The Most Beautiful Place in the World

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I dedicate this work to the memory of my daughter
Caitlin
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The Most Beautiful Place in the World
Songpan

I first entered China through an atlas. It was in May, 2002. I was looking for my teenage daughter Caitlin, who was there on a five-week trip with my mother. I remember feeling my scalp tingle as I realized they were deep in China. Only an inch on the map, but over a thousand kilometres inland to the north-west of Hong Kong. How easy to lose, I thought, and how difficult to find.

Now, five years later, on my second trip to China, a voice inside my head is telling me I may never return from this trip up the Eastern rim of the Tibetan Plateau. The small horse snorts as it labours under my weight. Loose stones rattle down the dry slope into the gully. Far below, the ancient walled town of Songpan disappears into a fold of the mountain.

The guide flicks the rump of my horse with his reins.

“Qu, qu,” he clicks his tongue. Go, go.

Dusty and half asleep, his feet hang loose from the stirrups as he comes up alongside and speaks. I can make out the words, *duo xiao*, many few, from his dialect, meaning, how many? He pinches the skin on the back of his hand. I guess he is asking the time. He couldn’t be more benign, but that doesn’t stop me imagining he is planning to mug me.

“Si dian zhong hui qu” I say. Four o’clock return.

If he mugs me, the boss at the tour office will know. He shakes his head and pinches the skin on the back of his hand again.

My heart rate doubles in an instant.

“Xia wu,” I say. This afternoon.

He grins and offers me a cigarette.

In the early winter, high above the tree line, the earth is dry and bare. Patches of dirty ice cling to the shadows under small bushes. As we climb, the morning mist vaporizes into an expanding blue dome. There is plenty of space. I feel pangs of well-being for the first time in years. I am prepared to die now, if I must. As we plod upwards, I make the connection. He wants to know my age.

I am lucky to be alive after the bus ride the day before; eight hours negotiating the Min Jiang Gorge, the People’s River Gorge.
With one hand on the wheel, the driver was steering the bus as if riding a horse, his percussive voice chatting and laughing. The day swerved between danger and beauty. He squealed around hairpin bends, veering over jade lakes far below, breaking sharply at every black-frost corner. Even along the straights the bus swayed from side to side. We climbed steep forested slopes which gave way to rocky orchards. By the afternoon we had climbed four thousand metres, rising into an indigo sky. At one of the rest stops I made a mental note of the license plate. BA0 007. Double-O-Seven: Ling ling qi, the Chinese say. James Bond was at the wheel. If I have a choice, I will take the other bus on the return journey.

Another worry undermines me: I have only a few hundred yuan. I calculate how long I can stay in Songpan if there is no ATM. Two or three days. Maybe Songpan will be like many of the villages we pass, a clutch of stone cottages huddled in leafless orchards. I amuse myself with my dictionary by translating the names of villages we pass through, villages with names like Clear Cloud, Fly Red or the inimitable This Village. The bus stops at a public toilet on the roadside. It is a long concrete sluice, separated into bays by low walls. Every few minutes a torrent of water flushes away the deposits.

When we arrive at Songpan, I stand up to leave the bus, but the driver waves me back. He shakes imaginary reins, signalling he will drop me at the trekking company, one more stop along the highway. As I climb down the steps, he points out the bus station where I should catch the bus back to Chengdu.

The shadow of the Qionglai Range has covered the town by four in the afternoon. Many pedestrians hunched against the cold straggle along a main road lined with blue roller-door shop fronts. The door of the trek company is open, but no one is inside. Two young Westerners sit hunched and shivering on the step outside.

“Are you waiting to book a tour?” I ask.

“We just came back,” the girl says.

“How did you like it?”

“Terrible. We had to cross ice,” the girl says. She looks close to tears.
I look up and down the road for a hotel. A young, long-haired woman washing greens in a basin on the footpath smiles.

“Hotel?” she asks in English.

As is often the case in China, it seems as if she can read my mind. I follow her through an alcove into a courtyard. Upstairs, workmen rent the air with screeching power tools. We pick our way over a tangle of electric leads in the breezeway. She shows me a room with the grout still drying on the tiles. Even here, in a remote corner of the country, China’s dynamic reconstruction is apparent.

“You ri shui?” Is there hot water?

“Wu dian hou,” she says. After five o’clock.

I head to the town centre wearing my new hat, a Nepalese woollen beanie with long plaits dangling from ear flaps. Along the road, people work in the roller door bays: men and women hammering or welding metal, repairing motorbikes or other machinery. Covered in black dust, a woman shovels hunks of coal into large jute sacks. I follow other pedestrians down to the ancient black-stone wall that surrounds the old town and enter through a huge arch. The wall is over fifty metres thick and ten metres high, built during the massive expansion of the Ming Empire in the twelfth century. Inside the wall, the town is divided by the small but gushing Min River, which prevents vehicles from entering the square. Here, crowds of townspeople talk and laugh in groups.

The local minority, known as the Qiang, has inhabited the western slopes for over two millennia, raising yaks and growing pinewood in the marginal lands on the mountainsides, an occupation which is reflected in written character of their name, with its two components, person 童 and sheep 羊. They traditionally call themselves the Erma, meaning Ourselves or Us. Taller and heavier than the majority Han population of the plains, with higher cheek bones and bigger flatter noses, they are more animated, tossing their heads and arms as they speak. The women have long hair either in a multitude of thin plaits, or in a single thick rope behind. The men wear brilliant crimson or purple scarves as head wraps. Both genders wear long woollen khaki coats, tailored to the middle, which are worn with one arm out of the sleeve. This distinctive empty
sleeve is folded flat at the back, and tucked into a sash at the waist, revealing the uneven stripes of their hand-knitted pullovers. Here, as in other parts of China, women are constantly knitting as they chat in the streets. Only the young adults are dressed western-style, in jeans and padded polyester zip jackets.

Across the new wind-and-rain footbridge, the streets are full of people. Another westerner moves towards me from the opposite direction: an older, unsmiling gent. He speaks gruffly to the Chinese guy he is with, perhaps a personal guide. A small girl with long plaits laughs up at me, skipping and swinging on her mother’s hand. I realize she is admiring my hat with its long plaits. In a side street, I stop to watch a noisy interaction between local men. The bystanders cheer when a chap pushes his coat tails behind, and with one hand on the hip, he exposes the silver handle of a knife set with huge fake purple, red and green gems. He flashes a row of glistening white teeth, sparking a mixture of fear and excitement. I have travelled back in time to the Middle Ages. Here on the fringes of the Eurasian desert, a deep wild passion ignites the people.

I stop to browse saddles and bridles stacked on the front steps of a shop. When I enter, an old man at the counter takes fright and scurries out behind a wall-hanging at the back. He makes me realize how tense I feel: uncertain, as if I am an intruder. The shop is crammed with ponchos, striped saddlecloths and multi-coloured hanks of cotton rope. There are bundles of red plastic bridles decorated with silver trim, racks of khaki overcoats and leather knife-sheaths covered in glass jewels. Everything is stacked on large bales of Tibetan prayer-flag material. I spot a brand-new Indian military saddle, rarely seen in the west. It is a no-frills product, with no shin flaps, a string girth, and with the wood and metal tree visible under the seat. A large woman in a traditional outfit appears and scares me with a fixed glare. I point out a khaki vest trimmed with brightly striped braid hanging high up on the wall.

“Kan kan yi xia?” Can I have a look? I ask.

The woman smiles at my Chinese and I immediately relax.

“Na ge?” she asks. That one? Her voice is soft.

She uses a long hooked stick to lift the vest from the wall.
I take off my coat, and try it for size. With her sleeve, she rubs a dirty mirror, then steps forward to tug the front of the vest down with both hands, removing the runkles. It looks good, but I decide I will look too eccentric. Instead, I buy a machine-knitted scarf in brilliant synthetic crimson.

I find an ATM but it doesn’t accept my card. I give the card an extra push, which lodges it further into the machine, swallowing my only source of cash. I am really scared now.

“Wait a bit,” the person behind me in the queue says, and disappears inside the bank.

I am a bad traveller. I had given up living out of a suitcase over thirty years ago after eight months backpacking in Europe. Travelling is still too much trouble for a troglodyte like myself, someone who would prefer to live in the past, in a world without cars and machines. A big attraction in China is the possibility of walking, bicycling, and now, this mad trip across the vast land to go on a horse trek. I am astonished when a staff member comes outside and hands me my card. This time I insert the card the right way, and my money is issued without a problem.

There is another, much more serious purpose for coming to China. Caitlin. Two years after her visit to China, there was a car crash. She had finished her final-year trials and had decided to drive home after a party. It was one of the last decisions she was ever to make. The crash investigator described how she clipped a small tree, flipped over a culvert, and was flung out of the car, dead before she hit the ground.

Since then, life has been lived in suspension, in a liminal space, where I cling to death, stalking it, as if I can make it release her. Even now, three years later, remorse and regret for every parental failing consume me. I see tinges of her everywhere, in every young face eager for life.

On the walk back to the hotel a small boy looks up at a wizened old man in a black fur hat. The collar and sleeves of the old man’s coat are lined with black fur and his legs are bound in black leg-wraps. They both giggle as the boy slides his hands into the old man’s sleeves. The kindness of the ferocious looking people surprises me at every turn.
I dine on rice and vegetables in a restaurant beside my hotel. A woman in an overcoat gestures me to sit beside the cast iron pot-belly stove in the centre. I am impressed by the metal flue, which makes a right-angled turn across the ceiling and passes outside through a hole chipped out of the front window. She fills a plastic cup with green tea from a large black kettle on the stove, topping it up regularly, so that it burns my finger tips and lips with every mouthful.

Back at the hotel, I discover the plumbing is not yet connected to the toilet and I have to fill a bucket to flush. I strip off while waiting for the hot water in the shower, which doesn’t arrive after several minutes of gushing, freezing water. It is really the next evening I am worried about, dead scared of catching a cold after the trek. I dress again, go downstairs and knock on the office door. It is not an office, I see, but a cupboard containing a bed. The girl rises blinking from tangled bedding.


“Mei you?” None? She yawns drowsily and reaches down to hand me a pink plastic thermos from the half-a-dozen lined up on the floor. Back upstairs, I fill the wash basin and give myself an all over wash. Under two thick heavy cotton-wadded doonas, I sleep without moving until dawn.

At nine in the morning, the doors of the trekking office are closed. The Lonely Planet Guide says there are two trek companies in town, but gives no information about their locations. I hail a passing bicycle cab, and jig my hands to show the driver I want to go horse-riding. He pedals down the highway, detouring around the massive stone wall to enter the town further down where the wall is in ruins. Like many ancient walls in China, sections were dismantled during the Japanese air attacks to enable fast evacuation. We follow a bicycle cart which carries a massive grunting pig laid prone across the tray. The driver stops outside a closed shop in a street of white-washed terraces.

“Heya,” he yells. “Heya.”

A long groan resonates from behind the old wooden doors. After a while, a young man emerges, rubbing his eyes and scratching. He beckons me inside. We talk while he logs onto a
computer and makes phone-calls. I’m doubtful a tour will set off with only one person.

“Xian zai tai deng?” Now it’s too cold? I ask.
“Shen me?” What?
“Tai deng?” Too cold?
He looks up from behind the screen and frowns.
“Bu deng.” Not cold.

With tousled hair, his wife rouses sleepily from the room behind the office. She asks me to sit and wait, and they both disappear. I study a map hand-drawn on brown paper which is sticky-taped to the wall. Several spots marked with small circles are named, but the scribbled Chinese characters are impossible to decipher. Like a child, I need each stroke clearly printed in order to be able to look it up in a dictionary. I wander to the rear of the building in search of a toilet and find a light-filled courtyard with a staircase leading up to a row of new hotel rooms. A Qiang woman with long hair and a bucket points the way, nodding and smiling.

After another half hour I have no idea about the status of things, so I call out to say I’m going.
“Deng yi xia,” wait a bit, the man calls from the back room.
“Hui lai,” I say. I’ll come back.
“Okay le,” he says.

I photograph a small, old, wind-and-rain foot-bridge which crosses the rushing Min at the end of the street. The roof has ultra-curled flying eaves which make the building look animated, almost alive. A phoenix and a dragon carved either side of the fascia symbolize Yin and Yang, the female and male elements which make up the cosmos. Trigrams are carved on the ends of the roof beams. Benches set along the sides provide seating for wayfarers. The old timbers are shrunken with age and covered in dust. A ragged fellow leading two ponies trudges across and ties the reins to a post.

“Ni hao?” I say. You good?
“Ni hao?” he grunts and we walk back to the office.

The wife dashes in from the street carrying two plastic bags of hot noodles and two large fried flat-loaves which she hands to the guide. I pay the boss, and he accompanies the guide and me back to the horses.
I was a rider for many years, but now I am not sure I can even mount. In my teens, I had a wild grey pony called Charlie who I could mount bare-back in one leap, like a Red Indian. Now, the guide holds the stirrup-iron while the boss helps me get my foot up, and then both men heave me into the saddle. The pony catches its balance and snorts. We tramp along a dirt road beside the stream to a temporary, blue metal bridge, where we wait for two shiny black cars hurrying along the opposite bank of the Min. They are wedding cars, decorated with streams of fluorescent pink tulle. A pair of “Hello Kitties” are set on a pink velvet heart in the centre of the bonnet. As they bump past, I glimpse a bride in red satin.

The morning mist lifts and vaporizes into a blue sky. The landscape is a desert; a few dusty bushes on dry earth. The guide shoos my horse from behind with every step up the mountain. On the slope below, fluttering orange prayer flags mark a recent burial site. Strings of flags arranged horizontally in a fan shape, form a tent over the grave. The central motif, the Wind Horse, carries good fortune to all beings. Beyond, to the far east, the white peaks of the Min Range line the horizon across a sea of crumpled brown ridges.

Now, three years after the accident, on my second visit to China, the climb up the Tibetan Plateau marks a point where grief begins to lose its stranglehold. Every step up the mountain is a step out of the mire. Between rock and sky, space expands and silence becomes vast in the luxuriant clean air. There is nothing here; maybe like death. The nothingness is beautiful. Weightless. Here, where the sky is larger than the earth, I feel like a bird.

At the top, we cross a vast bare flatland to a mound of white stones covered in a web of faded prayer flags. The white stones, called Ru, are symbols of the ancient religion of Ru and are placed as signs of respect to the many gods of the Erma people. Laid on rooftops and doorsteps, they are said to mark a trail back to Tibet, the homeland, far beyond the massive peaks of Si Gu Nian, the Four Sisters on the south-western rim. Up here, I feel happy, part of the vast expanding space. Even my fear of the guide subsides.

A small village of about fifty houses is visible far below in the next valley. The guide pats the knees of the horse, indicating that I should dismount before we descend because the path is too steep.
and the horses may stumble and fall. Tying the reins of both the horses behind their ears, he shoos them ahead.

“Qu, qu.”

The sun is hot and the air still. The only noise is the snorting and hoof-fall of the horses. I need to take a leak, but there is not much cover. I catch the guide's eye to let him know I am going off the track. He gives the faintest roll of the eye to indicate his complete lack of interest.

As we near the bottom, the horses plunge off in the wrong direction, stirring up a cloud of dust.

“Aaarrrgh,” he groans.

He runs around to head them off, waving me to stay back. My legs are shaking after scrambling downhill for an hour. At the bottom, I get myself back into the saddle by standing on the high side of the pony. We ride across a dry field to a new concrete road which runs along the valley floor. I am surprised that the five-year plan to provide sealed roads to every village in China has spread this far. A group of old men in black fur hats are sitting in the sun beside a small shack on the roadside. The guide dismounts and holds my horse while I slide off. He ties the horses to a post, and sits down with the men. One looks on while another writes at a table, perhaps a professional letter-writer. I approach, but the guide waves me away, pointing to the village.

“Qu, qu.”

The smell of pine resin surrounds a new wind-and-rain bridge which crosses a stream rushing down the gully. A woman in a long homespun skirt and leg-wraps spins each of the shiny new bronze prayer wheels which hang in a row along the rafters. The spinning acts like wind on the written prayers contained inside the wheels, sending them across the universe. She smiles proudly when I photograph the butterflies and flowers carved on the fascia of the bridge. The geometrical figure Wan, an ancient character said to represent the reversal of time, is carved on either side. Now more familiar as the swastika, Wan are among the oldest known symbols found in Asia.

The double-storey pine homes are painted in the five colours of Buddhism: white, yellow, red, blue and green, which transform
delusions into positive qualities. Prayer flags on tall bamboo poles rise above the houses, removing obstacles to happiness. There are no other people around, but I bump into the bridge woman on the way back. We stop and look each other up and down in open curiosity. We are about the same age and size, fifty and chubby. She wears a thick woven head cloth from which bundles of small plaits escape.

“Ni hao kan,” I say. You look good.
“Ni ye hao kan,” she laughs. You also look good.
She frowns as she inspects my pullover which I had half taken off, copying my guide, rather than having to find a way of carrying it.

“Bu hao,” she says, ticking it with a finger. Not good.
“Wo yi dian ri,” I say. I’m bit hot.
She gives me a quizzical look and rattles off a string of words.

“Ting bu dong.” Hear not think, I say, meaning I don’t understand.

“Wo ye ting bu dong,” she says. I also do not understand.
We both laugh, and I take my leave.

The guide is where I left him, chatting on the roadside. Standing on a rock, I climb onto the horse, and we return the same way we have come over the mountain. We encounter a group of three yaks on their way down. The massive beasts are much larger than Australian cattle, and much more elegant, with majestic curling horns. They stop and smell the air with large quivering nostrils.

At the top, the guide retrieves the lunch from his saddle bag and we sit on the ground to eat. He rolls the sides of the plastic bags down, forming them into bowl shapes, and hands me a pair of disposable chopsticks. I copy him, tearing shreds off the pan-fried bread with my teeth and scoffing the gingery soy noodles.

The sound of someone singing comes across the distance; two boys on horses kicking up puffs of dust as they descend the neighbouring ridge. When they get down to the flat ground, they gallop across to us, jump off their horses and stand grinning with their hands squeezing their pockets. The guide gives them a flicker of his eyelids as a greeting.
“Ni hai zi?” I ask. Your boys?

“Niu hai ze,” cow boys, he says.

I photograph their horses, the stirrups, briddles and saddles, then gesture with the camera for the boys to pose. With sunburnt cheeks, they laugh softly at the camera. They are still laughing as they gallop away again.

Using hand gestures, I ask the guide to find a stick I can use for the walk down to Songpan. He hunts around a clump of low bushes and hands me a gnarled bent stick. This time the walk down is much easier on my legs. At the bottom, after we mount again, the guide clicks his horse into a trot, gesturing me to hold tight to the saddle with one hand. Groups of wild dusty children racing along the road shriek with laughter when they see me bouncing along. Two boys stop to talk to the guide.

“Hai zi”, he says with a shy smile when they part. Sons.

As we enter Songpan, the wedding party comes stumbling half-drunk down a laneway, the groom squeezing the bride in her red satin dress, followed by a few male friends. Like much else in China, weddings are spur-of-the-moment affairs, arranged over a few days by a group of elders. They are huge movable feasts prepared in temporary outdoor kitchens, the women sitting together preparing vegetables, plucking chickens, scaling fish, dressing ducks and pork. The men do the frying in enormous woks sizzling over large metal drums of fire. Dismountable round tables are set up in the street or the square, and the food served by a multitude of hands.

The town is in shadow and cold again by the time I return to my hotel. Outside I see a strange and disturbing sight: the heads of three yaks sitting upright on the side of the road, their eyes wide open and staring. Blood glistens on the pavement. My eyes cannot make sense of the scene: the heads without the bodies. A woman laughs at me gaping and tosses her head. It must be the beginning of a large feast. I dine in the same restaurant as the previous night, and later collect my flask of hot water on the way upstairs.

Early in the morning, in pitch-black, I am relieved to see 007 leaving town. Today’s driver is far less flamboyant, but he talks on his mobile for much of the journey. As is common on long distance bus journeys, one of the passengers is violently and vocally sick,
vomiting into plastic bags for the entire eight hour trip back to Chengdu. None of the other passengers demonstrate any impatience towards the ill person. I offer the lad beside me a mandarin, but he declines, instead opting to take a piece of the mandarin skin which he nibbles bit by bit over the day.
The Most Beautiful Place in the World

From Chengdu, I take the seventeen hour train ride to Guilin, the place my mother had called “the most beautiful place in the world”, which she had dreamt of all her life. I had based myself there for three months the previous year, and was now eager to return for respite from the constant moving. As the train speeds south to Guangxi Province, I sit on a fold-out seat in the aisle, watching dusk fall over paddy fields and duck farms. Locals make their way along footpaths to mud-brick villages. Some rake late harvest rice spread out to dry on the new concrete roads.

“Hello,” a voice interrupts. A middle-aged Chinese man on the next seat, peering from under a thin black fringe combed over a speckled pate. His forearms are crossed over lanky sprawling legs.

“Where are you from?” he asks in English.

“Ao Da Li Ya,” I say.

“Australial!” he says. “I have friends there, in Melbourne. Where are you going?”

“Guilin. How about you?”

“I’m just travelling,” he says without pleasure, his lips turned down. “My children live in Canada and my wife died,” he says. “I would like to visit my children, but I would never come back.”

“You like China very much?” I ask.

“So, so.”

“I think it’s very interesting,” I say.

“Ah yes. That doesn’t mean you think it’s good.” He crosses one leg over the other.

I smile, acknowledging the subtle distinction between the words interesting and good.

“China is ugly,” he says.

“Parts are beautiful,” I say. “Guilin is beautiful.”
“We have a saying in China,” he laughs, “Guilin is the most beautiful place in the world.”

I’m amazed to hear a Chinese person say these words which had become part of our family lingo

“Is it beautiful?” I had asked Caitlin over the phone when they were there.

“It’s ok.” She sounded bored after two weeks with Nan.

“Where are you?”

“At the hotel. I’m sitting on the balcony rail overlooking the river.”

“How far up is it?”

“Second floor.”

“Oh my God,” I said.

“A security guard is watching from the ground.”

“Get down.”

She laughed softly.

My memory is all visual, not auditory. I can hardly hear her in my memory; can hardly remember the words she used. But the sound of her voice, and the words, are carried to me vividly through the China phone conversations, when I couldn’t see her. Even now, years later, I can feel the vibration of this soft laugh in my ears. I can still hear the excitement in “I’m on the Yangtze”, and later, the brimming pride of “I flew a kite in Tiananmen Square.”

“I went to Guilin last year,” I tell the man on the train. “But I didn’t stay there. I stayed at Yangshuo.”

“Ah, Yangshuo,” he chuckles. “There’s a second part to the saying.”

“Really?” I raise my eyebrows.

“Guilin is the most beautiful place in the world, but Yangshuo is the most beautiful place in Guilin.”

We both laugh, but again he shakes his head.

“There is much I cannot say”.

“Because?” I ask.

He shakes his head.

“Somebody listening?” I ask.

He laughs. “Mao Ze Dong,” he says. “Do you know him?”

“Everybody knows him,” I say.
He taps his foot as he collects his thoughts, eyes darting from side to side.

"There are two ways of thinking in China," he says. "The Mao Way and the Deng Way. They were great friends, but then Mao died and Deng became the leader." He leans back and takes a deep breath. "There were the four bad years. Terrible. Nineteen-fifty-eight to nineteen-sixty-two," he says, drawing out each syllable. "The villages were made into communes. You know communes?" He throws me a glance. "And the parents. The parents had to eat together. Not with the family." He winces, as if the words hurt his lips. "Not one true thing was said in those years. Not one fact," he snorts. "There was not enough food, so the parents didn’t eat. Many people died," he says, shaking his head. And Mao." He stops to breathe. "They had the meeting in Liuzhou. Mao’s great friend, Peng, the leader of the army, told Mao it wasn’t working. But Mao wouldn’t listen to his friend." The wrinkles on the man’s face unfold and reshape in disgust. "Mao said Peng was a counter-revolutionary," he says, again emphasizing each syllable. "And he was sent away." His foot starts bouncing as he thinks. "I was young. I joined the party and became a policeman. I didn’t know."

“How could you know?” I ask. I wonder if he was a Red Guard.

He raises an eyebrow.

“How can you know the future?” I ask.

He shakes his head. His past engulfs him. I am unable to penetrate his disappointment.

“Nobody in China can understand,” he says. “Only Western people know the real truth.”

“How did you learn English?” I ask.

“I studied English at University and became a middle-school teacher. Then, in nineteen-eighty-five, I finished. I decided I would no longer work for the government.” He straightens his back and slaps his knees. "I became a cutter in a factory and then a tailor in my own shop," he says, rubbing his hands along the tops of his thighs. "Now it’s the same," his voice grows louder. “They have everything. Expensive cars, mistresses. And the people are still poor. They have no money even to go to the hospital. The poor people,” he pauses,
“they just die.” His face looks sickened. He cradles his cheek in his palm. After a while he stands up and strides down to the end of the carriage for a cigarette.

“What are the Chinese words for the saying? I ask him later.

“What are the Chinese words for the saying? I ask him later. "About Guilin."

“Guilin shan shui jia tian xia.”

I hand him my notebook and pen and he writes the words in pinyin, the latest version of written Chinese using the Roman alphabet.

“Guilin mountain water best under sky,” he translates, pointing at each word with his finger.

“Shan. shui, mountain water. Like this?” I say, writing the characters.


I hand him my notebook and pen.

“Look how the two parts of Guilin begin the same way,” he says. 桂林. “With the tree figure. Make the right hand branch shorter so the rest can fit. Like this,” he demonstrates. “Yes. And see this. Lin. This is two trees, 林. It means forest.”

“I know this character, lin,” I say. Taking out my wallet, I show him the photo of Caitlin taken on the Great Wall, where she is
wearing the bamboo pointed hat she had bought that day for protection in the blazing heat. I had collaged this picture, replacing the water bottle she was holding with a cut-out of her Chinese name which was printed from the seal she had bought somewhere in China.

“Kay too lin,” he reads the seal.

The sound of her name dangles in the air like music, like a wind-chime.


“No,” I laugh.

“She wears a Chinese hat,” he says.

I laugh and put the picture away, thinking of where that hat is now, hanging on the veranda outside her bedroom door at Dungog.

“Jia is not in my dictionary,” I say.

“It means first, or best,” he says, and draws the character.

“Tian means sky or heaven. And xia means under.”

“So jia tian xia means best under the sky?”

“Yes. Or heaven. Or the whole of China.”

“Which translates as the whole world?”

“Yes,” he says.

“Xie, xie,” thank you, I say and put the notebook in my bag.

Caitlin made one long train trip in China, from Xian, the ancient capital in the heart of the country, to Beijing: a journey of seventeen hours. I remember I was worried the Chinese train would be too rough for her, especially the toilets. She had a powerful sense of smell and would always avoid public toilets. Nan was unable to sleep on the night of that journey, because of pain in her ribs whenever she tried to move. It turned out to be pneumonia.

Night has fallen and an attendant has drawn all the curtains along the corridor. I go to try out the toilet, a stainless steel squat with a foot-pedal flush, perfectly clean, the tracks rushing past underneath. My bunk is comfortable, with spotless white cotton sheets and a white doona. During the night we will enter Guangxi, arriving in Guilin at dawn. An old worry about Caitlin and the toilets in Chinese trains has been dispelled. But another of the mysteries has
deepened: the origin of the expression *The Most Beautiful Place in World.*

In an old Chinese tale, the ghost of an old man who had died retraces all the steps made when alive, picking up the footprints left behind. Like that ghost, I am in China following Caitlin’s footsteps. An image of her is transposed before everything I see. I am living through memory as if in a dream. Sometimes, I am sharply awoken to find I am living her life.
“Mum!”
“Mum!”
“What?”
“What does lacuna mean?”

Caitlin was writing an essay in preparation for the Year Twelve trials. The topic subject was “Journeys”. On the desk was a photocopy of the Leunig cartoon she was using as supplementary material. In the cartoon, Mr Curly sits on a cart being pulled along by a goat. He is traveling away from the dark clouds of the troubled world, on the right of the cartoon, towards a bright place symbolized by clear sky and flowers on the left, where a sign points to Lake Lacuna.

Two weeks later, September 4th, 2004, not long after midnight, a three-quarter moon watched over the scene. The night was silent, cold and still. A line of brushbox trees followed the arc of the corner where Caitlin left the road at a tangent. I know the corner well, having driven through it many times on the trips taking the girls to meet John, their father, in Sydney. Skirting the fertile flats under
the hills, the road climbed an older bank of the river, straightening out for a short stretch before the fatal bend.

The road was made in the days when travel was slow, when hills rather than corners were the main impediment to speed. Perhaps it was then that that corner first took shape, when the land was divided into grants, cutting across the trails of the aboriginal people. Perhaps it was a boundary corner, the meeting of two fence lines. Or maybe there was an inn there; a staging post on the journey north. Several old cottages sit at the edge of the road on the inside of the corner, beside the shed of a local bus company.

A woman inside one of the houses ran out when she heard the crash. Three lads, school friends of Caitlin’s, soon arrived, having heard the bang from the veranda of the hotel one kilometre away. Caitlin lay still in long grass. One of the boys threw his jacket over her.

Several hours later, two policemen drove north along the road to our house, crossing the river, following the roads through the paddocks of winter grass. For the next months, that corner became the focus of everything. Many factors had come together at that point, in the years, months, days and minutes before the crash. The map of life was redrawn in an instant, a cartography of pain. Every day I saw myself there, stretched face down, gripping the earth. From that date, life was lived in reverse, backwards in time, in an endless attempt to undo.

“An empty place.”
“What?”
“Lacuna.”
“Thanks, Ma.”
In the weeks after the crash I spent hours in mad fits searching Caitlin’s writings, looking for words: words written by her that would tell me I was a good mother. Something tangible. A talisman. I read a collection of exercise books kept from the early school years, both Kim’s and Caitlin’s. Together, they formed a picture full of details of our lives, complete with dates. I became absorbed in Caitlin’s giant letters, drawn with geometrical precision. I found the history of our pets, the kittens, rabbits and budgies. The story of how we went to a local dairy farm and chose Mitzy from a bunch of hay-shed kittens. Mitzy, who Caitlin and I had recently buried in the garden. Caitlin had dug a grave under the mulberry tree and we buried Mitzy wrapped in an Indian sari. I was sickened by the juxtaposition, the one death followed by the other. Children learn about life from pets, I had read somewhere: about life; birth, and death.

“She’s all stiff,” Caitlin had said, screwing up her nose. She was repulsed by death. Images of *Eric the Crocodile* and a large blue dinosaur emerge from the wild scribbles of coloured pencils. Grappling with the idea of extinction, Caitlin writes:

*Dorothy wuns trod on me. Ov kos I felt a bit ded afda that. I am ded.* The words undo themselves and latch onto me. A plan has
been fulfilled, it seems. These words from eleven years earlier cannot be related to the present, yet they resonate like a metal door clanging shut.

Animals are dominant in Caitlin’s books, which seems odd now, because she had a fear of most animals, particularly dogs and birds. Kim’s books, on the other hand, are about people; about Caitlin in particular. Her name appears on many pages; descriptions of what Caitlin is doing, where she is going, who she is with. I puzzled over her apparent concern with Caitlin. Kim had never been over-protective towards her. But then it dawned on me: sibling rivalry. That little sister who grabbed all the attention.

This continued into the teen years, when Kim painted three large portraits of Caitlin as a major work for her Higher School Certificate. Across one of them she had painted the words, “Caitlin is pretty, but she’s a kleptomaniac.” It has taken me years to piece together a story that makes sense of this. Kim had borrowed these words from a painting she had seen in a bookshop once.

“What’s a kleptomaniac?” I remember her asking.

There was the mystery of the lock, the hook and eye that had disappeared from the back door. Kim’s complaints that the money she was earning from IGA was being filched, twenty dollars at a time. Then much later, after everything, finding the missing lock on Kim’s bedroom door. Each, in her way, envied the other.

On a page of notes brainstorming the poetry of Gwen Harwood, Caitlin wrote, death—irrelevant. The coordinates of death plot a course through the past. Like unfolding a piece of origami, a certain logic is revealed in the creases.

As it was, there was a pattern to the unfolding tragedy. We were still recovering from an earlier trauma. When she was sixteen, during the millennium year, Kim was laid low by a mysterious bout of fatigue. Glandular fever was suspected, but a blood test revealed something much more insidious. The evening after the blood was taken, unable to sleep, she was sitting beside me on the lounge. She was strangely quiet; trance-like.

“We’re upside down,” she whispered, sending a chill through me.

“We are?”
“Up there.” She pointed to the ceiling where we were reflected in the brass light-fitting, upside down on the couch.

I got up to answer the phone. I remember Kim was dreamily drawing on the arm of the couch with her finger as the doctor gave me the news. Rogue white cells crowding the blood supply. She shook violently for hours after the phone call, shudders wracking the entire length of her body. We lay on my bed, trying to induce sleep by reading stories aloud. Towards dawn, when she finally drifted off, I began mustering the strength and courage for what lay ahead.

John drove through the night from Sydney and took us to the hospital in Newcastle After that, we had the massive resources of the medical profession looking after her. Remission was achieved in the first month, but the two rounds of chemotherapy over that year produced catastrophic complications. Even so, Kim completed the senior years of high school and went on to study communications at the university.

And now, Caitlin was about to complete her school years.

“How was the exam?”

“Okay.”

What did you write about?”

“China,” she said, flopping onto the couch. “Robbo was at school today. I had him for legal studies.”

Mr Robinson, the much loved retired deputy, who sometimes returned to teach as a casual.

“How is he?”

“I knew he was going to speak to me.”

“How?”

“It’s a look they get.”

She lowers her voice a register and says, “I heard Kim on the radio the other day,” mimicking Robbo’s voice. She mimes him taking his glasses off, hooking them onto her bottom lip. “Your Mum must be proud.”

We grin at each other across the lounge room.

“Like to see a play at the uni tonight?” I asked.

“What is it?”

“Can’t remember the name. Something about the beach.”
Caitlin had shown a complete aversion to the idea of going to university. I had thought that if she became familiar with the campus, and saw a bit of the social life, she might change her mind. That afternoon, I had seen a poster advertising the current production; an image of the play’s title written in sand, *A Property of the Clan*. Caitlin will like that, I had thought, if it is about the beach. But if I had known the subject matter of this play, I wouldn’t have taken her. I would not have wanted to see it myself.

Franny came with us, a friend who was teaching history at the high school. I remember the exact part of the road we were travelling on, just the other side of Clarendetown,

“Tell Franny about Robbo,” I asked Caitlin.

I laughed again when, even though she was driving through the dark, she copied Robbo’s removing his glasses action. It seemed like an unconscious mannerism, an automatic mimicking behaviour that gave her a handle on his character.

The theatre was full when we arrived, the audience seated in tiers of scaffolding benches. The attendants put a row of plastic seats along the front to make room for us. A chain-wire fence across a darkened stage set the scene, with the sound of waves crashing through the sound system. Two teenagers conversed in a quiet but intense confrontation. As the drama unfolded I realized it was the story of Leigh Leigh, a Newcastle girl who died in 1989 after being raped on the night of a drunken beach party.

There were many older people in the audience, relatives of the actors, or perhaps relatives of Leigh’s, or other people connected with the tragedy. The audience remained silent for the entire performance. It was like a courtroom. My senses craned forward to the words, as if they might make a difference, as if something might be revealed, something that could make sense of what had happened. The drama was too intense; I wanted to flee, still raw after Kim’s trauma. I took sidelong glances at Caitlin, but she kept her eyes fixed on the stage. The audience sat stunned and silent when the play ended.

It had been fifteen years since the rape; ten years since the conviction had been handed down. It was cathartic. I was drawn in by the tumult, into the pain, and then released. On the drive home, I
hoped that nothing like that would happen to our family. I hoped Caitlin would survive the gauntlet of the teen years. Then, several weeks later, hope was removed. I forgot about Leigh Leigh until I began writing and salvaging memories.

“I think I should visit Penny while she’s in China,” I remember Nan said on the phone. “She won’t be there much longer.”

My cousin Penny was living in Zhuhai, near Hong Kong, teaching English.

“How about taking Caitlin?” I suggest.

“I was thinking the same thing. What would John think?”

“He wouldn’t mind. But we should check if she wants to go.”

Caitlin was excited by the idea, and it seemed the perfect antidote to the years of anxiety. I knew that just as Kim’s trauma would have a shaping effect on Caitlin’s life, so would the journey to China.

“When I was a teenager I dreamt I was riding a bicycle in China,” I told Caitlin.

“Why don’t you come too?”

“I’m too busy. Besides, how much fun would you have listening to Nan and me bicker?”

On the night before their departure, we drove to Sydney to meet John at a Chinese restaurant in Chatswood. I remember feeling reassured by the kindness the Chinese waitress showed to Caitlin. Then we drove to Mascot to stay at a caravan park near the airport. It was late when we arrived, and I remember Caitlin, lit up by the headlights, banging on the door to wake the caretaker. I drove slowly behind her to the caravan. There were no sheets, only a couple of cotton blankets. We hadn’t realized we were supposed to bring our own linen.

Nan and I were doing a crossword together when Caitlin’s head appeared from the top bunk.

“Can you two be quiet?”

Nan and I grimaced like kids.

In the morning I dropped them outside the Departure Terminal before parking the car. Ten minutes later, I was sweeping around trying to find them. There were queues of people lined up at desks, like cows at dairy stalls. I phoned Caitlin repeatedly after
tearing back to the car to get my phone, but there was no answer. I cruised the entire hall, scanning the crowd in a panic. In the end I went back to the place I last saw them; where they were waiting.

“Where have you been?” Caitlin demanded, mock-serious.

We had a long breakfast, then dawdled up to the departure gate. I gave Caitlin a letter I had printed on a leaf of paper from a Chinese exercise book: English words over the red characters inside large ruled squares.

“Don’t go,” I said, in the usual game of desperate love we played.

“Bye, Ma. Love you.” She was excited, keen to get away.

“Here goes,” Nan said with a wry smile.

Caitlin had just turned fifteen, and Nan was eighty-two.

