in the stream of genealogy and history, 'a part of the maine'. Though every person is unique, he or she also shares with countless others, close kin as well as distant strangers, the same DNA, the same evolutionary history, the same humanity. Like ice floes, our visible features belie submerged and barely visible forms.

And like an ice floe, our existence begins as a piece of a continent, only to drift and disappear into an ocean with the taste of human tears.

How can one compose a picture of an iceberg that includes its tip, its mass beneath the surface, its watery environment and its continual transformations? Is it not like attempting to capture *simultaneously*

both the singularity of a human life and its similarity to the lives of others?

In his famous essay on the storyteller, Walter Benjamin speaks of the traces of the storyteller that ‘cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel’ – an allusion to the potsherds unearthed by archaeologists, whose accidental signatures locate an actual person within a historical period, a cultural context or religious tradition.

But a fingerprint is hardly a person, and one comes back to the question of whether, and to what extent, given the constraints of culture, class and circumstance, we are the authors of our own lives.

Toward the end of his life, Ricoeur admitted misgivings about having always placed his personal life *sous-rature*, avoiding subjective language because it seemed improvisatory and uncontrolled. In a sustained conversation with two close friends, Ricoeur decided, however, to merge the discursive spheres he had hitherto kept separate, allowing the ‘rule of life to overtake the rule of thought’. And he recounts how, within two years of his birth in 1913, his father was killed in the Battle of the Marne and his mother died soon after. He and his sister were adopted by their paternal grandparents and went to live in Rennes – a move that effectively cut the children off from their maternal kin. There is no doubt, Ricoeur observed years later, that this genealogical separation ‘exerted a very strong influence ... and [was] at the same time very traumatic, since the maternal side was hidden ... I only understood the figure of the mother through the way my wife was perceived by her children. The word ‘mama’ was a word pronounced by my children but never by

me.’ When his sister died of tuberculosis in 1932, Ricoeur was again made aware of how the past can hold one in thrall. Her ‘youth was in a sense eclipsed by mine,’ Ricoeur said. ‘I have regretted this all my life, with the impression that she received less than her due, while I received more than mine; I still struggle with the feeling of an unpaid debt, with the feeling that she suffered an injustice from which I benefited. This must have played an important role in my life: the “unpaid debt” is a persistent theme, turning up frequently in my work.’

Orphaned so young, denied the warmth and intimacy of a mother’s love, and raised in a household of older people where reading and religious faith were fervent preoccupations, it is not surprising that Ricoeur should discover a sense of deep well-being in books, and develop a bipolar fascination with philosophy and religion. Yet it is also tempting to see in the austere allure of scholarship a retreat from painful and possibly unresolved experiences of personal loss. Indeed I see it as both poignant and ironic that the author of *Time and Narrative* should seldom refer to any story drawn from life in this monumental work, and that his famed study of the hermeneutics of suspicion should focus on Freud’s philosophical writings and almost completely ignore the clinical work that cuts closest to the bone. It would be crass to suggest that the course of Ricoeur’s intellectual life was determined by traumatic events in his early childhood, but Ricoeur himself was surely mindful of the connection between his autobiographical disclosures and his comments on the origin that ‘always slips away at

the same time as it surges up in the present under the enigma of the always-already-there.’

Most academic explorations of our relationship to the past focus on memory. Past experiences persist because the mind cannot help but hark back to them, consciously or unconsciously mired, as it were, in what has already occurred. But the notion of an actual and enduring past that can be accessed, returned to, and held, like a stone in the palm of one’s hand, is an illusion. Memory is a misnomer. It is synonymous with the imagination. And the imagination ceaselessly reworks the impressions and images that come to mind, either from within or without, as it strives to render coherent and comprehensible a world that remains, however, beyond our grasp. If the past is anything it is an attic space, crammed with discarded or forgotten objects that may yet be raided by the imagination in its search for raw materials with which to make our present circumstances intelligible and liveable.

It was my friend David Carrasco who introduced me to Ricoeur’s enigma of anteriority, a notion that helped him throw light on the Latino fascination with the interplay of personal identity and indigenous origins, between a historical situation and its mythical beginnings.

In his discussion of what he calls ‘Aztec moments’, David quotes a dinner companion who expressed the view that Chicanos don’t just have senior moments, those moments of forgetting details of one’s memory or some recent event. ‘We have Aztec moments, when we realize que los Indios de Mexico, los Aztecas, los Toltecas y los Mayas are part of our historias, who we are. We are not Españoles,

we're mestizos and proud of our indigenista parts.' David and his dinner companions recalled conversations with parents and grandparents as well as childhood journeys to Mexico, where they discovered their names and faces and family stories in Mexican museums, parks, villages, churches, mining towns, myths and histories. 'In each of our families,' David writes, 'there was an Indio in appearance or in lineage. My father was called El Indio in his family because, like his mother Carlota Carranza Carrasco, he had what was perceived as the physiognomy of a Mexican Indian. In those days it wasn't a sign of pride. But for us around the table, having an Aztec moment meant that Chicanos are able to *re-member* their native roots, to expand their sense of identity beyond either Anglo definitions or the black-white dichotomy that animates so much of race discourse in the U.S. And we felt pride in this remembering and were coming to realize that our mestizaje was both a complex social location but also a symbolic meaning from which we viewed the world with complex eyes.'

