

AT THE WINDOW

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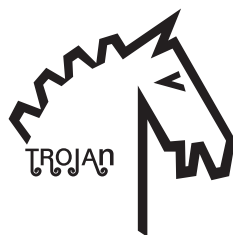
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Chester Eagle



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Martin, waking in the night, nudged his wife. 'It's freezing,' he said. 'You really want it open?'

At the moment of closing the window, she heard singing. People were walking home from a restaurant. 'Aaaaa ... ah ah aaa aa aa,' sang a wailing voice. 'Spaniard,' said Martin. 'Hurry up, you'll be cold.'

At the window, Carol felt a double pull. 'Not yet,' she said. 'I like to hear them pass.'

'I like it too,' Martin grumbled, pretending to be more sleepy than he was. 'But I can hear them just as well from here.'

Male voices provided an answer, or support, to the interrogative lament of the woman. Carol pushed her face into the chill. 'Don't go away,' she whispered. The roofs across the Boulevard were icy blue. Footsteps clattered an irregular rhythm against the chant. 'You say something?' Martin mumbled, but she was with the passing singers. She wanted to float with them as they floated in their music, but her husband, who would be gone in the morning, was willing her beside him. She resisted until they'd crossed the road, then returned to his warmth. As he rolled over to embrace her, she caught a snatch of the Spanish woman's singing. Kissing her neck, he whispered, 'We'll remember these nights all our lives.' It was unctuous, she said, 'I don't want to remember this, I want it available to me, always.'

'Can't be done,' he said. 'We're moving on, something new'll turn up.' He snuggled an arm beneath her, she found his readiness to leave her frightening. Wide awake, she wondered about their agreement - he'd go home to find a job while she stayed to finish her research - and before she'd had time to realize how queasy the arrangement made her feel, the chant came through the window she'd left slightly ajar:

'Aaaaaa ... ah ah aaa aa aa,' across the left bank of Paris. He felt her stiffen.

'We'll come back.' She shook her head.

'Then we'll find something better,' he said and she felt a disappointment verging on despair. 'I wish I was that woman,' she said, trying to escape into the night, yet clinging to his hands. 'I'd like it if you were a singer,' he said, misunderstanding. She turned so her back pressed against his chest, accepting yet refusing his embrace; when he entered her from behind, she made a point of being immobile. Climaxing was an act of failed assertion, he fell away from her saying, 'We'll have to resume this when we're home.' It surprised her that he thought that another place might resolve their problems when they were already somewhere that compelled her to voice her equivocations. For Martin, she saw, home meant a resumption of priorities, roles ... she strained to catch any sound of singing, but relaxed in her disappointment, leaving her husband feeling ashamed.

When he waved goodbye in the morning to Carol on her balcony he felt that his life was gaining an historical dimension; their guidebooks had told them of marches, rebellions, conversations and partings that had taken place in these streets; he was taking his life now, separately, to the hopeful nation where he intended his wife to join him. She stood on the balcony that had been theirs, in a blouse and tights despite the freezing air, having chosen not to accompany him to the metro. A burden bigger than he knew how to deal with hung about him as he waved, two cases lumped at

his feet, hand limp with love and guilt. She had never been more beautiful than in Paris, yet he felt summoned to some further destiny, and demanded that she follow ...

... when she'd finished her research. Carol, feeling liberated in her undress, and remembering that in the room behind her were notes and the pretentious title page of her thesis - *Dream, Traum and Rêve - Heightened Consciousness in the Romantic World View* - became aware that her awareness of Paris, and her life, had hitherto found an object, or focus, in the person of her husband, now disappearing down the Boulevard Saint Michel. Waving into the icy street with her bare fingers, she realized that it was, finally, her husband's gloves, black with red palms, that identified him. He was turning every few steps and waving as if his life depended on it.

She wanted, lifting her hand, to make him feel better for his cruelty, but she was already overwhelmed by the things he was shutting out - the even rows of rooftops, the briskness, sale boxes in the street, Notre Dame on her immemorial island. Ecstatic with her newfound sense of freedom, Carol waved as if her life hung on making Martin see her ...

... and Martin, seeing, believed that their love was unharmed by his decision to endow her with the last of the money they'd saved, and allow himself to go ...

... home. Carol felt herself wrenched as the red palms grew more distant. Trying to block him out, she ran suddenly into the room they'd shared and scratched at her notes, only to feel such shame at the speed of her desertion that she rushed again to the window in time to see Martin's red-palmed gloves at the entrance to the station. 'Oh my darling,' she cried, 'I don't want to be left like this!' and Martin, distant as he was, caught signs of her anguish as he lifted his bags and entered the tunnels of the metro, promising that he'd write from every airport on the way. He'd write in Athens, Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur and the moment he was ...

... home. Carol sensed more finality in his wave than he meant to give; crying, she stumbled inside and spread on their bed their map of Paris, and her notes and questions for the day's researches; none of it satisfied her, she felt a bodily longing for the man she'd wanted to reject the night before, and leant over until her forehead touched the quilt, which she suspected was rarely washed: dragging off her few garments, she showered till the water ran cold; then, putting on things she'd not worn before, she went down to ask for a cheaper room.