A month after the crash, I asked Caitlin’s friend Joss, who lived down the lane, if she could ask in the staffroom for the essay about China. I felt desperate, as if I believed the essay would somehow make a difference, unlock a door through which I could re-enter the past.

Here is Caitlin’s exam piece:

May 6th  2002

The plane took off about 15 minutes ago: and already there’s a small child behind me asking “are we there yet?” It’s going to be a long ride for that poor kid. Why isn’t he excited? I’m excited! To start with, planes are exciting. But the plane is only the beginning of our journey. We’re going to China!! I don’t really know what I’m expecting. A bunch of Chinese people I suppose. I’ll find out in about 12 hours.

May 8th

Well . . . It’s half what I was expecting. There are a lot of Asians! But it smells here, like off food I think. It smells everywhere. And I’m scared of the food, so far I’ve only eaten from McDonalds and a Bakers Delight I found. Not very adventurous of me, is it?
May 13th

So we’ve been to “the most beautiful place in the world.” I wasn’t fussed. I wonder if everyone else thinks it’s beautiful? I still haven’t eaten any real Chinese food. It looks dodgy to me.

May 16th

We started our tour today. I had real Chinese for breakfast, from the markets in the streets. It cost me almost 20cents, Aussie money. Wasn’t that bad either. Nice, even. There’s a nice bunch of people on our tour, all different ages, from USA, Canada, England, Australia, and Ireland. Lately I’ve been getting asked to have photos taken with me. It’s pretty funny. Because I’m blond I suppose.

May 21st

We’ve been busy, travelling around pretty fast, been to lots of towns and cities. Some of them are so . . . dirty. Not like anything I’ve seen in Australia before. Everything’s dirty, and I don’t know how it can be that dirty.

May 22nd

There was a little turtle as part of our banquet tonight: head, shell and all. Someone ate the head. Bizarre!

May 25th

Well, I’ve never seen a dead person before today. Today I saw two, floating down the Yangtze River. I can’t imagine there’d ever be two dead bodies floating down the Murray. And if there were, wouldn’t it be on the TV, or Radio? It was like no-one even noticed they were missing. That there’s so many people, it didn’t matter. It really shocked me. It shocked everyone I think. I rang Mum to tell her that night.
May 30th

Our tour ended today. And my Nan has been taken to hospital with pneumonia (I can’t even spell it.) I’ve never been alone in a city I don’t know before. I’ve been told I’m not to leave the hotel, but I snuck out today to do some shopping. I don’t think I would have gone out alone when we first arrived in Hong Kong. So, wow, I’ve grown up a bit already. How independent of me.

June 2nd

I’m going home tomorrow. On my own. Leaving Nan here in her hospital. I have to make my way to the airport in Beijing alone. That’s pretty scary. The Lonely Planet translation book only helps me so much. Ha. Well . . . I’m going home.

June 3rd

Mum rang the Australian Embassy. They came and escorted me to the airport, thank God. So now I’m on the plane home. Safe and sound. Not quite the same person as when I left. I feel a little more mature. But I’m absolutely dying to see my family! Now I feel like the little kid, I wish I had someone to ask, “Are we there yet?” Oh well . . . soon.

What were the highlights? The filth, the food, the places, the people. There were interesting comparisons with Australia. She said more about the dead bodies than she had ever said. She made herself part of the story, a girl who grows up a little. And our family. These were the words I was looking for, absolutely dying to see my family. I remember how absolutely I was dying to see her, too. But these words, written a few weeks earlier, came now as from a sickening, incomprehensible distance.

In her album, the photos are arranged in chronological order but without captions: from Zhuhai, near Hong Kong in the south, to Beijing. At the back, there are boarding passes, museum tickets,
postcards, Chinese currency, and receipts. Notes from the tour company are folded up, each in their own plastic sleeve. The letter I had given her is in the last pocket.

“It’s amazing,” I said to Nan over the phone. “She knew the exact day you left. Do you remember the date?”

“Yes. Well. I’d have to think about it.”

“It took me a while to figure out what year it was.”

“Course, you know, Penny made Caitlin get rid of a lot of her stuff,” Nan says.

“Yep, she mentions that in the email. She’s got the receipt from the post office in the back of her album.”

“What was at Zhuhai?”

“We went to the gardens. The Memorial Gardens of Sun Yat Sen.”

“Sun Yat Sen? I’ve been trying to find the location of his mausoleum. She was so excited about Sun Yat Sen’s mausoleum. I couldn’t understand it. How she knew anything about him, or how she could be excited about a mausoleum.”

“Oh yes! It’s what I call the China effect. It was all so familiar. I never learned about it, but it was what they all talked about, the old men, during the war.”

I jotted down the phrase, “the China effect”. It can go into the lexicon, along with “the most beautiful place in the world.

“It was his birthplace. He was the father of modern China, you know. Sun Yat Sen. Oh, yes,” Nan emphasized. “They built the model town to commemorate his birth. Everything there is perfect. They grow vegetables like ornaments on archways and walls.”

I visualised Nan running her hands over the air as she imagined the vines, spreading her arms and fingers out.

“They made perfect rice paddies. You might remember the photos with the statues of bullocks standing in it?”

“There’s two in her album,” I said. “I spent ages comparing them, trying to figure out if the bullocks were alive. Where was Sun Yat Sen’s Mausoleum?”

“Now where was that? It must have been in Nanking.”
Caitlin liked the visit to the Mausoleum. I don’t know if she was impressed with the grand scale of the site, or with the crowds of visitors.

“This is the entrance,” she had shown me: a staircase the width of a six-lane highway going up to a large gateway at the top of a grassy hill. Scores of people climbing the stairs. Large groups of Chinese.

“The groups wear the same hats,” I commented.

“So cute,” she said. “You can see the mausoleum from the top,” she pointed. “Here.” Away across the parkland, the mausoleum sat on the next hill at the end of a broad avenue flanked by acres of lawns.

From Guilin they flew to Shanghai to join an Intrepid Tour. There, she took duplicate photos of the street from the hotel room, both in the daytime and at night. I found an atlas of China in the library, and by referring to the boarding passes and train tickets in the album, I traced their journey to Beijing.

I phoned several days after the tour from Shanghai had begun.

“Hey Ma,” she whispered.

“Where are you?” I could hear the resonance of a large space around her.

“I’m in this museum. It’s horrible.”

“Is it ok to talk?”

“Yeah. Yep. It’s just these babies. The graves. The babies are buried face down,” she said.

The ticket to the Memorial of the Nanking Massacre was in the back of the album. The museum looks very modern; a huge crack runs down the outside wall from top to bottom. The Japanese Imperial Army massacred up to 300,000 people in Nanking in December 1937. The memorial has a viewing hall built over a grave where victims were buried.


“It was two years before WWII,” I said. “They were itching for a fight. Japan as well as Germany.”
“We knew nothing about it, never heard about the Japanese in China.”

“What about the Three Gorges Dam? How did you get there?”

“Train. We caught a train from Shanghai to Nanking, and then another one up to Yichang, where the dam is.”

“Yichang, Yep, I’ve seen that on the map. So then you went up-stream from the dam. How long were you in the boat?”

“Ages. Days.”

“Where did you get off the boat?”

“Chengking. Then we caught the train to Xian to see the Warriors.”

There are pages of photos taken from the boat on the Yangtze River. Turbulent brown water moving between steep banks. Small boats struggling against the current. At regular intervals, large white markers indicate the eventual water level of the dam. Rampant greenery covers abandoned mud-brick homes. An elegant arched bridge crosses a gully. Caitlin has photographed a pagoda perched on a promontory, its roof drooping like eyelashes. High above, glimpses of concrete housing appear crammed on the ridge; the new cities of relocation. After five pages, Caitlin appears laughing in a group photo on the deck with the river behind. She photographed her feet on the railing, in striped socks with a Paul Frank monkey face on each one.

“We’re on the Yangtzeee!”

“Wow! How’s the boat?”

She told me about the two girls in her group, both in their twenties. Louisa from Sydney, and Maeve, a Canadian. There was laughter in her voice. I was relieved she was having fun.

Two days later she sounded not so good.

“We saw two bodies floating past.”

“No.”

“A baby and a man.”

“You ok?”

“We’re all in shock.”

“Are there Chinese people on the boat?”

“On the deck below. I can’t wait to come home.”
“Do you want to come home early?”
“No.”

By the time the time Caitlin and Nan were in China, Kim had finished the chemotherapy and was in first year at university. Sore ankles refusing to get better heralded another problem.

“When did it start?” the osteo specialist asked.
“The day I had the last blood test,” she said. “When I left the hospital, I jumped over a puddle.”

I remember the moment, walking out of the hospital behind her; that joyous leap.

“Bone necrosis,” the doctor said.
He and I watched Kim walk across the surgery on her toes. She looked like she was walking on glass spikes.

“She’ll be in a wheel-chair in twelve months,” he said.
He said it casually, as if commenting on the weather. Ironic that an orthopaedic surgeon would have only the bare bones of a prognosis to offer. I was glad we never saw him again. But he was right. By November, the necrosis had spread to the hips; from limping she went to hobbling. At Christmas it was barely a shuffle. Refusing to use a walking stick, she leant on her boyfriend Daniel, and he carried her up and down stairs. Despite this, she was attending lectures at University, and running two radio gigs: one producing the Saturday morning show at the ABC studio in Newcastle, and the other on Sunday night, presenting a music show, live-to-air at the university radio station.

Seventy kilometres from Newcastle, our house at Dungog was out of radio range, but if we drove to the top of Hospital Hill the reception was clear in the car. Caitlin was learning to drive, so she and I combined the two activities, listening to Kim on the radio, and learning to drive. Caitlin drove around town, timing the circuits to arrive on top of Hospital Hill or The Tip Hill between brackets, when we would catch Kim speaking live-to-air. This was the routine from nine till eleven every Sunday night, driving between the two hills. I was totally excited to hear her on radio, hearing her affection for the music and her pleasure to share it.
On the Sunday night before Kim’s first hip replacement, instead of driving between the hills of Dungog, Caitlin and I drove to the university to see Kim at the radio station. The reception was good for the whole seventy kilometres. I remember using Caitlin’s phone to send Kim a message to say we were coming, and Caitlin getting frustrated trying to explain how to work her phone.

Ferocious mosquitoes circulated in the hot summer air under the campus eucalypts. Through the glass door of the studio, we watched Kim lever herself around the bench to open the door. It seemed crazy that she would drive to the radio station, getting herself up the stairs to the studio alone at night. She was uncontrollable, I quipped. By the time of the second hip replacement, six months later, I was a basket case. I had to keep myself away; look after my own anxiety.

After the accident, the house at Dungog was a hard place to be. I drank myself into unconsciousness every night. I left early every morning to have breakfast in the main street at the Snack Inn where Caitlin had worked for years. In the months after the crash, her workmates there treated me with special kindness, as did all the people of Dungog. Later in the morning, I would move to the Bakery or to Crazy Chairs, sitting at a footpath table. Friends and others would stop and talk; her teachers and workmates, sustaining me with memories and stories about Caitlin.

Before Christmas, Kim drove up from Newcastle. It had been a few months, but we were still reeling from the shock and dreading the festive season. We escaped from the house and went to the main street for coffee.

“I can’t believe how quickly she went into the past tense,” I said.

“What do you mean?”

“Straight away, people began talking about her in the past,” I said. “I can’t do it. It feels like betrayal.”

Kim’s eyes flickered.

“Even the language has stolen her,” I complained.

Kim looked far into the distance, at the hills across the valley.
“Let’s make a Christmas tree,” she suggested. “I had this idea to make one with wire and decorate it with Caitlin’s beads.”

We crossed the road and bought two rolls of wire from the hardware. There were beads all over Caitlin’s bedroom, in jars and cups on shelves, on the window sills. Kim bound half-a-dozen metre lengths of thick wire together at one end, and we fanned them out into branches. We coiled the thin wire into heart shapes and spirals, incorporating buttons, fluorescent hair elastics, feathers, glass beads, and dangled them like earrings all over the tree. The visual tactile engagement with her things, over a whole afternoon, felt something like being with her, as if she was with us.

“Prettiest tree ever,” Kimmy said. “Thanks, Ma. I feel much better.”

“Me too.”

Just as Kim was about to leave, I pointed out a magpie sitting on a low branch of the cedar. It was close enough to touch, but it kept still when Kim walked by. I rushed inside to get the camera. I would never have taken a photo of a magpie, when Caitlin was alive. She was terrified of them because they had swooped on her in the street. I often have this feeling of betrayal when doing things I would never do if she were here, particularly with certain foods. She could not bear the smell of sesame seeds, seafood, or dill. She also controlled my hairstyle, insisting I keep my hair long, and never allowing my fringe to be cut. If I go against her wishes, I feel I am betraying her. Even to speak or write about her in the past tense feels like betrayal.

Through the lens I saw the wing feathers of the magpie blowing in the breeze. As I waved goodbye to Kim, a screeching cockatoo came towards the house, flapping furiously from an old stringybark up at the nursing home. It appeared to be flying directly towards me, its screeching growing more raucous. It landed in the cedar, close above the magpie, squawking loudly and splaying its yellow crown feathers, directing its flak at the magpie on the branch below. The two birds were three steps away from me, but strangely unperturbed by my presence. I suddenly realized why the cockatoo was upset about the magpie; Caitlin must have been reincarnated in the cockatoo’s body. After a while, the bird went quiet and then flew
away to the lillypilly near the fence. I followed it and offered bread but she ignored me. An hour later, I noticed the magpie on the back of the garden seat. In the evening I heard the raucous screeching again, and was astonished to see the cockatoo swoop on the magpie from behind, actually clipping it. Two more cockatoos arrived, and they stayed for three days. I collected the white feathers that fell down, and hung them on the Christmas tree. Whenever I saw cockatoos, I imagined she was among them.

I dreaded the future. I dreaded her birthday. I spent many days by the river at Fosterton, sitting on the low level bridge. I was hypnotized by the water on its inescapable downward journey to the sea, by the wind passing through the leaves of the giant ironbarks on the bank, by the flight of birds following the river like a map, a lone heron eyeing me, or the disappearing blue flash of a kingfisher. Swallows swooped around me in tight circles. I could see the russet feathers on their backs. I followed the geometric manoeuvres of dragonflies in their ceaseless surveillance. Watching a school of small fish, I discovered they were watching me, following wide loops I made with my finger. I saw them jump out and snap at small low-fluttering moths. Every minute I was aware of the dying of insects, snatched by the fish or by fantails darting from overhanging branches. I felt part of the river, where death was normal, the long-dead timbers of the bridge holding me in time, in the present. I walked along the road and stood under a flock of noisy cockatoos swaying high up in a stand of roadside gums.

"Helloooo," I yelled. "How are you?"
Newcastle

I was too alone in the house. Friends in Dungog looked after me, shared meals, long walks and talks, but gradually they returned to their family routines. One afternoon, I sat down on a bench on the way home. I realized I did not want to go home. Four months after the crash I took a room in a share house in Newcastle where I would be close to Kim and to the University. I remember as I left the house, seeing one lone magpie watching from the power lines. My school friend Joanne had told me that the Hindus believe we are reincarnated in the body of the animal we liked least. If the Hindus are right, Caitlin must be a magpie.

Another reason to move to Newcastle was to attend AA meetings. It was a twenty-minute walk to the venue at a leaky hall in the grounds of the Catholic Cathedral. I remember on one of those early days, when my mind was in an alcoholic cloud full of churning memories and regrets, a car horn blasted me as I crossed the road without looking.

“Let go of old resentments,” went the creed at the meetings. I have no resentments towards anybody, I think. But one day, I realized I was totally pissed off with the whole world: with life itself. I felt cheated, bound up in misery.

“Think of all the things you have to be thankful for.”

It was like trying to excavate a mountain with a crowbar. Grief had fossilized. But when I made an effort to think of the things to be grateful about, a crack appeared and there was respite from the torment.

“You’ve got a hard road to go,” a bloke said after one of the meetings.

“I lost my brother under the wheels of a train,” Keith said.

“Seven years ago.”

He was an aboriginal guy who made everyone laugh.

“I ran,” he said. “I ran and ran and ran.” His eyes scanned the sky as he spoke.
I anticipated the handshake Keith gave after the meetings; the soft skin and weightless hold felt the same as Caitlin's. He lived in a housing commission ghetto near my place and we sometimes walked back together. He would take a series diversions along the way; crossing to the sunny side of the highway to the TAFE building where he leaned against the massive brick wall to soak up its heat like a lizard. One day, he wandered into a car auction house, opening doors and looking under bonnets. I felt like a kid walking home from school, like being with Caitlin.

Standing with Keith at intersection of the Pacific Highway and the New England Highway waiting for the lights to change, I felt I was in the vicinity of death, beside the controlled chaos of the traffic: the rushing metal on a collision course with the intersecting roads, an occasional slip-up cutting right through. Death clung to me like a shadow, changing shape with every movement, with every hour of the day.

“I had a dream about my daughter,” I said. “The second dream since she was killed.”

“Do you believe in death?” Keith asked.

“Well,” I said. “Yes.”

“There is no death,” he said.

The lights changed and we crossed to Market Town, where he bought his weekly rations: five tins of baked beans, and five cartons of UHT milk. He had the exact amount of coin ready between his thumb and index finger. Outside the stationer’s, he browsed over a table of books on display. He picked up a kid’s book cut in the shape of a coffin and jigged the cardboard handle of an articulated skeleton.

“My nephew would like this,” he laughed.

“Would you give this to a kid?”

“Why not?”

“It’s death,” I said.

“That’s not death,” he said. “It’s just bones.”

He picked rocks out of my thinking. He must have a secret philosophy, an ancient connection with death. I had always thought of death as a terrifying black void, but I could not place my daughter in such a place. I imagined Caitlin's spirit as an energy force made of
cloud-forming ions. In my mind, the great white paintings in the sky were the clouds she made.

In the library I found a video documentary about an Aboriginal funeral on an island in Torres Strait. I watched it over and over, inspired by the smokings and yellings, the beatings of tin. The vigorous treatment of death contrasts strikingly with the silent fragility of Western death. And the relationship with the dead is different: the Aboriginals shun the spirit of the dead, while the Westerner clings to it. I was bogged in the mud of my guilts and regrets. I experimented a bit by shunning Caitlin’s spirit, by yelling at her to go, get away. You belong somewhere else now. I could see the set of her face, the look that said she was not impressed. Not defiant, just determined.

I read about the Qing Ming Festival, the Chinese day of the dead when the graves are swept, incense is burnt, and food offerings of wine, rice and chicken are laid out. Long strings of firecrackers are unrolled and exploded to frighten away any bad spirits hanging around. In parts of China, the people fly kites carrying messages to the dead. In the cities, folded paper models, models of consumables such as clothing, watches, telephones, cars and houses, known as "paper horses", are burnt as offerings to the dead. Many different forms of spirit money are burnt to make sure the dead have ready cash: Grandfather Money, Yellow White Money, Shade money, Unreal money, along with many other paper charms. In rural China, plain brown money, known as First Treasure, is commonly spread on the street outside new shops, where it distracts any bad ghost, and their potential for causing trouble. I became curious about these rituals, and how they originated in Taoism. I wondered how they related to the ethereal philosophy of Lao Tze, which I had encountered in my hippie days.

I decided to have Chinese Bonfire for Caitlin’s birthday, a date which I had been dreading. I made invitations to her friends, asking them to make models of the things she liked that we would send to her by fire. I spent weeks making a large cardboard model of a Holden Ute, the car she had dreamt of buying. The physical activity of making the invitations and the cardboard ute, and the planning and food preparation, somehow removed the dread of the day, until
in the end, I was looking forward to it, looking forward to seeing her friends.

The entrance to the Information Common was thick with buzzing students. I wove through people queuing for coffee or stand-up email to a spot where I would see everyone as they came in. Students in pairs leaned together, laughing as they walked with books clutched in front.

“Hey, Sal.” It was Alice, Caitlin’s girlfriend in a pink fluffy jumper and smiling lipstick. She was with an African girl, also in soft colours, with hair in intricate plaits.

“What’s happening?”
“I’m meeting my Chinese tutor for the first time.”
“How will you know her?”
“She’s Chinese.”

We looked up and laughed because half the people milling around are Asian.

“She’ll be wearing white boots.”
“This is my best friend’s mother,” Alice said to her friend.

“How about you, Al?”
“I’m studying for a test this afternoon.”

It should be Caitlin, I thought. Not me. She had come to the campus a few times in the train from Dungog to meet me. I remember once Caitlin and I were walking towards the library under the giant gums, talking about boyfriends.

“Don’t know how to get one,” she said.
“What sort of boys do you like?” I asked.
“I like black boys,” she said. I stopped and stood blinking at her.

“And Asians,” she laughed.
“Ooch Moochy,” she said, as we arrived at the Auchmuty Library.

I was conscious of the dowdy interior with its seventies mission brown and varnished wood. I knew her sense of smell would be affronted by even the odour of the books. She cast her eyes from
side to side in mock horror, as we squeezed through narrow rows of bookshelves.

A pair of white boots brought me back to the present.

“Chloe? Hi, I’m Sally.”

“Sorry I’m late.” Her eyes glistened like black olives.

“Catch you later Sal,” Alice smiled, and she was gone.

“I only just arrived myself,” I said. “I’ve been at the Chinese class.”

Chloe was a student recommended as a tutor by my Chinese lecturer.

“What is your major?” she asked.

“English. Creative Writing.”

Chloe nodded, with eyebrows raised. “Why are you studying Chinese?”

“I’m writing a story about someone who went to China,” I said. “My daughter.”

“Oh,” she smiled. “Is she studying there?”

“Unfortunately she passed away,” I said, conscious of saying those words for the first time.

“I’m sorry,” Chloe said, her eyes moistening.

“Thank you,” I said. “Let's have coffee.”

“I come from the same province as your teacher.” She opened the text book to the map. “Shenyang.”

I watched her mouth carefully and copied her.

“Do you have a Chinese name? Everyone in China has their own stamp,” she said, using her two index fingers to draw a small square on the table. “We don’t use a signature,” she said, uncertain about her pronunciation.

“Little red seals? I have one.” I searched my bag for my wallet. “Caitlin gave me one from China,” I said.

I show her the photo of Caitlin on The Great Wall in her xiou mo, the pointy bamboo hat. Chloe bent down to read the seal.

“Kay too lin,” she read. “She is cute.”

The seals are printed with red ink made from the ore of mercury, cinnabar, pigment-base of the highly-valued colour, red. Caitlin’s seal is in a handmade box, covered with fabric and lined with red velvet. Beside it is a tin of red paste with two Chinese
characters printed on the lid. I count the strokes and find the words in the
dictionary. Yin Ni, print mud. In my mind Caitlin is looking over my
shoulder, enjoying this.

It was dark when the bus jerked to a halt at my stop. Everything was shining wet after a recent downpour. Four or five pedestrians stood holding umbrellas at the lights. As I crossed the road, a young Asian woman on the opposite side approached me.

“Do you know where is library?”

“Around the corner. I'll show you.”

The illuminated sandstone spire of St Andrews glittered through the branches of a fig.

“Is that library?”

“That's the church,” I said, wondering if it was a joke. “Are you a tourist?”

“I live Sydney.”

“Ni hao?” I said.

She stopped.

“You know Chinese?”

“I study it at university. Are you studying?” I asked, as we rounded the corner to Laman Street.

“I'm doing Masters. Finance.”

Her phone rang, green and blue lights flashing. She stood talking in a flood of Chinese.

“Would you like me to show you the library?” I asked when she hung up.

The library is a fifties building, a streamlined post-war design with a sweeping concave façade. Inside, we passed the long legs of two bronze figures which reach to the upper level of the foyer. I craned my neck to take in their whole length. Beside their great height, I felt alien, part of a strange race of small people. But I also felt kinship with the strange figures: out of place in the world. My companion rushed forward through the swinging barriers.

“Look CD's. So many. Can borrow?”

“Do you go to the library in Sydney?” I asked. “Do you like to read?”
“English too hard, take too long time,” she said. Swivelling on her feet she scanned the entire area. “Can we go up?” She asked, pointing upstairs.

“Sure,” I said.

“How many floors?”

“Four I think. Why do you want to see the library?”

“My friend tell me very nice library Newcastle. Go up more?”

“There’s a gallery up there,” I said, rushing up the red marble steps behind her.

The room was lined with prize-winning photographs of wildlife. We looked at a close shot of a wet orangutan whose bottom lip hung down.


A moose looks at us through bracken fern tangled in its antlers.

“Geng piao liang,” she said. Very beautiful.

“Where in Sydney do you live?”

“Pitt Street.”

“Near Chinatown? Is it scary by yourself?”

“No,” she said. Always too many people. You go Sydney?”

“I went last weekend. To the movies with my daughter. Dian ying.”

“Dian ying?”

“Movies.”

“Oh, dian ying,” she said. “Dian fourth tone, ying third tone.” She made hand actions to illustrate the tones.

“Very good Chinese,” she said when I repeated it. “What is your name?”

“Sally.”

“S A L L Y?” she spelt. “My name Emma. Where you live?”

“Close by here. Would you like to see my place?”

Outside we put up umbrellas. She grabbed my arm to help me across water collecting in a gutter. I had never been helped like this before. I was possibly twice her age, but definitely not elderly.

“I have two housemates,” I said.

“How much is your room?” Emma asked.

“A hundred dollars.”
“Just one person? I pay one hundred, but share room,” she said.

At the door I was surprised when she took my umbrella and folded it up.

“Take off shoes?” she asked.

“No, don’t worry.”

“Are you sure?”

Annabelle was slicing a fillet of veal while watching *The Simpsons*. Bernadette was not home yet. They were both young professionals. The three of us had planned to have dinner together as a farewell to Annabelle who would soon be moving out.

“This nice place. Can I see your room?” I was taken aback by her directness, but happy to show her.

“This nice room,” she said. Her eyes flickered as they scanned all the surfaces, the books, papers and pictures stuck on the walls.

“This is my daughter,” I said, pointing to the photo of Caitlin standing on the Great Wall.

Emma looked at the panorama, which was over a metre long, made with photocopies of photos Caitlin had taken on the Wall. It was the middle of a burning hot day. Caitlin smiling from under the bamboo hat.

“She was killed in a car crash.”

Emma touched the photo.

“This girl?” she asked.

I showed her my Chinese textbooks, a character workbook, a dictionary. I was aware that each moment I was going beyond my normal restrained mode.

“Do you know what this is?” I asked, handing her a large red paper envelope printed with yellow Chinese characters. Small images were printed all over it: mythological men dressed in classical Chinese outfits, pictures of cars, televisions, radios. She opened the envelope and took out a pair of black slippers made of paper.

“Where you get this?” She looked amazed, holding up the paper clothing she found inside.

“Here, in the Chinese supermarket.”
“I have gifts from China. When you come Sydney I give you.”

“Have you eaten?” I asked.

“No, but I have food.”

“Shall we go for coffee?”

Walking along the street, Emma steered me around every puddle and bump in the footpath. Water dripped on us from overhanging branches.

At Goldbergs I ordered a pot of green tea.

“You like green tea?” she asked.

When it came, she emptied the sachet of honey into her cup.

“What is the word for honey?” I asked.

“Mifeng.”

“How do you translate that?”

“Bee honey.”

“Where is your home in China?”

“Zhengzhou.”

“Where is that?”

“In middle. Half way Beijing.”

“Can you write it down?” I handed her my notebook.

“Pin yin or character?”

“Both, thanks. Will you go home to visit?”

“Maybe end of year.”

“I’d like to go to China.”

“You can come with me.”

“I want to go for the Qing Ming Festival in April.”

“Qing Ming?”

“Sweeping the graves.”

“Ah, Qing Ming,” she paused. “I go then. You come with me. Stay my flat. I have flat.”

“How did you get a flat?”

“I work in bank. They give loan.”

She offered me biscuits from a packet in her backpack. They were crescent-shaped like fortune cookies. I took one and she put three on my saucer. We exchanged phone numbers before leaving the café. On the street, she hooked her arm through mine, holding me firmly all the way across town to the railway station where she took the train back to Sydney.
Back at the flat, I cleared the table and aligned three sets of chopsticks across a small porcelain stand. I squeezed wasabi onto one side of a white dipping dish and sweet black soy in the other. Bernadette lit candles and Annabelle chose the music.

I felt very strange here, in the flat with the two young women not my daughters. Things were upside down. I was not present in the scene. When I cooked, I was not myself: I was someone else whose daughter had been killed. It was as if I was in the wrong body, looking out at the wrong life. A year ago I was a mother getting ready for the empty nest, thinking about what I would do with my life without children. I was planning to finish my degree and work as a teacher. I could never have envisaged living in a share house.

“Look how much wasabi she used,” Bernadette laughed. “Oh my God, that could last a year.”

“You’re a dag, Sal,” Annabelle shook her head. They both fell about laughing. I grinned wryly. It felt like a family, but it was the wrong family.

Upstairs after dinner, I looked up the Chinese characters for honey and wrote them in my notebook. How odd that Emma had no idea about the red envelope. At Dungog I have a drawer in which I have collected such things from Chinese stationary shops; squares of coloured tissue paper, hand-made squares of paper money printed with gold and with silver squares. Also Chinese school exercise books lined with square grids and large red characters. I had written the farewell letter on a sheet of paper from one of these books, which I had given Caitlin as she disappeared into customs with Nan on their way to Hong Kong. I had bought the red envelope while Nan and Caitlin were in China. I remember wondering about the paper clothing. Was it for dressing dolls? For babies?

The envelope was now in the back of Nan’s China album, and the letter was where Caitlin had put it in the back of her album. The boarding passes, hotel cards and odd stuff are there, in the albums. Every time I looked at them, more questions were answered. I could use a Chinese dictionary now, and read the characters on the tickets, the destinations. Later I showed the red envelope of strange things to my supervisor at the University, a Chinese man from Singapore.
“Where did you get this?” he asked, mystified.

“In Chinatown,” I pointed to the yellow objects shaped like the hulls of boats printed all over the envelope. “What are these?” I asked.

“It’s money,” he said. “Gold.”

Nan, John, Kim and I spent the night before Caitlin’s birthday at the house in Dungog. In the morning, four magpies took turns at drinking from the birdbath under the trees.

“I had a strange dream last night,” Kim said.

I handed her a cup of tea.

“About Caitlin. She was sleeping beside me, pushing against me all night. It was like the last time I slept with her.”

“When was that?”

“Just before the crash. The night I came here for Georgia’s twenty-first.”

“The night of the blackout?”

“Yep. Don’t you remember?”

“Six days before the crash.”

“The next morning we were down here in the kitchen. I was calling her chainsaw.”

“Was she snoring?”

“She was scissoring her legs against me. She thought I was stealing the doona.”

“What a great memory,” I said. “How come you were sleeping with her?”

“That fold-out bed in my old room is awful.”

The magpies stood in a circle, pointing their beaks up to sing long single notes. Three watched while the fourth crouched flapping its wings in the water.

“I’ve only had one dream,” I said. “In the same place. When I was sleeping in her bed.”

It was the third night after the crash. I was afraid to sleep in Caitlin’s bed, but I did not want anybody else to sleep there either. The house was full of people; relatives and friends from Sydney. I gave Nan my room so that she could have privacy. Kim and Daniel were in Kim’s old room. Everybody else slept on foam mattresses on
the living-room floor: John, my brother Mike and his wife Jenny, Henry a school-friend of Caitlin’s, and Joanne, my school-friend from Sydney.

It was impossible to sleep. I attempted to take my mind off the agony by looking at a book of historical black-and-white photographs. I saw the body of a girl in a black dress and a white lace pinafore lying in a coffin. The large family encircled her, facing the camera which looked down so as to include the one inside. In the mother’s wide drawn eyes I saw myself captured: frantic worry frozen in time.

In the dream, Caitlin and I were face to face. She looked determined, her mouth was set. An invisible barrier stopped us from speaking. Each time I woke, the moon had moved an increment across the sky. She was the moon looking at me all night. I absorbed strength from the light. When the sun rose, I left the house of sleeping people and walked to the shops. I sat at a table on the footpath outside the Snack Inn, where Jason, her workmate, brought me tea and toast.

On her birthday, at four in the afternoon, we drove out to the bridge at Fosterton. Thick low clouds darkened everything. The air was noisy with whistling trees and gushing water. My friend Franny laid a crimson sarong on the ground for the paper offerings. Squally gusts flicked the girls’ hair as they stood shivering in small groups. We collected wood from piles of detritus left behind after a flood.

One by one we threw the things into the flames and sent them to the invisible world: a paper bikini, a cardboard swimming pool, models of hot chips. Kim threw in a pile of paper CDs. Nan had made a large cut-out of Bart Simpson. John made a pair of purple scissors; the handles decorated with small red, green and yellow stars. There was a collective cry when Franny emptied an envelope of paper stars onto the fire, and a large purple star escaped the flames and looped-the-loop.

“She would love this,” Alice said.

We went back to the house for a ritual feast; a spread which included all Caitlin’s favourite dishes, pasta, pizza, garlic bread and potato-bake. After eating, Franny did the teacher thing and formed
everyone into a big circle. We laughed into the night, playing word games and drinking.

It was early on a Sunday morning in Newcastle, too cold to be in the flat. I was lying on a park bench soaking up winter sunshine. Ancient figs encroached on my view of the cobalt sky. On the periphery of my vision, cars whistled along King Street making a moving border between the park and the city. The homeless man lay on a bench fifty metres away. Soon he shuffled away, the ripped trousers flapping like flags. Always on the move, his feet were sore from the endless walking. He shunned people, clung to the buildings on the footpath if you came from the opposite direction.

A plane appeared out of the fig tree, a small white arrow. I could have picked it out of the sky with my fingers. Inside the plane was the story I needed to tell; memories seated in rows, each with its own number. Holding a pencil, I lay on the bench for an hour, watching magpies darting between branches.

At lunchtime I walked to the mall where mothers with small children or groups of teenagers roamed under leafless trees. I took the negative of a photo to the print shop to have an enlargement made, and then sent a text message to Kim.

“Meet me at Pacific Park for a walk?”

In fifteen minutes I had the picture. I lay down on the grass in the park and looked at the photo of Caitlin’s face, turned slightly away from the camera. The angle showed the contours, the cheek giving way to the nose and the other cheek, unblemished dunes rolling away. It was from the film taken by Kim in 2001, as preparation for the major work she was making for her school finals. Caitlin posed on the kitchen stool and wearing sunglasses, grinning, her face in her hands, the thick silky hair on her cheeks. One shot was taken from further away, to illustrate the setting: a bed sheet hung over a string-line tied between two trees in the garden, Caitlin looking down, slouching on the stool with feet pushed apart. She is framed by the crinkled sheet, which is framed by the greens of the grass and the eucalypts, framed again by the edge of the photo. I was lost in the face, the honey skin, the teeth shining between lips about to shape a word.
“Hi Mummy.”
Kim’s voice pulled me into the present. I handed her the photo and she smiled and touched Caitlin’s face. We walked across the park to City Beach, the sea all spume and bluster.

There were strange coincidences with my flatmate, Bernadette. One of my classmates at the university writing group had been in her class in high school. Another was one of her singing students. Then there was the thing about Patrick, Bernadette’s brother.

One evening we were chatting in the kitchen. I was keyed-up because I had received an email from an upset friend. It was the birthday of his friend who had died. My head was reeling because the story had many parallels with Caitlin’s story: a young person who had been killed in a road accident; born one month after Caitlin, killed one month before.

“It’s weird to think he never mentioned this before, even though he knows about Caitlin,” I said.

“I have something I should tell you,” Bernadette blurted.
The look on her face frightened me.

“I was at Patrick’s house last night,” she said. “He was the ambulance driver at Caitlin’s accident.”

“What?”

“I didn’t know if I should tell you.”

“Holy fuck.”

We sat and talked until she had to leave for work, then I rang Caitlin’s friend, Alice.

“I’m meeting some of the others tonight. We’ll drop in,” she said.

Four of Caitlin’s friends came later that night, dressed in strappy tops, long beads and high heels, ready for a night of clubbing. We talked the whole thing over and then went to the pub.

I answered the phone when Patrick rang the following week.

“Bernadette told me,” I said.

“I wondered if she would.”

“I was glad she told me.”

“Really?”
“It’s great to know someone good was there.”
“How are you going?” he asked.
“It’s terrible. But I’m ok. My other daughter has a rough time.”
“It must be hard. I have two little kids myself. When they’re little, you can protect them.”
My fingers squeezed the handle of the phone.
“I’d like you to know that everyone who was there treated her with the utmost respect. It’s always like that, in ninety-nine percent of cases.”
“Thank you.”
“If you have any questions any time, please feel free to ask.”
“There was one thing,” I said. “The next day a policeman gave me the jewellery she was wearing. I didn’t like the fact that someone had touched her.”
“Contact me anytime if you’d like to talk.”
I wanted Patrick to tell me it was him who had removed the jewellery.
Bernadette came home soon after and was rushing to go out again.
“Patrick rang,” I called from the couch.
She stopped and turned, holding the door-knob.
“How was that?”
“We talked. It was good.”
“Really?” she asked.
“It was really good,” I said.
We took a long look at each other before she left.

At Qing Ming time, the Chinese send messages to the dead by flying the words on kites. Like the Buddhist prayer flags, the invisible power of wind transmits words of the living to the invisible world of the dead. Some of the oldest Chinese characters, on the oracle bones, represent this observation of the invisible, depicting the transference of food through the invisible aroma of cooked chicken, or the invisible power of sound carried by drums and firecrackers.
In the flat in Newcastle my room glowed orange from the security lights at the back of the building next door. The window
overlooked a car park which was lit-up until four in the morning. I woke every night with Caitlin on my mind, the Town Hall bells counting the hours until morning. Coal ships blasted foghorns on their way into the port and again on their way out to sea, the vibrations coming from afar making me feel a part of something big.

I had made a kite to fly on the day of the anniversary: a huge circoflex, a large two-metre ring. I bought fluorescent pink parachute fabric, and sewed the whole thing by hand, each stitch connecting me to Caitlin, easing me through the dreaded weeks before the anniversary.