David's reflections on his mixed heritage brought me back to the question that had prompted my return to the country where I was born and raised. It is not that one remembers one's past exactly. Nor that one completely imagines it. Aotearoa and Aztlan are as historical as they are mythical. Let us say, then, that we draw on *what we think we know* of the past to create a sense of solidarity with others. And it is on the strength of this image of a primordial or foundational identity that we make claims for belonging and standing (tūrangawaewae), presence and recognition (mana), and well-being (mauri ora). But we can also invoke the past in making a case for

disconnectedness and irremediable difference. Then our exclusive identity claims – ethnic, national or personal – come up against the identity claims of others. What is first and fundamental for Māori may be incompatible with what is prior or a priori for Pākehā.

While Māori express firstness in autochthonous terms – as an umbilical connection with the land that gives them status as tangata whenua (people of the placenta), many Pākehā invoke rather different archetypes of belonging.

When, as a child, I thought of the world to which I was naturally heir I did not think primarily of family or lineage, but of a quiet bend in a local river, a pine plantation, a remnant stand of native bush, a hill from which, on a clear day, I could see the mountain. These elements defined a *social* microcosm of which I felt intimately a part. Winter and summer, I explored, charted, named and absorbed this world of mine until there wasn't an acre I did not know by heart. This was at once my lifeworld and myself. Animate, attuned and entangled. It's why I have always felt a deep affinity with Paul Cézanne. His paintings of Mont Sainte Victoire touch me like no others. These landscapes, like the landscapes my mother painted, are really abstract portraits – worlds not of rock and pine but of the flesh.

This mystical participation in nature was, I came to realize, not peculiar to me; it defined a national disposition.

Although New Zealand and Algeria are geographically distant, they share a similar colonial history. It is this history, Albert Camus suggests, that shapes a social imaginary in which landscape comes to figure as a central motif.

Writing in *Noces* about such places as Algiers, Tipasa, Oran, and Djemila, Camus frequently alludes to the cult of physicality that filled the cultural void in which the pied-noir (French colonist) found himself. Having, on the one hand, no first-hand everyday knowledge of metropolitan France, and on the other, no practical understanding of Arab or Kabyle lifeworlds, the outsider tended to drift into a poetic, mystical relationship with the physical landscape – the sun, the light, the sea, the mountains – and cultivate an idealised athleticism focused on sports and sexual prowess. The New Zealand in which I came of age was strikingly similar. Though my grandparents still spoke of England as a motherland to which one was both constitutionally and sentimentally tethered, I tended to see it as a antiquated, class-conscious, and distant country in which I could never feel at home. At the same time, I felt that indigenous Māori culture was, despite its exotic allure, equally beyond my reach. Perhaps this is why I grew up feeling not so much betwixt and between two cultural worlds, as cultureless. As a result, I wavered between a ‘feminised’ and poetic sensibility, anchored in the landscape, and a ‘masculinised’ ethos whose ritual foci were body-contact sports such as rugby and athletics. But the authentic *social* belonging that finds its consummation in culture and community always lay elsewhere.

The affection and familiarity I feel toward my homeland is always commingled with a sense of disaffection and unfamiliarity, the origins of which are beyond my power to understand. Perhaps it has something to do with the terrible violence that accompanied the birth of the nation. Perhaps it reflects the isolation I felt as a child, always

walking into the wind, going against the grain. I remember the deep affinity I felt for my grandfather, who struggled to overcome his working-class background while remaining loyal to a working-class ethic of the common man. As an intellectual, I often find myself in revolt against the arcane, abstract and reductive conventions of the academy, but have never embraced the demotic view that common sense and intuition can be counted on to edify and enlighten, or determine right from wrong. My New Zealand background made it easy for me to identify bullshit, but it did not help me recognize wisdom. Perhaps I am simply observing that home is always a particular and familiar world – a place where one kicks over the traces, or from which one fares forth, looking for a wider world one can call one's own. But while one might outgrow the place where one began, one's offspring will find in a parent's accomplishments only another beginning or blind alley, from which they, in turn, will feel compelled to move away in order to discover themselves.



On the night flight from San Francisco to Boston I dreamt I was in a large bed, trying to protect a small, premature and naked infant from the other who shared my bed and kept turning and threatening to smother it. Curling my arm protectively around the fragile new life, I gazed on it with overwhelming love.

Notes

First things first

what hold our histories have over us — Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1984, p. 10. ‘Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.’

something about our first experiences in life that make all that follows pale in comparison — Psychologists speak of ‘the primacy effect’ to account for the fact that ‘firsts affect us so powerfully’, and refer to an ‘early-life memory bump’ in explaining why experiences in our late teens and early twenties are remembered with greatest vividness. Jay Dixit, ‘Heartbreak and Home Runs: The Power of First Experiences’, *Psychology Today* 2010, 43 (1), 62-69, 62.

Memory, like a good storyteller, is an artful liar — C.f. Sue Halpern: ‘Memory ... is an expert storyteller.’ *I Can't Remember What I Forgot: The Good News from the Front Lines of Memory Research*, New York: Harmony Books, 2008, p. 66.

[Return to main text](#)

Braided rivers

cars falling into holes — Roger Marshall, recalling the Christchurch earthquake.

Phil Mercer, 'Christchurch: Broken city faces life after quake', 24 February 2011, electronic document <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-12565923>

Sohrab and Rustam — (1963) dir. Vishram Bedekar, music Sajjad Hussain.