In the computer lab at the city campus, I filled out an application for a scholarship to study in China. I wanted to go to China, but not as a tourist. I searched *Teaching English as a Foreign Language* and clicked on the first site that came up. The school ran a course at Zhuhai. The name of city mobilized me. I read all the information, checked the course dates and costs and filled out an application form. By afternoon I was accepted. I paid the deposit immediately to secure my place. Suddenly I was committed to a trip to China, a four-week course in December.

A few days later, Nan was due to arrive at the station. I was making space for her things when the phone rang.

"I'm at the station. Where are you?" She sounded exasperated.

"You rang yesterday to say you'd be an hour later."

"I did?"

"Don't move. I'll be there in five minutes."

The east coast was in the grip of a spring heat-wave. Wild gusts carried smoke from a bushfire across Newcastle. I ran down the steps to Civic Park. Drops of water from the fountain spotted my skin and evaporated instantly. Nan was sitting at a table at the station snack-bar surrounded by business-college girls with their backs hunched against the wind like horses, hair whipping their faces.

"Let me take the bag," I said, after bending to kiss her cheek.

"I can manage," she said, gripping the handle tighter.

"Really, Nan. Let go. I was going to take you around to the level-crossing, the way we went last time."
“I can’t remember anything about that,” she said. “Anyway, a kind young fellow took the bag up the steps for me.”

We trundled across the square into an air-conditioned café.

“How was Sydney?” I asked.

She recalled her movements over the past week, often unable to remember the sequence.

“See that man,” I said. I nodded across the street where the homeless man trudged along the footpath. Even in this heat he was wearing the coat, his face hidden inside the hood, hands hooked into the pockets.

“I see him everywhere,” I said. “He walks the streets perpetually always wearing the same torn trousers.”

Nan’s eyes followed him as he shuffled down the pavement, sticking close to the glass fronts of office buildings.

“Last week, I was sitting at a bus stop when he sat on the other end of the seat. The smell was overpowering. The skin on his legs is covered in black grime. Then suddenly, he jumped up and stepped into the traffic. Walked across the road without looking. Cars screeched. Two teenagers rushing along clumped down beside me, one with a ten dollar note in her hand. ‘We can’t catch him,’ the girl said. ‘We’re trying to give him this money but he won’t take it.’ We all stared in disbelief as he crossed the road not once looking up. As if he’s taunting death.”

The waitress brought the two cups of coffee.

“They say he came home one day and found the house burnt down with his wife and kids inside,” I said.

“Oh god,” said Nan.

“It would be terrible to have such grief.”

Nan peered through the window.

“Look, he’s walking in the traffic,” I said.

We watched him wander along beside the parked cars, traffic skirting around him.

“Sometimes when I think of her,” Nan said, “I get this welling.” She rolled the air in front with her hands. “It’s worse for you, I know. There must be a time you have to stop, to tell yourself to stop.” Her eyes began to water.
It is two years after the crash, and still Caitlin is always on my mind. Sometimes I find myself in conversation with her, suggesting ways she can save money, or making suggestions about how she can organize herself and keep her room tidy.

“Music gets me,” I said. “I can’t stand it. Even happy music makes me cry. Especially her music.”

“I always think about what she would be like now,” Nan said.

“Too painful.” I shook my head. “I like to think she’s here. Part of everything.”

We walked across the park under the giant figs, their branches creaking in the hot gale.

“I’ll take the bag,” I said as I unlocked the door of the flat. Nan stood gripping the handle.

“I’ve got the door. You go,” she said.

“No. I’ll take the bag.”

“You go in,” she said.

“You always have to be the boss.” My voice was rising.

“What? Don’t be silly.”

“I’m trying to help you. Obviously that’s silly.” Nan dragged the bag inside.

“Cup of tea?” I asked.

We were sitting on the lounge drinking tea. Nan was talking. One of Caitlin’s drawings was on the shelf behind her, a pastel of frangipanis as large as a hand. At this moment, the picture did a somersault and landed on the carpet. Somehow it disturbed none of the things that were on the shelf in front of it: pens and pencils inside a glass, the telephone perched on a stand. Nan continued her story undisturbed. A poltergeist, I thought.

“Caitlin drew this,” I said getting up to retrieve the picture. “I had it framed to give to John for his birthday.”

“That was three months ago,” Nan said.

“I’ll give it to him tonight. Kim and Daniel will be here too,” I said. “What shall we have for dinner?”

“Lamb chops,” Nan said.
From up on The Hill, Newcastle spread out like the skirt of a dancer, the river swirling into the scalloped edge of the beach. Everything looked rosy from the setting sun blazing through bushfire smoke on the horizon. Lining up in the steady breeze, the queue of waiting ships stretched to the south. The kites struggled to be released as we took them out of the car.

Kim’s purple diamond tadpoled straight up then looped into a nose-dive before crashing.

“Crazy,” she said. “It self-destructed.”

The big fluorescent circoflex caught the wind, but it stayed hovering close to the ground.

“Run with it,” Nan yelled, her white hair blowing like a cloud. Daniel took the string and ran along the spur of the hill, jumping off the slope as if he was launching a hang-glider. But the thing refused to climb into the air. Half the strings of the bridle came undone. We laid it on the ground and rejoined the strings.

“Can you put me on the ground, Daniel?” Kim asked.

He collected her under the knees and let her down, like a rugby tackle in slow motion. After we had tied up all the strings we spent an hour flying the kites. John and Daniel flew a fancy kite John had bought, which raced back and forth like a maniac.

“Let’s go,” Nan said when it was too dark to see.

“Here’s to my trip to China,” I said, when we sat down to eat. “I’m booked into a four week course in December.”


“Zhuhai.”

“Zhuhai?” Nan cried. “That’s where Caitlin and I went.”
Zhuhai

Zhuhai is a sprawling new city at the mouth of the Zhu Jiang, the Pearl River, which is the southernmost of China's three great rivers. Thirty years ago, Zhuhai and its twin, the city of Shenzhen on the opposite bank of the Zhu estuary, were the first of the Free Economic Zones set up as part of Deng Xiaoping’s Open Door Policy. Whereas business in Shenzhen successfully caught the boom wave, Zhuhai missed it and is now considered an economic failure. The only reason it appears in the Lonely Planet Guide to China is because it has a border entry point to mainland China, from the ex-Portuguese colony of Macau. Now it is offering me exactly what I want, an opportunity to live in China, and at the same place Caitlin and Nan began their trip.

But the prospect of cutting myself adrift and going to China was frightening. The closer the time of departure comes, the more I regret the decision to go. Yet the alternative, long lonely days in Newcastle, was not a good prospect either. Kim was working full time, and my university friends were like those in Dungog, busy with their own lives. On the internet, I booked a cheap room at The Victoria Guest House in Kowloon, which is located in a building described as the infamous Mirador Mansions, as I found out later.

Before leaving I spent lengthy sessions looking at Nan and Caitlin's photos. The plan, of course, was to photograph the same scenes from the same places. In the weeks after the accident, there was a spontaneous amassing and sharing of photos of Caitlin, a focus that brought my hysteria close to eruption. After six months, the fear had changed into fetish. I printed and photocopied photos, cutting them out and overlaying them like cartoons, animating her. The cartooning was consoling. The anxiety abated and the photos became, in a real sense, imprints of Caitlin.

Looking at the photos she took became just as involving as looking at the photos in which she is the subject. In her bedroom were several shoe-boxes full of photos she had taken in which she rarely appeared as one of the subjects. Yet, taken as they were, from
her point of view, they revealed something more of the inner Caitlin. They took me to a place beside her; made me feel more like a companion than an observer of her. This change of perspective not only brought me closer to her, it took me away from my own nightmare.

Caitlin’s photos of China were the only ones she ever put into an album. She and Nan spent eight days with my cousin Penny, who was teaching English in Zhuhai. Together in one pocket of the album, Caitlin had a series of shots taken from the window of Penny’s fourth-floor apartment. These are the only shots she took in Zhuhai. Side-by-side, they made a panorama of tenement blocks, ordinary buildings only distinguished by different coloured roof-tiles, different window-grilles and different placement of air-conditioner units. On the ground below, there is an interesting concrete concourse raised up around a large open garden space. Unidentifiable goods spill onto the footpath from the ground floor shop fronts. Nan took an almost identical series of shots from the window of Penny’s apartment. The only difference is a large blue and white glazed dragon pot that appears in the foreground of one. Nan had taken ten other shots of the city. I studied all these photos at length, looking for connecting clues. There are two photos of what could be the same tree-lined road looking in opposite directions. I inspected all the cars and buses to see if any appeared in two photos.

Nan’s album has a series of photos all taken with the same building in the background: a shopping centre with ugly red blocks like battlements on the corners of the roof. In one of the photos, Caitlin is a pedestrians standing on the curb. There is a photo of boy behind a glass counter. Under the shade of the umbrella, the only visible feature of his face is his teeth. Nan has a wicked habit of winking at children for the fun of watching their reactions. Folded inside one of the pockets of Nan’s album is a map sketched by Penny on which a street name Ning Xi is marked with the word restaurant inside a square. Flat and bike shop are also marked.

“How is the food?” I had asked Caitlin. “Have you found anything you like?”

“I’m about to go and buy ingredients to make pasta.”

“Isn’t it a bit late?”
“The shops are open till after nine. The kids never go to bed here, they are still running around.”

There is one photo of Caitlin and Penny together, posed between two palm trees. Caitlin is wearing the knee-length denim skirt the travel agent had advised her to take so as not to offend the Chinese sense of modesty. The other much more significant feature of this photo is the location in which Caitlin and Penny were standing, because later, when I arrive in Zuhai, it is the exact spot where the taxi will drop me. After taking that photo, Nan had turned one-eighty degrees and taken a photo of the school I will attend, across the plaza.

December 1, 2006, I fly from Sydney to Hong Kong. After landing at Lantau Island, I squash in to a packed train in the subway. Face to face with my reflection in the glass doors, I see a ghostly figure, almost invisible, overweight, with grey hair and a web of wrinkles around the eyes. I look like I feel, only half in the physical world. When the train emerges from the tunnel, we speed past the glass towers crowding the waterfront of Victoria Harbour.

From Nathan Road, the Mirador Mansion looks like a demolition site, with boarded-up windows, torn blinds, rusty grilles and flapping awnings. People from all over the world mill around its narrow entrance hall, which is packed with souvenir stalls, Indian women in gold trimmed saris, men in turbans and Africans. Clean-cut Arabs in white shirts squeeze into the lifts with Chinese carrying bolts of fabric or half-made suits. A few stooped old people in the mix make me feel safe.

On the sixteenth floor, the lift opens onto an internal walkway around the four sides of a large well in the middle of the building. This well is open to the sky, so that the building has generous outdoor walkways that function like balconies on every floor. There are bamboo rods with washing suspended into the middle. A covered staircase zigzags down out of sight. I walk three sides of the square looking for my guest-house. Inside open doors, tailors bend over ironing boards. A jeweller peers through a magnifying glass under a desk lamp. There are small altars outside many doors, with cups and incense pots set beside images of gods.
Four African women lounge on old couches inside the doorway of The Victoria Guest House. The Chinese proprietor, Apple, in jeans and fluffy slippers, is friendly and helpful. She leads me along a nearby corridor wide enough for one person, and into a narrow room with two narrow beds. The shower is set directly above the toilet in a small cubicle. A small glass door leading to a balcony gives a slight whiff of luxury. I dump my bag, and head out with my camera.

Several doors along from my room, an African guy is giving a haircut to someone sitting on a stool in the corridor.

“No,” he yells out when I point the camera.
He strides towards me.
“You take picture?”
“No.” My pulse races. I feel like running.
“You sure?” He holds out his hand for the camera.
“You said not to.”
He eyes me for a few seconds, then walks away.

In the street, I roam around in the crowd, photographing the gaudy plastic footpath altars. I eat in a small crowded restaurant squeezed in to a table with a friendly young couple from Taiwan. I am fired-up by the richness of life. For the first time since the accident, without me noticing, Caitlin has been displaced. I sleep well, on the narrow foam mattress with the street noise of Hong Kong drifting up from below.

The following morning, at the wharf in Kowloon, I photograph the name of my destination stencilled on a yellow tin sign. Zhu, Pearl, Hai, Sea. The city where the Pearl River meets the sea. Until thirty years ago it was a small fishing village. For a thousand years, ships from all over the world had sailed up this river to the trading centre of Canton. In the sixteenth century, the Portuguese established the colony of Macau on the rocky peninsular adjacent to Zhuhai. Now Macau is a booming Vegas style casino city, with a narrow border to mainland China. Four weeks later, as it turns out, I will walk across the border to Macau to meet Kim, who will fly over a few days after Christmas.

The ferry speeds out of Hong Kong into the swell of grey water under a thick grey sky. We pass many small islands dotted
with wind-blasted boulders and stunted shrubs. After an hour, the boat veers in a wide arc into the mouth of the Zhu, where the towers of Macau loom out of smog.

“Is this Zhuhai?” I ask the man beside me.

“Yes.”

“Jie Zhou?” I read out loud from the large sign on top of the terminal.

“Jie Zhou,” he says. “This wharf area.”

It is eleven-thirty on Saturday morning, already half-an-hour past the designated time of arrival at the school. I pass through the customs and immigration hall at the wharf and make my way to the head of a row of taxis on the curb. I hand the driver a card I have made with the address of the school written in Chinese characters. I am shocked to see springs poking through the worn upholstery of the back seat.

Warm air blows in the open windows as the driver speeds around the four-lane waterfront boulevard, laughing aloud at talk-show on the radio. Wooded hills rise behind suburban apartment blocks. I scan the streets searching for the buildings in Nan’s photos. The taxi turns off the highway and climbs over a wooded rise and down into another area of dense housing. Pulling to the curb, he points to a building across a plaza with the name of the school on a blue banner above the entrance. The shopping centre with the ugly red corners is on the opposite side of the road.

The foyer contains nothing but a majestic curved staircase. There is no lift in the building and I have to drag my luggage upstairs: another shock to my western sensibility. The TEFL school operates in several rooms within a large private English language school called The Gateway Language Village. At a desk on the first floor, a receptionist tells me where I can find Mei Ling, the TEFL administrator. I am apprehensive about meeting her as I had received a sharp email from her after my on-line payment had gone askew. She looks up when I tap on the door.

“You’re the first one here,” Mei Ling says. “Wait a minute.”

She never smiles, but I don’t see any sign of the irritation I perceived in the email. She seems to be fully occupied keeping up with her work.
On the walls are group photos of past classes, one for each month of the year.

“How many are doing the course?” I ask.

“Five,” she says.

I fill out and sign forms including a document promising not to talk to the other students about anything to do with the school. My acculturation has begun.

“Also, read this,” Mei Ling says. She hands me a photocopy explaining certain cultural differences;

1. In China, a clean floor is not important. A dead cockroach on the floor doesn’t matter, but a Westerner might be upset to find one in their flat. A westerner likes the floor to be clean enough to eat off.

2. In China, punctuality is very important. For a Westerner, arriving late to class is normal, but in China it is not. Students must always arrive at class early.

“I will take you to your accommodation,” Mei Ling says.

We walk the two blocks through the shopping area that features in Nan’s photos. The boom gate at the entrance to my compound is manned by a uniformed guard standing in a booth. Two rows of tall Chinese scholar trees line the drive between the two five-storey buildings. The mould-streaked cement-rendered apartments are the first generation of developments after the Open Door Policy in the eighties. Kids are playing ping-pong on the ground floor which is an open car-park. Mei Ling unlocks the heavy metal grille to the stair-well, and we climb several flights which are half open to the weather at each landing. There are no altars outside the doors here, but outside of some, the ends of burnt incense poke out of small containers. Most of the doors on the way up have strips of red paper painted with black Chinese characters on either side.

Two more keys are needed to enter the flat through another heavy grille and a solid wooden door. A dozen pairs of slippers and thongs crisscross the entrance into a living room with polished wooden floors and freshly painted white walls. The kitchen facilities comprise a hot and cold water dispenser and a microwave oven. The
washing machine is on a balcony enclosed by a stainless steel grille, where rows of bright lacy underwear on coat-hangers are spaced on chrome rods along the ceiling.

“You share with seven girls,” Mei Ling says. “All studying English at the Language School.”

She shows me the two dormitory rooms, each sleeping four, and the two renovated bathrooms. I have the third room to myself, with another key of its own.

“We meet at the school 5pm for dinner,” she says, handing me the heavy keys.

A double bed, a desk and a wardrobe use up all the space in my room. The large window opens onto the branches of a tall Australian brushbox which obscures the traffic of the busy road below. I flop onto a tightly-sprung mattress and I lay on my back enjoying the great relief of having arrived. Somebody in the flat above is playing Beethoven on a piano, and I listen for a while.

In the afternoon I go looking for the spots around the shopping centre where Nan took her photos. I stand holding up her photo of the key-cutter, with the car-park in the background, to compare it with the scene in front. A moving shadow alerts me to someone peering over my shoulder: a lad in a military uniform, one of the cadets who stand on each street corner. I move over so he can have a better look at the photo. It is a two-storey retail centre covered in advertising. In the four years since the photo was taken only the advertising hoardings have changed.


“Ai,” he calls over to the key cutter, who strides over.

“Di di,” the key-cutter laughs at the photo. Little brother.

“Your son?” I ask.

“Brother’s son,” he smiles. And he smiles every day when I walk past for the next month.

On the grass verge under palm trees Nan had taken two shots of the main road, Ning Xi Road, facing either direction, the same road marked by Penny in her sketch map. Nan turned to take in the shopping centre where Caitlin stood at the edge of the photo waiting to cross. An old man in a xiao mo hat pedaled past her on a bicycle cart loaded with cardboard. Nan had turned again to take in
the further reach of the shopping centre, down towards my apartment.

Nan took five photos in this car-park, each time standing and turning to take several shots from the same position. They are random photos without any focal point, yet it seems to me she was photographing the place so that I would recognize it when I found it.

Only one of my class mates comes for dinner in the evening: Sandy the Filipino girl who has been living in Zhuhai for six months with her aunt, a teacher at the language school.

"The two guys from America are too tired for dinner," Mei Ling says. "The other girl is from Mongolia. She is repeating the course because she failed last month."

I imitate Mei Ling and Sandy as they use chopsticks to take chicken bones from their mouths and place them on the table. They keep up a conversation while I attempt to copy the way they eat. I take too long to get bones out of my mouth and then drop a few on the floor.

Over the next four weeks the shops, markets, stalls and restaurants that fill the car-park become my habitat. The place is vibrating with energy; yet there is aura of calm throughout. Between my flat and the school is a new noodle restaurant with walls covered in panels of back-lit food photos. Yellow plastic tables and chairs are fixed to the floor. Next is a small supermarket selling anything from dried sea-horse, live fish and beer, to pyjamas and toothpaste. Next to it is a booth selling lucky tickets and further along the street, a restaurant where a young man in a white cap stretches large balls of dough outside a restaurant. Then there is a pattie-cake maker where trays of sweet yellow cakes are baked and sold while still hot. I walk past a dumpling café where customers sit outside at two chipped laminex tables eating from bamboo steamers and an elegant tea shop tiled with red marble, where people sample tea from thimble cups around a low ornately-carved wooden table. Around the corner is a cigarette counter, beside a bar selling grilled chicken thighs, legs and feet heaped in separate piles.

The streets are full of people but no one hurries. Friends stand and chat as if at a picnic; grandparents with babies, older women arm in arm. Schoolgirls lean on each other stroking each
other’s hair or clothing as they talk. I see Nan standing with a camera in her hand looking around for Caitlin who has stopped to buy patty cakes. The men huddle around low tables playing Chinese chess or sit on stools between racks of clothes. A shopkeeper dozes on a bamboo armchair in a pool of winter sun. People stare at my shoes and at the camera attached to my belt. I smile when I catch their eye, but they return blank looks and turn away. I soon learn that if I nod as well as smile, as I learnt to do in Dungog, people will smile and nod back.

An outdoor hairdressing school operates in the carpark, where customers sit on stools with long, bright-orange cloaks tucked around their necks. In a side lane, shoe repairers use treadle-powered boot-stitchers. Chickens roosting on top of cages watch a florist decorate a black wedding car with long ruffles of fluorescent pink tulle. The tables of an outdoor restaurant are set in front of a stack of glass tanks squirming with live snakes.

Behind the shop fronts is a large produce market. Large blue tubs of fresh bean sprouts stand in front of tables stacked high with lettuce leaves, bok choy and broccoli stalks. Fish swim in rows of concrete tanks which are aerated through hoses running around the wet floor. The fish are killed by a blow to the head with the handle of a chopper. A guy hoses the gory chopping blocks where the fish are gutted, washing the blood across the floor. Up an escalator I find an internet café, possibly the one Caitlin used. It is a large dark space, with over a hundred computers. At night the air is rank with cigarette smoke and full of young people playing games, wearing headphones and chatting in front of web cams.

One morning as I am walking across the plaza to school, a woman gives me a severe frown. She shakes her head when I nod, making a subtle movement with her hand to show my fly is undone. I zip it up and laugh, but the woman glares furiously. Chinese modesty, I think. I must take more care.

It is difficult for me to buy one apple from the street vendors in the car park. Some vendors grumble.

“Yi ge ren, yi ge ping guo,” I say. One person, one apple.

The woman laughs and imitates me when I polish the apple on my jeans; she has never seen such a thing. She shakes her head
and offers me a knife to peel it, but I refuse. The knife may be dirty. The woman looks horrified when I take a bite. I sit on the concrete wall by the footpath. A toddler smiles when she sees me and drags her mother over to the steps beside me. The child sits on the step and kicks her feet and grins at me, ignoring the mother who is tugging her to stand up.

I have trouble crossing the road even at a zebra crossing. Cars travel on the opposite side of the road to that in Australia. It is like trying to write or do something while looking in a mirror; my reactions are skewed. Cars seem to approach randomly from any direction. There are traffic lights, but the drivers ignore them, sneaking out into the traffic when they can. I wait at the curb till other pedestrians cross and walk beside them.

On Sunday, I go on a mission to find the location of Penny’s flat. The streets adjacent to Ning Xi Road are filled with apartment blocks similar to the ones around Penny’s, about ten years old, six to ten floors high, covered in white tiles, and with a rim of orange or blue roof-tiles set at an angle around the top, like faux eaves. I am looking for a compound, a bit like my apartment block, with trees and a footpath between the buildings. I spend several hours searching in vain.

In the afternoon I take a bus to Gongbei, the commercial area at the border with Macau. Every hour, thousands of people cross the border here. A huge square in front of the Immigration Hall conceals an extensive underground market, laid out in a network of stalls under low ceilings which I spend the afternoon getting lost in. I buy a fake Gucci watch which has twelve Chinese characters around the face instead of numbers: the Twelve Earthly Branches, part of the Chinese hexagenary time system. As soon as I show interest in the watch a crowd forms around to witness the haggling. A collective hum goes up when the money changes hands.

On the first Monday I arrive at school early to try out the breakfast. Free meals are available to all the participants in the TEFL course, on the expectation that we will mix with the Chinese students who are not allowed to speak Chinese while on the school premises. The bulk of the students in the canteen are in their twenties, dressed in jeans and sweaters. Among the throng looking for seats, one
young woman stands out because of her conservative mode of dressing and her air of self-possession. She sashays through the crowd wearing a crimson tartan skirt and matching vest, an outfit that might have been hip in the eighties. Her patent black heels click the polished floor. She smiles all the time not to anyone in particular, as if on a catwalk.

She is in my classroom when I arrive; and I sit beside her. In this small room, the TEFL school runs one class per month with a maximum of eighteen students. We sit on pine stools with narrow pine desks for two. Mei Ling stands at the front introducing the course. She hands out the timetable and outlines the expectations for homework. When she is finished, she hands out blank sheets of paper.

“Form into pairs,” she says. “Then draw pictures of your interests and hobbies. Exchange the drawings and then introduce your partner to the class.”

I am paired with Jenny, the girl in tartan skirt, who watches me draw but doesn’t draw anything herself. She smiles as she reads my pictures.


“How about you?” I ask.

She shakes her head and laughs. I almost feel patronised, but her smile is sincere.

“It’s time to hand you over to Jenny,” Mei Ling says. “She will be your teacher for the first two weeks. If you have any questions come and see me at the office.”

I am astonished to find the tartan girl is to be our teacher. How can a non-native English speaker teach native English speakers how to teach English?

Rick, the Philadelphian, has just finished high school. He is a big guy with shaggy hair and the shadow of a musketeer beard. Within a few days he hooks up with the Mongolian girl, Bolor, who is doing the course for the second time. She is very beautiful and very serious; her eyes and lips curl under long dark waves of hair. Adam, from Washington, who is teaching English in Japan, has come to China during the winter break to acquire formal accreditation.
“Sally. You're late again,” Jenny says on the second morning. The wall clock says five past nine. Is she serious? She is not smiling.

“You have paid a lot of money to do this course. You should make sure you arrive on time.”

I feel affronted, but I never arrive late again. During the first recess, I show Jenny the watch I bought. “Can you read this? I can only find a few of these words in the dictionary.”

She peers at the watch and shakes her head. “These are old words,” she says. “We don’t use these words now. They were for the fortune teller, for the hour of birth. In old China, the day was divided into twelve shi chen, each worth two Western hours. This one, Wu is noon, the two hours between eleven and one. Means middle of the day. Two o’clock, Chou, means tie a knot. Yin is polite. Mao means lush. Chen,” she pauses. “Chen is a constellation of stars. Si, maybe foetus, or snake. Wei means not yet. Shen is spirit. You is wine. Xu means to wound or kill. This last one before midnight, Hai, means son. This is the luckiest hour.

The school day is very intense, alternating between communication exercises, practical experience, grammar and theory. In the first week, we learn the anatomy of the mouth and throat, and then the phonetic alphabet, in which we are tested. Each of us is assigned to a private student to whom we give a one hour lesson every day. My student, Charmaine, is a Chinese woman of my age, recently married to a Canadian teacher. Unlike me, she is tall and slender, with elegantly curled black hair and crimson lipstick. She says she needs to learn English quickly because her husband speaks little Chinese. My task is to identify problems and devise strategies for improvement.

She is very excited, almost panicky, speaking too quickly, repeating words. She pauses when I speak, but continues without responding.

“I learn cooka English. He wanta me cooka pizza, masha potata,” she says. “Cutta cheeza very very smalla smalla smalla.” She pinches two fingers together beside her mouth to emphasize the size. Her eyes shift from side to side as she scans her mind for the
words. I take her for a walk to the dining hall, and we talk about pictures of vegetables.

On the second weekend, I continue the search for Penny’s flat. This time I take the opposite direction, and circle around the back streets behind my school. I walk very slowly, looking at everything. I have a strong feeling that I am in the right area. As I go along a backstreet towards the main road, I come across a family cooking outside a ground floor flat, and feel strongly this is the place. Opposite I see the raised concrete concourse. Yes, this is the place. Kids are running around, a group of card-players sit around a circular table. I follow the pedestrians down a side path under a row of the large-leafed *wutongs* where two small boys are playing with toy cars in the dirt. Scanning the wall of the apartment block, I see what I am looking for: the definitive sign that tells me I’m in exactly the right place. Three flights up a concrete staircase is the large blue and white dragon pot which appears in the corner of Nan’s photo, sitting behind the grille on the staircase.

In the second week, our teacher hires a minibus to take us to a local primary school at Dongping. The bus won’t start, so the two American lads are enlisted to push-start. I can’t believe it when the driver stops while crossing the main road, and proceeds to make a U-turn in four lanes of traffic. The traffic slows down and flows around our bus without one horn blowing or brakes squealing. The whole manoeuvre is accomplished as smoothly as a rehearsed stunt. Adam and I exchange raised eyebrows.

We drive for thirty minutes through miles of busy suburban shopping areas to ever bigger highways, past massive new government offices; chunky modern fortresses set at the centre of expansive empty car-parks. I see many other English colleges in the commercial areas we pass, and begin to realize how big the city is and how much of a coincidence it is that I happened to have ended up at the same part of Zhuhai Nan and Caitlin had visited. The bus takes detours along back-lanes to avoid road works, the overpasses and intersections under construction.

The school at Dongping comprises two four-storey blocks with little space between them. The ground floor of the first one is an open concrete assembly area which doubles up as the playground.
Kids in white track-suits run past, then stop and stare. We wait to meet the headmaster in a timber-veneered room in a demountable building. The headmaster comes out of a side office, gives us a blank nod and retreats again.

The bare concrete classroom is bereft of comfort. There are no books, pictures, or any sign of art or craft work. The only resources are the blackboard and wooden stools. We arrange the stools in a horseshoe before the class of thirty kids arrives, half the standard class size. The kids chase each other around, laughing and pointing. The girls have their hair in multiple topknots or braids held with bright-coloured hair-bands. A few kids have grotty faces and rotting teeth.

The children have been learning written English, but have no speaking or listening skills. We use a system of pictures, which we have individually drawn with crayons, to set context and model questions and answers in simple language. Hand signals and tone of voice are the tools of command. We spend the morning at the school, four of us observing the fifth teaching a forty-minute class. After we return to our school in the afternoon, we are expected to comment on each other’s performance at a “moderation session.”

Despite my fears, I enjoy being in front of the class. The vibrancy of the children works on me like magic and I feel more confident. At the moderation session, Jenny fails me because I didn’t keep to the lesson plan. There is a strict sequence to be followed: contextualizing, modelling and dialoguing with individual students, using the pictures as prompts. I will have to do an extra practice class to make up the points.

We return to Dongping the following week, and this time several Chinese student-teachers sit in on our classes. Before we leave, we are invited to join other teachers to watch a special demonstration class in which sixty children are taught to sing a new song. The teacher has the persona of a showman, engaging everyone in the room. She forms the kids into trains to learn the different parts while weaving around the room amid much hilarity.

One day in the second week, I use the two hour lunch break to explore the side streets in the district around the school. I come across an older low-rise suburb of white-washed two-storey flats with
potted geraniums on the balconies. A road winds up a hillside past large single mansions behind walled gardens. The weather is dry and calm now, but copious black mould stains on the buildings tell of the hot wet summers. At the end of a cul-de-sac a man with an eight-litre water bottle on his shoulder is walking down a bush track. I follow the track up through a stand of lichen-blotched wutong trees in an undergrowth of dusty bracken fern. The track leads to an open area where a dozen locals, all with plastic containers, are standing around a spring.

"Ni hao," I call.

None of them answers, so I repeat myself, using a more emphatic tone.

"Ni hao, ma?"

"Ni hao, ni hao," a few of them say, and turn away.

I follow the track up a steep slope, which soon peters out. On the way back, one of the men at the spring beckons me over to the group of water-collectors. I smile, but none of them smiles back. The guy grabs my wrist and reaches across my back to grab the other arm, getting me into a body lock. I feel strangely disconnected. Although unfriendly, nothing suggests they are threatening, not even this. The man points up to the bush where I had been and shakes his finger. Again I am being chastised; first for leaving my fly undone, then for being late to class, and now for going into bushland. They are affronted by my behaviour: I am intrigued by a culture in which strangers have no compunction in telling me what I should be doing. I am learning that I am responsible for more than myself, that I have a social responsibility to do the right thing, and that others are obliged to point this out to me.

"Xiao xin," the guy says as he lets me go: little heart, meaning take care.

A young woman coming up the track asks in English what I am doing. She explains that the people are collecting water to make the renowned Zhuhai soup.

"They believe the spring water is very pure," she says. "It will give them a long life."

People have been collecting water at the spring for generations; a remnant of the village culture. The soup is brewed
inside large, man-sized clay pots on the pavement outside restaurants. Small pots filled with the raw vegetables and pure water are sealed with a covering of brown paper tied with string, and set on top of red-hot charcoal inside the urns.

Although happy to explore bushland, I feel unadventurous when it comes to dining out. Adam, our American classmate, suggests we should dine together every Friday night. Having spent eighteen months teaching in China, his Chinese is quite good. He takes us to Wang Jiao, King Dumpling, on Ning Xi Road.

“You should try fungus,” Adam suggests, “highly nutritious.”

“Sounds delicious,” I say.

“They call it wood ear,” he says. "Mu er.”

“Not really appetizing,” I say.

“Fu yuan,” he yells over the noisy crowd to a waitress, who rushes across.

“That wasn’t very subtle Adam,” I say.

“That’s how they do it in China,” he says. “Otherwise they ignore you.”

He orders several types of dumplings, and a dish called *Luohan Cai*, Buddha’s Vegetables.

“It has wood ear and golden needles,” he says. “Tiger-lily flowers.”

“Great,” I say.

“Don’t worry,” he says. “It’s quite bland.”

One evening I ask one of my flatmates, Cathy, to accompany me to the car-park to see the blind musicians. She is from Guangzhou, the capital of Guangdong Province a hundred kilometres to the north. A short girl, even shorter than me, but half my weight.

Sitting on plastic stools, the four men play tunes on the *erhu*, two-string, which they rest on their legs and play with a bamboo bow. A thick layer of white rosin dust covers their instruments and thighs. The leader keeps time with a cymbal on a rusty stand, which is operated by a bicycle chain around a cog to the foot-pedal. The three other players droop as if ready to sleep.
On the way back to the flat I ask Cathy if she has tried the meat skewers. I am fascinated by the fellow in a white cap who stands outside a Mongolian restaurant making noodles. Above the door images of animals are superimposed on a steppe landscape of grassy plains flowing out to mountains. The scene looks like an illustration for nursery rhymes, with a red circle surrounding each animal, a cow, a duck, a goat, a rooster, a snake. After dark in the carpark, an old man with a long thin beard and a white hat, stands barbequing small pieces of meat on skewers over a charcoal grill.

The old man and the boy greet us as if it is an honour. Cathy orders four skewers. The old man fans the charcoal with the stem of a palm frond trimmed into a ping-pong bat shape.

Covered in a mix of chilli powder and sugar, and juicy with fat, the lamb is delicious.

“Are you worried about your daughter coming by herself to Hong Kong?” Cathy asks. “No,” I say. “She went to Vietnam last year, with her boyfriend.”

“She is so young,” Cathy says. “In China, a girl of twenty-two is too young to go by herself.”

“I went to Hong Kong myself, at the same age,” I say.

But I am thinking, she is right. If she knew Caitlin’s story, she would have no doubt I was a crazy woman.

I dine regularly on lamb skewers after that. The boy is nine or ten years old. He does all the waiting, day and night. When I order, he leans on his elbows to look intently at the menu as I point out my choice, which is nearly always stir-fry egg and tomato. His skin is almost flawless, like Caitlin’s, like fresh fruit. There is an older boy with a sullen face who keeps watch in the background. My classmate Adam informs me it is a Muslim restaurant, which explains the white caps which I had thought were cook’s hats.

“Qingzhen, they call it, Pure Truth. The Chinese words for Halal.” Adam says.
Sure enough, there is no pig among the animals on the sign above the door.

It was last year, the second Christmas after the accident, that Kim and Dan went to Vietnam. For that whole year I had been living in two places, coming and going between the share house in Newcastle and Dungog. I had decided to move out of the house, and either sell or lease it. I gave myself the three summer months to sort through everything amassed during the fifteen years we had lived there. I dreaded the emotional confrontation with the past. I was far from ready to dispose of any of Caitlin’s things.

Primed with alcohol, I approached the drawers full of saved childhood mementos: school reports and photos, writings and drawings. Reading the school reports and putting them in chronological order in display folders was like piecing together a memory puzzle, giving me the feeling that I was still involved with her life.

One afternoon I sat on the verandah with a book Kim had given me for Mother’s Day when Caitlin and Nan were in China: a large second-hand Time-Life book called *A Day in the Life of China*. One hundred photographers had been commissioned to produce images, each of a different place, but all taken on the same day. The last photo in the book was an image of students in Beijing sticking angry posters on a wall. They were protesting the shabby treatment of Hu Yaobang, a leader revered by students for his incorruptibility, but who was not given a proper funeral by the Party. These complaints led to the general protest against corruption, and the consequent massacre in Tiananmen Square. After browsing over the pictures, I read the preface and discovered the day in question was April 15, Caitlin’s birthday, her second birthday in 1989. A new baby, in pure white swaddling on the front cover, is packed in a row of black-haired babies, all born two years after Caitlin.

Although in Zhuhai I share the flat with seven other people, I rarely see anyone when I am there. Several times I invite Cathy to dine out with me, but she always declines, which I come to understand is an economic imperative.
“I’m going to Sun Yat Sen’s hometown today. Do you know it?”

“Who?”

“Sun Yat Sen,” I say, thinking since the words are Chinese, she must know who I mean.

“I don’t know,” she says.

“The father of modern China.”

“Oh,” she says. “Sun Yixian. We call him Zhongshan, Middle Mountain.”

Cuiheng village is twenty kilometres to the north of Zhuhai, but because of a wrong decision, it takes me half the day to get there. I catch the right bus, but from the wrong side of the road, and end up at the terminus past Gongbei. When I show my map to another passenger, others gather around in an animated discussion. This ready inclination to form into a group is fascinating, like a flocking instinct, maybe part of the communal sense of responsibility I have met. One woman pats the seat beside her, indicating she will show me the way.

Scrappy suburbs give way to dry paddy fields covered in winter dust. We pass a saleyard stocked with massive tree trunks covered in dried mud; the tangled mass of roots left intact. Next to it is a yard crowded with huge limestone rocks. The rocks are not sculpted or machined, but left in their natural state, smoothed and furrowed by water. The Chinese revere these objects for their great age, reflecting the shaping effects of nature. These pieces are destined for public gardens or large civic spaces.

I am oddly calm about being lost. I feel I can belong here, where nothing is familiar. It fits the feeling of being in a world that has become foreign. It is good to be out of the city. Rows of tall Australian paper-bark trees planted either side of the road provide shade for straggling pedestrians carrying baskets dangled from either end of shoulder poles, loaded with grass, for pig-fodder, or for fuel. Old men perch on their haunches in brown fields, watching over cows dragging nose ropes along while picking at stubble. In the villages, everything is in a state of transformation. Brick homes under construction rise three storeys above crumbling mud-brick cottages. Vines and mould encroach on cement brick walls bearing

The woman beside me signals when it is time to get off the bus. She puts me on another bus going the opposite direction, directly east. The bus takes a new highway over hilly country covered in hectares of eucalypt plantations. The gum trees are very tall and very straight, but by the thinness of their trunks I judge they are only a few years old. In another year they will be harvested and milled into furniture veneer.