[Return to main text](#)

Against the grain

in Canterbury, he could not decide — In his discussion of chiasmus in Butler's work, Ralf Norrman argues that since 'the two halves of a chiasmus are each other's mirror images, chiasmus is therefore likely to be typical of narcissistic people, who have problems with their relations to others, and most of all wish to see in others a reflection of themselves.' *Samuel Butler and the Meaning of Chiasmus*, Macmillan: London, 1986, pp. 6-7.

beyond the pale of civilization — Samuel Butler, *A First Year in Canterbury Settlement*, ed. A.C. Brassington and P. B. Maling, Auckland and Hamilton: Blackwood and Janet Paul, 1964 [orig. pub. 1863], p. 48.

some signs of human care — *ibid.*, 59.

far better adapted — *ibid.*, 50.

sheep, horses, dogs, cattle — *ibid.*, 35.

the solitude was greater than I could bear — Samuel Butler, *Erewhon or Over the Range*, ed. Hans-Peter Breuer and Daniel F. Howard, Toronto and London: Associated University Presses Inc., 1981, p. 74.

totally debarred from the intellectual society of clever men — Letter to his aunt, Mrs Worsley, 1861. Cited in Peter Raby, *Samuel Butler: a Biography*, London: Hogarth Press, 1991, p. 81.

Early settlers in the Matukituki Valley — John C. Aspinall, *High Country Sheep Station: A Bulletin for Schools*, Wellington: Education Department, School Publications Branch, 1976, pp. 6-8.

It took time to get used — ‘Matukituki’, in Michael Jackson, *Going On*, Dunedin: McIndoe, 1985, pp. 58-59.

the insubstantial and curiously childlike buildings — Compare Samuel Butler’s first impressions of Lyttleton: ‘scattered wooden boxes of houses, with ragged roods of scrubby ground between them.’ *A First Year*, op. cit., p. 33.

Henry Lawson at Mangamaunu — Details drawn from W.H. Pearson, *Henry Lawson among Māoris*, Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1968, and Charles Ferrall (ed.), *Henry Lawson in New Zealand*, Wellington: Steele Roberts Publishers, 2011.

sentimental rot — Henry Lawson, ‘A Daughter of Māoriland’, *The Antipodean* 1897, 3, p. 4.

Pākehā attitudes to Māori — Henry Lawson to Hugh McCallum, June 25, 1897. Mitchell Library Uncat. MSS. Set 184, Item 7.

I was slow at arithmetic — Henry Lawson, ‘Fragment of an Autobiography’, Mitchell Library MS. Published in *The Stories of Henry Lawson*, ed. Cecil Mann, 3 vols., Sydney: Angus and Roberston, 1964.

Poor girl ... but I shouldn't care to punish her — Henry Lawson to Hugh McCallum, op.cit.

there is no creature whose inward being is so strong — George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985, p. 896.

As the loneliness of this place is affecting Mrs Lawson's health — Henry Lawson, letter to The Secretary of Education, September 28, 1897. Cited in Pearson, op. cit., p. 177.

a disillusioned and cruelly wronged man — Henry Lawson to George Robertson, March 28 1917, 'Correspondence re Selected Poems of Henry Lawson', Mitchell Library MS., ii, 260. On Māori recollections of Lawson, see Pearson, op. cit., pp. 156-157.

... dark and lonely — Henry Lawson, 'The Old Mile Tree', *Miscellaneous MSS, Verse*, I, 111, Mitchell Library, A 1869. Published in *Bulletin*, November 23 1911, p. 44.

miserable little hell of New Pipeclay — *Fragment of an Autobiography* op. cit., vol. ii, fo.139-140.

delicate, shabby, soul-starved — 1913 Autobiography, fo. 5, Alexander Turnbull Library MS. Edited version in *Southerly*, 1964, 4, p. 193.

Lawson was predisposed — Pearson op. cit., p. 152.

Bill Pearson himself — Paul Millar writes of Pearson as 'diffident ... hesitant, unsure of himself, vulnerable', and 'quite outside the pale', thus echoing Lawson's descriptions of *his* childhood personality. Pearson was also bullied at school and 'picked on' at home. He recognized Hans Christian Andersen's tale of the ugly duckling 'as the story of myself'. Paul Millar, *No Fretful Sleeper: A Life of Bill Pearson*, Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2010, p. 325, p. 192, p. 32, p. 31.

magnificently ugly ... a calm and sensuous soul — The first comments are by Henry James, the second by Ralph Waldo Emerson.

there is no creature whose inward being — George Eliot, 'Finale', *Middlemarch*.

I sometimes wonder whether — Bill Pearson, from an unpublished interview with Jeffrey Paparoa Holman, 12 July 1999. Paul Millar also

makes this connection between Bill Pearson's identification with Māori and his own sense of being excluded and disparaged. The Māori club became, for him, an alternative community, a place of 'warmth and unconditional friendship'. Millar, pp. 236-237.

I pulled out of the Māori club — Pearson, *ibid.*

[Return to main text](#)

No direction home

No Direction Home — *Bob Dylan* Documentary, directed by Martin Scorsese (2005). The title is from Dylan's song, 'Like a Rolling Stone' (*Highway 61 Revisited*).

why Lawson was so uninspired by the Inland Kaikoura range — One of Lawson's rare poetic evocations of the Kaikoura Coast is interleaved with nostalgic references to the Australian outback, 'the wastes of the Never Never ... where the dead men lie.' Ferrall, *op. cit.*, pp. 117-118.

Francine Sweet — Francesca Horsley, 'Spanish Flair', *New Zealand Listener* 3568, September 27, 2008, www.listener.co.nz/culture/dance/spanish-flair

the idea of 'originals' among the Mehinaku — Carla Stang, *A Walk to the River in Amazonia: Ordinary Reality for the Mehinaku Indians*, New York: Berghahn, 2009, pp. 51-52.

Next I was a waitress and a bookshop assistant — Brigid Lowry, 'My Writing Life,' Brigid Lowry website, www.tasman.net/~penwoman/

Sometimes it seems the most pleasurable job — *ibid.*

Beginnings are not the same as origins — Paul Ricoeur, *Critique and Conviction: Conversations with François Azouvi and Marc de Launay*, trans. Kathleen Blamey, New York: Columbia University Press, 1998, p. 100.

This was the enigma of anteriority — Ricoeur, *ibid.*

jute barons and jute industry — Samita Sen, *Women and Labor in Late Colonial India: The Bengal Jute Industry*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

When the Roman jailers — Jean-Paul Clébert, *The Gypsies*, trans. Charles Duff, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967, pp. 24-26.

[Return to main text](#)

Crossing Cook Strait

Crossing Cook Strait — James K. Baxter, *In Fires of No Return*, London: Oxford University Press, 1958, p. 58.

John Mulgan's *Man Alone* — Auckland: Longman Paul, 1972.

Les Cleveland's *The Iron Hand: New Zealand Soldiers' Poems from World War Two*, Wellington: Wai-te-Ata Press, 1979.

But I could not persuade anyone in the battalion — *ibid.*, pp. 11-12. In his poem, 'The Long Way Back', Cleveland writes of the same moment: 'A week ago the other survivors / Carousing rowdily in Rome / Declined to join this excursion' (51).

and all the other friends of friends — *ibid.*, p. 52.

Back in New Zealand — *ibid.*, p. 12.

a stripped-down, pragmatic mentality — David Brooks, 'Where's the Trauma and the Grief?' *New York Times*, August 15, 2008.

If I were to attempt an epic of our military experience — Les Cleveland, 'An Assiduous Industry', *New Zealand Books*, June 1997, p. 15.

combat soldiers have something in common with workers in hazardous civilian occupations — Les Cleveland, 'Soldiers' Songs: The Folklore of the Powerless', *New York Folklore*, 1985, 11 (1-4), 79. See also Les Cleveland, *Dark Laughter: War and Song in Popular Culture*, Westport, Conn., Praeger, 1994.

I've always tended to look back — Cited in Athol McCredie, 'The Social Landscape', in *Witness to Change: Life in New Zealand*, ed. John Pascoe, Les Cleveland, and Ans Westra. Wellington: PhotoForum, 1985, p. 52. See also *Les Cleveland: Message from the Exterior, Six Decades*. Wellington: City Gallery, 1998.

[Return to main text](#)

Metaphor of the table

My life as Me — Barry Humphries, *My Life as Me: A Memoir*, London: Michael Joseph, 2002, pp. 75-77.

Banaba is our mother — Jennifer Shennan and Makin Corrie Tekenimatang (eds), *One and a Half Pacific Islands: Stories Banaban People Tell of Themselves*, Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2005, p. 128.

the loss of laughter and joy — *ibid.*, p. 115.

We look on Rabi as synonymous with Banaba — *ibid.*, p. 127.

Life is good — *ibid.*, p. 71.

the first complete New Zealand pop song — Chris Bourke, *Blue Smoke: The Lost Dawn of New Zealand Popular Music 1918-1964*, Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2010, p. 155.

even as a child he was 'extremely shy — Bourke, p. 154.

one day, 'halfway across the Indian Ocean' — James Thornton, 'Ruru Karaitiana – Māori Songwriter', *The New Settler*, 1949, p. 17. Cited in Bourke, p. 103.

within half an hour he had written lyrics 'in his head' — 'Success in America: Dunedin Songwriter's "Blue Smoke"', *Otago Daily Times*, 5 April 1952, p. 11. Cited in Bourke, p. 103.

It is possible, however, that the tune — Les Cleveland, personal communication, August 4, 2011.

differed from the lines penned by Ruru Karaitiana — Les Cleveland recalls that Ngarimu's lines were identical with the lines he learned in Trentham Camp and the Middle East in 1943.

recorded more 'slow sad waltzes' — Bourke, p. 161.

I don't know whether Ruru ever felt free to start — Jack Kelleher, 'Blue Smoke', *The Dominion*, 17 December 1970, p. 15. Cited in Bourke, 163.

[Return to main text](#)

Destruction and hope

Destruction and Hope — Paul Klee, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

On April 15, 1945 — Though echoing Keith's account of his father's experience, the following paragraph is closely based on Gavin Mortimer's account of the liberation of Celle and of Belsen. *Stirling's Men: The Inside History of the SAS in World War II*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2004, p. 322-324.

It is as if I walked into Dachau — Cited in Caroline Moorehead, *Martha Gellhorn: A Life*, New York: Vintage: 2004, p. 284.

His sense of continuity was powerful — Keith Ridler, 'If Not the Words: Shared Practical Activity and Friendship in Fieldwork', in *Things As They Are: New Directions of Phenomenological Anthropology*, ed. Michael Jackson, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996, p. 244.

while you are at the table — Paul Myerscough, 'Diary', *London Review of Books*, 29 January, 2009, pp. 35.