I arrive at Cuiheng Village in the afternoon, a complex of small grey brick buildings, with classic flying eaves, arranged around a courtyard. Sun Yat Sen slept upstairs on a four-poster bed in a room along the balcony. An inkstone and brush lie ready on a desk in a room adjoining the bedroom. Downstairs, I imagine two young men pushing the wooden arms of a mill, grinding soy beans into powder for milk and tofu, and silk-clad women shuffling on bound feet along the stone alley past a walled orchard to the granary. Behind black-lacquered wooden bars, a prisoner watches an old man repair a winnowing machine.

In the Ancestral Hall, a papier-mache Huang Di, the Yellow God, sits on the altar surrounded by plastic food offerings. Strings of fire crackers hang from the rafters. I want to know how these Taoist ritual items relate to the philosophy of Taoism. I remember years ago, when studying modern history at high school, reading that the religion of the Chinese was a mirror of their bureaucracy. I can see the resemblance of Huang Di to the emperors, with their operatic face make-up, elaborate head gear and their fabulous embroidered silk robes, but I have to believe there is something more than just an organized hierarchy, in a culture which produced the wisdom of Confucius, the cosmology Taoism and the intriguing I Ching.

Both Nan and Caitlin took photos here. In the extensive gardens outside the museum, I look for the tree under which Caitlin was sitting when Nan photographed her on a low circular wall. This is the only picture in Zhuhai where she is in the foreground. I take a photo of the empty place, with the long dragon-hedge she admired in
the background. As I follow the trail of the photographic images, the wisps of memories start to come alive.

Before catching the bus back to town, I walk down a narrow tree-lined side-street to the village outside the museum. Side lanes branch into narrow alleys, into the real, old China I would love to explore. I would like to see life in the back lanes or even inside the homes. Locals sitting in groups outside corner shops seem friendly, but I am too timid to enter.

My time in Zhuhai is coming to an end, but I want to stay longer. I am excited by China; excited that Kim is coming. I think I should extend my time as there is no pressing reason to return to Australia. I enquire about working as a volunteer in the Language School, for which free accommodation is provided in exchange for four hours of conversation per day. I am given an appointment with the Head of School, an American woman called Mary who had founded the school with her Chinese husband.

I spend a few evenings in the dim, smoky internet bar, drinking beer and writing long emails. One night while walking along Ning Xi Road, I see a crowd silhouetted against the lights of the gas station. I am apprehensive, seeing the figures are moving with their arms raised as if in a riot. It turns out that they are couples dancing in the dark in the carpark outside the post office; fox-trotting to waltzy music blaring from a portable player on the footpath. A smaller group is moving very slowly to classical Chinese flute music, like a kind of tai chi dancing. I sit on a low wall and watch for a while, barely able to believe what I am seeing.

It is common to see women arm in arm, or teenage girls holding hands, or males of any age walking along with their arms around each other, but displays of affection between the opposite sexes are rare. Going out for lunch, I see the old man and the boy wearing big grins outside the Moslem restaurant. They are looking across the car-park at two of my classmates on a park bench. Rick, the Philadelphian, is leaning to kiss the Mongolian girl who is sitting on his lap. She leans back to avoid his lips but keeps smiling at his eyes. A few other passers-by stop to look. The boy and the old man exchange happy looks with me as I pass.
Christmas day falls on the Monday of my last week at the school. It is not a holiday in China; I am relieved to escape the agony of the Christmas season and the all-pervading carols that, since the accident, are emotionally overwhelming. A verse of *Silent Night* will have me sobbing; even the two words: *silent night*.

Kim arrives in Hong Kong on Wednesday, and we plan to meet on Friday, after my course finishes. Neither of us has come up with a plan for the ten days we will spend together. I am not sure why, but Kim is reluctant to come to Zhuhai. Perhaps because Caitlin was here.

On the last morning, I pack all my things ready to leave. On the way to school, I stop at the Moslem restaurant for breakfast. Over the last four weeks I have lost my appetite for Chinese food. The food at the school, like all institutional food, became very bland after a week. I am craving western food. This morning the boy is not there. One of the men who make the noodles takes my order.

“Boy at school?” I ask in my halting Chinese.

“Sleeping,” the fellow says, tilting his head sideways on his two hands held together.

“Is he your son?”

“Di di.” Little brother.

He points to the old man who is sitting at the back table threading meat on skewers.

“Baba,” he says. Father.

The old man smiles and starts to enumerate his sons: the two young men in their twenties who pull noodle dough outside the front of the restaurant, then the two younger boys whom I thought were grandchildren, and another little one about two years old standing beside the old man, holding his trouser leg.

“Wu hai zi,” the father says, holding up five fingers. Five sons. He smiles with terrific pride.

A young woman wearing a black lace mantle draped over her hair comes bustling through from the street to the kitchen, and soon I hear the sizzle of tomatoes landing in hot oil. She has been called in to cook for me. I am left wondering how this family works in terms of the one child policy. It dawns on me that the boy never goes to school.
Later in the morning, an American teacher at the language school asks me to join a class she is giving on the topic of Australia. The Chinese students have many questions about immigration and study in Australia. Then a surprise question.

“Do they have a one-child policy in Australia?” a young man asks.

“No.”

“You mean you can have as many children as you like?”

“Yes,” I say. “But the birthrate is low. People don’t want to have children.”

“Why?”

“Young people value their freedom. Our government pays people to have children.”

“Really?”

I nod a few times, and start to find it incredulous myself. I remember that, in the so called Golden Age of Rome, the Emperor Augustus paid the citizens to have children.

“Five thousand Australian dollars for each child, thirty thousand yuan,” I say. Equivalent to two years low-paid work in China.

At lunch time I pluck up the courage for one more challenge: to have my hair cut at the carpark hairdresser. There are several modern salons in the shopping centre, but I’m intrigued by this set-up. A lad with feathered orange hair sits me on a stool and wraps me in the orange cloak. Holding a pair of scissors up, he gives me a quizzical look.

“Yi dian dian,” I say. A little.

“Hao de, Hao de,” he says. Good, good.

He applies intense interest to my hair, carefully combing and snipping. A few students gather around to watch, all with exotic plumes of colour in their black hair. A guy with a broom sweeps the cuttings into the gutter where the hair has collected in deep drifts. While my hair is being cut, the four blind musicians walk by in single file, each holding the shirt tale of the one in front. The first one holds on to the long plait of a teenage girl who is leading them. I am a bit worried that I will be ripped off by the hairdresser, having not asked
the price beforehand. But like most of my fears in China, it is unfounded. The haircut is free because it is a training school.

In the afternoon, I take my luggage to the school, once again lugging it up the stairs to the first floor. I have an appointment with Mary, the head of the school, about the prospect of volunteer work. In the staff room, Mary stands up from her desk and leans against the wall with one hand pushing her hair back while she collects her thoughts.

“We decided against,” she says.

My face drops.

“It wouldn’t be good for the other volunteers who are not native speakers,” she says, “because the students will want to see you and not them.”

My mouth tightens in disbelief.

“But we would like to offer you a paid teacher job.”

I blink several times.

The previous week she had invited our class to apply for jobs at the new school they are opening in Hangzhou, near Shanghai.

“I’m not ready to work full time at the moment,” I say.

I have never had a professional job, and do not feel competent. I walk up to my classroom feeling disappointed, but also happy to be free to take up other options. Maybe in my travels with Kim, I will find a place to spend more time, writing and studying.

Jenny suggests we go to the rooftop for my last moderation session, a large student common with tables and chairs, where we have enjoyed a few classes in the winter sun.

“You will be a good teacher,” she says, “because you can control every person in the class.”


“I enjoyed having you in the class.”

“Really?”

“I especially liked reading your journal.”

“Why?” I laugh.

“I have a question for you. What is a make-over?”

“It means making an improvement to your appearance.”

“Do you need to?”

“I couldn’t believe how terrible I looked on that video.”
“No,” she says.
“They told me I can’t work as a volunteer here.”
“Why not?”
“Because I’m a foreigner.”
“What?”
“I’m disappointed. I’d like to stay.”
“I would like you to stay too,” she smiles. “One hundred percent.”

I hand my keys back to Mei Ling and take my leave, wheeling my bag across the plaza to hail a taxi.

“Macau,” I say to the driver.
“Bu zhi dao,” he says. Do not know.
“Macau, Macau,” I say, pointing ahead, my voice raised.
He shrugs, but drives ahead.

Before we reach the CBD, he pulls over to the curb to make a phone call, enraging me further. Then he turns to the back and hands me the phone.

“Where do you want to go?” I am astonished to hear a female voice ask in English.

“Macau.”

“Aomen,” she says. The Chinese name for Macau.

The driver talks on the phone again and then takes off, but he turns right before we reach the square where I want to get out.

“Ting,” I say, stop, but he ignores me.

I know he will drive around to the bus station under the border-crossing. This will cost me only another ten yuan, less than two Australian dollars, but I’m furious, swearing under my breath. When he pulls up in the underground, I pay him and I find my way up to the surface through a network of escalators. Another cranky foreigner.

The Immigration Hall is packed with black-haired people waiting to cross into Macau. Only a few tall Westerners poke out from the thousands queuing.

“I’m on a bus. I’ll be there soon,” Kim says when I ring.

“How can you arrive in a strange city and use a bus straight away?”

“Easy.”
I walk through customs, pass through the x-ray gates. A narrow water-course, which must be a canal marking the border, passes underneath the walkway. Then another queue at the arrivals desk. Kim is waiting at the exit point, looking completely unstressed.

“Hey Ma!”

I have been to Macau before. It was thirty years ago accompanying my father on a business trip to Hong Kong. He and I caught the hydrofoil across for a day-trip. I was shocked by the seediness of the seven-storey casino with its reeking carpet covered in cigarette burns. I remember the ruins of a magnificent stone cathedral on a flight of stone steps. A mixture of fear and curiosity stirred me at the A Ma Temple, also reeking, from the smouldering yellow coils of incense hanging from the rafters.

After breakfast in the morning, Kim and I find our way over the top of the peninsular, wandering through convoluted lanes of terraced houses and small shops selling fresh-fried bread sticks and warm custard tarts. At the top of the peninsular, pastel-coloured colonial mansions in avenues of plane trees are buzzing with a dozen wedding parties. Smiling brides surrounded in clouds of satin and tulle pose for photographers.

Down on the promenade, crowds of tourists converge outside the Temple. It was built fifty years before the Portuguese set up a base here in 1557. Today, the locals still pay homage to the girl for whom this temple was built. Born ad960 at the coastal town of Putian, in Fujian province, she was a girl of unusual intelligence, famous for being able to predict the weather. As she grew up, she used this unusual power to save the lives of many fishermen. Her healing powers drew pilgrims from afar. Hundreds of temples dedicated to her memory have been built all along the South China Sea. Five hundred years after her death, the A Ma Temple was built on the sheltered side of the rocky Aomen peninsular.

Tourists pose for each other before the dusty vermilion moon gate. Standing tall with chins slightly elevated, whole families gaze beyond the camera to the sky, adopting the stylized heroic pose seen in communist propaganda posters. Inside, packets of crimson incense and bundles of spirit money are for sale in small booths.
Worshippers light incense sticks at oil lamps set on tall chrome stands and plant the incense in ritual sand boxes. An elderly woman throws handfuls of spirit money into a large ceramic paper-burner with a chimney. She fans the notes out like a card player and then casts them into the flames.

Inside the main hall, food offerings fill a long bench before the altar; plates of biscuits, apples and oranges. A small, smoked pig and a skinned rabbit lie stretched on a tray in the centre. The Goddess, Guan Yin, sits cross-legged in embroidered silk robes. Two electric candles either side of her glow inside pink lotus lanterns. Several women bring large platters of folded paper offerings, large pineapple-shaped and star-shaped objects formed from modules of folded spirit money. When set on fire, they will burn slowly and evenly from the bottom to the top.

“We should light incense for Caitlin,” I suggest.

“I think she’d prefer money,” Kim says.

We buy a packet of spirit money from a monk sitting behind the large old wooden counter and, by gesticulating, I ask him to help fold it. He demonstrates fold by fold, making several until we get it right. A boy monk comes along and hangs an arm over the older one’s shoulder, and then he shows us another method of folding. They help us fill a plastic bag with the folded paper and we take it outside to a paper-burner. Kim and I take photos of each other throwing money into the flames.

In the afternoon we climb up the sixty-six stone steps to the ruins of St Paul’s Cathedral, and sit for hours watching the peaceful sunset light up the sandstone carvings on the façade. Built at the end of the sixteenth century, all but the façade was destroyed by a typhoon in 1875. I even enjoy the romantic mood of the tourists: the happiness and pleasure they share in each other’s company.

Gradually Kim and I make a travel plan. We decide to fly to Guilin, to keep true to Nan and Caitlin’s journey. From there, we will fly south to the island of Hainan, where Kim is keen to enjoy the beach, and I am interested in the minority culture. I convince her that we can buy cheap air tickets from the agency in Zhuhai where my teacher had taken me to inquire about prices. In China, unlike in the West, air tickets are discounted in the week before the flight.
On New Year’s Eve, we cross the border to Zhuhai. I am very excited about taking Kim to my favourite places, but I control my enthusiasm so as not to dampen hers. We visit the school and then go the travel agent, where I am relieved to purchase air tickets without any language problems. In the evening, at the Moslem restaurant, the boy and father greet us warmly.

“Ni nu er?” the father asks. Your daughter?
I nod with a smile.
I wonder if Kim will see what I see and value in the boy, a face like Caitlin’s with flawless rosy cheeks and dark melting eyes.
He brings us the menu and I order eight rou skewers.
“Ba ge?” He holds up eight fingers.
“Ba ge,” I nod. Eight sticks.
I order a cucumber salad, and a dish of fried eggs and tomatoes.
“Yi ge zhi ge, yi ge zhi ge,” I say, pointing them out on the menu.
“What did you say?” Kim laughs, amazed to hear me speak Chinese.
“One of this and one of this.”
He repeats the words, and looks at us.
After we have eaten, I ask him his name.
“Sunni,” he says.
“Can you write it?” I hand him my notebook and a pen.
He sits down and applies his full concentration to the task of writing.
“He’s written in Arabic,” Kim says.
We are both amazed.
“Can you write in Chinese?” I ask.
He writes two Chinese characters with great deliberation.
“What a gorgeous boy,” Kim says.
“Like Caitlin, do you think?”
She smiles sadly.
“He’s one of five brothers.”
“What about the one child policy?”
“It means he doesn’t have the right go to school. It’s incredible that he can read or write at all.”

In the morning we take the first of the three flights which will bring us back to Zhuhai. Beginning with a two-hour flight to Guilin in the north of the neighbouring province of Guangxi. Then three days later, a flight to the island of Hainan, the southernmost province where we hope to enjoy some tropical winter sunshine before returning to Zhuhai in time for Kim’s connection back to Sydney.
The Most Beautiful Place in the World

A cold change has swept across the south of China during the short flight to Guilin. We book a hotel at the airport desk, where a girl in an immaculate hot pink suit persuades us to buy tickets for the river tour.

“Maybe we can buy cheaper tickets tomorrow,” I say.
“Only one tour,” the girl insists.
“Nan said we must,” Kim says.
“You’re right,” I say, and we buy the tickets.

We wake before dawn and are in the hotel lobby by 8am. A few mini-buses arrive, but each one waves us away. I am convinced we have been ripped off. My mood worsens with each minute.

“We could have gone for breakfast,” I complain. “I can’t function until I’ve eaten.”

“Sit here,” Kim says. “I’ll find something.”

She returns a minute later with a plastic bag full of hot boazi, steamed buns. A mini-bus collects us and drives through Guilin, picking up other tourists. The famed natural beauty, which flicks past between concrete tenements, is advertised in huge photographic images printed on plastic banners stretched across the fronts of buildings. The massive limestone towers sprout out of the ground like random monolithic seeds. As we bump along, the suburbs blur into the condensation on the windows. A tour guide at the front of the bus cracks jokes in English through a megaphone, but only makes me more irritated.

Three or four busloads of tourists arrive at the river at the same time. Guides urge us to hurry as we are channelled into a building lined with souvenir stalls. We rush through the turnstiles to the wharf where ferries moored in rows at the bottom of ancient stone steps. The wharf scene jolts me, jarring like a hand-held camera. It is the same scene as in Caitlin’s China album.

I have scrutinized every photo with great intensity, as if I something would emerge if I looked closely enough. At the same time, I chastised myself for not having shown enough interest at the
time of Caitlin's journey. Neurosis of failure, Freud calls it, the continuous rehashing of the past. A deeper memory unfolds as we rush down the steps: sitting with Caitlin and looking at the photo of the wharf scene.

“Did anyone help Nan with her bag?” I had asked her.

“The guide helped her,” Caitlin said.

Now, marshalled by attendants, we clamber over gangplanks across the back decks to the furthest boat, which fills quickly and casts off down the Li Jiang. The embarkation is an exercise in crowd control carried out with military precision. We slot in along one of the two rows of banquet tables inside the cabin as the engine begins to churn.

The ferry glides into an ancient wilderness under a thick brow of cloud. Sunbeams cut shadows across the shoulders of the pock-faced limestone towers standing like pilgrim figures crowding the banks back to the horizon. They were formed by the same tectonic collision that caused the Himalaya uplift eighty million years ago, and now their reflections loop away in the dark-green bow waves.

The Li Jiang is linked to the Yangtze River by the Ling Canal, said to be the oldest canal in the world. It was built between 234BC and 214BC by the first Emperor, Qin Shihuang. Over the millennia the Li Jiang has been part of the China’s extensive inland water transport system. Even today, some villages along the shores can only be reached by boat. In the clear water, strands of thick weed string out over pebbles visible on the bottom. I had expected the rivers in China to be polluted. In Caitlin's photos the Li Jiang was brown.

“They said it was because of rain,” she had explained.

“I bet they always say that.” I shrink to remember what I said.

In the deep green bends, fishermen on bamboo rafts set nets in the strong currents under the cliffs. Locals wash clothes at the bottom of steps winding down from bamboo groves. We have arrived in old China, a place I thought no longer existed. The river is transporting us into the past. Kim and I climb a ladder to the top deck where specks of sleet eddying down in the cold air melt on our clothing. Over a loudspeaker, a Chinese voice names each passing mountain, relating folktales in both Chinese and English. I spot Apple
Mountain ahead, but miss the story which involves Grandfather Mountain. The word, *ping guo*, apple, literally means peace fruit, and in my mind, it means Caitlin; fresh and beautiful.

“My battery’s flat,” I tell Kim.

“Use my camera,” she says, but by the time I’ve worked out how to use it we have rounded a corner and the Apple Mountain has gone.

“I’m going down,” Kim says. “It’s freezing.”

Steam from the sizzling cooking oil wafts up from the open kitchen on the bottom deck. A bowl of hot peanuts arrives, and a plate of battered, deep-fried crabs. I accept a glass of bronze-coloured wine and try one of the crabs.

“Ee-oo,” Kim says, but she puts one on her hand and photographs it.

Outside on the water, a man on a long bamboo raft approaches and attaches the raft to our boat. He climbs up to the window, clinging with the fingers of one hand, his face braced to the window. His bare chest and back are covered in red blotches from the cold. Everybody ignores him as he waives a large plastic jade Guan Yin, the Buddha of China.

At Yangshuo we squeeze through the press of street vendors and hawkers and find a hotel in a row of grey brick terraces on a cobbled side-street. Two teenage girls who speak no English show us a room which has clean white doonas, air-conditioning and a new en-suite. We leave our bags and set off to explore the back streets.

Heavy clouds have darkened the town. Squalls of cold wind blow litter against the legs of pedestrians streaming along the street. Old people gather around small fires on the pavement, squatting on their haunches or perched on stools. Several schools along the road advertise lessons in English, Chinese and Tai Chi. We turn back when the street squeezes between two cliffs, the air swirling with the grit from the construction sites beyond.

In the evening we order Beer Fish at a restaurant where the waitress places a small charcoal brazier on the floor beside our table. She uses a pair of brass tongs to add pieces of charcoal, which is made from sticks which have been pre-burnt. This beautiful smokeless fire stimulates a new area of interest for me, into the
economy of energy. I wonder how this charcoal is made, and how much it costs. The next morning, we decide to visit Yulong Qiao, Meeting Dragon Bridge, built in 1412 during the Ming Dynasty.

The ticket-seller at the bus station cannot understand my Chinese, so I point out the name on a map. Two girls sitting behind us on the bus are eating fried noodles from a plastic bag, each with a pair of disposable chopsticks. They giggle when I try to converse with them. We stop at Baisha, a large town on the main road to Guilin. Locals carrying produce on shoulder-poles walk towards a market with baskets of oranges or stacked lettuce leaves and bok choy on circular bamboo trays. They keep their shoulders still by swivelling their hips, producing a gliding gait that gives the baskets a smooth ride. Our bus turns off the highway, and drops us at a side-road a few kilometres out of town.

At the corner, a teenage girl with red cheeks and a single thick plait is sitting on a motorbike under a large sign bearing a faded and torn picture of the bridge.

“Dragon Bridge,” she says in English and points down the side track.

“She was in Baisha,” Kim says.

“Really?”

“She spoke to the two girls behind us through the window.”

A layer of high white cloud bleaches colour from the landscape. The dust is blowing across stubbled paddy fields from a rim of limestone towers. We set off on foot past a few mud-brick houses at the edge of the road. Dirty white ducks make circles in a pond at the side of a house where an old couple sit on steps playing with a toddler. Two youths stare at Kim, one with his arm dangling around the shoulder of the other. We walk across the desiccated field to the next village where the road takes several right-angle turns through lanes bordered by mud-brick houses. Open doors reveal groups of locals watching television or playing cards, with chickens and children skirmishing through to rear courtyards. Pop music from a ghetto-blaster blares over the black-tiled rooftops.

The streets are designed like mazes, with many T-junctions but no cross streets, in order to confuse bad spirits which can only travel in straight lines. The girl on the motorbike is waiting on a
corner. She signals us to turn right. As foreigners, we would have been considered on a par with ghosts in traditional times.

“Xie xie,” thanks, I say as we go by.

The girl nods without smiling. Piles of shredded red paper litter the laneway, the debris from recently exploded firecrackers; another major method of deflecting ghosts who may trouble weddings or hang around causing sickness.

At the end of the street, a small pavilion looks over the languid green Meeting Dragon River. Leafless cedars frame the five-hundred-year-old bridge, a semi-circular arch which draws everything to its centre in its perfection of geometry. A flurry of children chase each other over upended stone blocks along the bank.

“One of those kids whacked my leg,” Kim laughs.

We follow a small horse loaded with bricks up to the top of the arch. Foot traffic has worn grooves in the large slabs of stone layered in steps. Two stone ramps for wheeled traffic run up each side. We buy pickled melon from an old man at the top. He fishes out two peeled zucchinis from a large glass jar swirling with red flecks of chili, piercing each one with a bamboo skewer. We lean forward to drip the sweet peppery brine. Half-a-dozen men leaning against the stone balustrade smoke as they watch the passers-by: a woman wheeling a bicycle, a young fellow bracing his whole body against a motor bike to push it over the arch, a girl herding an ox which she steers from behind by hitting its flank with the flat side of a sickle.

“Qu, qu,” she encourages the ox.

When we turn back, the girl with the red cheeks is waiting at the bottom of the bridge, smiling now, with her arm around another girl.

“Nimen yao mo tuo?” she asks.

“Do we want a motor-bike?” I translate.

“Okay,” Kim nods, “my ankles are sore.”

The girl approaches a group of people in the laneway. She pats the seat of a motor bike and the guy sitting astride nods.


“Twenty-five,” he says.
Kim climbs on behind and I lever myself behind her. I worry he will go too fast, but he takes care, driving slowly along the bumpy road. Once we are on the tar, the smooth ride and the gentle breeze give me a great sense of peace as if we are flying.

People from all over the world come to Yangshuo. The South of China has a tropical climate: wet in summer, dry in winter, which means the river is high during the peak tourist season, when over two hundred boats arrive at Yangshuo every day. The riverfront concourse is layered in two or three levels, where the ferries can pull in at various points, depending on the depth of the water. Stepping stones at regular intervals provide access to the river for locals to wash clothing.

As the passengers alight, they enter the town between rows of stalls selling handcrafts. They walk from the river along West Street, a narrow lane lined with souvenir shops, restaurants, and disco bars, to the bus station where buses return to Guilin every ten minutes. Caitlin had showed me her photos of the magnificent peaked landscape along the river which I had envisaged as a lake. I don’t remember her mentioning Yangshuo, but in her album there are a few photos she had taken from the ferry when it docked here.

Many travellers stay in Yangshuo to enjoy bike-riding in the countryside, bamboo rafting or rock-climbing. Others stay longer to teach English or to study Tai Chi. A few Westerners have married Chinese girls and opened restaurants or bars. Hundreds of Chinese students come from the cities to study at one of the fourteen private English schools in town. By far the bulk of visitors are Chinese tourists who come for the scenery, and for the Western-style cafes. West Street gets its name from its east-west orientation but it is a fitting name reflecting the concentration of Western cafés and restaurants catering to backpackers. It is like a reverse Chinatown; Westertown in China.

That night Kim and I join the press of tourists in West Street and have pizza at Drifters Café.

“I could be comfortable here,” I say. “I’ve been thinking I’ll come back after Hainan.”

“Really?”
“I’m too old for total immersion. If Western food is available, I can be more comfortable.

“Too many tourists,” she comments.

“I can write here,” I say. “And study Chinese.”

The next day at Panda Travel, a small agency near our hotel, I have my return ticket to Sydney re-scheduled to allow me another twenty weeks in China, the limit of my visa

Kim and I spend another day visiting local sites before taking a bus to Guilin for the flight to Hainan Island, the southernmost Province in China, where we enjoy the warmth of tropical sunshine.

The last night we were together, I remember speeding along the dark freeway from the airport back to Zhuhai. Kim and I were the only passengers in a new coach. The only other vehicle on the road was far ahead, but the driver of our bus blasted the horn as we gained on it. I suddenly understood the language of Chinese traffic: Don’t move sideways, I am passing.

Kim and tell each other how much we have enjoyed travelling together, but I can tell she misses Daniel. I feel bereft after farewelling her on the ferry to Hong Kong, and roam around the markets of Gongbei as if lost. I sit near a man playing mournful tunes on an Er Hu, and find myself following him after the police move him on.

That night, I return to Guilin on an overnight sleeper-bus. Certainly a cheap travel option, but not a comfortable one. The bus has two rows of double-storey beds. Twenty-four passengers, many of whom do not sleep but talk loud and long into the night. That, coupled with the jerky driving and swaying suspension and the generous use of the air-horn, makes it almost impossible to sleep. The bus passes through Yangshuo in the pre-dawn hour, but I want to take the river tour again, so I travel another hour to Guilin.

Hawkers waiting at the bus station hustle me to buy a ticket for the river tour. I negotiate a price with a female hawker and follow her to an adjacent office where she writes a receipt, then hands me a mobile phone.

“You want river tour?” a man on the other end inquires. “Ten thirty. My name is Mike. I see you at bus station.”
I buy a large savoury pancake made on the spot by a street vendor cooking on a large hot plate, and a warm soy milk drink vacu-sealed in a plastic cup. I walk along the main boulevard, Zhongshan Lu, Middle Mountain Road, named after Sun Yat Sen. Steps down beside a bridge take me to a small river lined with stone walls and parks. A pathway weaves around gardens bordering on the water, where I come across groups practising traditional fan-dancing or progressive ballroom. A group dance with ping-pong bats and balls. Another group play harmonicas plugged into small speakers strapped around their waists.

I sit on a wall and open a writing workbook I had bought in Zhuhai. Disney characters illustrating Chinese words: Mickey Mouse jumps, Minnie walks, Donald Duck waves. A woman nearby comes over to watch me write. She reads the words aloud, excited and laughing.

“Ni shuo,” she says. You say.

Together, we read all the words in the book, with her correcting my pronunciation.

By eleven-thirty at the rail station, I am agitated. Mike is an hour late. The woman who sold me the ticket is sitting unconcerned, knitting in her office. Hawkers crowd around hassling me to buy tickets. They disperse when I yell the word no, leaving me standing alone inside an empty circle. The hawkers stand back, watching me carefully. Mike arrives with the jacket of his crumpled suit flapping.

“Hello, hello, hello,” he says. “Come with me.”

He stands out from the multitude in his sunglasses and a white shirt. I run to keep up as he rushes around, weaving between idling buses. He stops to survey the scene with his hands on his hips.

“What are you looking for?” I ask.

He ignores me and rushes out to the street where he hails a taxi. Nobody objects to the young guy who jumps in the front seat. I fold a massive temper in my arms and glare out the window.

“Where are you from?” Mike asks.

“Australia.”

“Ah, my brother at Melbourne,” he says. “How long you in China?”
"Excuse me?“ he asks softly. “How long you in China?“

“Where are we going? We’ve missed the boat."

“Don't worry,” he says. “Which city you from?"

Fifteen minutes through the traffic, the taxi pulls over. Mike takes my bag and ushers me onto a small crowded bus. One of the passengers moves over to make room.

“Keep in touch by phone,” Mike calls from the open door, waving and smiling from the curb as the bus drives away.

I am speechless. I have been abandoned. What phone? Maybe this is it. I will never be seen or heard of again. But my mood is too cranky to allow panic. I search for the sun to orientate myself. We have already crossed the river to the east and are traveling south; at least the right direction. After several detours around freeway construction sites, the bus turns into a tree-lined side road with paddy fields on both sides.

As we crawl along behind an old truck overloaded with bricks, I calm down a little. Pedestrians and bicycles string along the road. A few passengers alight at every village until only one other passenger is left. The bus pulls up in a dusty village square where the driver turns off the engine, lights a cigarette and climbs out of his seat. I get up to leave but the other passenger waves me back. It is the lad from the taxi. He must be my tour-guide. Again my fury is ignited. Everyone except me seems to know what I am doing. When the driver finishes smoking, he takes us around the corner to the river.

The guide, who is about eighteen with hair cut in the feathery bird fashion, points me to the empty tables of an outdoor restaurant, but I ignore him and wander over to the river. There is no sign of the ferry, only a mass of bamboo rafts criss-crossing the bank at the bottom of the steps. The deep water in the bend of the river reflects the leaf-green of the steeply wooded slope on the opposite bank. A circle of blue sky opens, letting in a few beams of warm sunlight. Several women sitting on the bank wander over with small bags of mandarins and peanuts. I buy a bag of peanuts and sit on the wall cracking and eating while each of the women urge me to buy more. The hands of the women are fibrous and crusty like the peanut
shells. One of the women is wearing a brass bangle with Chinese words etched on it.

“Shen me shuo?” What does this say? I ask.

The woman takes it off and hands it to me. The bangle is crafted from a flat piece of metal formed into a circle, the two coiled ends clasp it like a pair of hands.

“Shi kwai,” she says. Ten Yuan. “Yao, bu yao?” she asks. Want, not want?

The tour-guide walks over from the restaurant and hands me a mobile phone.

“Would you like eggs and tomatoes for lunch?” It’s Mike's voice.

Incredible, I think. He even seems to know my favourite food. I pay the woman for the bangle and follow the lad over to the restaurant. The guide dines with me, but he keeps quiet.

“What time is the boat?” I ask, pointing to my watch.

A slight flash of recognition disturbs his eyes, but he says nothing. After lunch, I follow him down the steps to the river and we climb across the rafts onto one of the small local passenger boats: a long narrow vessel made of steel, with a low front deck and a long window-lined cabin. The driver offers me a cigarette and ushers me down a few steps to the cabin. There are no other passengers, only a portrait of Mao at the back, one corner flapping over his unruffled brow. I am the only passenger on this boat.

Again I am carried along by this fast-flowing river, through the forest of limestone towers crowding the shores. The hundreds of peaks are like volcanoes covered in cropped shrubs, like a landscape artist's impression of prehistory. Black streaks of mould and dark cavities blotch the cliff faces. Fresh rock falls expose fossilized sediments locked away eons ago. In the extensive caves inside these mountains implements from the Stone Age have been found. In 1987, the remains of fourteen men were discovered buried in soil dumped by floods six thousand years ago.

I sit on a small stool on the front deck, close to the water. Time peels away from me as the boat rushes along with the current. A woman poling a bamboo raft across the river intercepts our boat. She and the driver conduct a fiery exchange as she flings a pair of
squawking cormorants onto the deck. The driver attaches the two birds to the boat using the length of rope that ties them loosely together by the legs. The birds wrap their webbed feet around the low rail on the edge of the deck and turn their heads into the wind. At night, these birds are used in a traditional method of fishing, diving for fish under lantern light. A ring around the neck stops the fish from being swallowed, allowing it to be retrieved by the fisherman. I sit with the birds and admire their jade eyes, the same colour as the river. Apple Mountain comes into view, but disappears just as quickly as we sweep around a bend.

As we approach the village of Yangdi, where a few large ferries are moored among fishing boats and rafts, the driver signals me to go inside the cabin. I had thought I was on a private tour, but now I realize I am on a shonky tour. The big ferries returning upstream from Yangshuo are empty of passengers. The workers on board are cleaning, using hoses to scrub the decks. On the back decks, the cooks shampoo their hair and hose themselves under torrents of water. I spot a couple of Europeans walking along a track on the bank and I know that, next time, I will come down the river on foot.

At Xingping, the driver parks the boat on a pebbled bank, anchoring it with a bamboo pole slotted into a socket through the deck. The driver shows me a twenty-yuan note and points upstream. It is the scene on the money: the classic roller-coaster hills etched in brown, a fisherman in a pointed hat punting a raft across the river. I take a photo of the guide holding one of the notes. A few handcrafts are for sale at a row of stalls set on the grassy bank. I am astonished to see my boat-driver inside one of the tents playing solitaire on a computer. I lie on the grass in the warm sunshine, feeling tired but satisfied.

Back on boat, the engine seems to have failed. After three attempts at ignition, the driver throws up his hands. He takes the bamboo pole up to the bow, and poles us across the river, walking the whole length of the boat as he pushes, then returning to the front to push again. He hums loudly, smiling between the two worlds; between the old and the new. I too, feel I am leaving my own history behind as I enter another.
At the top of stairs on the opposite bank, a line of tourists pose for photos, holding up twenty-yuan notes. My guide ushers me into a taxi parked further on, the only vehicle in sight. Mike has all the links in place. We speed along the local roads to Yangshuo, dodging weaving motorbikes, overloaded bike carts and dawdling bullocks. The driver swerves to avoid other cars which frequently approach head on.

“I know a good hotel in Yangshuo.” Mike is on the phone again.

But I know where I want to stay. When we arrive, I go straight to Panda Travel and negotiate a rate for a months’ stay. My room is on the third floor, at the top, with a view looking over rooftops to the peaks beyond the river.
Drifters Café

Every morning I have Breakfast C at Drifters: eggs on toast, yoghurt with fruit, fresh-squeezed orange juice and brewed coffee from Yunan. The three waitresses, all local village girls, are eager to practise their English and help me with my Chinese. I spend several hours here every morning, writing and keeping warm. The plaster walls are covered in signatures and messages written by travellers over the years. Hundreds of tickets and docketts bearing hand-written notes are tacked on the wall posts. Chinese tourists often photograph each other with the graffiti wall as a backdrop.

Melinda, Amy and Moyan become my friends very quickly. They live nearby in a dormitory provided by the café.

“I was here last week,” I say. “With my daughter.”

I show them photos in the camera: two pictures of a guy topping up the charcoal.

“Our boss,” they laugh.

They are expected to study English when the café is not busy and value having me there to practise speaking. Moyan is the youngest and the most outgoing. She has large round eyes and full lips, like Caitlin.

“How much you think these shoes?” she asks, showing me her joggers.

“One hundred,” I say.

“More than three hundred,” she says.

Moyan talks about how much she misses the carefree life of the village, catching frogs and collecting wildflowers.

“I really want go Hong Kong,” she says.

I show them how to use the camera, and they pose in front of the graffiti wall like the tourists do. When I see a picture of my own face surrounded by the smiling Chinese girls, I recall the shot in Caitlin’s album, taken with two Chinese girls in Shanghai. I get the strange feeling that I am living her life, but instead of the fresh promise of youth, there is the faded eyes and weary smile of age.

“Can I see your room?” Moyan asks one day.
I take her during the lunch break.
“Two-eighty a week.”
“Two-hundred and eighty?” she asks. “Too much.”

The girls earn one hundred and twenty yuan a week, working twelve hour days, with two days off per month. They find it hard to understand how I can spend twenty yuan on breakfast, equivalent to one day’s pay. In Western terms, twenty yuan is the price of a cappuccino.

Another day Moyan invites me to see their dorm in a narrow lane off West Street. The lane is barely wide enough for two people to walk alongside each other. Several of the houses in this area are from the pre-tourist era. One is a barn-sized mud-brick place with open double doors. At the back, a ladder goes up to an open loft. An old couple in heavy coats stoop over a wok on the floor.

The girl's dorm is a two-storey unpainted cement-rendered building. The bottom floor is dark and empty, with a bathroom under the stairs. Upstairs Amy and Melinda share a room, and Moyan shares the other room with the two female kitchen staff. The beds are pine bunks wrapped in pink mosquito nets. Each girl's belongings are in small piles against the wall on their bunks. Their clothes are on hangers hooked on bamboo rods across the back of their beds. There are no mattresses, just woven bamboo mats, identical to the ones my mother used to bring to the beach when I was young, with red binding around the edges.

“I must wash jacket,” Moyan says. “Do you mind?”

She puts the jacket in a bucket and we go down the lane to the riverside promenade, and out along the concrete stepping-stones to the water. Although the river is still gushing, it has shrunk to a narrow stream in the middle of a vast bed of pebbles. Long weeds below the surface float out in the clear torrent. A few women washing clothes smile when we arrive. Some use bars of soap, but others use powder in plastic dispensers. Moyan lays the padded nylon jacket on the cement and scrubs the cuffs and collar with a brush.
When she finishes washing we return to the dorm and go up to the roof where she hangs the jacket. We sit and chat while she works on a pair of slippers she is crocheting.

“Foreign people are different from Chinese,” she says.

“How?”