[Return to main text](#)

Distance looks our way

Distance looks our way — Charles Brasch, ‘The Islands’ (ii).

Schweitzer’s dismay — *On the Edge of the Primeval Forest*, Macmillan: New York, 1948. Schweitzer discusses briefly the conflicts between what he calls civilizing and colonizing interests (79) and makes observations on the timber trade without, however, remarking the negative repercussions of massive deforestation.

[Return to main text](#)

The illusion of Corsica

Gregory O’Brien’s recently published memoir — *News of the Swimmer Reaches Shore: A Guide to French Usage*. Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2007.

those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it — George Santayana, *The Life of Reason*, or, *The Phases of Human Progress*. New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1905.

The solace of such work lies in this — Lawrence Durrell, *Justine*. London: Faber and Faber, 1957, p. 17.

Every day includes much more non-being than being — Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being: Unpublished Autobiographical Writings*. London: Triad Grafton Books, 1978, p. 81.

the pollinating gift of facts — This and the following quotations concerning Norman Lewis appear in a review of a Lewis biography by novelist and essayist Andrew O’Hagen, ‘Candle Moments,’ *London Review of Books*, 25 September, 2008, 30(18), p. 23.

while some psychologists find evidence for the permanence of some memory traces — David F. Hall, Elizabeth F. Loftus, and James P.

Tousignant, 'Postevent information and changes in recollection for a natural event.' In *Eyewitness Testimony: Psychological Perspectives*, eds. Gary L. Wells and Elizabeth F. Loftus, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984, pp. 124-141 (pp. 132-135).

to see people not only as they are but as they might be Lyndall Gordon, *A Private Life of Henry James: Two Women And His Art*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1998.

In truth, everyone, in life — Letter of Henry James to Grace Norton (1880). Cited by Colm Tóibín, 'A Man With My Trouble', *London Review of Books*, 3 January, 2008, pp. 15-18.

during a four day's passage This and the following quotations are from Joseph Conrad's 'Author's Note' to *Victory*, London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1962, pp. ix-xvii.

[Return to main text](#)

Nothing to write home about

at home among men who earned their living — Vincent O'Sullivan, *Long Journey to the Border: A Life of John Mulgan*, Auckland: Penguin Books, 2003, pp. 78-79.

The sense of contending pressures — *ibid.*, p. 115.

What is so living and graspable — Vincent O'Sullivan, *On Longing*, Auckland: Four Winds Press, 2002, pp. 9-10.

I learnt the German from the record — Allan Thomas, *Music is Where you Find it: Music in the Town of Hawera, 1946, an Historical Ethnography*. School of Music, Victoria University of Wellington: Music Books New Zealand, 2004, p. 90.

We have become so accustomed to history books — Caroline Daley, *Leisure and Pleasure: Reshaping and Revealing the New Zealand Body, 1900-1960*. Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2003, p. 3-4.

[Return to main text](#)

Return to the Manawatu

A cherry tree — Letter from Emilie Monrad in *Kaingahou: A Palmerston North Home for Many Families from the Monrads to the Present Day*, comp. Bodil and Gunner Petersen, published by the Manawatu Branch Committee of the New Zealand Historic Places Trust, 2001, p. 11.

He and his companions — *Mosquitoes and Sawdust: A History of Scandinavians in Early Palmerston North and Surrounding Districts ('Scandia II')*, by Val A. Burr, on behalf of the Scandinavian Club of Manawatu, Palmerston North, 1995, p. 49.

The People of the Four Winds — ‘The mixed Māori population of Pukekohe have given themselves a name – Nga Hau E Wha (The Four Winds) – which expresses their varied backgrounds. The Four Winds of Māoridom appear to have been caught in the stronger current of change, and it is worthwhile considering the direction in which they are blowing.’ B. Kernot, ‘Which Way are the Winds Blowing,’ *Te Ao Hou*, 42, March 1963, p. 20.

what Walter Benjamin calls ‘the unique existence’, or the ‘aura’ of the original — Walter Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, New York: Schocken Books, 1968, pp. 221-222.

it was Thomas Wolfe who famously said, ‘You can’t go home again’ — Thomas Wolfe, ‘The Quest for the Fair Medusa’, from *You Can’t Go Home Again*, excerpted in Maxwell Geismar, *Selections from the Works of Thomas Wolfe*, London: Heinemann, 1952, p. 505, p. 557.

[Return to main text](#)

Death's secretary

Death's secretary — Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, New York: Schocken Books, 1968, p. 94.

John Berger — *The Sense of Sight: Writings by John Berger*, New York: Pantheon, 1985, pp. 239-242.

a smart boy, but given to morose moods — *New Zealand Times*, 16 April 1910.

death is the sanction of everything — Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* op.cit.

any story drawn from life begins, for the storyteller — John Berger, *The Sense of Sight*, p. 240.

[Return to main text](#)

Burned places

Burned places — Most Taranaki towns were built in bush clearings after the native forest was axed and fired. The Gaelic etymology of Inglewood, my hometown, is from aingeal, 'fire', hence 'a fire-cleared space in a forest'.

He and a friend Bill Webb would go across the bridge — Julia Millen, *Ronald Hugh Morrieson: A Biography*, Auckland: David Ling, 1996, p. 120.

a revue called Topsy Turvy — Allan Thomas, *Music is Where you Find it: Music in the Town of Hawera, 1946, an Historical Ethnography*, School of Music, Victoria University of Wellington: Music Books New Zealand, 2004, pp. 61-64.