“They tall. We Chinese girl short,” she says. “Foreigners have big blue eyes.”

“Do you want a foreign boyfriend?”

“Of course not. I’m Chinese girl. I want Chinese boy.”

“When will you get one?”

“Not for long time. I want stay with my mother,” she laughs.

“My father tell me, Don’t choose for look only. Pick a kind heart.”

“We have two days free every month,” Moyan says. “I go my hometown. I very like my mother. My mother give me good feeling,” she says. “Like you. You very like my mother.”

This moment feels very surreal but also natural, a waking up from grief in an unexpected way. I feel affirmed and valued in a way I thought would never happen again.

“I need Western name,” she says. “Can you give me name?”

I write down five names: Caitlin, Caity, Alice, Joss, Elise.

“This is my daughter’s name,” I say, “and this is her nickname. These are her friends.”

I tell her how Caitlin had come to China, and about the accident.

“I like this one,” she says. “Caity.”

“My daughter’s nickname. Are you sure?”

“I like.”

I like too. In this moment, it feels like the universe is attempting to deliver Caitlin to me. It is another strange mystery, how Caitlin figures keep appearing. Bits of Caitlin are everywhere: likenesses of her eyes, her skin, her hair, her shape, her manner, her style. Moyan, now called Caity, looks like Caitlin, is self-conscious about her appearance, wearing carefully chosen necklaces, bangles and bracelets, wanting all the latest brand names. It feels magical, but I continue to reserve my emotion.

Amy is tall, unlike Caitlin, but she is a quiet observer, shy, just like Caitlin. Her long hair is tied back at the nape, rather than up
high. Her clothing is all grey. She smiles if I speak to her, but she doesn’t speak. She often sits hunched over an English text book.

“Can you read?” I ask.
“I can’t.”
“Read slowly.”

She tentatively pronounces each word, and after a few times she reads more fluently and speaks more confidently. I know from my own efforts, that I can read Chinese better than I can speak it. The written word is static and visual, and for me, easier to remember, while the spoken word is fleeting and elusive.

A group of children in yellow baseball hats bob past the café chattering at high pitch.

“What do Chinese schoolchildren do when they go home for lunch?”

“They go school from 7.30 to 11.30, then go home,” Amy says.

“Do they help their parents?”
“Help?”
“H-E-L-P.”
“Yes, of course. All Chinese children help parent.”
“How do they help?”
“Cook food, use the broom, wash clothes.”
“How do they wash the clothes?”
“How?”
“Do they use a bucket?”
“Bucket?”

I sketch a diagram of a bucket and write the word.

“This bucket? They don’t use. They go small river and use the stone.”

“Boys and girls?”
“Boy too,” she laughs, “if family have no girl.”
“Do you have any brothers or sisters?” I ask.

Amy has two older brothers, Melinda has a younger brother and Caity (Moyan) has an older sister and a younger brother.

“How does this work with the one child policy?” I ask. “Did your parents have to pay?”
“My mother pay eight thousand for me,” Caity says, tightening her lips. “She borrow from aunt. Now more expensive. Maybe one hundred thousand.” Her eyes shift nervously as she speaks showing the worry of this situation.

Melinda, the third girl, is twenty-three and has been working at Drifters for two years.

“Hallo Sally. Zao shang hao,” she says every morning. She learns passages from a local tour guide text book. The English text is Chinglish: a mixture of English words with Chinese grammar. I wonder about this incorrectness which is amusing but sometimes ridiculous. The words are too big and the sentences too long, often obscuring the meaning. Melinda delights in reciting entire passages verbatim. She left school at fifteen and went to work in a factory in Guangzhou. Her pay was used to finance her brother’s education, and she continues to support his university studies.

“I want to be a tour-guide,” she says. “But I need to do exam. My English not good enough.”

“Your English is great. You should do the exam.”

“Did you go to Moon Hill?” she asks.

“I went to Yulong Qiao with my daughter.”

“Where?”

“Meeting Dragon Bridge.”

“Yu Long Qiao,” she repeats each word slowly and asks me to follow until I get it right.

“Have you done the walk from Yangdi?” I ask.

“To Xingping? No, but I want. One day we can go together.”

I enquire about Chinese lessons at The Outdoor School, two roads back from West Street across from a pond covered in large lotus leaves. I have an interview with Simon, the principle, and arrange to have a two hour Chinese lesson every afternoon. I am assigned to Cham, a Chinese guy who has spent two years in America. My classmate, Shirley, is an English woman teaching in Yangshuo, living in an old flat above shops on the riverside. Cham has progressive ideas about language teaching, using props and games rather than books and pens. In the first lesson, we listen without speaking while he names everyday things in the room. By
the end of the lesson, we can point out blackboard, desk, book, pen, window and light switch.

After the first lesson, we are invited to join the entire school, which comprises twenty students, for dinner at Seventh Heaven in West Street.

“It’s a tradition in China for the students to take the teacher out for dinner,” Cham says.

“Why don’t you have a Western name?” I ask.

“Young people like Western names, but I think we should have more pride in our own culture,” he says. “Cham is the Chinese name for Ghengis Khan.”

The restaurant is in a large upstairs space with a long verandah overlooking West Street. Two large round tables are pushed together to accommodate our party.

At dinner I sit between Kathleen and Humming Bird, who are both college students studying English in their holiday break.

“What should I call you?” I ask Humming Bird.

“Bird,” she says. She bounces her foot and looks away. Her attention seems entirely focused on Cosimo, the forty-year-old teacher from Italy who is sitting at the other table with Cham. Two of the young Chinese male students, Edison and Johnstone, consult the menu and order for all of us.

“I think my pronunciation is not good,” Kathleen says. “I need to practise more.”

“Your pronunciation is better than mine,” I say. “You speak very clearly.”

“What language do you speak in Australia?” she asks.

“English.”

“But England is very far,” she says.

“The English came to Australia two hundred years ago.”

“After the First World War?” she asks.

“Before that.”

“Maybe after English Crusade?”

I am amused, but then it is hardly surprising that English colonialism is not big on the Chinese curriculum. By the same token, it is appalling to think that the history and culture of Asia barely feature in the Australian education system.
After the meal, I go with Kathleen and her classmate Wendy to see the room they share near the school. The entrance is through the lounge room of the family who owns the building. Several people draped in blankets on a lounge glance up from the television as we enter. Kathleen’s room, up three floors, has twin beds and an ensuite. She offers me snack food from foil packets: biscuits and dried plums.

“I want to improve my pronunciation,” Kathleen says.
“You should go to West Street and speak to foreigners.”
“I'm too scared.”
“I'll go with you.”
“Really?” she squeals. “I wish you were my mother.”

I spend one night chaperoning Kathleen and Wendy around West Street. We sit in Alf’s Aussie Bar and watch the action around the snooker table. I encourage her to ask the young chap with long brown hair behind us to show her how to play.

“Tap him on the shoulder,” I suggest.

“Sure,” he says. “Put your name on the blackboard.”

When the game is finished we walk in West Street. Outside every disco bar, cool young Chinese are making a few rap moves, spruiking for customers from the passing crowd. Kathleen takes a while to get enough courage to enter. Inside, mini-neons flash blades of blue and green across the walls of mirror tiles. A couple of drunk Western fellows in my age group are flirting with Chinese girls on a small dance floor. Kathleen moves with confidence, having trained as a dancer. She doesn't seem to appreciate my offbeat rhythm.

“Listen to the music,” she suggests. “Follow the beat.”

Listening to hip-hop is like listening to a foreign language; too fast. But the sound of glass shattering across the fibrillating rhythm of the music grabs my attention. The shattering builds to a crescendo which sucks me back across time and space to the scene of the accident. I resist the urge to flee from the violent recall, and somehow, as the sound decreases, I have the feeling I have pushed through a wall and emerged unshaken. Later that night I write in my journal: *It's like I have to die with her.*

Outside the bar at midnight, we sit on the street around a brazier with a group of young Americans.
“Do you think Hilary Clinton will win the primary?” Kathleen asks a young guy with long blond hair.

“It’s hard to say,” he replies. “Between her and Obama, if either one wins it will be a first for America.”

Later I ask how she keeps up to date with American politics.

“I check the New York Times website every morning,” she says.

In the space of a few weeks, in a process that seems magical, a bunch of young women have become part of my life. Somehow I am attracting the thing that has been missing. The emptiness is being displaced.

One morning at Drifters, a Chinese woman starts a conversation with me.

“Do you mind if I sit down?” she asks.

A Beijinger, I think, because she is tall, but also because it is unusual for a Chinese woman in my age group to be wearing jeans.

“Are you are travelling in China?” she asks.

“I’ve been here three weeks. Before that, I was in Zhuhai for a month.”

“Why are you staying here?”

“I’m a student,” I say. “I’m researching Chinese culture. How about you?”

“I’m a financial manager in Beijing. Have you got a focus for your research?”

I am taken aback. Most people are satisfied by my standard answer. I look along West Street and see Caitlin in my mind.

“Death, really,” I say. “I want to find out how Chinese people think about death.”

A riffle disturbs her eyes, but she doesn’t blink. Maybe she is offended by my directness.

“You may not be successful in your work if you can only talk to people you happen to meet,” she offers.

“As I get to know more people, I can ask about the way they think,” I say. “Your English is very good. Have you lived in the West?”
“In Manchester. I did a Masters in Economics, and then a PhD,” she says. “Can you do research on the computer?”

“There are plenty of studies available. But the West has always looked at China through Western eyes. They are only now beginning to study the way China thinks about itself.”

“Yes, I agree. When I went to England, it was very different from the way I was taught.”

Again I am surprised, to think Western perceptions could be seen as a kind of brainwashing, in the same way we believe the Chinese are brainwashed.

A shoeshine guy stops to polish my boots; one of three who roam the town carrying wooden tool boxes, looking for customers.

“How much do you think he makes in one day?” she asks.

“One-hundred-and-fifty maximum,” I say. “But he is lucky to make anything now in the low season.”

“This man is a peasant. There’s nothing to do on the farms so he has to come into the town.”

At the next table, another hawker is cutting paper silhouettes of blond American girls having breakfast.

“Beautiful, beautiful,” he says. He wears a fetching red scarf and an easy smile. He slips the red cut-out into a cellophane sleeve on a piece of white paper and hands it to one of them. The young woman looks dubious.

“Is my chin like that?” she asks her friends.

“I give you free,” the hawker says.

“No, thank you,” she says with a big smile.

He sets to work on the next one. All he has is his charm and a pair of scissors to wield his trade.

“A couple of people have told me they come from Mao’s hometown,” I say to the Beijing woman. “They’re very proud. They love him,” I say.

“The West thinks China is unified. But it’s not. Mao helped the peasant people. That’s why they love him. Eighty percent of population are peasants. They think the Mao way, and the other twenty percent, in the cities, think differently.”

“Why did you come to Yangshuo?” I ask.
“My daughter is leaving school. I’m looking for a place she can study English before she goes overseas,” she says. “Also, I want to speak English and eat Western food.” She pauses for a second. “Maybe sometime I can tell you the way Communists think about death.”

“Great. How about tonight for dinner?”

“Ok.”

“My name is Sally.”

“Mine is Hu Xin Xin,” she says, handing me a card. “In England after I was awarded my doctorate, they called me Doctor Who.”

After she leaves, I enjoy a rare dose of sunshine. The street hawker passes me a paper-cut of my face. I don’t want this image of myself, the person with the sharp nose and double chin, but maybe this is the guy who cut out the silhouette of Caitlin’s face. I have no idea where she was when it was cut, but she was also given a double chin.

Later, I re-read the emails she sent to John. On the day they arrived in Shanghai, she told him about being photographed by Chinese tourists.

-----Original Message-----From: caito potato [mailto:c8ty_da_gr8t@yahoo.com.au] Sent: Saturday, May 18, 2002 6:25 Subject: G’Day

On Thursday, halfway up a limestone hill, a Chinese group asked if they could have their photo with me. So I had my photo with that guy and then continued on back down the hill (more of a mountain really). When we got to the bottom another 5 or so guys wanted their photo with me! Then a man cut out the silhouette of my face on a little piece of paper while saying “free, beautiful, free”. then our tour guide told them no more photos and that was the end of that.

I look closely at the dockets and tickets in the back of Caitlin’s China album in an effort to discover exactly which day they were in Yangshuo. There are two receipts from ATM machines that
day, but I cannot identify a location. It was either at Yangshuo or in Guilin that the silhouettes were cut. At the base of my profile, he has cut a horizon of limestone towers, one with a moon shape to represent Moon Hill, signature of Yangshuo. It is a spectacular mountain with a crescent-shaped hole eroded right through its peak, possibly the landform that gave Yangshuo its name, meaning “crescent moon on the south side of the mountain”.

That night at Drifters, Dr Hu and I dine on pizza.

“Now I will tell you the Communist way of thinking about death,” she says when we finish the meal. “While my mother was looking after my sick father she had a heart-attack,” she says. “Then he died while she was having a by-pass operation.”

I shake my head a little.

“I don’t know how to help my mother. She is not prepared for death.

“My family is the same,” I say. “We don’t have the words.”

“In England, I was taken under the wing by Methodists. I was impressed by the inner peace and kindness of the Christians.”

“Did you end up believing?”

“I couldn’t.”

“I’m the same. I want to believe, but I can’t.”

“We used to sit in groups studying Mao, like Bible study. He said ‘life is as heavy as mountain, death as light as a feather’. His words help to live, but not to die.”

“Poetical,” I say.

“I don’t know what I can say to my mother.”

“Maybe there is no need to say anything. Just help her to live.”

“In China,” she says, “old peasant women prepare the clothing for their own body.”

We exchange looks that register the challenge in this idea. Before she leaves, Dr Hu takes photos of the graffiti wall, and then asks the three waitresses to pose with her while I take photos.

“Maybe my daughter can come and work here,” she says.

I am planning a trip to Longshen, in the north of the province, to visit the Miao minority village where the spectacular terraced
paddy fields and the minority culture have recently been opened to tourism. There are hundreds of minority groups in China's border regions, tribal groups pushed into the mountains during the Mongol invasion of Kublai Khan in 13th century. The Miao people of Longshen are related by language to the Hmong in northern Laos and Vietnam.

“Can you take me?” Caity asks at the café.

“Great” I say. “When can you go?”


I am too unsure of the traffic to venture out on a bicycle. In Yangshuo pedestrians share the road with a mix of vehicles; vans, cars, three wheeled tractors, small electric buses with roll-down sides, motorbikes and scooters, bicycle carts and bicycles. Vehicles do not use indicators and there are no traffic lights; yet everything moves along without interruption like a river. It’s crucial not to make any sudden moves. If you want to turn, you make a slight change in your direction, and then the traffic moves around you to make way.

At lunchtime, Caity hires two bikes from a rack outside a hotel on the street behind Drifters, paying less than half the tourist price, and without the normal exorbitant deposit. She rings her bell liberally as I follow her through backstreets.

“Be care,” she says when we cross the highway, four lanes of loosely weaving traffic. The town has expanded across the highway, where hectares of new luxury apartment blocks are set in a maze of cul-de-sacs, with elegant regency street lamps and underground power. We follow a small sealed road out of town, past mud-brick villages surrounded by vegetable gardens.

Dwarfed by the random limestone towers, we ride through their shadows into the paddy fields. Chooks scatter down a muddy village lane. Under a small stone footbridge two women with buckets wash clothes. It feels natural hanging out with a Chinese girl, but at the same time unbelievable. The sea I am drifting on is no longer a sea of grief; I keep washing ashore. We arrive at the Yulong River, Meeting Dragon River, about ten kilometres downstream from Meeting Dragon Bridge, where Kim and I had been.

“Take picture me?” Caity asks.
She poses in front of a tree by the river, then on the reclining chair of a bamboo raft. Gazing wistfully at the camera, she refuses to smile. On the way back to town she parks her bicycle and poses in a patch of leafy bok choy by the side of the road. It feels like shopping with Caitlin, indulging her.

The following day in her lunch-break, she comes with me to the photo shop and we order prints of the pictures.

“You want to go Yangshuo Park?” she asks. “I really like go there.”

The park is a meeting place for groups who gather under the spreading branches of slender trees, leafless now in the winter. Chess and card players sit around portable tables, musical groups sing, play cymbals and drums, and the two string er hu.

A husband and wife sell the cheapest bananas in Yangshuo from a table at the base of a cliff. They store the bananas in a cave behind, where they are stacked under a single bare electric light globe. An old man sells honey from a drum on wheels. The park surrounds a large green lake where ten white ducks are tended by a yu ren, a duckman. He transports the ducks everyday in a trailer behind a bicycle. Sometimes I see him further down the creek, scooping snails out of the water with a long-handled net. Later, the ducks come and eat snails from his hand, before he takes them home.

“Good morning,” he calls in English whenever I see him.

Caity and I climb a set of steep irregular steps up the side of a limestone peak, to a pagoda with a view over Yangshuo. She takes up the offer to have her fortune told by a guy sitting in a pavilion half-way up. His face, neck and arms are burnished by the sun; the edges of his sky blue shirt frayed. In an old worn book, he looks up numbers from Caity’s name and birth-date.

From up here, I can read the streets of Yangshuo laid out below like a map. I follow the way back through the park, past the street market in Banyan Shade Street, and down Silk Road to Panda Travel. Pillars of blue smoke rise from the tin flues of restaurant roofs. To the north, truck exhaust and construction dust collect in the gulch between two mountains where Spirit Mountain Road heads north.
Caity looks worried as she listens to the fortune-teller.
“What does he say?”
“He say death in my name.”
“My daughter’s name?”
“No,” she frowns. “Don’t worry.”
I look over his shoulder and take photos of the page he is reading. A scab on the rim of his ear is weeping. Caity leans forward to listen as he sits back and talks.
“I’m going to the top,” I say.
“Ok.”
A small square pavilion perches on the precipice at the peak. Flying eaves arch out over the large moon doorway. Traces of pale pink and green paint soften the cement-rendered surface. I can read two of the three words above the moon gate xia yun piao, and find the third in my pocket dictionary. Floating Beneath Clouds. High above everything, close to the sky, I can imagine moving through into another realm from here; reaching out and touching what cannot be seen. I stay for a while, soaking up the silent peace.
When I return, Caity is still locked in conversation with the fortune-teller.
“I need to go to my Chinese lesson,” I say.
“Ok,” she says. “See you later.”
Things change after that. Caity becomes distant and unsmiling. In the morning when I go to pick up the photos, they have disappeared. The assistant lets me look through the envelopes waiting for collection but mine are not there. I go to the café and explain to Caity the photos are gone, but she shrugs.
“Don’t be angry,” she says, when I explain again.
“Come to the shop with me?” I ask.
She disappears into the kitchen without responding, then returns with the envelope of photos and drops them on the table in front of me.
“I don't understand,” I say. She goes back to the kitchen without replying.
“She see man in park yesterday,” Melinda says.
“I know,” I say.
“Do you believe?” Melinda asks.
“No,” I say. “I don’t believe.”
But it feels real.

For the next few days, Caity continues to avoid me or even ignores me. If I happen to walk past the café during the day, instead of giving me a happy wave, she disappears into the kitchen. I feel uncomfortable when she is around, but act as if nothing is wrong.

The only way to keep warm is to keep moving. After breakfast I go back to my room and wrap myself in a blanket to write. The air-conditioner is not powerful enough to heat my room properly, only warming the air above my head. In the afternoons I search for street food which is hard because the government has cracked down on street vendors. Police roaming in green utilities clear them off, issuing orders through hand-held megaphones.

I often buy tofu nao from a woman constantly pushing a bicycle cart around. Tofu is produced in many shapes and forms including Stinky Tofu, a fermented mouldy variety which you might find for sale in the evenings. The acrid stench attracts a crowd of locals who gather around to buy the thin squares sizzling in a wok of hot oil. The tofu nao, translated literally is tofu brain, an opaque white jelly the woman spoons into a disposable plastic bowl from a speckled green enamel urn. She tops it with a splash of sweet brown liquid from a vacuum flask. Nao is the same word used for computer, dian nao, electric brain. Today, I find the woman who sells cobs of corn from large a pot on the back of a cart, but she moves off, having caught sight of a green police utility creeping along the road. I follow her until she stops.

Standing on a corner munching the corn cob, I watch the flow of pedestrians along the cobbled street. One street away from West Street, locals are shopping and socializing. On the opposite footpath, a woman outside a dress shop is washing lettuce leaves in a blue plastic basin. A grandmother hobbles along with a baby inside a hand-made pouch tied to her back. Many shops cater to tourists; shops selling trendy clothes, a laundromat, a pizza bar, a travel agency. I copy down the English words on a sandwich board outside a funky shop selling matchboxes and Mao era poster art.
Hans Christian Anderson finding resonance in China. An old man idling along on a motorscooter turns the wheel in and stops on the curb. He takes off his coat and hands it to a woman sitting at a treadle sewing-machine on the footpath. Taking a small pipe out of his back pocket, he packs the bulb from a small tin of tobacco dangling from the stem. He tokes three times, then knocks out the ash and tucks the pipe back into his trousers.

Next door, a young Chinese man I know comes out of Café Too, the second-hand English book shop. He has a large red book under his arm.

“Bruce,” I call. “You look very studious. What’s this?”

He hands me the book.


“It’s about Jiang Zemin, the previous President.”

“Do we like him?”

“He was very good for China,” Bruce says. “What have you been doing? Just writing your tome?”

“My slim volume,” I say. “I’ve been setting the scene for the first chapter.”

“If you read Paul Theroux you will find a good pattern you can follow,” he says.

“Yes, I’ve read Theroux,” I say. “He’s annoying.”

“Why?”

“He’s pompous.”

“Supercilious?”

“Exactly.”

Bruce is a twenty-four-year-old from Hebei province, north of Beijing, who has been studying English in Yangshuo privately for three years, preparing himself for a career as a translator. I am impressed by his claim to having a vocabulary of over thirty thousand English words.
“How does your first chapter go?”

“It starts on a train, talking to a man about Guilin, the most beautiful place in the world.”

“Famous words,” says Bruce. “Every Chinese child must learn these words by heart.”

“Why?”

“Probably some cadre decided.”

“But why were they chosen?”

“They’re part of a famous piece of writing. Children have to be able to recite the whole passage.”

“What’s the idea?”

“The idea is that if you can learn something excellent by heart, you can copy it and expand your own mind.”

“Oh, I see. How about a cup of tea at Drifters?”

“You have a penchant for tea?” he asks.

“They have heaters,” I say. “It’s a good place to talk.”

It is a short walk past the two rock climbing shops, a Nepalese clothing boutique, the Café Yak. On the promenade beside the creek, we pass the several old women who read fortunes on the footpath and the shoe-repair man who works under a beach umbrella by the steps of the Dragon Moon footbridge.

At Drifters, Bruce orders a pot of green tea.

“Do you normally drink green tea?” I ask.

“Only after lunch,” he says. “To quench my inner fire.”

“You mean indigestion?”

“No,” he says. “It’s a Chinese medical term. I don’t know what the Westerner calls it.”

“Tell me about the man who changed China.”

“Jiang Zemin. He was the third leader chosen by Deng, one of the three they called Puppets. But Jiang became strong in his own right. For example, at the meeting he had with Queen Elizabeth the second about Hong Kong.”

“The Queen of England?” I query, doubting such a meeting ever occurred.

“Ter atch er.”

“Margaret Thatcher.”
“Right, that’s her. It was a very public meeting but it occurred behind closed doors. Thatcher told Jiang that the British had no intention of returning Hong Kong to China.”

“She was strong like that,” I say.

“He told her that if Britain didn’t hand over Hong Kong, China would go to war.”

“Whoa.”

“After the meeting, Thatcher fell over.”

“She fainted?”

“She fell over when she was going down the stairs. Then everybody could see . . . “ Bruce pauses to find the word.

“Her underwear?”

“That’s very funny,” he chuckles.

“Sorry. What did they see?”

“They knew the outcome of the talks.”

After Bruce leaves, Caity sits down at my table. “I want talk you,” she says. “I come your room after work?”

“Sure.”

I meet Caity later and we walk back to Panda Travel, a five-minute walk down the lane and over Two Moon Bridge. We go through the door at the side of the desk and up the three flights of steps to my room. Caity sits on one of the twin beds.

“Sally, you like my mother,” she says. “I like you. Every time I remember your little daughter die, I want cry.”

I give her a rueful smile.

“I have many Western friends help me, give me money.”

“You’re lucky.” I say.

“Amy want go Longshen,” she says.

“I know,” I say.

I am a little mystified by this talk, but relieved that she has relaxed. It takes me a long time to figure that she had been trying to explain that I am Amy’s first Western friend and she wants Amy to have the opportunity to go to Longshen.
Several days later, at 7:30 am, I wait for Amy at Two Moon Bridge. Not many people are around. Even now in the low season, the restaurants and bars do not close until after midnight. The street sweepers are here before dawn; women with brooms made from lengths of bamboo branches lashed together with PVC string. I look around to find the source of a strange rhythmic sound nearby: a man snoring inside a mosquito net. He is a security guard, sleeping on a board laid between two boxes against the door of a restaurant. This morning, the security guard in my building has already left; an old man who sleeps on a cane couch set up every night inside the glass doors. Before he sleeps, he drinks several bottles of beer and smokes cigarettes which are stubbed on the tiles. If I come home late, I have to rattle the doors to wake him.

When Amy arrives, we buy steamed buns from a bicycle cart on the way to the bus station.

“Have you been to Guilin before?”


Rows of Australian paperbarks line the busy two-lane road to Guilin. It is a choreography of near-misses in slow-motion. The bus sits on eighty kilometres per hour, slow enough to avoid collisions as it passes the over-laden trucks and small buses on the road, moving over to avoid buses and trucks overtaking in the opposite direction. Trees without leaves look dead in the dry, cracked earth. Frost in the shadows blanches colour from the scene. So many bare trees in Australia would indicate a severed drought. I have to translate the seasons between northern and southern hemispheres to remind myself that in spring, this landscape will return to life.

Large, yellow, pear-shaped citrus called Pomelo are stacked in pyramids on roadside stalls. Locals use the thick pith in cooking, preserving it by laying it out to dry in the sun. Amy takes out one of the two You Zi in her bag.
“This from my home,” she says. “My mother grow it.”

She opens a pen knife and makes two cuts from top to bottom through the thick spongy pith, then digs her fingers under, forcing the pith off. The flesh is dry and full of seeds, but very sweet.

“This Baisha,” Amy says at the first major stop. It is six weeks since Kim and I came through here on our way to the Dragon Meeting Bridge.

“Big market town. I go school here.”

“It’s a long way from home.”

“I live at school. Go home every month.”

“Why didn’t you go to college?”

“My mother want me study for nurse, but I don’t want.”

“What would you like to do?”

“Study English. Maybe work in city.”

I had read about Longshen in the China Peoples Daily. Until the Communist Revolution, the minority peoples lived as they had for hundreds of years. The men hunted to supplement their rice staple. They conducted raids on the Han Chinese in the plains, even stealing people and enslaving them. Assimilated into the tribal groups, the slaves lived with their owner-families. Children of the slaves were given as bride-price with the marrying daughters of the tribe.

In the Fifties, the Communists re-organized the village structure, outlawing the shamans, replacing the headmen with Communist sympathizers, freeing the slave class and building schools. This history of slavery is recent enough that some of the released slaves, and certainly their offspring, are still alive in these communities. Development of tourism began in the last decade, with the construction of a serviceable road into the area. The flow-on is evident in the villages in the construction of promenades, new wind-and-rain footbridges and stone footpaths and steps.

The Dragonfields of Longshen are famous for the spectacular terraced slopes of the upland valleys. Roads service several of the larger villages, but transport between the villages is by foot via a network of old footpaths through the hills. The largest of thirteen villages, Pingan, is the main village of the Blue Miao, with over five hundred residents. The women wear sky blue kaftan shirts
and black pants trimmed with braid. At Dazhai, the main village of the Red Miao, the women wear black outfits embellished with very fine red, orange and pink embroidery. The Red Miao women are famed for having the longest hair in the world, down to their knees or longer. The villagers grow most of their own food; pigs, chickens, fish, vegetables and herbs. Local women earn money as guides and porters, taking tourists on day treks to view the extensive spectacular rice terraces.

It takes three buses and seven hours to arrive at our destination in the mountains. The final leg up the unsealed narrow road into the mountains is nerve-wracking. The minibus has to weave around piles of earth across the road, often pulling over to allow oncoming traffic to pass.

Local women waiting at the bus depot accompany us on the short walk through the hills to Dazhai. The village nestles in the bottom of a valley of terraced slopes that resemble the scaled back of China’s beloved dragon. Several streams gush down gullies between the houses before passing under a new wind-and-rain footbridge at the entrance to the village. Known as Dazhai, Big Village, it is the second largest of many hamlets in the surrounding mountains. About seventy families live here in large, multi-storey wooden houses, stepped together up the hillside. The local women take us to Dazhai Hostel, up steps in the second rung of houses.

“We’ll get two rooms,” I say.

“Why two?” Amy asks.

“Because I snore.”

“Snore?”

“I make noise when I sleep.”

“It doesn’t matter,” she says. “Two rooms too expensive.”

“Ok,” I say. I comply with her the same way as I did with my kids.

The spacious home is like a Swiss chalet completely lined in pine. The floorboards creak as we climb upstairs. Everything is new and clean and comfortable. We set off to explore, following a path to a neighbouring village on the hillside across a paddy field. Here, the houses perch on glens where gullies merge. At the foot of a gully three young women in jeans wash their very long hair under a
bamboo conduit coming from above. High overhead, several women in traditional dress sit around a loom on the sunny platform of a house. The sound of a number of people talking comes from another house. It is hard to guess what is happening inside. The subdued voices indicate it may be a wake but two smiling children looking down from a window suggest it is not too serious. The houses are set close together among the trees. Glimpses of pink clothing hang from verandahs where several women holding children watch us go by.

We go back to the hostel at dusk. The double doors and windows are all left open even though the temperature has dropped. A charcoal brazier is placed under the table where we are served a dish of stuffed tofu. It is like indoor camping. Amy asks the grandmother if she knows a guide who will take us to the next village. She nods and points to herself. She will take us. We go up to our room to keep warm. Amy turns on the television and I get into bed fully clothed and immediately fall into a deep sleep which continues undisturbed till morning, a full ten hours, the best sleep I have had for many years.

At nine in the morning, the grandmother is waiting downstairs carrying a basket on her back. She is dressed in traditional clothing, with her hair wrapped in a horn-shaped bun at the front under a black head kerchief. She wears the black jacket of the grandmother class, with buttonholes bound in blue patterned fabric, and a knee length black skirt creased into small pleats around the whole width. I wonder how the pleats are made. There is electricity in the town, but I doubt the electric iron has reached the valley. I have never seen a clothes iron in China. We pass through the village we visited yesterday where a crowd is still murmuring inside the same house.

“Ask the guide what is going on in the house,” I say.

“She no answer,” Amy says. “I ask question before but she no answer.”

“What did you ask?”

“Why women wear old clothes but men not.”

“Maybe she can’t hear,” I say. “Let’s stop and ask.”

Amy calls for her to wait and then asks what is happening in the house.
The old woman screws up her mouth and turns up the hill. Amy and I exchange looks.

“Ask her why she doesn’t answer.”
The woman mutters something without stopping.

“She say baby come,” Amy translates.

The path climbs up through the village under a stand of large old pines. At a fork in the trail, a stone tablet with a map engraved on it is set upright in the ground. I can read a few of the names: Big Village where our hostel is, Small Village where we are walking to and New Village, in between the two.

We wind around a gully and up over a ridge to another reach of the vast terraced mountainside. The stepped contours curve into the haze of the distant horizon. There are no fences or gates, no roads and no engines. The smell of dry grass fills the air. Our footsteps are the only sounds. I try to get our guide to stand beside Amy for a photograph but she turns away frowning.


“Bu piao liang,” the guide says.

She bunches her cheeks with her fingers to indicate wrinkles. We laugh, and after more cajoling she stands for a photo. She has a few strands of grey hair showing under her head-scarf. Heavy silver earrings dangle from big holes in her earlobes; a piece of red string is looped though the earrings and hung over the ear to take the weight off the lobe.

Clear rushing water flows around the mountain in a narrow mud channel parallel to the path; a massive irrigation system which functions without pumps. Water is diverted from natural streams into select paddies through openings in the channels. Sometimes the water is re-directed along lengths of bamboo split lengthways. We stand aside to make way for a woman carrying two huge bundles of dried grass on either end of a pole across her shoulders.

After traversing several deep folds in the hillside, the track plunges down across a stream over a new wind-and-rain bridge. Around the next spur we find the village of Xiaozhai on the side of a wide slope covered in huge boulders. We stop to rest on a rock outside the first house. Within minutes we are surrounded by local
children and women. The women wear the traditional embroidered outfits, but the kids are ragged in dirty western track-suits. A girl of about seven holds an exercise book folded back to the page she is working on. I ask Amy if we can get a cup of tea. One of the women talks to the little girl who beckons me inside a lean-to on the side of the house. In a small kitchen, the girl picks up a drinking glass from the bench, and I follow her into another room with a row of plastic thermoses on a bench. She fills the glass with steaming water from a pink thermos.

"Can we get tea with tea leaves?" I ask Amy.

"This woman make tea," Amy says. "About twenty minutes."

We follow her up the path into the village. Amy admires a large boulder across a large rock platform.

"I have a big rock in my home village," she says. "We climb when we small."

"Go over," I say. "I'll take a photo."

She climbs onto the boulder, but in her brown clothes, it is hard to distinguish her from the landscape.

"Hold your arms up," I call.

She stands with her arms drooping like a bird with wet wings. The camera is new to her, and she is shy about posing.

"Up higher," I say, and demonstrate with my arms.

We cross a plank over a creek which gushes down a crevice between the houses. I wonder where the water comes from, when everything is very dry.

The woman's house is large and empty. Lattice windows across the front are closed. A young woman with two infants ignores us. The toddlers wear traditional children's hats: padded black velvet crowns decorated with tiers of dangling silver beads. The women disappear into the kitchen at the back of the house.

The kitchen floor, which is excavated from the hillside, is the foundation of these pole houses, called Houses with Hanging Feet. The women invite us in to sit on the stools around the small heap of cold charcoal on the earthen floor. The room is dark, barely lit by a soot-blackened window. The smoked sinews of a chicken are hanging above the fire.
One of the women stokes a flame with handfuls of wood shavings. She tips a cup of rice into an oiled wok and stirs it over the heat. After a minute the rice grains swell and pop. She stirs in a cup of peanuts, then a jug of water followed by a ladle full of a thick brown stock from a bowl in the cupboard. Finally she adds two generous teaspoons of white powder. She takes time over every aspect of the cooking, her arms and hands work together in circles spooning and stirring, smiling all the while.

A large television on a sideboard is playing a dvd about the Dragonfields. Amy tells me the dvd was made by the son-in-law. The woman points out her daughter on the screen. We see her side-on admiring a view, her black hair blowing in the wind. She turns and pokes out her tongue. We all laugh. Amy and I are given a bowl each. The brew of tea is like soup, fried-rice soup.

“Do you like it?” Amy asks. “I love it.”
“Yes,” I say “but it’s not like English Breakfast.”
She accepts another serving.

I give the lady twenty yuan and ask to take photos. Amy takes photos of me standing beside the woman with one of the children on her hip. In the photo I am wearing one of their traditional head-kerchiefs. The women touch my head and laugh.

We find our guide waiting at the bottom of the village and begin the walk back to Dazhai.

“How many people in your family,” I ask our guide.
“One daughter,” she says.
“Where is she?”
“At work.” She gestures to the hills above. “Collecting firewood.”

As we pass through Xiaozhai, I see one the traditional skirts drying on a board in the sun, with the pleats folded in place and secured with tacks.

Back at the hostel we order eggs and tomatoes for lunch. The mother of the house serves it with a huge bowl of steamed rice and chopsticks.

“You can use chopsticks,” Amy says, “but you don’t hold bowl up.”
“No, but I think I should,” I say. “I spill too much food.”

“When I was a small child my mother tell me hold it up. She say I lazy if don’t.”

“I like the way the Chinese make noise when they eat,” I say. “My mother told me never to make noise when I eat. We must never open our mouths when eating. Never speak with food in our mouths.”

“We can’t bear it when foreigner uses the napkin on the nose,” Amy says.

“To blow the nose?”

“We cannot eat if they do,” she says, making a sick face.

The grandmother takes our plates back to the kitchen, then she moves a loom from under the stairs to a sunny spot near our table. She puts on large pair of spectacles with heavily scratched lenses and begins weaving. She picks out diagonal square patterns with a smooth bamboo tool, and then shunts the bobbin through. When the bobbin empties, she changes colours, using oranges, pinks, reds and a dark pine-green. She is making the sleeve panels for a jacket.

We take the last bus down the mountain that afternoon. I am learning to suspend my panic on the dangerous road. The piles of earth and rock are the result of blasting, to widen the road, not the earthquakes and landslides of my imagination. The bus takes a back road into the village of Heping at the junction with the main road to Guilin.

Heping is congested with pedestrians. The bus can hardly turn the tight corners on the steep slope. We stop while a three-wheeled motorbike bus filled with grinning faces and bunches of vegetables squeezes past.

“Let’s eat here,” I say. “We can catch the Guilin bus later.”

Kids running around stop and stare as we enter a shop. Amy inspects the contents of two bubbling pots at the back, and orders two bowls of noodle soup.

“Chicken or pork?” she asks

A large woman in stained apron and rubber boots throws lettuce leaves, sprouts, mushrooms and a few scraps of uncooked chicken into a pot of simmering stock with a plateful of fresh noodles.
She scoops it into enamel bowls using a gauze ladle. Amy scoops noodles with a tin spoon and strings them into her mouth with chopsticks, encouraging me to do the same. When the noodles are gone, she picks up the bowl with the other hand and drinks from the rim.

It is getting dark when we walk back to the highway. A couple of crammed buses pass without stopping, then a private micro-bus stops to see if we want a lift to Guilin.

“How much?” Amy asks.

“Ten yuan.”

Very cheap, but what a nightmare journey. The driver is in a hurry, overtaking everything, even on blind corners. He drops us at the bus station in Guilin and we arrive back at Yangshuo much sooner than I expect, in plenty of time for chocolate cake at Drifters.
Woman with Fish

The woman comes in to Drifters on most evenings. She is very short; equal to my height when I’m sitting down. She carries a bamboo basket full of trinkets: plastic beads, glass bangles, old bronze coins, Buddhas. I sort through the basket and choose a red-lacquered fish, which suddenly sucks me back to Easter two years before.

I was living in the share house in Newcastle. Easter Sunday would be Caitlin’s nineteenth birthday. Sometimes I browsed the Church circulars Bernadette left lying on the table. For the first time in my life, the Easter ritual struck a chord with its detailed re-enactment of the events leading up to Christ’s death. Bernadette and I talked a lot about Easter; what it meant to her.

“It’s a gruesome story,” I had said. “The crown of thorns. The crucifix.”

“It is,” Bernadette agrees.

I began to get a feel for the idea of renewal. I invited Caitlin’s friends to fly kites on the hill at the common at Dungog, for Caitlin’s birthday, and invited myself to stay with Charlotte and Lenny, friends at Dungog the night before on Good Friday.

“I’ll bring fish for dinner,” I said.

On the Thursday, the queue at the Newcastle Fish Market is very long. I was number one hundred and fifty-seven. About ten assistants were serving at the counter, with two men fully occupied gutting and scaling fish. One of the men doing the gutting was Chinese. I mentally prepared myself to speak Chinese to the man. I bought two whole snapper.

“Gutted?”

“Yes, please.”

My heart raced as the Chinese man gutted my fish.

“Xie, xie,” I said as he handed me the large parcel wrapped in white paper.

He laughed and said something I did not understand.
I rode back to the flat and put the fish in the bottom of the fridge for the next day.

Two trains travel to Dungog on Good Friday, one at 5am the other at 5pm. I set the alarm for 4am. Early in the morning, I lugged a backpack and a bag containing the fish, as well as another long thin packet with bamboo garden stakes for making kites. I saw myself reflected in shop windows on the way to the station, a bag lady, the only human around under the streetlights of the city. It was still dark at Civic Station at 5am. A girl in a tight black dress was slurring at high volume on a mobile phone.

Drifting in and out of sleep on the train, I saw the sky change from black to purple. I rattled awake when the outside started going by in the wrong direction. The train was returning to Newcastle. I was on the wrong train. I alighted at the next station. The sky was light now, but the sun was not yet up. The stone walls of Maitland Gaol rose from the opposite grassy slope. In the distance along the tracks a lone person on a footbridge walked to the right and then back to the centre, back and forth. A train appeared as a small dot under the bridge, and rapidly increased in size as it approached. I grabbed my bags but the train clattered by without slowing down. That must be the Dungog train. I lay on a bench feeling totally defeated. In half an hour another train came and I caught it to Maitland. I sat head down on a platform seat, tears falling. A young man walked up and down the platform.

"Scuse me, Miss. You Ok?"
"Yes."
"You sure? You don't seem Ok."
"I'm fine."
"Sorry, Miss, but I can't stand to see someone crying. What's wrong?"
"Nothing."
"Where are you going?"
"Dungog. I missed the train."
"What are the garden stakes for?"
"Making kites."
"Are you going to see the kids?"
Fresh tears burst as I shook my head.
“Sorry. Wish I could help.”
A train rumbled in to the platform, wheels squealing as it slowed up. The young man looked around and then back.

“Have you got a fiver?”
I handed him five dollars.

“Thanks, Miss. I hope you’re feeling better,” he yelled from the doorway as he jumped on the train.

I moved outside the station to a bench in the sun, thinking I would ring Charlotte later. A homeless man sat in unwashed ragged clothes beside a large cardboard box on a trolley. He poured drink into a cup using his box of things as a table. I dumped my bags on the seat and leaned on them.

“You catch’n the bus?” the man asked without turning.

“No.”

He shuffled through his box of things making soft grunting noises. A woman in a uniform came out of the station with a dustpan and a long-handled broom. She walked from one piece of rubbish to another sweeping. I felt comforted by these non-intrusive human activities around me. The warmth of the sun felt good. I moved the bag of fish into the shade.

“She’s still in bed,” Lennie said when I rang.

“Don’t wake her,” I said.

“No, that’s not advisable. You know what she’s like.”

“I caught the wrong train. I’m stuck at Maitland. With the fish.”

In a few minutes a text message arrived from Charlotte.

“Woman with fish, ring me.”

Forty-five minutes later, she collected me in her car.

The old woman is overjoyed that I am buying the red-lacquered fish. She reaches around my shoulder and squeezes me, her eyes watering. The fish is in two halves which are strung together through holes in its mouth. Inside there are small figures. On one side a praying goddess sitting cross-legged at the base of a tree. She is surrounded by wriggly branches and tree roots. On the other side, a naked figure crouches, the hands and feet tied together.

“What does this mean? I ask, Bruce.
“I don’t know,” he says. “Nobody knows.”

I see the old woman often, when she will grab my hand in Drifters, or in the street. The last time I see her, she is climbing onto the back of a motorbike behind a young man. She waves and grins when I wave and grin.
Amy’s calmness and gentleness is like a balm, yet I sense that she too is suspended, somehow uncertain about life. On her next day off, she takes me to her village, a half hour bus ride on the road to Xingping. Dust stirred up by the traffic covers the few shops clustered at Toupu, the T-junction where we get off the bus. People sell chicken or pork from tables set up on the corner. Intent onlookers crowd around several tables of card games. Half-a-dozen guys with motorbikes watch us in the hope that we will want a lift. Lying stretched along the seat of his motorbike, one guy is sound asleep with his feet resting on the handlebars. Amy strides across the road without turning her head as we set off down the side road.

“That is my village,” Amy says, pointing to a necklace of houses strung around the base of the parabolic hills across the plain. “Twenty minute walk,” she says.

Our feet crunch over wheel ruts on the road. She points out the double-storey, white concrete building on the edge of town where she went to school. The faces of locals grin from the back of a motorbike bus that passes from behind. Sun-burnt cheeks are crammed in with hessian bags and bunches of greens.

“You don’t want to catch the small bus?” I ask, thinking that she prefers to save the fare.

“No. The people talk too much.”

“What about?”

“You.”

“Me?”

“You are the first foreigner to visit my village.”

The paddy fields fan out across the plane, rows of stubble from last year’s crop patterning the bone dry soil. She identifies the citrus orchards we pass: the massive yellow pomelo, orange, mandarin and the small sweet cumquat which is eaten skin and all. Behind the town a track winds up to the saddle between two hills, and I wonder what lies beyond.

“Did you explore the mountains when you were small?”
“We get wood for fire. There is mountain like boat.”

“Does your family grow rice?”

“Of course.”

“When will they plant the rice?”

“Soon. First they have to dig.”

“With the cow?”

“Yes, they follow the niu. The cow.”

“Before or after they put water in fields?”

“Two times, after water. First make it soft, next time make it smooth.”

Rows of large pottery jars are stacked against the wall of a shed.

“What’s in those pots?” I ask.

“Rice wine.”

A tall stone with three Chinese characters carved on it stands at the entrance to the village.

“Shi Ji Tou,” she says. “Our village name.”

“Melinda lives that way, left,” Amy says. “We go this way. Our house new,” she says. “But have old part,” she adds, knowing I like old things.

“My aunty.” She tilts her head towards a woman standing on a concrete water conduit across the paddy. She stands in filthy rags, staring like a spectre, through matted hair. I’m taken aback, not only by the woman’s state of destitution but also because there is no greeting between the two. We go down a side path between two houses to Amy’s house, which is a single-storey white-washed concrete box with green double doors in the centre. A large-hand pump is set in the middle of a paved yard at the front.

“Nobody here. My mother will come home for lunch.”

“Where is she?”

“Working in orchard.”

She unlocks the double doors into a large room with a low wooden table and stools. An altar set into a recess high on the rear wall dominates the room. Dui lian, Chinese characters painted on red paper strips on either side of the altar, send lucky words to the gods and ancestors. The crimson ends of burnt incense sticks poke out of a pot of sand. The only other adornments in the room are two
pencil portraits above the lintel: a man and a woman transfixed in shades of grey.

“My grandmother and grandfather. Do you know which is grandmother? When I was small I don’t know.”

“Her hair is pulled back,” I say, “so it looks short like a man’s. Can I take a photo? Can you stand underneath?”

Their position above the door lintel suggests their continuing influence over the family.

I follow Amy into a side-room.

“This my room,” she says. “Put your bag on bed.”

The bed is a large pine four-poster surrounded by a mosquito net. There is no mattress, just a woven-straw mat. I lift the wooden lid of one of half-a-dozen large pottery crocks sitting on the floor. Inside, round white shapes float in liquid.

“What’s this?”

“Rice cake.”

“Is it water or vinegar?”

“Water,” she says. I look around the room as I follow her out, taking in as much detail as possible. I recognize some of her clothes hanging on a bamboo rod suspended from the ceiling.

“My father made this cupboard,” she says as we go back through the main room. She taps a low sideboard and opens the door to reveal several power tools inside. A television sits on top, and bits of paper and odd pieces of crockery. We enter another room off the lounge area.

“This my brother bedroom.”

Hundreds of pomelos are stored in here, piled up to the window sill. Amy rolls over a few, inspecting the undersides, and chooses a couple.

“Did your father make the bed?” It is a double bed with an impressive carved rounded bedstead.

“Does he sell furniture?”

“If someone ask him.”

She taps the door of the third room.

“My parent room,” she says. Hundreds of mandarins fill one corner of the room, each one wrapped in plastic.

“Come upstairs,” she says, handing me a mandarin.
We duck a row of speckled sausages hanging from a string halfway up.

“Pepperoni,” she says, displaying her café vocabulary.

The stairs lead directly to the flat concrete roof-top.

“We dry rice here.”

She touches a wooden winnowing machine against the wall.

“This machine for rice,” she says. “Rice come out this side, skin out other side.

The whole village is visible from up here, three long streets of houses running parallel. At the foot of the mountain, a few large ancient trees have been left standing. Revered for their great age; they may confer long life on anyone in the vicinity. In the lane below, a stone grinding-wheel leans against the wall of a mud-brick cottage beside the threshold.


“Can we have a look?”

I follow her back downstairs. She lifts a wooden bar to unlatch the back door. We cross the lane and enter the old house. A huge pile of straw fills the barn-like interior. Bunches of straw poke between the ornate turned railings of an upper level. Two large rusty circular combs lean against the mud bricks.

“This soft plough,” Amy whispers.

“Can we go upstairs?”

“Shhh. Come through here.”

She guides me past several pieces of threshing machinery to the back. Cigarette smoke curls through the hook of an arm in a side-door.

“A man,” I say.

“My uncle. He not good,” she whispers as we step outside into another lane. “He killed his son.”

“What?”

“Come here,” Amy says.

“He killed his son?”

“Come this way.”

“When?”
“Three years before.”
The same year as Caitlin.
“Why?”
“Sometimes,” she hesitates. “He crazy.”
“Oh my God.”
“Don’t be frighten. Come this way. Around here.”
I follow her through the lanes back to the front of her house.
“Does he drink too much beer?”
“He doesn’t drink beer.” She glances behind.
“Is he coming?”
“No.”
I am burning to know exactly when the son died. Maybe the same day as Caitlin.
“Drink tea? ” she asks.
“Why is he crazy?” I ask.
“I don’t know. Sometimes, the spirit.”
“Takes him?” I ask.
She pinches a few green leaves into the cups.
“Sit down. Have tea.”
The two faces of the ancestors stare with eyes of stone from their position above the door.
“When will you get married?”
“After I am thirty. Six or seven years. Another cup?”
She refills the cups.
“I don’t want marry. Bring too many problem.”
“Problem?”
“Have to grow the pig. Have to visit everybody, take pork.”
“Will you move away?”
“If husband has brothers I can stay here. Their wife will live with his family.”
She tops up the tea from a thermos.
“I think mother not come for lunch.”
“Can we find her? I’d like to meet her.”
“Long walk. Forty minute.”
“When is the last bus?”
“Six-thirty. If you want see her, we go now.”
“Where is the toilet?”
“Near the pigs. It is not clean."
“It doesn’t matter.”
We go to the back lane again.
A man’s head pops up from a low mud wall further along.
An old wicker gate attached with string barely provides privacy. I balance on two planks across a large shallow ditch full of excrement. There is no bad smell because of the excellent ventilation. Afterwards, I wait for Amy, and then we wash our hands under a gush of water from the pump on the front porch.
We stop at the ancestral hall on the way out of the village.
“This A Gong Ting,” Amy says. Grandfather room.
She points up to the sign at the top of the entrance.
“My father made this.”
“What are the words?” I say.
“Fei Hong,” she reads. “It say Fly Wild Goose.”
We walk between thorny hedges lining the road. Amy points out several patches farmed by her parents: an orchard and two narrow strips planted with vegetable seedlings at the side of a concrete water channel. She points out the large rock she used to climb as a child, a huge lichen-mottled block, twice her height.
“This always have water on top. Even if long time no rain.”
“Very mysterious.”
“Climb up?”
“You climb,” I laugh. “I’ll take a photo.”
She climbs up and splashes the water for the camera.
“Again we walk together,” Amy says as we continue.
“Yes,” I say. “It’s good.”
“I’m very happy meet you.”
“Me too,” I say, and we give each other smiles.
We pass a stone quarry where overloaded trucks make circles in clouds of dust. Amy points out the Boat Mountain which appears as the road winds between two hills, a long, low ridge, much more eroded than the surrounding limestone hills. A high point at one end looks like a sail blown in the wind.
We enter a wicker gate, and wander up through an orchard. In a field beyond we find Amy’s mother using a long-handled shovel to loosen the soil around young orange trees. Her face is barely lined; only a few strands of grey in the short black hair under her green Mao hat. We laugh as we greet. The mother takes off her hat when I ask if I can photograph them.

“It’s hand-sewn,” I comment.

“She make it,” Amy says.

I position them so that the Boat Mountain is in the background. Amy shuffles over a bit when I ask them to stand together. They chat as the Mother packs her things into a jute bag, giving us each a mandarin. Amy unties a cow tethered nearby and we walk behind it.

“Qu, qu,” she shoos the cow, when it strays.

“Mother asks will you eat with us? She will kill a chicken.”

I ask Amy what year her mother was born, and they confer for a while.

“1956.”

“One year after me,” I laugh. “I thought we must be the same age.”

After we pass the stone quarry, the mother disappears down a footpath across a paddy to find the other cow which had wandered off in the morning.

“Mother angry,” Amy says. “My father play card last night. Didn't come home.”

“With friends?”

“Not friends. With anybody. Sometimes he stay home to make furniture. When she go work, he play cards. I never give him money. I always give to her. Last year he went bank to borrow money. Then one day bank men came to our house. My father said he didn’t borrow money. He took them away to talk. But Mother know.”

I frown at the ground as we trudge along. The harshness of their lives is unrelenting. These three young women all carry a burden of responsibility, all earning money to support their families, each aware that they have only a small window of time before starting a family of their own.
Back in the village, Amy does not acknowledge the town lads who gaze at her as we pass. She unlocks the door to the house and turns on the television.

“Are you tired? Sit down.”

Her mother comes through the back door dangling a chicken by its legs. The feet poke out from her fingers like tangled roots. Amy fills a small white bowl with clear fluid from a plastic jerry can and hands it to her mother.

“Try this,” she says and gives me a bowl.

“What is it?”

“Mandarin wine. Make at home.

The volatile fumes hit my nose as I take a mouthful which burns nicely as it slides down.

I watch from the door while the two women prepare the meal on the porch. Amy lights a fire on the dirt floor of a low mud-brick shed at the side. She steams rice in a pressure-cooker, using sawdust from a large bag to keep the flames high. The mother pumps water to rinse a wooden board and a plastic basin. She sharpens the blade of a thin knife on a large worn stone beside the pump, then she plucks feathers from the neck of the chicken, holding the head back. Amy comes inside to get a white bowl. She throws a handful of salt into the bowl. The chicken is held calm by the older woman while Amy applies the knife.

“Don’t look,” she says. “Go inside.”

I turn to watch the television. An ancient drama plays on the television. Groups of men with hair tied in long tails invade a palace, feet flying first. A princess in white chiffon keeps them at bay using the veils as tentacles. A boy and grandmother watch the action from behind a door.

When I look back, the white bowl is full of blood. The chicken’s eyes are rolling. It is placed on the ground where it kicks and stretches its legs before fluffing out its feathers and folding itself into a nesting position, a death as painless as falling asleep.

Soon, the mother brings the plucked bird inside and divides its body into pieces on the bench beside the television. At the door behind, I hear feet scuff the cement floor. Amy’s father enters. The women look up but say nothing. A smile fades from his face before
he goes into the bedroom and shuts the door. Amy sets up an electric hot plate on the table and lays out the bowls and chopsticks. She pours stock into a stainless steel pan and the mother adds the chicken pieces. A huge plate of washed lettuce and the bowl of blood are set on the table. They pile lettuce leaves into the stock, then fish it out onto a dish of rice. Amy uses chopsticks to tweezer a chicken leg into my bowl.

“Mother say this best part,” she says.

Heaping more lettuce into the hot pot, she picks up the bowl of blood.

“You like this?”

“The blood? No, but I don’t mind if you put it in.”

The red blood has already jellied. It blanches pale pink in the soup, staying in clumps. Amy picks bits out and slurps it into her mouth.

“I love it,” she says.

The destitute aunt is no longer standing on the concrete conduit, when we leave town. I wonder if she is the aunt whose son was killed. Her image stays my mind as I try to imagine losing a son in such a way, and wonder about the law that governs here. Surely the whole village is protecting that man. Some stories can never be told. I feel humbled by this raw existence, humbled by the kindness of the people.
In the street where I live, above Panda Travel, I hear music from before dawn till after midnight every day. It begins with a folk song played over loud-speakers in the Party Headquarters at the end of the street: a place that has the feel of an enclave, with a wall and a grand stone gateway. At 8am every morning, a water-tanker plays Happy Birthday as it circles the streets spraying water and sweeping. At night I go to sleep listening to the sound of mournful karaoke singers, far more comforting than silence. This morning, I hear what sounds like Irish folk music in the distance.

I open the window to see a funeral procession three floors below. It is led by a man throwing handfuls of brown paper money: behind him, half a dozen women in unbleached hemp tunics walk backwards, bowing to the coffin and wailing with every step. They have dried grass tied around their waists. The body is inside a wire frame covered in white paper and decorated with crimson and green butterflies and rows of bright paper rosettes. Musicians follow, playing gongs, horns and drums. At the end of the procession a woman with a broom sweeps up the fake money.

In the afternoon, at my Chinese lesson, we sit outside the school on the patio.

"Ni hao?" Cham asks.

"I'm bu hen hao," I say. "Not very good. Tired."

"In China, we say hen hao, very good, even if we don't feel good," he says. "Tell me about your morning. In Chinese."

"Jin tian, zao shang, wo ting ying yue," I say. This morning I heard music.

"On the radio?" he asks in Chinese.

"Ting bu dong," I say. Don't understand.

I tell him about the funeral in English.

"There was no body."

"Really?"

"I magnified the pictures in the camera. There was a man's suit laid out, with the sleeves crossed, but it was empty."
“Strange,” he says. “Maybe they hid the body. The government wants people to burn the body, but they still try to bury it. Did you hear firecrackers early in the morning?”

“Sometimes.”

“If somebody dies in the night, they immediately set off crackers. Just a few. In my hometown in Zhejiang, when somebody dies, the people hold a long piece of rope and walk to the river then dip the rope in the water. My father died ten years ago. He worked very hard to support us. He was a stone mason. He rode his bicycle to work every day, in the heat, cold and rain. When I was a small boy he used to pick me up and carry me on the triangle of the bike. My mother stayed at home and worked. She used to faint in the kitchen because she was hypoglycaemic. She didn't have enough food. My mother and father fight a lot. He was very angry. ‘Where is the money I gave you?’ he said to her. ‘I bought meat to give to the children. Why you want me have so many children?’ she asked him.”

“When my father was three, his father died. His mother died when he was thirteen. His older sister fell in love and went away. The neighbours lent him the money for a coffin for his mother. In those days the coffin was very expensive, maybe as much as a house. So my father was an orphan at age thirteen.”

Cham’s eyes well up as he talks.

“My father left me an exercise book in which he wrote how much he earned every day, and all the expenses. That's all he left. The story of his hard work.” He gives a wistful shake of the head.

“Can you understand why Chinese people have strong family relationships? In China the relationship between people is important. Not money. Now I've told you my story, can you compare it with Western families?”

There is an edge to his voice that frightens me a little.

“I think about this a lot,” I say. “It's different in Australia, because most people have money, so they can be more independent.” But I know what he means. Family bonds are an invisible but powerful cohesive force in Chinese society, perhaps binding people together more strongly than the external tie of the Party.

“How about we walk and talk?” I suggest. “To keep warm.”
After a few days we progress from walking to bike-riding. We ride up *Shenshan Lu*, Spirit Mountain Road, where Kim and I had walked when we arrived in Yangshuo. For the first time, I go past the construction sites to the northern edge of town. We take a left turn into a small valley of paddies. Here the landscape takes a different form, with the foothills sloping up to the limestone cliffs, rather than the cliffs jutting out at sharp right angles.

In the distance, a track winding up to the saddle at the head of the valley draws my focus, and we ride in that direction. Across a weir is the small village of Shenshan, Spirit Mountain, where three lanes converge at a village square. An old man sitting on the steps of a derelict ancestral hall nods as we pass. Outside a small shop, a group of locals gather around a card game.

We continue through orchards fenced with stone walls, stopping at a paved area where locals are washing at a well. We lean the bikes against the trunk of a large old elm, where several women wash lettuce leaves at three spring-fed, stone pools built into a large paved terrace in the bank. Small fish wriggle through strands of weed in crystal-clear water of the first pool, which is used for drinking. Looking into this pool is like entering a different beautiful world through the clarity of the water. It overflows imperceptibly into the second pool, which is used for washing vegetables, and then into the third which is for washing clothes. From there the water feeds into a large pond where fish and ducks are raised, before it flows into the paddies.

I ask Cham about the three small oblongs of red paper stuck to the trunk of the elm.

“For the tree spirit,” he says. “The people respect the great age of the tree. The red paper means blood and life. They offer it to the tree, hoping for the favour of a long life.”

The surface of the path changes as it begins to rise at the head of the valley. Stone tiles laid upright in a crisscross pattern create a thick, non-slip surface. The path is well cambered with gutters on either side. Half way up, large foot-polished stepping stones take over from the patterning. A wall under a small tree provides a seat looking back over the valley towards Yangshuo. We pull a few brambles away from a large stone tablet carved in rows of
Chinese characters. Brushing away dry moss, Chem translates the top row.

“This path, Muji Lu,” he reads. “Wood Chicken Road, renovated in the ninth year of Guangxu Emperor,” he says. “About 1884.”

I wonder why such a substantial track was built. Further up, we find a defunct water-race circling the hillside down to a deep round cistern carved into the mountain. Two birds startle in a bush up the hill and fly away one behind the other, beak-to-tail, down the valley. They are the largest birds I have seen in the wild, their long slender tails curling up slightly. That night I search the birds of China on the computer at the back of Drifters and find a magpie, xì qìe, meaning happy bird, with the distinctive lilting tail and the beak-to-tail flight pattern. Its feathers are sky blue, and the long tail striped black and white.
Qing Ming

It always rains at Qing Ming, begins a famous Chinese poem, one of the many poems children learn by heart in their first years of school. Over the winter, the Li Jiang has shrunk to a level that makes it impossible for the tourist boats to come down to Yangshuo. Only bamboo rafts use the narrow stream that flows though the acres of dry pebbles. But in the three weeks before Qing Ming, the drizzle falls continuously and the springs, creeks and irrigation channels begin to flow.

In the Chinese agricultural calendar, the year is divided into twenty-four seasons. Jing Zhe, Awakening of Insects, the true herald of spring, occurs on 5th March. Fifteen days later is Chun Fen, the Spring Divide, which falls on the equinox. Another fifteen days later is Qing Ming, Clear Bright, which falls on the 5th April. On this day, the people go across the fields to tend the graves and pay respect to the ancestors.

“Do you know this?” I ask Caity. I show her the characters Jing Zhe, Awakening of Insects.

“This last month,” she says. “Next have Qing Ming. You come my village for Qing Ming?”

“The week before I return to Australia,” I say. “Yes I can come.”

We take a bus to Wucheng, Five Cliffs, on the morning of Qing Ming. There is a shop at either side of the corner: bicycle repairs and a barber. Caity takes me into the school grounds near the corner where she talks to the caretaker and admires his new baby. The spacious grounds are surrounded by a tall white-painted wall, with classrooms arranged along one side. Sparrows swoop by us in the puddled lane, which leads around the corner to Caity’s new double-storey cement-rendered house. In fact, the house is two buildings which the lane passes between. On the left is the sleeping quarters and on the right is the kitchen.
Another family, cousins of Caity’s, live in a half-built house adjacent to the paved area at the front of the kitchen. We join the young family sitting on the steps while the mother feeds an infant. Other random people stop and talk and sit around. When the baby has finished feeding, the Mum holds it out to pee through an opening in the pants seam. It’s rare to hear a baby cry in China, because the babies are never “put down” to sleep. There are no cradles or cribs and no uncomfortable wet or dirty nappies. The babies always sleep in someone’s arms, and at night they sleep with their parents.

Like at Amy’s house, there is a well in front of the kitchen, but without a pump. Caity uses a red plastic pot on a rope to fetch water, drinking while she pours, splashing her face.

“Drink?” she calls. “I love my home water,” she says. The water is crystal clear and tastes completely untinged.

“Come see my room.”

We cross the lane to the living quarters. The lounge room has an altar on the back wall, with a bright new poster of Mao as the centrepiece and a television to one side. A large map of the world is stuck on the wall above a varnished wooden lounge. A teenage boy with styled hair and expensive jeans sits watching television.

“This my brother.” She sits down and squashes up against him, squeezing him with an arm around his shoulder. “Take picture?”

Upstairs, Caity has a four poster pine bed covered in a pink mosquito net.

“Ah, my mother wash jacket,” she cries. She holds the green jacket to her face and breathes deeply with her eyes closed. Along the window sill is a row of empty bottles: tequila, vodka, rum, brandy.

“From Drifters,” she says.

She shows me a tin box full of photos of herself.

“My Sweden friend give me,” she says.

The sound of sharp voices rises up from the road below. She looks down from the window, her brow furrowed.

“My parent,” she says with a worried glance. “They always fighting.”

She takes me on a tour of the old town, which is at the centre of the village. We enter narrow lane and wind through a compact maze of grey-brick houses. Everything is small here, low ceilings and
doorways, tiny courtyards. It is almost a miniature village. Black tiled rooftop have collapsed into yards stacked with derelict farming implements, and weathered bamboo baskets. Spongy green moss grows on a wall under a dripping wooden gutter.

Back at the well, Caity’s mother is washing two fresh-plucked chickens. We have an early lunch; the father presiding over the hot pot in middle of the table. Caity doesn’t introduce me, and there is little talk over the meal. Afterwards I wander around the other side of the kitchen and look into a large dark room at the back. Inside a water-buffalo munching from a pile of straw throws its head up breathing loudly when it sees me.

We join a large group waiting at the corner shop, and walk single-file for several kilometres along the highway. Two teenage cousins walking with us, call Caity jie, meaning older sister. A few men carry hoes across their shoulders. A large basket of offerings is carried on a shoulder pole. We turn off a side track and walk between orchards and vegetable gardens. Along the way, other groups gather around graves, pulling weeds and raking. Bursts of exploding firecrackers sound near and far amid billows of blue smoke.

The track winds between two massive rock towers, the cliff faces dark with moisture and mould, full of gaping holes and speckled with small green bushes. We stop to drink at a fast-running spring at the base of a cliff, and pass the ubiquitous stone quarry. The graves are in a pecan nut orchard with new leaf buds about to burst into leaf. Family groups chip weeds and rake the ground in front of a row of graves. An older man offers cigarettes to other males arriving.

The graves are mounds, with a platform in front. Their positions are determined according to Feng Shui principles, preferably facing south towards the sun, with a hill behind, and with converging water courses in front, designed to contain everything good, and exclude the bad. Caity climbs up to join a group inspecting a large new gravestone. Others stand around talking and admiring the huge new stone tablet which is carved with columns of characters naming all the descendants.
“This my father grandmother,” Caity says. “Have everybody name.” The multitude of descendants attests to the good fortune at work within the family.

“My name,” here Caity says, pointing to the base.

We move along to a grave at the far end of the row, where the men are pouring wine into three pink plastic goblets. They set a cooked chicken and three bowls of rice before the grave. The invisible aroma of meat cooking is thought to directly connect with the spirit world, where the ancestors, if pleased, have the power to influence events in the material world. Each take turns to bow three times, holding sticks of incense. They fold brown paper money in half, handing some to me to help in the folding, and let it fall in a heap in front of the grave, before setting it on fire. Before moving on, they unroll a pack of firecrackers and drape it over the mound, and watch the minute it takes for them all to explode.

I go with Caity across the orchard to another grave where two young men are pulling weeds from a mound. There is no gravestone here, just loose rocks stacked across the front.

“This my uncle here.”

We fold a pile of money and burn it. A roll of crackers is unrolled and ignited.

“Now we go mountain,” Caity says. “Come with me.” A group of twenty has gathered outside the orchard. They seem barely connected; there are no greetings or signs of pleasure or recognition exchanged. We set off along a foot track between brambles and patches of close cropped grass watched over by the dramatic limestone towers.

A young woman hands out sticks of sugar cane, and we chew the sweet fibre as we walk. The long line of people snakes up the worn stone steps between two cliffs. At the top we look down over a magnificent view of a lake reflecting the blue sky in a valley surrounded by a circle of stone towers. Water gushes from the base of a cliff, feeding an enormous volume of water into the lake. Smoke drifts up from a single house on the far side of the lake. It could be Lake Lacuna.

The track skirts around the hillside between huge fallen boulders. We stop on a high rock platform and rest before leaving
the valley. A woman hands out packets of sticky rice wrapped in
bamboo leaves. The people stand separately without speaking, looking back over the beautiful lake. I notice Caity’s father further away standing silently gazing. For many generations the families have walked this path, tending the graves and making offerings to the dead. Here, they are retracing the footsteps of their lives and seeing the future, as it will be, with the previous generations paying respect to the ones that went before.

The line reforms and snakes down to the home valley. We visit two more grave clusters. The same chicken and bowls of rice are laid out before the graves. The woman with the plastic basket offers me a mandarin. We have a chuckle together when she shows she is using the basket to conceal that the seam of her trousers has come undone from the crotch to the knee.

Caity and I leave the group behind, and make our way back. An old stone footpath between orange groves takes us down to the flatland paddies. We follow an old man walking a water buffalo and watch it submerge itself in a large brown reservoir, grunting with satisfaction. The path takes us into a grove of giant elms at the foot of a cliff.


We jump across stones to avoid mud in a water course. Caity stops when we emerge into the open.

“This my village,” she says, looking at the row of house on the far side of paddies. “I really like my village. And I really like my name.”

I look at her face as she gazes across to her home.

“People call me Caity,” she says. “I am Caity.”

Twelve months later, when I return to China, I visit Kathleen, the student I met in Yangshuo, and stay with her in Shenzhen. From there, I take a train to Zhengzhou, to spend four days with Emma, the girl I had met in Newcastle, who had failed in her application for
Permanent Residency in Australia. From Emma’s it is a short seven hour journey to Xian, where I pick up Caitlin’s trail again, on her visit to the Entombed Warriors. Only another seventeen hours from Xian to Chengdu, and then Songpan, where I began this story. I have had no contact with the three café girls over the last twelve months I have no idea where they are or what they are doing.

I arrive in Yangshuo in the morning and book into a hotel. One of the shoeshine men catches up with me as I was rush down West Street to Drifters.

“Ming tian,” I say. Tomorrow.

He walks beside me talking excitedly.

“Ni hui lai,” you return, he says.

“Ni ren shi wo,” I laugh. You recognize me.

“Salleeee,” Melinda yells. “Sally’s back.”

Amy and Caity appear from the kitchen.

“I know you come soon,” Caity says.

“Breakfast C?” Amy asks.

The shoeshine gives my boots an excessive polishing while the girls make my breakfast.

“We all finish work at Drifters,” Caity tells me later.

“When?”

“Four weeks. But must wait for boss find new girls.”

I spend another cold winter in Yangshuo, visiting the villages again, exploring the countryside by bicycle. One day, Melinda and I walk the twenty-five kilometres from Yangdi. Caity takes me on a walk across the paddies from her hometown to visit her grandmother. Amy and I come across a festival at a small Taoist temple built into a cave in Snail Mountain near Xingping.

Ma ti zhu wang, horses, hooves and spider webs: the traces and clues left behind. Caitlin’s imprint in China is as ethereal as a dream, as fleeting as a bird in flight, but following her on this hopeless journey has opened up a world of endless fascination and possibility.

I sometimes return to the house at Dungog and stay in the garden flat where Kim and Caitlin had their bedrooms. All of Caitlin’s things are there, much as she left them. Nan had washed all her
clothes, and they are still folded on the shelves. The photos she had
pinned on her cupboard, of all her friends, the gorgeous year ten
formal, and the adored cats, are curling up and fading.

Today I open the doors of the verandah onto the branches of
the invasive jacaranda. Sitting on the couch, I am eating a cheese
and salami sandwich, a rare indulgence now, but one Caitlin and I
often used to share. A magpie stands in the doorway, looking from
side-to-side. It walks across the floor to where I am sitting. I hand her
a few pieces of cheese and salami which she scoffs down, walks
outside, and flies away.
Grief Narrative: A Response to Death
Introduction

Any given cultural construct—from religion and poetry to psychoanalysis and medical technology—may be construed as a response to the disordering force of death. Culture itself would then be an attempt to both represent death and to contain it, to make it comprehensible and thereby diffuse some of its power.

Sarah Webster Goodwin and Elizabeth Bronfen (4)

The subject of death has always been significant to homo sapiens, the one living creature who, as its Latin name, *sapiens*, indicates, is defined as “knowing”. The human question of how to live with the knowledge of death is at the heart of philosophy and religion, and according to Bronfen and Webster Goodwin, at the heart of all culture. Consciousness of mortality as a shaping force in the culture of peoples is evident in the earliest human remains and in the oldest known texts. For archaeologists and anthropologists, the past is studied through human remains: the bones, graves and tombs, the offerings and epitaphs. The way a society treats its dead reveals something of its values and beliefs. Death and grief are age-old subjects of narrative, from the outpourings of the Old Testament and the Homeric epics, to Greek and Shakespearean tragedy. The image of the crucifixion, a graphic and enduring representation of death, testifies to the power of the death-narrative and the phenomenon of grief.
In the modern era, Edvard Munch’s painting, *The Scream*, is an expressive representation of the interiority of grief. It portrays a scene in which the repercussions of trauma reach into every aspect of life: the stricken skull-like face and its environment engulfed by shockwaves of violent colour and energy. A scream is a bodily reflex. It is the infant’s response to its first experience of life, a reaction to its first breath. And for its first years, the infant scream will erupt as it repels what it cannot bear: the feeling of hunger, the outrage of siblings, the anxiety of separation or any other pain or discomfort. While an infant scream is produced involuntarily as a reflex, it alerts others to the distress, functioning as an alarm. Over time, an infant learns other ways of managing its anguish, adopting the codes of its social milieu, and converting the energy into more productive forms. Like Munch’s painting, the grief narrative as a literary form is a contained expression of a silent scream. Even in this distilled and compressed form, the sense of alarm is palpable in the grief narrative, and this may be the ultimate purpose of such a work, to alert others to the human predicament.

The horror and despair depicted in *The Scream* captures the anguish I felt in the first years after the death of my teenage daughter, Caitlin, in a road accident. At that time, writing provided a constructive way of retrieving and recording memories, and resulted in a collection of random fragments. The process of writing these fragments helped derail negative thought patterns and enabled small periods of respite by transforming pain into positive feeling. I printed and cut out the fragments, and glued them into a scrapbook, along with press cuttings, photocopies of Caitlin’s diaries and letters of condolence. I thought of this scrapbook as a kind of grunge writing,
raw and unflinching, showing the horrible reality that must be faced. I was filled with the knowledge that what had happened was terribly important, and I wanted to tell the whole world about it. Each time I wrote, I was trying to write the beginning of a story, something that would immediately impart the urgency I felt so that others might be warned and avoid such a tragic outcome. The scrapbook was too raw, too personal, too uncomfortable. It was a journal, a daily outpouring without the atmospherics of exposition or the softening of interpretation. After twelve months, I completed a short three part work entitled About Caitlin. The final part of this work was about a trip Caitlin had made to China several years before the accident. The focus on China led me to study the Chinese language, to begin researching the geography, history and literature of China, and eventually to visit China myself. Following the footsteps of Caitlin’s journey became the basis of my memoir, The Most Beautiful Place in the World, which is the creative component of this submission.

In recent decades, the memoir has come to the fore both in book sales and as a subject of critical study. Its evolution most obviously combines the two distinct genres of autobiography and biography by joining a story of the self with a story of an other. This other, unlike in classic biography, in which the subject is a public figure, is personally significant to the writer, rather than to the public following of the subject. In this merging of two major genres, the memoir has freed itself from the constrictions of both these models, no longer concerning itself with the arduous task of circumscribing an entire life. The memoirist is free to select and limit the themes and time span that suits his or her project. Described by Jonathon Tadashi Naito as an “unruly category of narrative” (478), the memoir
form has shown itself to resist definition due to its shape-shifting tendency. In *Repossessing the World*, however, Helen Buss claims this generic disobedience is a defining attribute of the genre, giving it a plasticity that enables writers to accommodate their subjects in new ways. For example, Buss identifies that writers of memoir disrupt chronological plotting, transgress codes that delineate boundaries between private life and public life, and locate a discourse in a narrator who admits partiality, incompleteness and personal bias. (45-46). She claims that the memoir form can “mandate contingency and conditionality as part of its very nature”, challenging the traditional concept of an author as authoritative (51). This shift from an idealized construct of the self as author in memoir, to a realistic construct of a questionable self, represents a drive towards a deeper truth of experience.