Te Hawera means burned place in Māori — John Houston, *Māori Life in Old Taranaki*, Wellington: Reed, 1965, pp. 180-181.

In the 1940s and 1950s, Māori lived in the small settlement of Taiporohenui — Allan Thomas, op.cit., p. 36.

Fires in Morrieson's fiction — Fires connected with insurance scams and illicit gambling also appear in *Came a Hot Friday*, Julia Millen op. cit., pp. 156-157.

[Return to main text](#)

Revenant

That's the bad part about golf — Johnny Miller, commenting on Retief Goosen (on the eve of his fortieth birthday), about to putt on the 16th green at the PGA Transitions Championship, Sunday, March 22, 2009.

[Return to main text](#)

Te Atiawa

Te Atiawa — The generic name for the iwi occupying their ancestral homelands in Taranaki.

Between the abstract poles of dominance and subordination — Ranajit Guha, *Dominance and Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997, pp. 20-23.

The simple fact — Hannah Arendt, 'Labor, Work, Action', in *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, ed. Peter Baehr, New York: Penguin, 2000, p. 180.

strikes out on its own and affects others — Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958. p.190.

the chaotic uncertainty of the future — *ibid.*, p. 237.

Life is a constant struggle between progression and regression — Te Pakaka Tawhai, *He Tipuna Wharenui o te Rohe o Uepohatu*, MA thesis, Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand, 1978, p. 16.

the milder and quieter reception within the lighted house at night — Te Rangi Hiroa (Peter Buck), *The Coming of the Māori*, 2nd ed. Wellington: Whitcombe and Tombs, 1966, p. 373.

ancient explanations and ancestral wisdom (kōrero tahito) are invaluable — Te Pakaka Tawhai, *op. cit.*, p. 14. Judith Binney makes the same point, observing that ‘Narratives born of social and political crises are preserved in memory not so much as records of those times but as tools by which to act in the present. When cast in predictive form, an “orthodox” structuring for many oral societies, they may also change the present, and the future.’ Judith Binney, *Stories Without End: Essays 1975-2010*, Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 2010, p. 325.

the past is never dead — William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun*, 1. 3.

For Māori, the past is seen as that which lies before one — Binney, p. 72.

I will not agree to our bedroom being sold — Cited in *The Taranaki Report – Kaupapa Tuatahi, by the Waitangi Tribunal, 1996*, 3.6.

As the troops advanced *ibid.* 4.5

In 1863, the army, now vastly outnumbering Māori — In 1860, there were 800 British troops in Taranaki. A year later the number had risen to 3500; by 1865 it was almost 5000. Te Atiawa fighters seldom numbered more than 500, and in his first campaigns Titokowaru was outnumbered twelve to one. *ibid.* 4.10.

I hitch up my horse and pass to the front — Cited in Dick Scott, *Ask that Mountain: The Story of Parihaka*. Auckland: Heinemann, 1975, p. 11.

Te Whiti-o-Rongomaia and Tohu Kakahi — Both men attended the Reverend Johannes Frederic Riemenschneider’s mission school at Warea, built and managed a flour mill there, and arranged horticultural and building schemes until 1865, when Warea’s school, homes, mill and cultivations were destroyed by Government troops. They then made their decision to establish Parihaka.

it cannot be assumed that grievance dissipates — *The Taranaki Report*, op. cit. 5.9

The fact that one group — Michael King, *Being Pākehā Now: Reflections and Recollections of a White Native*, Auckland: Penguin 1999, p. 11.

As far as I am concerned — *ibid.*, p. 235.

But pointing out that all New Zealanders are immigrants — J.G.A. Pocock argues that both Māori and Pākehā immigrated to New Zealand under duress – escaping marginalization in their original homelands, victims of social injustice, exiles from Eden. Whether their origin stories are called history or myth, they provide common ground for conversations between two peoples whose histories have driven them together. ‘Once the Pākehā stop seeing their first ancestors as heroic barbarians and see them as dispossessed exiles from paradise instead, dialogue with the tangata whenua becomes possible. The question is whether either group will retain a discourse of liberty, or merely self-pity.’ J.G.A. Pocock, ‘Tangata Whenua and Enlightenment Anthropology’, *New Zealand Journal of History* 27(1) (1992) pp. 28-53 (44-45). Anne Salmond makes a similar argument in *Two Worlds: First Meetings Between Māori and Europeans, 1642–1772*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991.

the aspiration of many Māori to be Māori first and New Zealanders second — Michael King p. 132.

This is not only because those who proclaim to be autochthonous — In the Cameroons, for instance ‘Beti and Bulu people now proudly proclaim to be *autochthones* – “born from the soil” – of the forest area in the south of the country. Yet the same Beti/Bulu may clinch arguments over to whom the forest “really” belongs with the simple statement “La forêt est à nous

puisqu'on l'a conquise" (the forest is ours because we conquered it), referring to their epic immigration from the savannah southward into the forest 150 to 200 years ago.' Peter Geschiere, *The Perils of Belonging: Aughtony, Citizenship, and Exclusion in Africa and Europe*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2009, pp. ix-x.

[Return to main text](#)

Symbolic landscape

Symbolic Landscape — Diego Rivera, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

From low on the water — Geoff Park, *Nga Uruora: The Groves of Life: Ecology and History in a New Zealand Landscape*, Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1995, p. 119.

the expatriate's attempt to inoculate himself against a nostalgia — Walter Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood Around 1900*, trans. Howard Eiland, Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006, p. 37

There is a balance here — Vincent O'Sullivan, *Blame Vermeer*, Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2009.