Biographies initiated by the death of a parent are an earlier form of memoir in which a life completed in due season is given an eulogical rendition concerned with paying homage to a parent’s life. *The Invention of Solitude* by Paul Auster, written after the death of his father, broke new ground in the memoir form, not least by the use of novelistic flashes in time and place, but also by floodlighting areas of life normally kept in the dark. His investigation of the distempered life of his father, back-grounded by his own recently failed marriage, is a tragic but ordinary story of seemingly hereditary solitude. The story is weighed down by a leaden subtext of grief, not about loss, but about disappointment in a man who had so little to offer as a father. The mood of Auster’s memoir is reminiscent of the earlier James Agee novel, *A Death in the Family*, which was written before the rise of memoir, when personal stories were often fictionalized in
order to preserve the more polarized division between public and private life that characterized much of the twentieth century. Agee’s novel is an intense rendition of a small boy’s experience of his father’s death and funeral. In this work, perplexed observation and disappointment combine in silent, powerless rectitude as the small boy watches as his father is stolen away. At about the same time, in the fifties, the novelist Rosamund Lehmann published a memoir about the sudden death of her adult daughter. In this narrative, the structure is held together by the association and signification of memories, anticipating the fragmentation of the post-modern era. The novelist Blake Morrison brought parental memoir to the fore with the publishing of the best-selling story of his father’s life, *And When Did You Last See Your Father?* which was later made into a successful feature length movie. Morrison’s candid revelations of his father’s private life, and his own revealing portrait of himself, create a realistic rather than an idealized version of events, striking a major chord with readers. Whereas in the past, writers developed fiction as a site to accommodate personal subjects, contemporary writers such as Auster and Morrison show the plasticity of the memoir form in their redrafting of the dividing-line between public and private life, mining the rich field of the personal to give value to the ordinary. Transgression of the dividing line between private and public occurs at the intersection of another binary, that of the divide between fact and fiction. Questions of integrity drive writers to speak their truth, an action which is balanced against the act of exposing themselves or others to the public gaze. Such an economy of ethical issues informs a network of dilemmas that the memoirist negotiates in the construction of personal narratives.
Recent trauma and grief narratives are examples of how the memoir form can be adapted to the difficult subject of personal bereavement. Mark Allister was one of the first theorists to use the term “grief narrative” in *Refiguring the Map of Sorrow*, in which he studies a selection of recent American memoirs about grief. He identifies a geographical or ecological treatment of grief, where landscape provides a stable site that can absorb the destabilizing effects of bereavement and loss. The writers in his study construct their engagement with landscape as metanarratives, which provide a structural framework in the texts in the form of a linear journey, or a circular structure encompassing a limited physical space, such as a bird colony or race track. This merging of content with form weaves an intricate literary fabric that can carry the depth and breadth of traumatic experience, mirroring the experience of the author’s grief at the same time as creating a more comfortable emotional distance from the traumatic subject. The metanarrative, as it displaces the intensity of grief, provides a supporting structure that softens the impact of the story.

For the purpose of this study, I have limited my choice of texts to grief narratives similar to my own in that they relate to unanticipated deaths: the death of a beloved spouse, the premature loss of parents or the death of a sibling or offspring. Trauma caused by unexpected premature death is the overarching problem these memoirs have in common. The narratives studied in this exegesis are primarily concerned with the individual processing of the shock of bereavement and the following grief. These stories attempt to engage readers in difficult terrain. In this exegesis, I will attempt to unpack the complexity of grief experiences as they are represented
in these stories. My interest is not in discovering a paradigm for grief, but in exploring the literary expression of grief, and discovering the techniques and structures used to convey the intensity and complexity of the experience. In writing my memoir, the problem was how to write it: finding the beginning, and making it cohesive and giving it depth. By far the largest difficulty was the construction of a narrative self. Largely, this was a process of trial and error; needing the time to find the necessary distance and gain a measure of confidence. In this exegesis, I investigate how others create their stories of grief.

The study is divided into three parts which reflect my interest in the breaches and imbalances caused by bereavement. The first part, *Death and the Self*, is an investigation of how writers react to their personal encounter with death. I will explore the effect of the experience on the psyche and on identity. I will show how trauma leads to the questioning and re-evaluation of beliefs and values, and show how these aspects of grief provide narrative threads that give the stories cohesion. Further, I will argue that narrative mood is a component of self-figuring within the texts and make an analysis of how mood is constructed. The second section, *Finding a Place for Grief*, explores how grief writers dramatize the “outing” of death: the social awkwardness and isolation that can occur as a result of taboos about death, and the physical dislocation from one’s place in the world. I will explore the sites in which writers locate their grief, and the role this location plays in their narratives. I will argue that taboo topics are constructed as narrative themes and show how they are sometimes used as axes around which discourse is developed and sustained. The third section, *The Public Face of Grief*,
addresses ethical concerns inherent in the publication of private stories. I will discuss how writers directly approach such ethical issues and, conversely, how attitudes towards ethics appear indirectly as subtext within their narratives.
Part One

Death and the Self

In *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth states that the notion of trauma "confronts us with a fundamental enigma concerning the psyche's relation to reality". (91). The paradox that underlies this enigma, Caruth suggests, is "about the necessity and the impossibility of confronting death" (100). It seems that death pushes the human mind to a limit beyond which it cannot go. In grief, the mind and emotions continue to try to connect with the missing person despite knowing that the loss is permanent. The psyche operates at a primal level driven by a natural impulse to re-connect. Like a blowfly trying to go through a window, it repeatedly bangs into an invisible barrier. The act of formulating the experience into a written work provides surrogate connectivity and, it might be said, one of many forms of consolation. This section is about the psychological experience of the self in its direct confrontation with death, and how writers represent and construct the self in grief narratives.

In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud explains his theory of the origins of self-conflict within the human mind. He supposes that the first systems of thought came about as a result of observation of sleep and death. "The chief starting-point of this theorizing must have been with the problem of death [. . .]. Even for us it is lacking in content and connotation" (76). The grief narratives in this study show the difficulty of accepting the fundamental enigma of death, and how hard the human mind works to give death "content and connotation". Grief narratives explore the profound effect of loss, often involving a
questioning or even a repudiation of self, as if, in grief, the self must undergo its own parallel death. Ellie Ragland sees trauma as an encounter with the “naked real”, in which the mind is stripped of its protective layer of comforts and defences. “We encounter the naked real only in psychosis or in nightmare (94)”, Ragland says, an interpretation which, to me, explains why bereavement feels like insanity. Death strips life of its protective shell, exposing its fragility. Grief narratives write this story of exposure, of the breaking of the protective shell. To some extent, the writing of a grief narrative is a construction of a new protective shell, a creative act that contributes to survival in its assertion of order over chaos. As Caruth argues, “Trauma is not simply an effect of destruction but also fundamentally an enigma of survival. It is only by recognising traumatic experience as a paradoxical relation between destructiveness and survival that we can also recognise the legacy of incomprehensibility at the heart of catastrophic experience” (58).

Constructing the self as a character was the most challenging aspect of writing my memoir. In hindsight, the problem was one of timing. Although keeping a journal was essential for salvaging and generating material, the time of writing being too soon after the painful subject made an objective approach impossible. The self was immersed in grief, at the same time as being withdrawn or “suspended” from the outside world. In my case, this withdrawal became a characteristic response. Internally, however, it involved a breach with the past and with everything once taken for granted, demanding a critical and on-going review of all that had happened. The self bears much of the brunt of this critical examination which is a constant and repetitive mulling of memories. This particular set of
thought patterns has been identified as a symptom of traumatic stress disorder, again making bereavement akin to a mental health problem. The bereaved self is a contingent self: a self rejecting its new identity. If it wants to survive, however, the grieving self must abide its grief, at least. Thus alienated and abiding, my bereaved self had no direction and no time-frame with which to shape the narrative it was attempting to write.

At another level, grief is a momentous experience, full of profoundly meaningful insights, significant connections and impossible coincidences. This is the poetical material of the writer, material in which I floundered in my attempts to bring to words. Here I felt my story needed a broad base which could carry such momentous material, and that at some point the thing would develop a life of its own and that the words would find their place. In addition, my lack of experience as a writer made this project over-ambitious. I discovered the work of the Dutch writer and painter Armando, who explores sites of holocaust trauma, evoking the traces and disappearances of horror in the anonymous faces and voices of present-day locals. In a similar fashion, his artworks resemble large stains, evoking the body fluids that have been spilled. Ernst van Alphen names this technique "radical indexation", referring to the way it "indicates" from a "radical" or sideways position, indirectly pointing towards the subject (12). I borrowed this technique, attempting to evoke my feeling by recreating scenes such as the manic search for Caitlin’s words to represent anguish, or my attempts to maintain connection with Caitlin through ritual. It was my hope that I would be able to create
emotional resonance in the reader by layering scenes that indirectly related to my subject.

To begin, I want to discuss Martin Amis’s memoir, *Experience*, written after the death of his father, who was a well-known novelist. Although traumatic grief is not central to this memoir, there is a tragic sub-plot through which Amis attempts to discern something of the grief experience. From this vicarious position, Amis raises valid questions about grief. The first chapter, *Missing*, introduces the thematic thread about Amis’s cousin, Lucy, who disappeared when she was twenty-one. Twenty years later, when her remains were finally discovered, she was found to be the victim of a pair of serial killers, a case that drew the attention of the whole nation. Amis chronicles his growing awareness of the effect of the loss on the victim’s mother, brother and sister, creating a kind of grief narrative-by-proxy. Amis is conscious that, although the disappearance is shocking, he is not nearly as traumatized as Lucy’s next of kin. He re-creates the moment when he first heard the news of Lucy’s disappearance, describing his own reaction as a feeling of “magnified apprehension” of the “dread outside world” (53). Although he had known Lucy all her life, Amis is “once removed” from the trauma. He is not stricken by grief, and cannot comprehend what has happened, yet he makes a narrative of the grief through Lucy’s mother, sister and brother, in an attempt to realize the extent to which the loss reaches into their lives. The year following Lucy’s disappearance, a visit by her mother sets Amis thinking “about the unassimilably dismal event of the previous December. Can you think about something you can't assimilate? I don't think you can. Or I don't think you do” (52). He poses a similar paradox to Caruth,
identifying both the necessity, and the impossibility, of confronting death. This question is behind all the scenes he constructs about his cousin as he attempts to realize the family’s grief, while at the same time questioning his own limited response. The year after the disappearance, Amis is shocked while overhearing his aunt talk about the experience:

My aunt was leaning against the counter, with her hot drink, holding it close with joined hands. And she said in a steady unemphatic voice that not a minute passed without her thinking of Lucy and wondering where she was . . . I cowered inwardly away from this, at the depth of my incomprehension of it. [. . . ] I ducked my head and I thought Poor Miggy! What a terrible thing. She still thinks about Lucy every minute, and it’s been . . . nine months. Nine months. (54)

In this passage Amis compares his inability to think about Lucy with his Aunt’s inability to stop thinking about her, catching a glimpse of the invisible but intense cognitive work that consumes the bereft. He reflects about his incomprehension, knowing that his heart was fully engaged, but his imagination wasn’t (53). He chronicles his growing awareness of the plight of Lucy’s family, returning to it throughout the memoir. Twenty years after the disappearance, Lucy’s remains are discovered and exhumed. Amis quotes Lucy’s sister’s diary entry: “I felt a paralysing feeling of weight, fear and a pain in my heart. This is enormous. Shock brings you into the present like giving birth. All your energy goes into focusing on survival “ (66). Lucy’s sister’s physical reaction overwhelms her to the extent that she fears for her own survival.
Several months later, having arrived early at the funeral, Amis sits in the church conducting “involuntary thought experiments” in which he imagines “each of [his] sons finding themselves, as their distant cousin had, in such a violent force field”. He imagines “the moment when they sensed the magnitude of undifferentiated hatred that was ranged against them” (66). Here, Amis experiences the kind of self-torture that accompanies grief. Such involuntary thought experiments are a common experience of the bereaved, as the mind automatically and repetitively imagines and rehashes the dying moments of their loved one, a process that may continue for months or years.

The bereft self struggles to believe something that it knows as a certainty, and it is a constant inescapable struggle. For someone close to the deceased, the dread is impossible to externalize as “the dread outside world”. Like a colonizing empire, death invades the self, setting up its structures of dread within, uninvited and unwelcome. During sleep death is forgotten, but the remembering upon awakening repeats the blow. It may take many years for the knowledge to lose its power to re-shock. Amis’s word “assimilation” is an apt word to describe grief as a process in which loss is gradually absorbed and incorporated into the mind and body.

The mind and body, however, lose cohesion as an immediate result of loss. Emotional collapse accompanies psychic collapse, as fear and guilt contribute to a corrosive free-floating anxiety. With the collapse of psychic cohesion, things in the world of grief no longer make sense. In To Travel Hopefully, Christopher Rush chronicles the illness and death of his wife, and the following year of his grief. “The first day after a death the sudden absence is hard to comprehend.
Then it dawns on you like the new day. The absence is eternal: it will never go away” (38). He describes himself as “one mind-blown man [left] to record the hurt” (41). He constructs a self undergoing change at all levels, unable to find consolation in any of his previous pursuits. He resorts to his poetry notebooks, in search of strength for the next term as an English schoolteacher, still believing that “literature could be a substitute for life, or if not a substitute, then at least a consoler” (48). He chronicles a self breaking-down at the core: “I used to believe I had a separate inner life. Now I know I was wrong, and that human identity is invested in relationships. So much of me was invested in her for all those years, and now she is dead I feel my own identity obliterated” (46). The loss of his wife results in a collapse of his beliefs and causes a loss of identity that makes him challenge himself. “I was wrong,” Rush says, realizing the importance of the relationship only after it has gone (23). He structures this collapse of the self through a monthly chronology in which the emotions are mirrored in the seasons: “December came in storm-winds and lashings of rain. From my classroom window I watched the hills taking the hammering. Oh to be up there now, to be lying flat out on the ridge feeling the rains driving through me like nails!” (60). A few weeks later, “Advent arrived unregarded in the midst of hell” (61).

In her memoir *The Year of Magical Thinking*, the novelist Joan Didion also attests to the collapse of pre-conceived ideas that can be caused by bereavement. The memoir follows the events immediately after her husband’s death, a period in which she is doubly traumatized due to the life-threatening illness of her adult
daughter, Quintana, who lies comatose in a hospital. As Didion says, her memoir is her attempt
to make sense of the period that followed, weeks and
then months that cut loose any fixed idea I had ever had
about death, about illness, about probability and luck, about
good fortune and bad, about marriage and children and
memory, about grief, about the ways in which people do and
do not deal with the fact that life ends, about the shallowness
of sanity, about life itself. (7)

Here Didion shows how the loss triggers a questioning of self
on many levels. In the past, Didion notes, she had

shared a habit of mind usually credited to the very
successful. They believed absolutely in their own
management skills. They believed absolutely in the power of
the telephone numbers they had at their fingertips, the right
doctor, the major donor, the person who could facilitate a
favour at State or Justice . . . I had myself for most of my life
shared the same core belief in my ability to control events . . .

Yet I had always at some level apprehended, because I was
born fearful, that some events in life would remain beyond my
ability to control or manage them. Some events would just
happen. This was one of those events. (98)

The memoir traces Didion’s personal negotiation with death
as she learns the extent of its power, and the limitations of her own.

Didion does not easily relinquish control of her life to the
apparently random and indiscriminate dominance of death.
Remembering the details of the events, and trying to place them in
correct chronological order is a driving impulse in the memoir. The
day after the death, Didion “wondered how much time had passed between the time [she] called the ambulance and the arrival of the paramedics” (15), a question that is finally answered eight months later, when she asked the manager of the apartment building if he still had the log kept by the doormen for that night. The next day the manager sent the page in which she “noticed the paramedics were in the apartment for forty-five minutes. I had always described it as fifteen or twenty minutes” (21). Didion makes her acts of memory narrative links, interspersing them with the thoughts and conversations she has along the way, questioning and correcting her memory, refining and crystallizing the experience in its logical sequence. The narrative is constructed like a mystery in which Didion seeks to re-trace every minute surrounding the scene of the death, as if by doing so, she will re-establish control.

Control of the mind is a recurring theme in Didion’s narrative. Several chapters re-trace chains of associations that take her on side-trips to the past, provoking emotional responses that Didion fears: “The way you got sideswiped was by going back” is a phrase reiterated in italics at intervals throughout the text, like a note to the self that warns of the danger of memory and the past (112). Didion names this chain of associations “the vortex effect” which she tries to control by avoiding any venue she might associate with either Quintana or John (107). The vortex leads her to memories that cause her to question decisions that, had they been made differently, might have averted the current disaster. Yet her thoughts are beyond her control. As in Rush’s experience, there seems to be an independent automatic mechanism in the mind that tries to take responsibility for the death. Didion asks herself: “Would I need to
relive every mistake?”, expressing a wish to forget, but an inability to do so (132). This process is a kind of mental defragmentation in which the data banks of memory are regularly fed through a programme, until eventually, the memories are cleared of pain. Unlike Rush, Didion resists the guilt mechanism by deliberately avoiding places that she knows will trigger memories. This resistance is constructed as a rigid internal frame in the memoir, providing points of narrative tension and giving the work a brittle tone. In contrast, Rush’s free-falling, meteorological structure evokes his emotional turmoil. He revisits the places of memory, such as the sites of holidays, and the cemetery, in what is, however, a similarly doomed attempt to re-capture what is missing.

Fear of loss of emotional control and loss of mental coherence are major problems of Didion’s grief. For six months after her husband’s death, Didion keeps herself together while she tends the critically ill Quintana, but as Quintana achieves remission, and the pressure is reduced, Didion begins to lose mental cohesion. “There came a time in summer when I began feeling fragile, unstable” (167). Didion begins anticipating catastrophes of her own. She starts

leaving lights on through the night. If the house was dark I could not get up to make a note or look for a book or check to make sure I had turned off the stove. If the house was dark I would lie there immobilized, entertaining visions of household peril, the books that could slide from the shelf and knock me down, the rug that could slip in the hallway, the washing machine hose that could have flooded the kitchen unseen in the dark, the better to electrocute whoever turned
on a light to check the stove . . . I realized that for the time being I could not trust myself to present a coherent face to the world. (167-68).

Similarly, Rush also experiences loss of control of his mind and his emotions, but he goes into free-fall, emoting and dramatizing freely rather than fearing and intellectually resisting. For Rush, grief is about the loss of connection with his world: about his relationships with people and places. Didion’s grief is about her fear of losing her mind: her loss connection within the self.

Although their personal responses to grief differ, both the Didion and Rush memoirs share a similar tone of narrative voice: both are driven by a sense of emergency, a dramatic mood that infuses the text. An narratological analysis of the texts in this study suggests that certain structural features relate to the narrative mood and thus to how writers construct the self in grief narratives. The grief narrative is a story of a self in which loss is experienced, and to some extent recuperated, in a telos of self that forms the narrative structure. The narrative voice, as the vehicle of this structure, is characterized by a mood. The texts in this study fall into two distinct narrative mood types: either dramatic or reflective. These moods are seemingly more an infusion of feeling that pervade the text than a definable structural entity. An analysis of the narratology, however, shows there is a relationship between mood and structure in these narratives. These structural features are determined by the point of view of the narrator in relation to how time is framed in the narrative, and by the position the death is given within that frame. The dramatic narratives are written in the historic present, with the death scene placed close to the beginning. In these stories, the unfolding of time
in the present gives the works a mood of dramatic immediacy and suspense. The body of the story is concerned with what happened after the crisis of death. Both Rush and Didion construct their narratives in this way. In contrast, the reflective narratives foreground the history leading up to the death, involving childhood or family history as the dominant narrative focus. In these reflective narratives, the death is located towards the end of the story, and the narrator’s point of view is in the author’s present, real-life time of writing. The reflective narratives, rather than dramatizing grief, reconstruct events that lead up to the death, analysing influences that shaped the death itself and the grief.

Two memoirs in this study are examples of reflective grief narratives: Rosamond Lehmann’s *The Swan in the Evening*, which is about the death of an adult daughter, and Mikal Gilmore’s *Shot in the Heart*, about the execution of his brother. Both these narratives develop stories in which death has been a part of life from childhood. In a sense, they are extended answers to Amis’s question: how to assimilate death. They are stories in which death has already assimilated itself into their lives, from an early age, to the extent that the tragedies that occur later seem destined, and that everything that came before seem to be a preparation for that outcome. In both these narratives, grief is processed by unfolding the past and following the creases left behind, like a piece of crumpled paper. An unfolding of self occurs in both the dramatic and reflective narrative modes, the difference being in the direction taken through time, either into the past or into the future. I suggest these constructions represent a major structural choice in the representation of self, a choice to opt for dramatic immediacy or retrospective depth.
Lehmann’s narrative is a chronicle of memories and events that all together form a history of traumas, both great and small, which trace a development of Lehmann’s awareness of the phenomenon of death from an early age. Lehmann reconstructs the memories using vivid scenes with dialogue. The memoir begins with a childhood memory of a kindergarten scene and several memorable exchanges with Miss Davis. Lehmann reflects that these are identity forming experiences which “startle the dark backward of my identity with a flash”, or which place her “absolutely on the map . . . I am linked with Miss Davis . . . I am given status and protection” (10). These memories signal identity and security as themes of the self in the memoir. Twenty years later, she happens to see Miss Davis, who had recently lost her husband. Miss Davis is with her son who introduces himself, saying his mother had followed Lehmann’s career as a novelist. Unsettled by the encounter, Lehmann hurries away, noting that “dislocation, preoccupation are evident; a couple precariously tethered to their situation. The pathos of the filial stiff upper lip strikes me forcibly. Her dual image shocks, compels my imagination many days” (13). Thus Lehmann layers death into the narrative, connecting two memories, creating a “dual image” of her teacher before and after bereavement. Like Amis, she constructs a scenario in which she figures herself as an onlooker, not only foreshadowing the death to come, but providing contrast between the earlier vicarious experience and the later actual experience.

Another childhood scene follows when Lehmann’s infant brother swallows a bottle of perfume and a maid scolds her, saying “You may have been the death of him”. Lehmann spends a terrified
afternoon hiding under a bed. The following passage reflects on another childhood memory, the death of the gardener’s daughter:

Not till close on half a century later, when I in my turn suffered the cruellest and seemingly most unnatural of all human bereavements, did I think of her again, and of her father, remembering them as they had been together, in the hayloft, each the other’s innocent delight. . . . They then, I now, or so it seemed in the first days Sally [Lehmann’s daughter] left the earth. Yet at the same time at another mysterious level, it was as if they had drawn close and were showing themselves to me in a way I can only describe as living pictures. (29)

This is when the subject of her own bereavement is first alluded to, at the same time as Lehmann's other taboo subject, the mysticism that develops as a result of her experience of loss. This first part of Lehmann’s memoir is a construction of a storehouse of memories, from which she re-creates the experience of the way memories resound after her daughter’s death. This resounding of memory is a phenomenon similar to Didion’s “vortex”. It is as if the mind searches for experiences in the past that explain what is happening in the present, seeking patterns, linking associations and imbuing them with meaning. Didion resists this wayward activity of the mind, refusing to give memories meaning or succumbing to such “magical thinking” which she fears is the beginning of a descent into insanity. Lehmann, on the other hand, embraces the associations which she feels connect her to her daughter, providing her with consolation rather than the desolation Didion fears.
In the second part of the memoir, reflecting on the childhood memories that comprise the first section, Lehmann addresses the question of representing the self:

What I have put down so far might almost be called sub-autobiographical. It has been like a descent into a vault or cave or crypt, where all is darkness when you first penetrate. Then a torch flares, light is thrown here on a painted fresco, there on a carving or bas-relief: figures in a landscape, real and recognised, yet each with the mystifying impact of a symbol-in-itself, pure interpretation and interpreter; and able to be caught only just on the outward side of verbal or pictorial existence. Any attempt to treat the findings, or to expose them to more air and light might cause them to vanish altogether. (65)

Here, Lehman represents a contingent self, both suspended from and engaged with her loss, coining the word “sub-autobiographical” and relating it to the word “sub-conscious” through her description of the obscurity and fragility of the memories. She draws a fearful self, who, during bad times, experiences a void which “advanced its tentacles to suck [her] down” (92). In this part, rather than writing vivid scenes representing herself in the throes of grief, Lehmann reflects on her difficulties, creating a complex multi-faceted self whose different parts are in dialogue with each other: “Even at the very worst, I was upheld by an inner voice quietly telling me to wait, trust, keep still, submit with patience to every aspect of my maimed existence” (90). Lehmann claims that although she has “an unassailable conviction” she remains “lonely, secretly consoled,
troubled, disorganized, intellectually engrossed, aggressively on the
defensive” (129).

Mikal Gilmore, in Shot in the Heart, also constructs a
historiography, although unlike Lehmann, he locates his narrator as
an onlooker, observing the events, but not a part of them. Near the
beginning of his memoir, he says he has a story to tell, a story of
murders;

part of this story I know well. I have lived with its
causes and effects, its details and indelible lessons, my
entire life. I know the dead in this story—know why they
made death for others, and why they sought it for
themselves.

But there is another part to this story—a part that is
both more troubling and more illuminating, and that isn't yet
finished. In a sense, it is the place in this story where I am
stuck—that is, the place I must live in until I can unravel its
mysteries. It is the hidden part of this story, and it has never
been told because it has never been discovered. (4)

Thus Gilmore signals a search for his own place in the story.
The narrative traces the family history, finding origins of violence in
the bleak Mormon household of his mother’s childhood and the
public hanging his mother was forced to witness as a small child. “It
is possible that, in some small way, my brother’s fascination with
lives of violence—and with the end results of those lives was
inherited from my mother’s fears” (7). Indeed, although Gilmore
understates this, it is prophetic that when Gilmore was a child his
mother would
follow the news of impending executions with a fearful anxiety. She would write letters to the governor, arguing the morality of the death penalty, and asking the state to commute the condemned person’s sentence. And she would have [her sons] join her at the dining table and write letters to the governor. Since, she once explained, these killings were the only killings we knew were going to occur—the only killings, that is, that had a schedule to follow—then they were also the only killings we might possibly prevent. (9-10)

It is a cruel irony that, as it turned out, her son was the first man to be executed after a ten-year moratorium in the States. Unlike Lehmann, Gilmore does not attribute a mystical significance to this coincidence. Nor, like Didion, does he fear making connections with the past. Instead he looks at the social history, both within his family and the community, to find the origins of the mayhem. His family, Gilmore reflects,

was a family that brooded on violence and was fixated with its legends. Maybe that fascination was a way of trying to make a friend of the violence, so it would only serve us and never surprise or overpower us. Or maybe it was simply a way to get closer to it, to learn its codes and honor its ceremonies, to will it even deeper into our world. (6)

He traces the origins of the family violence to the Mormon community of his mother’s childhood:

Mormon Utah had its own codes and remembrances of violence to pass along. The Mormons had been persecuted horribly in early nineteenth-century America: They had been driven from community after community, their
members—including their children and leaders—had been sometimes murdered, until they fled the nation, and made a home apart, as exiles in the western desert. Along the way, they had come to believe in a certain use of violence: not just as a method of protection, but as a method of payment for abuses and betrayals. (7)

He tells of his inner conflict in the years after the execution: his attempts to build a sense of family through countless vain romantic relationships, and his sabotage of those relationships as a way of never having the family life he wanted so much, so that he would not pass along to his children the inheritance of violence. Or how he “simply stopped wanting any home or family, because it hurt too much, felt too much like irredeemable failure” (95). Many years after the event, Gilmore represents himself as having been in denial, his life suspended. His grief process was more one of acting out than working through. The act of writing the memoir, however, is a working through of grief. Although Gilmore constructs a self who is distanced from grief, the narrative voice carries the weight of grief, as subtext, infusing the work with the seriousness it deserves.

At the end of the story, Gilmore the narrator still cannot find an answer to the question, “how does it feel to be the brother of Gary Gilmore?” Yet an answer is available in the subtext of the book. While he claims to be in denial of his own feelings, making his own actions peripheral to the story, the narrator shows himself in a process of emotional truth-seeking, discarding destructive behaviours, reviewing his own motives in relationships, facing his own fears. He seems to be shedding pain as he pushes through the history, going through the violence piece by piece like trash,
investigating it as evidence, but more importantly weighing up its value before discarding it. It is this questioning narrative voice that permeates the narrative, a subtext that explicates a process of grief as re-sorting, crossing and re-crossing the line of violence and murder in a process that gradually brings that line into focus. Although their narratives are about the uncertainty of the self, both Lehmann and Gilmore write from a later position of self-certainty, reflecting on the effect death has had on their lives from their earliest memories. Thus, for these narrators, death has always exerted a shaping force on the self, engraving itself into the psyche as if in preparation for the actual deaths that follow.

The structures of the Lehmann and Gilmore memoirs have much in common. Their narratives explicate a history of influences that have shaped their response to death. Unlike the other memoirs in this study, they circumscribe the immediate confrontation with death, instead reflecting over their lifespans and making the historical links that give their stories meaning. They both construct narrative selves that look back over events rather than locating themselves within the milieu of trauma. In contrast to the other memoirs in this study, in which the self is constructed unravelling in the face of death, these two memoirs write selves that have already assimilated death.

The grief writer, lost and disconnected, attempts to re-connect through words, to engage the reader in their particular story. It is the writers attempt to “claim the experience”. This section has been concerned with the representation of the self in a confrontation with death, an inquiry into how the psyche reacts to bereavement and how writers represent the interiority of that experience. The grief
narrative, however, is the story of how the loss of a significant other can have repercussions on the entire web in which self is located, and through which the self fashions identity. The next section will inquire into the wider repercussions of bereavement within the social sphere and in the geographical sphere: into how bereavement may affect relationship with the external world.
Part Two

Finding a Place for Grief

The preservation and enhancement of life is a goal of any civilization, society or culture. Great civilizations, with their external and internal defences, provide the peace necessary for the flourishing of human life. It may stand to reason, then, that as massive resources are directed towards extending and enhancing life, death may be seen as an affront to this common goal. The business of death, when it does occur, is carried out smoothly and swiftly. A public façade of calm and order minimizes the social impact, maintaining the highly valued peace. Unspoken codes determine what remains private and what is acceptable in public. A bereaved person in a social situation may find the subject of their bereavement, at best, smoothed into silence or awkwardly avoided. The bereft find themselves isolated within these structures of silence. Suffering from their own taboos about death, they cannot believe or accept this worst of outcomes, but they cannot smooth it over, close it or turn it off. As Helen Buss suggests, “memoir is increasingly used to interrogate the private individual’s relationship to a history and/or culture from which she finds her experience of herself and her life excluded” (3). They must develop strategies to absorb or displace the reality. A grief narrative, as a sub-genre of memoir, is the story of exclusion from a relationship as a result of bereavement.

This exclusion reaches beyond the relationship with their lost one, however, as the bereft find themselves foreign in their own
territory. The crisis has extensive and permanent repercussions, often reaching into every aspect of life: the bereaved may find themselves alienated both socially and physically. The home, as a place of refuge, may now be a place from which one wants to flee. The sense of belonging has suddenly become a hopeless longing. The grief narrative involves negotiation of this displacement, and a mapping of the territory, as it surveys the damage in a search for meaning. Writers might depict scenes in which they encounter awkward situations in their immediate social circle, or like several grief writers, they might seek validation within the broader sphere of their reading public. The grief narrative, as a material text, is an artefact of this displacement: it is a material embodiment of displaced pain, taking a place beside any other cultural acknowledgement or representation of death. Often the mapping of this dislocation clarifies the changed situation for the narrator, as they survey the position in which they find themselves washed up. Other narrators find that grief acts like a snagged anchor, and that physical relocation can provide release from a grief they cannot escape. The physical relocation carries grief away from its origin, a journey that may be constructed as a metanarrative in the memoir, performing a narrative release from the intensity of grief. At yet another level of placement, the grief narrative, in its insistence on naming pain and enclosing it within a completed space, imaginatively, if not effectively, removes it from inside the writer’s being.

The first section of this exegesis was about how the self apprehends a confrontation with death and how the psyche finds ways to absorb grief. In this second section I will discuss how the
bereaved can be displaced within their social environment, and the techniques and literary devices used to locate, or dislocate, grief. These include setting scenes of social discomfort, developing a discourse about isolation, creating a sustained metaphor or constructing an evading metanarrative.

At an early age, Elizabeth Kübler-Ross recognised the problem of social isolation caused by the subject of death. Her memoir *The Wheel of Life: a Memoir of Living and Dying*, tells the story of how she made it her life’s work to dismantle barriers surrounding the subject of death. Hospitalized as a young girl, Kübler-Ross shared a room with a terminally ill girl who never received visitors but who impressed Kübler-Ross with her courage in the face of death. Later, when working in hospitals, Kübler-Ross noticed many doctors routinely avoided mention of anything to do with death. Dying patients were shunned and abused. Death “was probably the greatest mystery in medicine. The biggest taboo too” (128). Her book *On Death and Dying* was received with both high acclaim and moral outrage. The book was based on a series of interviews with terminally ill patients. In the interviews, which were conducted in a lecture theatre before an audience of medical students, the patients themselves welcomed the chance to talk openly. By giving voice to their feelings, both patients and audience were liberated from fears about death. From these interviews, Kübler-Ross formulated her thesis identifying five stages of dying. She was ostracised by her professional colleagues who believed she was exploiting ill people.

Although death may now have found a more acceptable place in hospitals, the subject of death continues to be a cause of
social discomfort. The bereft can find themselves imprisoned by the
delicate frame of reference imposed on death in a social context.
The grief writer sometimes makes this social discomfort a subject in
their narrative. Virginia Lloyd's memoir, *The Young Widow's Guide to
Home Improvement*, opens with a scene of this kind of social
awkwardness. The memoir begins at the front door with a dialogue
between Lloyd and a tradesman who has come to inspect the rising
damp. He wants to know how the problem was allowed to become
so severe. Lloyd reflects on the problem of "how to answer" the
tradesman (4). Throughout the dialogue, Lloyd articulates a range of
imagined responses: "We were too busy trying to stave off my
husband's death from an excruciatingly painful form of secondary
bone cancer"; "Ah, there's the reason. The umbrella reason that
contained all possible reasons. But it was the one response I was
not prepared to give" (5). At the same time, the scene indirectly
introduces the taboo subject of the narrative to the reader: the death
of her husband. This kind of performance writing provides the drama
which can carry the difficult subject. By reflecting on what is at stake,
however, Lloyd gives the reader an insight into the social alienation
experienced by the bereaved;

the risks of an honest answer were multiple. Jim
might get that look on his face — a fumbling mess of
confusion, awkwardness pity — and I'd feel compelled to say
something glib to make him feel less uncomfortable . . . Or
Jim might be one of those 'oh well, they say time heals all
wounds' types; or worse, suspect that I might be playing the
sympathy card in order to elicit a discounted quote for the
work. (5)
By opening the memoir with this scene, Lloyd foregrounds a complex taboo subjectivity, shaped by her need to protect others from discomfort. Lloyd’s reflection on the situation draws the reader into the taboo situation, in which, although the discomfort of the tradesman is only anticipated and imagined, the reader can identify with the social discomfort of such a scene. At the same time, Lloyd admits the reader into her interior life by revealing her thoughts, in which she articulates the same problem as Lehmann’s: that of “how to answer”. Through the construction of this scene Lloyd creates a taboo subjectivity for herself, and at the same time introduces a continuing theme concerning the difficulty of negotiating taboos about death as a problematic of grief.

The question Lloyd asks herself, “how to answer?”, is the overarching problem for the writer of grief narrative: how can the nightmare of bereavement be put into words? Over the time of writing my memoir, I attended weekly writing workshops. It seemed that every week deaths occurred in the fictions being presented at the workshops; gratuitous deaths, I thought. At the time, I was shocked by the casual treatment of death: a woman’s throat neatly slashed in front of her children in order to complete the story of a stalker, the congregation of a small country church sprayed with bullets, or a death drug manufactured by a local chemist. Much to my confusion, when it was my turn to present work, I was met by a wall of awkward silence. Death seemed to be divided into two discrete and opposite parts: virtual death was like a game, as opposed to actual death. The immediate, obvious distinction was the divide between fictional and non-fictional representation: imagined death or real death. I was able to reconcile these two sides of death
when I decided that the playful treatment of death was, literally, a play. My workshop colleagues, in their fictional deaths, were rehearsing what I was having to live.

Erin Vincent constructs this kind of scene in *Grief Girl*, her memoir about the sudden death of her parents in a road accident. Twelve months after the accident, the students in a social studies class are each required to tell “an interesting story”. Vincent’s classmate, Rose, is the first to get up and tell a story she says they will all love:

“My dad works at a funeral parlour doing up the corpses. He makes up the dead bodies for viewings,” Rose says, standing in front of the class.

Do I want to hear this?

“He gets bodies ready for funerals. First they wheel them in on a table, all bloated and hard. And get this—my dad cuts into their stomachs to let the gases out, and it stinks like you wouldn’t believe.”

People grimace, wrinkling their noses. [. . .]

But are these people complete morons? Both of my parents just got cut up like this. Don’t they think this is just a little creepy for me? I can’t believe the teacher is letting her go on. Maybe they’ve forgotten or they think I’m over it by now. People seem to think this grief thing is something you get over quickly.

I’m trying to act fascinated like everyone else, but it’s not quite the same. (171)

In this example, Vincent, like me in the writing workshop, is reacting to the “insensitive” treatment of death by her classmates. In
this case, however, the story Rose relates to the class is not fictional. Rose’s story is also a true story, based on her father’s experience as a worker in a funeral parlour. Rose not only appears comfortable with death, she finds it hilarious. It is not the rendering of death as fictional or non-fictional that determines how it is received, and not even whether it is representation of death or an actual death; rather it is about emotional proximity to the deceased. The bereaved may lose the ability to be clinical about death. The scene Vincent creates is about the confusion and social displacement she experiences, as a result of grief, in which she is unable to share the joke. Both Lloyd and Vincent, however, show themselves to participate in the construction of silence: Lloyd by deciding not to mention her husband’s death to the tradesman, and Vincent by “acting fascinated” with Rose’s story. In both these scenes the narrators show a complex subjectivity, in which their internal state is at odds with their exterior social world.