[Return to main text](#)

Two women

Two Women — Fernand Léger, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

our wariness of new technologies — A paraphrase of Michael Jackson, 'Familiar and Foreign Bodies', in *Existential Anthropology: Events, Exigencies and Effects*, London and New York: Berghahn, 2005, p. 131.

on the slowness with which new technologies are taken up — Gerard Macdonald, 'The Political Economy of Schooling', in *Twenty-First Century*

Schools: Knowledge, Networks and New Economies, Gerard Macdonald and David Hursh, Rotterdam and Taipei: Sense Publishers, 2006.

Samuel Butler's letter — ‘Darwin Among the Machines’, *Christchurch Press*, 13 June 1863. Republished in *The Note-Books of Samuel Butler*, selections arranged and edited by Henry Festing Jones, New York: Dutton, 1917, pp. 42-47.

All my life I have loved traveling at night — Michael Ondaatje, *Divisadero*, New York: Vintage International, 2007, p. 136.

every writer creates his own precursors — Jorges Luis Borges, ‘Kafka and His Precursors’, trans. James E. Irby, in *Labyrinths*, ed. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970, p. 236. Borges acknowledges T.S. Eliot’s earlier phrasing of this view in his essay ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, in *Points of View*, ed. John Hayward, London: Faber, 1941, pp. 25-26.

we can rearrange the furniture of our past and reorganise the figures in its landscapes — Echoes of this idea inform Michael White’s remarkable work on the process of ‘re-membering’ in narrative therapy, *Maps of Narrative Practice*, New York: Norton, 2007, ch. 3.

[Return to main text](#)

Guardians of the secret

Guardians of the Secret — Jackson Pollock, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Through the miracle of natural genetic recombination — Ellan Ullman, ‘My Secret Life’, *New York Times*, January 2, 2009, p. A21.

[Return to main text](#)

The road to Karuna Falls

distant and listless, and engrossed with cares — Alistair Campbell, *Island to Island*, Christchurch: Whitcoulls Publishers, 1984, p. 75.

the Campbell children who had been “lost across the sea” — Campbell, p. 9.

It was a fairy tale ending — Campbell, p. 9.

Kumarahou, mānuka, kawakawa, horopito — For further details, see Murdoch Riley, *Māori Healing and Herbal: New Zealand Ethnobotanical Sourcebook*, Paraparaumu: Viking Sevenses, 1994.

startling though the image may be — Carole Hungerford, *Good Health in the 21st Century: A Family Doctor’s Unconventional Guide*, Melbourne, Scribe, 2006, p. 412.

[Return to main text](#)

The lost child

It is debatable whether some ships are ill-fated — David G. Wright, *Joyita: Solving the Mystery*, Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2002, p. 1.

It was largely at his urging that the voyage took place — *ibid.*, p. viii.

to see if she had any further thoughts on the case — *ibid.*, p. x.

It was clear that we were becoming fond of one another *ibid.*, p. xvi.

they must have had enough time to come to the sad realization *ibid.*, p. 97.

[Return to main text](#)

Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?

Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going? — Paul Gauguin (1897), Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

The child sleeps beneath a headboard — Bronwen Nicolson, *Gauguin and Māori Art*, Auckland: Godwit Publishing, in association with Auckland City Art Gallery, 1995, p. 63.

this French bohemian — Jonathan Mane-Wheoki, ‘He Ao Weherua: Gauguin and Taonga Māori’, in *Gauguin and Māori Art*, op. cit., p. 76.

a portrait of his part-Peruvian mother as Eve in paradise — Wayne Anderson, ‘Introduction’, *The Writings of a Savage: Paul Gauguin*, ed. Daniel Guérin, trans. Eleanor Levieux, New York: Viking, 1978, pp. xiv-xv.

Don Pio had remarried at eighty — *Gauguin’s Intimate Journals*, trans. Van Wyck Brooks, Mineola, New York: Dover, 1997, pp. 65-66.

Emily had been an exceptional pupil at Shelf Board School — Following the 1870 Education Act, schools were established under the control of locally elected school boards. Although fees could be charged, the schools were financed by government grants and subsidised by local government rates. Education was provided for children from five to ten.

The hospital was built in 1912 and closed in 1998 — Lester Thorley, ‘Return to Tokanui’, *Waikato Times*, July 8, 2006.

I had seized upon its emptiness and remoteness as a symbol of my own estrangement — Geoff Dyer makes a similar observation in his book on D.H. Lawrence. ‘Lawrence himself said more or less the same thing in Kangaroo. The autobiographical figure, Richard Lovat Somers “wearied himself to death struggling with the problem of himself and calling it Australia.”’ *Out of Sheer Rage: Wrestling with D.H. Lawrence*, New York: Picador, 2009, 114.

[Return to main text](#)

Sleepless in Sydney

How is it that one perceives oneself in another human being — W.G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, London: The Harvill Press, 1999, p. 182.

Mike said he had been reading a history of Ohakune and District — Marilyn George, *Ohakune, Opening to a New World: A District History*, Ohakune: Kapai Enterprises, 1990.