Social displacement is a major discourse in The Swan in the Evening, in which Lehmann attempts to bridge the divide between the personal experience of grief and the social awkwardness it can cause. Her mystical experiences in the aftermath of her daughter’s death had caused friends and associates to withdraw from her. Consequently, Lehmann withdrew into herself, and for many years was unable to write. “If speaking caused such consternation,” she says, “how could I ever expose myself, or her, or the forbidden subjects of Death and Survival of Death, nakedly in print? Yet the forbidden subject, with [Lehman’s daughter] as the beating heart of it, engrossed me altogether, day and night” (88). This is the voice of a person not only isolated by taboo, but also disempowered by it.
Here Lehmann encapsulates the isolation experienced because of the consternation she caused when “speaking” about her loss. She writes from within the experience of the taboo, as the tabooed subject, displaced socially as “other”. She identifies her parents' agnosticism which was worn “in the manner of a spiritual shield” (94): a shield that defines them as non-believers, but which is unable to absorb Lehmann's childhood fears or her feyness. Again, the imposition of silence, while it effectively contains or limits a difficulty, may merely render it invisible. The problem she articulates in her memoir is not so much the problem of her grief, as how to expose herself in print. She breaks through the blockage by making taboo about mysticism a subject of discourse in the memoir, re-creating the scenes that prompted the social withdrawal. As well as shaping her writing, Lehmann's experience of herself as a tabooed subject is a reason for writing: to put into print what cannot be spoken. Her discourse on her isolation attempts to validate her experience in order to reclaim a place within the fold she has been excluded from.

Lehmann’s narrative provides a contrast between two sides of social discomfort caused as a result of bereavement. In the encounter with her kindergarten teacher previously outlined in part one, she constructs a scene of social awkwardness, when she encounters her recently widowed kindergarten teacher. In this scene, Lehmann is not the one suffering bereavement; she is the outsider who flees in order to avoid the discomfort, finding herself disturbed for several days after. By constructing this comparison with the earlier happier scene, in which her teacher is about to be married, Lehmann recreates the jarring contrast between the two memories, and her resultant inability to face the situation. These scenes
functions as layers in the strata of memories through which Lehman constructs her history of disturbance, but as sub-text, it also shows her in the position of observer of others in their bereavement, and not knowing how to approach them. In this scene she shows herself in a tabooing subjectivity, rather than the later tabooed subjectivity. By fleeing, in effect, she cuts herself off from the social interaction, it seems, because she is too overwhelmed by emotion. Thus, social awkwardness can be seen as a natural way of containing strong emotions that may otherwise overflow, perhaps causing an increase in the awkwardness on the part of both parties to the interaction. The taboo is more against the public display of emotion than it is a forbidding of the subject of death.

For Lehmann, and for Gilmore, already mentioned in part one, ambivalence about their relationship with the public forms a substratum in their memoirs. These two memoirs stand out from others in this study through their claim for validation and legitimacy in the public sphere. Although, as I asserted in part one, both memoirists write from a position of self-certainty, their memoirs reveal an underlying uncertainty about their relationship with their public. While the act of publishing a memoir implies, and even demands, consciousness of public receptivity as an imaginary of the writing, these writers make public reception a subject in their memoirs. Both writers locate their stories within the public sphere showing a personal side of life as a public figure. My analysis of their texts will suggest why public receptivity is important to them, and attempts to explain their need to locate their grief within the broader public sphere. Lehmann was well known in England because of her success as a novelist, and Gilmore because his brother was the first
to be executed in America after a ten year hiatus in executions. In the second part of *The Swan in the Evening*, Lehmann reflects on her career as a writer in a lengthy passage which is an appeal for understanding from her readership. Discouraging the public reception of her work, she cites examples of how both she and her writing have been widely interpreted, and misinterpreted. She reflects on the “anxious shrinking” she felt in response to “praise and generous encouragement” (70). At the same time, Lehmann reminds herself of her motives for writing, guiding readers to a more informed interpretation of her work. “I have tried to eliminate all the words and forms that seem to lack resonance or the essential gesture” (71). In this passage, although it seems unrelated to her story of grief, Lehmann extends the social framework of the memoir beyond her immediate circle to include her readership, asserting a place for herself within the wider setting.

In his memoir, Gilmore realizes the extent to which his grief has been hijacked by the publicity surrounding his brother’s execution:

You watch what was once a private and troubling relation of your life become the subject of public sensation and media scrutiny; you watch your brother’s life, and therefore, in some way a part of your own life, become larger than the confines of your sway, and after a while, it doesn’t seem much like your life anymore. (84)

He identifies his place beside his brother in public perception, and from this position argues for an expansion of that perception:
In order to truly solve a murder, you have to solve not just the crime — that is who committed it and “why” — but you also have to solve the structure in which it occurred. In short, you have to look at the act’s history and context, discover why it occurred in the world at that time, and how it affected the world. (102)

Gilmore builds a field of vision that takes in both the public horror of murder, and the personal story behind it, constructing a discourse in which murder is seen to be born in a historical and social context. In doing so, he enlarges the origins of the phenomenon of murder beyond the individual and the family to include the wider society. In effect, he redraws the excluding lines in order to include himself, thereby claiming a legitimate place within society.

For both Lehmann and Gilmore, the memoir form has enabled a working-through of their ambivalence about public reception. In both cases, the ambivalence has acted as a barrier to personal progress: for Gilmore, the blockage is a barrier to his experience and his expression of grief; for Lehmann, ambivalence about public reception underlies her inability to write. In both cases, taboos about death function as points of conflict which set up a discourse as part of the narrative structure. The telos of the narrative is determined by how the narrator approaches and solves the problem. Gilmore’s narrative is steered by his search for personal identity. The telos of the Lehmann narrative is determined by her mysticism, which is the point of conflict in the memoir. Through their writing, both authors expand their experience of grief, at the same time imposing an order that makes it understandable. Through this
process and by publishing their memoirs, they make a place for their grief in the public eye.

Losing one’s place in life can be a side-effect of bereavement by which one can lose the sense of belonging. Home is a place that can be problematic for the bereaved. For Gilmore, a home exists only in dreams or nightmares. For Rush, the home becomes like “some museum” (45). For Lloyd, in contrast, the work of grief involves the literal and physical work of home renovation. The title of her memoir, *The Young Widow’s Guide to Home Improvement*, immediately draws a parallel between the work of grief and the work of house renovation. The metaphor acts mechanically, as a solid base which provides support, balance, direction and momentum to the narrative. “Looking back over the first year and a half as a young widow, I’m surprised it took me as long as it did to notice the extent of the metaphor,” Lloyd reflects, “to connect the excessive damp in my house’s foundations with the intense grief of losing John” (262). It provides a paradigm of decay and repair that fits the decline and renewal of grief:

> My home improvements sought an emotional, rather than a material, transformation. John and I had spent our life together in a state of constant change, but throughout all we placed great value on the life we lived together in our home. I believe that my home now honours the life John and I made there. (261)

The house, used as a metaphor and as the setting which is central to much of the narrative, functions as a cohesive core in the text, providing a stable site which can absorb an essentially unstable story.
In *Billy’s Halo*, a memoir about the death of her father, Ruth McKernan constructs a metanarrative that has a similar stabilizing effect. Using her knowledge as a biochemist, she constructs a biological metanarrative in which she discusses the physical processes of emotion as they occur in the brain. The memoir weaves together two narrative strands, the scientific with the emotional, creating a discourse about the body, emotion and death. Through this metanarrative, Mckernan challenges the wall of objectivity and detachment that normally surrounds scientific research. In the first chapter, about the part of memory that is a function of the hippocampus, she reflects

It must be strange living without a hippocampus, there can be no old news. The shock of bad news will evoke the same emotional reaction each time: the pain of bereavement will strike anew, not dwindle. The pain of bereavement? Where did those words come from? Scientists don’t write about emotional things like the pain of bereavement*. (23)

McKernan foregrounds her story with the irony that as a scientist she dares to approach the subject of emotion. With her literary skill and scientific knowledge, she renders a narrative in which biology becomes a source of emotional strength, and indeed, in which emotions themselves can become a source of strength. The structural device of a metanarrative provides a positive balance to the painful wasting of disease.

Finding a way back to a place in the world is the underlying quest that forms a narrative basis for the grief narrative. Ultimately, it is a matter of “survival”: of *viva*, life, *sur*, rising above, as the
etymology suggests. Traumatic, overwhelming grief changes one’s position in the world at many levels, requiring re-valuation of personal history or re-arrangement of one’s social world. For some, the essential link is made through the physical, material world.

In the first part of *To Travel Hopefully*, Rush chronicles the alienation from his own home caused by grief:

Sometimes I look up with a shock to find myself sitting in what used to be our home. But I feel as if I am visiting some museum. The house, with its once familiar furniture, ornaments, domestic objects, gifts given over the years, has become a cold catalogue of the past. (45)

At the same time, he is fearful of the outside world, “suddenly frightened by lorries, sliding along the blank motorways, frightened by the tree-ringed skylines, the millions of acres of earth, the anonymous green grass covering the millions of vanished lives” (45). The instability of this all-pervading sense of alienation, however, is recuperated in the middle and final chapters of the memoir. By the deliberate undertaking of a challenging physical journey, Rush succeeds in a quest to re-engage with the world. “The art of writing is not much different from the art of living,” he says. “If you are out of connection for too long you will start to perform badly—as an artist, as a human being. When my wife died I lost the ability to connect . . . and if I am not writing, I am not living” (81). Thus he begins the middle chapter, in which he traces the origins of his plan to walk a donkey through the Cevennes, in the footsteps of Robert Louis Stevenson. The third and final chapter describes the gruelling ten-day journey, every bit as arduous as the year of grief he had already completed, yet with a different set of problems. He says, when he
comes out of the Cevennes, “the pivot of the universe had shifted once again. I left Monastier, in Stevenson’s phrase, ‘a miserable widower’ and arrived in St Jean-du-Gard remarried—to life”. He identifies that it was the real, physical extremes that made him appreciate “what you’ve got and what you are, and, if you have lost something, just how much you still have left to live for [. . .] You have to hunger and thirst after your own redemption [. . .] I believe I pushed myself to the point where I wanted life again” (250). Having been emotionally displaced by the loss of his wife and unable to connect to his home or to his own life, the physical hardship of the journey demands his re-connection with the world, acting like a bridge to life and to the future. The literary parallel, made through Stevenson’s *Travels with a Donkey*, provides another level to the narrative, re-connecting Rush with the literary world. Within the memoir, the journey provides a metanarrative which displaces Rush’s grief as central to the memoir, diffusing and dissipating its power and enabling a resolution.

In *Catfish and Mandala, A Two-Wheeled Journey through the Landscape and Memory of Vietnam*, Andrew X. Pham has written a memoir in which grief is embedded in a travel narrative. A Vietnamese American, Pham undertakes a bicycle journey around the Pacific Rim, from California to Vietnam, as a trial through which he hopes to break open the family silence regarding the death of his older sister: a death which “left a silent dark hole in family life like an extinguished hearth no one could relight.” Pham’s family talks “around her history, unknowingly lacing her secret and our shameful failures deep into ourselves” (29). The story of grief, however, is not central to the narrative but is underlaid as a mystery into which the
reader is given occasional glimpses. Like the Lehmann and Gilmore stories, the memoir has a history to reveal before the story of the sister is told:

   since the day Chi [Pham’s sister] ran away, I have wondered how utterly alone she felt. I have wanted to run away the way she did. In the years it took me to become an American, I haven’t been able to answer the one question that remained framed in my mind from the day she left: How did America treat Chi, one vulnerable yellow in a sea of white faces? (33)

   On his return to Vietnam, the history of the family’s escape from the Vietnam War in a leaky boat is told through flashbacks in memory. This unfolding history answers the question of the role America has played in their lives and tells of the repercussions that have played out long after the end of the war. For Pham, the death of his sister is linked to the war, and to America’s treatment of refugees. Framing his story within the arc of the Pacific Rim and locating it within the arc of time between the war and the present, Pham locates his grief in a broad sphere that might accommodate it more readily than the small circle of his family. By undertaking the journey, Pham realizes the extent to which history plays a role in his life, and establishes a larger frame in which to locate his grief.

   For several years between the time of the accident and my first trip to China, I was suspended from the world by grief. This social withdrawal and isolation is perhaps a normal reaction to trauma, allowing the conservation of emotional energy which is needed to do the internal work of grief. In China, contrary to my expectations, I found an environment in which I felt at home. The
relative poverty of the people and the harshness of their living conditions aligned with the poverty I felt through loss. In addition, it was impossible not to be drawn in by the incredible amount of visible human activity and interaction. In these conditions, my aloofness collapsed as I found myself capable of making new friends, and also, once again, prone to petty concerns. My focus, however, continued to be on Caitlin. Following Caitlin's footsteps connected me in unexpected ways. Like Lehmann, I had been unable to give words to the strange coincidences, powerful resonances and strength of feeling that had consumed me and which continued to occur in China. The journey was a detour from grief which provided the stepping stones back to life, and which would also provide the wider focus of a metanarrative for my memoir.
Part Three

The Public Face of Grief

A defining characteristic of the memoir form is its publication of personal material, an act which raises ethical questions about what is suitable for inclusion, and what should be excluded. Questions of privacy are under consideration in life-writing in general, as they are in everyday life. Crossing the line between private life and public life is an everyday occurrence, a crossing that might require preparation, such as washing and dressing, at least, in order to present an acceptable face to the world. A myriad of judgements and decisions are made about how one presents the self, and how one wants to be received. Once outside the house, anything a person does or says is open to public scrutiny. It might be said that the appearance and actions of others can be a great source of interest, pleasure, inspiration or on the downside, of pity, disgust or repulsion. When a memoirist publishes their personal story, a similar set of judgements are made about what is appropriate or desirable to set before the public gaze. Choices are made about what is appropriate to be shared, both as a giver and a receiver of information. Everyday expressions, such as “it’s not my business” or “too much information”, demonstrate the quidity of common criteria used to determine ethical codes relating to privacy. The word “appropriate”, stemming from the Latin verb appropriare meaning “to make one’s own”, points to a useful criterion for thinking about to whom and where information belongs. A book is like an open house: anyone is welcome to enter. The state of the interior is determined by the owner: whether ordered or chaotic, harmonised
by the use of fabric and colour, darkened with blinds, softened by candles or laid bare under fluorescent light.

This scrutability, and the response it generates, reflects the kind of reciprocal imaginary a writer brings to their work when making judgements and decisions about what will be included. The writer constructs the frame of reference for their story from this reciprocal imaginary of scrutability, a frame which includes both those within the narrative whom they expose to the public scrutiny, and the reading public. The writer’s decision to write a memoir, rather than a fictional story, is a decision to negotiate a range of ethical problems that otherwise could be avoided by writing fiction. This engagement with the personal is, in itself, an ethical stance, a declaration by the writer of the factuality, or actuality, of his or her subject. Within this stance, many criteria may be brought to bear on how a writer decides what to include or exclude in the narrative.

In writing about the loss of a loved one, the writer brings to the work the depth and strength of feeling held for the person who has been lost. This core of feeling may be the source of a narrative ethic: a sensibility which infuses the work. More than criteria for deciding what material is suitable for a memoir, a writer’s ethic shapes the character of the narrative and every aspect of the writing. An ethic is a writer’s code for transforming experience and for shaping a narrative. It may be a function of the author’s integrity: part of the guiding intuition and reasoning that informs his or her decisions and actions. A writer’s ethic works with memory to interpret experience, a filter through which a person makes sense of the world. The connections made within the narrative provide the cohesion for an ethical framework, a nervous system which directs
the energy of the work and which reflects a drive towards an ideal, an aesthetic, a truth, or a reality. The connections made and how they are structured within the work bring to the fore what is important for the writer, and therefore represent an ethical viewpoint. Thus, an ethic is integral to the personal viewpoint that a writer brings to the memoir form.

A number of ethical concerns within the wider field of life-writing have been mapped by Eakin: questions of truth, morality, betrayal and resistance. He identifies the “infringement of the right to privacy” as a transgression of a tacit rule of life-writing (“Breaking the Rules” 113-14). The question of privacy pertains to the matter of trust which is crucial to the formation of relationships. My analysis of ethical concerns will focus on relationships within and surrounding grief narratives. These relationships fall in two directions: one between the author and their subject, and the other between the author and their reader. This regulation and negotiation of responsibility and information reflects authorial priorities concerning to whom and where information belongs. I will analyse how responsibility is allocated and negotiated, and how this economy of information is regulated within the narratives.

As observed in the first two parts of this study, grief narratives negotiate the personal fragmentation and social dislocation resulting from loss. I attempted to isolate two realms, the interior realm of self, and the exterior realm of other, in order to explore how they are apprehended and how they are structured within grief narratives. In this section, I want to look at the relationship between these realms, self and other, attending to how responsibility is managed within these relationships. Through this
analysis, I will explore how death impacts on the ethical concerns that arise from writing about others. As a way of framing this discussion, I will borrow Buss’s concept of “limit-attitude”, a critical methodology which is derived by constructing “an anecdotal reference to the critic’s own position in the critical text”. This method is used to generate an authentic discussion based on individual concern rather than on an artificial position of academic authority (41). By adopting limit-attitude, my intention is to include something of my own limited ethical approach to life-writing as a lead into the discussion.

 Initially, as a writer of memoir, my ethical concern was subsumed by the emergency of crisis. At the time of Caitlin’s accident, everything that was happening carried the weight of momentous importance. My drive to write about it was impelled by a desire to let everyone know the whole story, so that they might avoid such a calamity. Although she was dead, however, Caitlin’s voice was a part of my conscience, over-riding much of what I was writing. I decided that the right thing to do was to use the same code of privacy as before her death, in effect, to exclude anything questionable or sensitive, or anything that was not my business. Although this restricted the material, it made the selection process clear. The story of Kim, my older daughter, presented another ethical dilemma, as she was recovering from a two year battle with Leukaemia at the time of the accident. Her story is a big one, but not mine to tell. On the other hand, the three of us had only just begun to emerge from the trauma of Kim’s chemotherapy at the time of the accident; to omit it from the narrative might appear to represent a dismissal of its importance. Although she gave me permission to
“write anything”, it took several years to find a way to include Kim’s story in Caitlin’s story.

Ernst van Alphen, in his analysis of the contemporary holocaust writer Armando, identifies a subtle approach to writing trauma in which death is represented as sublime and unspeakable. Employing semiotic theory, van Alphen analyses Armando’s technique of “pointing to” or “indicating” his subject, an indirect mode which van Alphen calls “radical indexation” (12). Armando’s narrator visits sites of previous Nazi trauma, creating contingent or “touched scenes” where random interactions with locals evoke a now invisible past. In an ethic of resistance, Armando refuses the drama of a death scene, instead indicating death by representing traces and imprints left behind. These touched scenes inscribe, rather than describe, emotional and mental connections: they refer to the implicit, rather than expose and make explicit. They come from position of restraint and understatement, rather than from dramatic outpouring or detailed rehashing. Van Alphen’s concern relates to the semiotic impossibility of representing something unique, such as the horror of World War II, which has no equivalent available for use as metaphor or symbol. He identifies an ethic of aesthetic expression, which refuses an imaginary depiction of that which is no longer present, instead evoking it through traces left behind. I adopted van Alphen’s concept of radical indexation as a paradigm in writing my memoir by locating memories in scenes which bear imprints and traces of Caitlin.

While van Alphen identifies an approach that refuses to speak death, Davis and Womack favour an approach that exposes death. Their study analyses an anthology by the poet Donald Hall,
entitled *Without*, which concerns the death of his wife, and his subsequent grief. They welcome the poet’s graphic realism in the depiction of his wife’s dying days. To my mind, however, Hall’s detailed description of his wife’s chemotherapy is as invasive as the cancer which has taken-over her body:

As they killed her bone

marrow again, she lay on a

gurney

alone in a leaden room

between machines that

resembled

pot-bellied stoves

which spewed out Total Body

Irradiation

for eleven half-hour

sessions measured over four
days.

It was as if she capped

the Chernobyl pile with her

body.  (20)
Hall’s focus is on the machinery, evoking a scene which accentuates his wife’s vulnerability. In an almost gothic deathbed scene, Hall writes that, he “smelled the sharp almost sweet/ smell” which began to rise from her open mouth” (45). With this immersion in the viscera of death, however realistic, Hall shows himself as detached from his wife, exposing her at a time that might arguably be called her weakest moment. For Davis and Womack the act of revelation is, in itself, an ethically desirable act, regardless of any ethic a relationship might require. Davis and Womack state that Hall’s ethics of mourning demands that he candidly recount his trial of grieving; that he must not “polish the memory of [his wife’s] slow deterioration with the glossy oil of sentimentality, nor can he manipulate the rhetoric of superficial courage or unfeeling stoicism in order to present himself as untouched by the hand of extinction.” Hall’s ethics of mourning, they say, obliges him “to reveal the very aspects of death that he has been taught to conceal by a culture that has banished the act of dying out of our homes” (168).

In his poetry, Hall is more focused on his own emotions than on the suffering of his wife. While it is understandable that Hall feels helpless in the face of his wife’s dying, her suffering is eclipsed by his own:

Waiting for the light

To cross the avenue, briefly he imagined

Throwing himself in front of that bus. (23)
Even here, as he imagines the drama of his own suicide, he renders it gratuitous by his use of the adverb “briefly” to moderate it. As Davis and Womack appreciate, Hall does not manipulate his readers with an “unfeeling stoicism or superficial courage”; he depicts himself as terrified and hardly able to face the situation. For Davis and Womack, this truthfulness acts like a release from a cultural expectation of having to feel or act courageously in the face of death. What they are talking about is emotional honesty: emotions which, once revealed, are transferred by empathy to the reader. Their ethical concern is with the implications of inauthenticity imposed by cultural expectations.

My ethical concern is with the lack of privacy or empathy granted by Hall in his representation of his wife. This lack, however, may be the result of a refusal to apply the glossy oil of sentimentality, yet it may also reflect an emotional detachment within the relationship, which may have been more predominantly intellectual. It is interesting to note that in this poem, and others in the collection, Hall refers to himself in the third person. This kind of grammatical detachment releases the writer from the difficulty of untangling the complexity and intensity of his personal scenario, both in the felt life and in the text. It allows the writer to disown himself by constructing a disembodied narrator. This construction mirrors the reciprocal imaginary mentioned earlier. To imagine oneself in the third person is to imagine that one is someone else, watching another someone in the street waiting to cross the road. The failure to return the narrative to first person creates an emotional distance from the scene. In effect, it is a fictionalizing paradigm, and allows a fictional escape from the reality. While this need to escape the dire situation is
understandable, Hall’s depiction of himself, and the way he constructs himself, allows an ethical detachment, verging on dissociation, in which responsibility towards his wife is abrogated.

In *To Travel Hopefully*, Rush performs a similar abrogation of responsibility towards his wife. He tells the painful story of how, unable to face her illness, she did not seek help from the medical profession, not even telling her husband about her breast cancer:

No, she would crawl to hospital rather than be taken by ambulance but at least she agreed to go by car. The doctor left and we began the journey to the bathroom so that she could wash before being admitted to the infirmary. We locked the door and she stood before the mirror. And she said that the moment had now come when she could confront the truth.

‘We’ll look at it together, shall we?’

She spoke in a whisper, not because she was speaking low. A hoarse croak in her throat was all that was left of her voice.

I stood beside her and slipped off her nightdress. How often we’d performed this exciting action as a prelude to passion. Your gowne’s going off such beauteous state reveals . . .

Now it was a grim business. We both felt it, as if the nightdress were a shroud, as if we were unwrapping the bandages from something out of Egypt. She kept her eyes tight shut as I slid her arms through the sleeves and looked on my wife’s nakedness for the first time in many months. I too had lost count.
I was standing behind her and stared straight over her shoulder at what the mirror had to tell us.

Mirror, mirror on the wall . . .

She listened to my silence and still with her eyes shut asked:

‘Is it bad?’

I had no answer.

She opened her eyes and looked straight into the glass. She gasped at what she saw. (13-14)

It seems to my ethic, that Rush negates his wife’s privacy by publishing a lengthy and agonizing scene in which together they look at her diseased breast. It appears there is sometimes an ethical crossing when someone dies, an often unspoken but radical deviation in the circle of privacy drawn around a relationship, in which that which was once intimate is exposed to the public gaze. Further than this, Rush doctors the scene with the medieval literary flourish of *Sleeping Beauty*, using the memory of passion he and his wife had shared to dramatize the moment and display his literary wares. As a writer, Rush’s ethical bias is slanted towards engaging his reader, away from his deceased wife.

The controversy over John Bayley’s memoir about his wife, Iris Murdoch, and her decline into Alzheimer’s, attests to the difficulty such transgressions can generate in readers. Gertrude Himmelfarb uses the term “familial cannibalism” to describe this kind of over-exposure in memoirs (36). It appears that ethics, in grief-narrative, is an emotive issue: dependent on feelings, opinions and morals, and therefore contingent. Another recent grief narrative, *Give Sorrow
Words by Tom Crider, provides a more challenging scenario. The story is of the author’s grief after the death of his twenty-year-old daughter in a house fire. Without a doubt, Crider is stricken by the loss of his daughter, but I am horrified by an early passage:

Awake again in the night, he stands in the dark in front of Gretchen’s ashes . . . He feels a strong urge to open the box, fill his hands with her ashes, and eat them.

Visions of things known and unknown torment him. He imagines her autopsy. Her body lies naked on a table, her burned face stares up, her body is being cut open, lungs peeled back, her vagina is examined for evidence of sexual activity. (There was none, according to the coroner). (5)

This dramatic scene evokes a feeling of startling existential anguish. Crider’s desire to eat his daughter’s ashes, however, almost completes his literal “familial cannibalism”. My limit-attitude is offended by this invasion: I wonder why a father would commit to paper his graphic thoughts about his daughter’s body. Perhaps, as a possible interpretation, Crider believes he is proving his daughter’s virtue by revealing that she had not had sex that night. Like Rush’s breast scene, it is certainly dramatic, and possibly realistic, but it is hard to deduce any other ethical criteria to warrant the exposure of his desperate self-drama. Yet towards the end of the book, the narrator recalls:

One night, a week or so after her death, the urge to have some contact with her had overpowered his better instincts, and he had opened one of Gretchen’s diaries. After reading about a sexual
experience she would have wanted to keep secret, he shut the diary, ashamed of himself for violating her privacy.

He remembers coming into the living room one day when she sat on the couch writing. She turned toward him with an apprehensive look and quickly closed a notebook.

“Hi, Dad!” Now that she’s dead, her secrets can’t embarrass her. But if she is to live on in him and in those who remember her, he should allow her the privacy he would grant her if she were still alive. (112)

Here Crider’s ethic is confessional: a claim for self-honesty. But in a logic that is hard to follow, he negates the grant of privacy he gives to his daughter. Although ashamed of himself for violating her privacy, he is not too ashamed to construct the scene for publication. His avowal of discretion is made gratuitous by including the reference to a sexual experience he says she would have wanted kept secret. Apart from his indiscretion, he implies that there may be a sexual experience his daughter would actually want made public. In these passages, rather than priding himself on his daughter’s virtue, he seems proud that she has been sexually active. By publishing these confused sexual references Crider appropriates his daughter’s body to himself. Just as disturbing is the statement, “Now that she’s dead, her secrets can’t embarrass her,” in which death is given the power to destroy discretion, allowing the writer to relinquish responsibility towards his daughter’s memory. Again, as in Hall’s poetry, the author detaches himself by writing of himself in the third person.
Although Crider’s attitude is repellent to my limit-attitude, his self-exposure provides an insight into the limits of his attitude. A third paragraph provides a clearer ethical basis for his writing:

When Gretchen’s friends come to visit, he draws diagrams of her room, showing where the candles fell over, where her bed was, and where her body was found. He hopes this will keep her death from being an abstraction to them. The details make things real, and he wants everyone to feel the reality, the terrible reality, of her death, as he does. (23)

Crider’s ethic here is more general, derived from his need to bring home reality, to everyone. At times, however, Crider’s need to make things real is the dominating ethic, over-riding his concern for confidentiality. He creates scenes in which underlying ethical concerns are brought to the surface, such as whether to be “real” or to maintain “confidentiality”. These conflicting concerns are at the heart of the ethical dilemma involved in making personal stories public. This conflict of interest is not constructed as a subject in the narrative, however, but emerges from the sub-text. Crider’s narrative focus is concerned with the encounter of turbulent emotions from which ethical concerns appear as spin-off. By the same token, the subtext of Crider’s narrative parallels the confusion of grief, and the difficulty of resolving or making sense of tumult.

In contrast to Crider’s ethical confusion, Virginia Lloyd’s grief narrative is less conflicted in its exposition of ethical concerns. The opening scene sets the tone of the work in which Lloyd characterizes her narrative voice with a considered and controlled manner, giving the narrative a similar quality. Like Hall and Crider,
she includes intimate details of the relationship with her husband: of his illness and treatment, and of his last dying moments. There is a difference, however, in Lloyd’s treatment of her subject. Rather than a dramatic engagement with the narrator’s fearful emotions, the narrator brings an ethic of care to her subject, approaching personal, private and intimate subjects openly but without invading or exposing. By constructing vivid scenes with action, and by the use of dialogue, Lloyd’s narrative activates the relationship with her husband, bringing him to life as a character and making the dynamic between them central to the narrative. In a scene of potential embarrassment, Lloyd shows how she is disarmed by her future husband’s manner:

“That’s quite a tan you’ve got,” I said to John at our next meeting, a dinner party at Paul and Anne’s several months later. “Have you been away somewhere?”

“No holiday to report, I’m afraid, just a side-effect of the chemo I’ve been having,” he said brightly, and stretched across the table to top up my wine glass. “How are your travel plans going?”

“Oh, um, they’re fine,” I said, trying to act as if I hadn’t just exposed my foot-in-mouth disease for everyone at the dinner table to see.

The room’s dim lighting hid my blush. I felt like such an idiot for confusing the effects of chemotherapy and sunshine, but instinctively also knew there was no need for me to feel that way. While the rest of us were trying our best not to say the wrong thing, John was disarmingly pragmatic and straightforward about his illness. (24-25)
By constructing vivid scenes with dialogue and action, such as friends sitting around a table, a wine glass, and an outstretched hand, Lloyd brings her future husband and his predicament alive in the narrative. In contrast to the narratives of Crider and Rush, in which the narrator’s emotional turmoil is allowed to dominate the narrative, Lloyd reflects on the situation, comparing her own discomfort with her partner’s, moderating the dramatic tension whilst at the same time providing an interpretive layer to the narrative:

John’s primary tumour protruded about an inch from his sacrum in the shape of a slender baguette about the length of my clenched fist—widest in the middle, tapering off to each side—that sat horizontally across the base of the spine. We are so bombarded with images of strictly defined physical attractiveness that he had long ago disregarded the possibility that anyone would love him again.

“I’m so lucky,” he would say to me.

‘I’m the lucky one,’ I always replied.

It was an odd sensation for me to touch John’s tumour at first. It was a body part that I had never imagined existed. It felt the same as touching his nose or elbow, I was neither turned on or off by it. John’s sensation was diminished in his lower back due to his surgeries, so it was far from an erogenous zone for him. There were enough erogenous zones for us to explore. In our first year together we kept ourselves very busy exploring them. (45-46)
Lloyd’s consciousness of the ethics of using the life of another as the core material of a narrative is brought to the fore in the closing pages: “I had asked John, at the very end, whether it would be all right with him if I tried to write about us. He just looked at me askance and said dismissively, “Not much of a story is it?”” (258). By combining the dramatic mode with the reflective mode, Lloyd constructs a balanced narrative in which discretion is not sacrificed in order to create drama, and ethical concerns are recognised and approached. Eakin has identified that “ethics is the deep subject of autobiographical discourse.” He has also come to the conclusion that even more fundamentally, it is a discourse of identity (123). The grief narrative, as it crosses social barriers between private and the public, may even set out to redefine such boundaries in its project of reconstructing identity.

In the mammalian world, when a mother loses her offspring, she will carefully lick the creature all over, then lie down beside it and go to sleep. When I lost my daughter, I immediately knew that the loss was permanent, that I would never see her again, yet I could neither believe nor understand what had happened. The years afterwards were taken up with learning how to live with the reality. T.S. Eliot wrote “human kind cannot bear very much reality”, as Lehmann quotes in her memoir (71). The unfathomable complexity of consciousness of mind and body is like a multifaceted prism that absorbs and emits experience at multiple levels simultaneously. This system, however, must contain self-balancing and regulating mechanisms that allow it to function with a measure of equilibrium. There seems to be no death hormone that is activated to enable the readiness to accept death that other mammals demonstrate. Story
making, on the other hand, may be a natural human response which possibly has a balancing function necessary for human survival. Even if not a written story, the mind is constantly organizing information. Often everyday thoughts have a particular audience in mind as a recipient of a story. Oral stories, shared between those we live with, come out in daily serials. Story making is a human way of dealing with life, of making sense of things: a constant reshuffling, defining and refining of thoughts about the past and the future in order to make them manageable. In Freud’s terms, it is constant sifting of content in a search for connotation.

By publishing a story, a writer takes possession of a set of words and commits them to hard copy. This public commitment involves responsibility towards one’s subject, and responsibility towards one’s readers. The writer negotiates a path between fidelity to themselves, to their subject and to their audience. At the same time, publication is an act of exposure, a surrender of the walls of privacy, and like surrender, signals a dropping of defences. It is an invitation into a private world. In the case of a grief narrative, it is a bidding into the fearful realm of grief, a world where, although things appear unchanged, they have been totally overturned. The grief narrative is an attempt to represent aspects of the cataclysmic event and the enjambment of emotions that results. In so doing it sets a path through the landscape of grief, a landscape that involves side-tracks to the past through memory involving a questioning of who is, or was, the self, and the discovery of the values and meanings that made up that self. Without the physical connection through the senses, the exchange with the lost one can no longer occur and the meanings and values no longer have an end point. A grief narrative
is a story of the self as it struggles to comprehend the shrivelling and withering of meaning after the severance. Thus, value and meaning, rather than being fixed, static concepts, show themselves to be organic functional mediums that are part of the energizing exchange that occurs between people in their relationships.

The bereaved find ways to recover from loss, each in ways as individual as the lost relationship. They establish memorials or rituals that attend to the dead, and through this attention, maintain a semblance of connection. Often a memorial is constructed in a public place, or a ritual is enacted in public view, attesting to a need or wish for public placement of grief. The process of memorialization establishes a kind of surrogate relationship that stands in place of the lost one. Giving grief a form, such as by erecting a memorial, or by establishing the repetition of a ritual, provides a structural endpoint, a physical embodiment of an end which, by its public placement, ensures the continuance of public memory and by so doing provides an alternative connection. A grief narrative is an example of such a memorial.

The loss of a significant other is like a personal earthquake. The fault line cuts across time, damaging the past and destroying future possibilities. Personal history is repetitively reviewed and remapped, a lengthy involuntary process of adjustment, which may eventually serve the purpose of bringing the past into alignment with the changed present. The fault line also cuts across the landscape, shifting one’s place in the world and imposing a change of perspective. The writing of a grief narrative is the story of such a dislocation and the adaptation to the changed circumstances required of the self. It is an act of self re-creation and an assertion of
that self into the changed context, an act which may help forge a path into the future. For established writers, it is often a story that must be written before any other writing can be commenced.

The grief narrative can only ever be a partial representation of grief. A writer delineates boundaries in time and place that both frame and limit their narratives. This frame of reference may reflect “writerly” choices about whether to limit the story to the immediate experience of grief, or reflect on wider social or historical implications of their experience, or to frame a thematic discourse, or to provide a metaphorical space in which to sublimate grief. A writer may want to bring alive the intensity of the drama in the present, or they may want to place more focus on the shaping effect of the past. Other writers may choose to locate their grief within the physical landscape. The rupture of self is contained within these narrative frames as it negotiates the change, re-constructing its frames of reference, in time and place and re-establishing the cohesive function of the self. Writers identify points of difference between the past and the present, within the self, within social situations, and within locations, to create dramatic scenes, or to develop a discourse. These points of difference are used as points of narrative tension within the structure, creating reader identity, engagement or suspense. The eventual resolution of these points of narrative tension reflects the process of assimilation which is the work of grief.

Grief is an intense, sustained experience many will encounter during their lives, but for many an experience that will remain untold and unheard. The work of grief is the work of adaptation: of finding or creating another frame of reference in which value and meaning can be rebuilt. For a writer, the work of writing a
narrative may be the work of constructing a new frame of reference. Each narrative referred to in this study contains a crucial point which is vital to the writer. Often this vital point is signalled in the title given to the work. The *Magical Thinking* of Didion’s memoir refers to the tendency to associate memories and to attach significance to coincidences, which Didion fears is a sign of impending insanity. In the title *To Travel Hopefully*, which is a quotation from Robert Louis Stevenson, Rush points to the rediscovery of hope found through his journey tracing Stevenson’s footsteps. The title *The Swan in the Evening*, which is a quotation from a traditional song, refers to the beauty and innocence of the lost daughter at the time of day when the shadow of night begins to fall on the land and the light evens, suggesting the in-between, mystical world between life and death that absorbs Lehmann. *Shot in the Heart* captures the literal and emotional content of the story of a brother’s execution by firing squad. In the title *The Young Widow’s Guide to Home Improvement*, the author romanticizes herself in the setting of what is ultimately a love story. *Grief Girl* succinctly captures tragedy and youth. The preposition, *Without*, used by the poet Hall, takes on several levels of meaning, embodying the loss, but also, by its juxtaposition of opposites, “with” and “out”, captures a sense of the searing departure, and the difficulty of finding a place for grief. *Give Sorrow Words* is a quotation from Shakespeare, through which Crider expresses his feeling of the imperative to write. From Malcom, in *Macbeth*, the line continues: “The grief that does not speak/Whispers the o’er-fraught heart, and bids it break,” providing an image that suits the grief narrative, and its attempt to speak an over-fraught and breaking heart.
Works Cited