Dave Mitchell — A selection of Dave's poems appeared in 2010. *Steal Away Boy: Selected Poems of David Mitchell*, ed. Martin Edmond and Nigel Roberts, Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2010.

why is it that I am prevented from saying what is in me to say? — Martin Edmond, *Chronicle of the Unsung*, Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2004, p. 72.

A woman in her thirties, with light golden skin and freckles — Martin Edmond, *The Autobiography of my Father*, Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1992, p. 124.

when every point has its own antecedent — Martin Edmond, *Luca Antara: Passages in Search of Australia*, Bowden, South Australia: East Street Publications, 2006, p. 93.

the notion of toi whenua for Māori? — The term means 'home', 'birthplace', or 'original inhabitants', depending on context. From toi, 'origin, source of humankind', and whenua, 'placenta, land, ground'.

Borges's essay on Coleridge — Jorge Luis Borges, *Other Inquisitions*, trans. R.L. C. Simms, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964, pp. 14-17.

carries traces of the first city — Edmond, *ibid.*, p. 270.

notorious for its disregard for God and disrespect for order — Max Solling, *Grandeur and Grit: A History of Glebe*, Sydney: Halstead Press, 2007, p. 70.

[Return to main text](#)

Taking a line for a walk

Taking a line for a walk — Paul Klee, *Pedagogical Sketchbook*.

Charles Sanders Peirce — ‘It seems, then, that the true categories of consciousness are: first, feeling, the consciousness which can be included with an instant of time, passive consciousness of quality, without recognition or analysis; second, consciousness of an interruption into the field of consciousness, sense of resistance, of an external fact, of another something; third, synthetic consciousness, binding time together, sense of learning, thought.’ ‘A Guess at the Riddle’, chapter 3, *Principles of Philosophy*, vol.1, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss, Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1960, p. 200. Interrogating the numerous empirical examples that comprise my book, I find it impossible to find much use for such a hierarchical model, or such a decontextualized, cut and dried classification of consciousness. Consciousness is in continual flux; ‘pure’ experience is so quickly adulterated by thought and secondary elaborations that it is absurd to separate these as different modalities; and the metamorphic flow of our awareness reflects who we are with, moods that pass, thoughts that are fleeting, fantasies that fasten on one object one moment only to switch, in the next, to something else, much as when one wanders through a gallery of graphic, sculptured or painted art.

a recent issue of Psychology Today — Jay Dixit, ‘Heartbreak and Home Runs: The Power of First Experiences’, *Psychology Today*, January/February 2010, v. 43 (1), 61-69.

This character of startling unexpectedness is inherent in all beginnings — Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958, p. 178.

the enigma of anteriority — Paul Ricoeur, *Critique and Conviction: Conversations with François Azouvi and Marc de Launay*, trans. Kathleen Blamey, New York: Columbia University Press, 1998, p. 100.

the godwits vanish toward another summer — Charles Brasch, ‘The Islands’ (ii).

the sailor lives, and stands beside us — Allen Curnow, ‘Landfall in Unknown Seas’.

Here we find a sort of always-already-present — *ibid.*, p. 100.

the region where they are prepared — Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior*, trans Alden L Fisher, Boston: Beacon Press, 1967, p. 222.

cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel — Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt, New York: Schocken Books, 1969, p. 92.

rule of life to overtake the rule of thought — Ricoeur, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

exerted a very strong influence — *ibid.*, p. 4.

In his discussion of what he calls Aztec Moments — David Carrasco, ‘Aztec Moments and Chicano Cosmovision: Aztlan Recalled to Life’, in *Moctezuma’s Mexico: Visions of the Aztec World*, ed. David Carrasco and Eduardo Matos Moctezuma, Boulder, University of Colorado Press, rev. ed., 2003.

[Return to main text](#)

Acknowledgements

Words cannot express my indebtedness to my Harvard colleagues and loyal friends, David Carrasco, Arthur Kleinman, Kimberley Patton and Michael Puett whose moral support and encouragement have given me the confidence to write in a vein that more conventional scholars might shy away from. I wish to thank the Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard Divinity School for the Faculty Grant that funded my fieldwork and travels in Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia in 2008 and 2011. I am also deeply grateful to the following friends, family and colleagues for their hospitality, support and shared stories, as well as their generosity in allowing me to publish passages from private conversations: Brian Boyd, Alan Campbell, Ngaere Campbell, Richard Campbell, Dr Kate Campbell, Christie Carlson, Ray Carter, David Carrasco, Les Cleveland, Mary Cleveland, Ronda Cooper, Martin Edmond, Kathy Golski, Jack Golson, Ghassan Hage, Jack Hansen, Beth Jones, Ruth Jones, Anne Harris, Jeffrey Paparoa Holman, Heidi Jackson, Helen Jackson, Juliet Jackson, Louisa Jackson, Margaret Jackson, Miles Jackson, Beth Jones, Susan Lloyd McGarry, Brigid Lowry, Judith Loveridge, Stewart Lusk, Ewen Macdonald, Karl Maughan, Bronwen Nicolson, Anne Noonan, Susan Norrie, Gregory O'Brien, Mahara Okeroa, Vincent O'Sullivan, Peter Oxley, Geoff Park, Emily Perkins, Rachel Perkins, Ken Piddington, Michael Puett, Nigel Rapport, Keith Ridler, Larry Rueter, Jennifer Shennan, Cris Shore, Birgitte Refslund Sorensen, Don Swearer, Allan Thomas. Finally, my warmest thanks to Penelope Todd and Raymond Huber for their invaluable editorial guidance and creative advice.