Madame, keeping the hot roller and a pile of sheets between them, offered her an attic. Carol felt the older woman was amused by this first action of a woman left on her own. She moved her things to the attic, then resisted. Madame, handing back the key to the room she'd shared with Martin, said to her, 'La menace n'est pas dans la possibilité, mais dans soi-même, n'est-ce pas?' Carol had never felt afraid of herself before, nor was she now; she felt like a moth, or bird, whose wings had been wet, or oil-slicked, and now were clean - but there was a point of fear inside her that the world might let her down ...

... as her husband had: by opting for the sensible, even generous arrangement, he had somehow devalued her and their joint experience. They'd stood one morning in Notre Dame dividing their francs because she was going to the library and he to some Polytechnique he'd heard about, and a burst of sunlight had brought them a ruddy benediction. Carol had felt the distance between herself and the high rose window disappear, but her husband, she saw, had crumpled, and appeared to be on the verge of kneeling, while she had felt a strange completeness encircling her, as if layers of meaning that had been crowded out by noise, or too much activity, had made themselves apparent. The two of them had stood thus until Martin resumed the partition of their day's allowance, and at the very moment when he'd pressed money in her hand, a flight of pigeons had left their gargoyle-encrusted haunts to circle the church, casting their winged, floating, lofty shadows on the

fiery glass: Carol felt as if her being had been extended by uncountable layers. Martin, looking on her illuminated face, had seen her as someone touched by mysteries he could appreciate but by no means generate. Object of his admiration, she was, he felt, oddly unmoved when voices in the nave began to sing; the music, which was for him an addition, was a matter of indifference to her, like grass underfoot. 'Carol!' he'd cried, and tried to take back the money as if the division was cheapening them, but she'd dropped it in her bag, smiling on him, and had gone to read a little more about the crossover from romantic dream to Freudian dreams ... and she had known, setting out her notes in the reading room, that Martin had felt excluded by her vision whereas she'd felt him solid as a rock throughout, neither changed nor threatened, merely in abeyance while she enlarged.

Passing the cathedral as she walked to her work, she wondered if the sensations it had given her, like the singing the night before, would lose power when she re-entered her husband's circle, or whether it was merely his political ambitions, towards the creation of a grimmer, more puritanically just regime, that she feared.

Martin, stepping into a dawn of rosy pink at Melbourne airport, wondered why the future seemed like a battlefield where hopes would be killed by practicality. The cars in their parking bays were like an army of well-marshalled thoughts. I've given up my marriage for this, he thought, or I think I have ...

Their house, on a morning ready to blaze with the Australian summer, was dank. Crawling into bed unslept and overfed, he told himself that right or wrong he had to go on from where he was; he'd tried to crush something in Carol, and his return was as much a retreat from shame as anything else. Dragging Carol's pillow under his own, he wondered if political ideals, though demanding long hours of thought, and endless determination in their pursuit, might not be more rewarding than ideals of love. Everything in a relationship came back to you, scarcely improved, the moment it left. The pressure was too personal. Falling asleep, he wondered if the neighbors had kept the papers as he'd asked them.

When he woke, he put aside his accumulated mail for the headlines: he'd used the same airline, he discovered, as one Tirath Khemlani, a dubious financier who'd been brought to Australia to discredit the Whitlam government. The raucousness of the press in full cry told Martin he'd returned to witness the slaughter of his hopes, and of the government that had embodied them. Trembling, as if it was his own fate he was trying to unravel, he turned backwards and forwards through the news, looking for signs that his party could regain the initiative, but seeing that the dynamic had been lost; it was only a struggle to survive, now, against the gathering enemies. This, thought Martin, must be what it's like to die - disbelieving, expecting another chance when you know it isn't coming.

He rang Paris, but Madame, cold as snow, treated him as an interloper. Where was Carol? From the well of his misery he dragged enough resolve to walk to Dave and Margo King's, a couple he knew from his ALP branch. Scared to ask if there was any hope, he tried to talk about Italy and France, but Dave swept him aside: an army exercise, code-named *Rescue*, had been given the task of saving Canberra from a hypothetical civil disaster. 'They're getting ready!' Dave told him, brooding among his files. Martin felt Margo needed him to talk about anything but politics but Dave, his papers imperializing three quarters of the study he shared with his wife, whose desk had nothing to show but a few letters and a novel, demanded to know what Martin thought would be the most effective form of counter-terrorism that could be mounted in Australia, with its right-wing hegemony running right down to boy scouts, girl guides, et al. Martin, fresh from Europe, gave an

enormous laugh at Dave's expense which, he sensed, set Margo free of her husband. 'It's not that I'm not used to these ideas as theoretical propositions,' Martin said to Dave, who had his pipe in the early stages of production, 'but what you're describing simply isn't the country I left.'

'The country you left isn't the country you're in, mate,' said Dave, smugly malicious. 'Catch up on your papers and I'll talk to you.'

'Come round to dinner,' Margo broke in. 'The moment you're ready. We'd love to hear all about Europe ...'

'Ready to take us over, probably,' Dave said, turning to his desk and letting Margo show their visitor to the door; Martin saw that Dave's obsession with urban guerrilla warfare and the pre-conditions for revolution was undermining his wife. 'Do you really want me to come?' he asked. 'Come around late,' Margo said. 'He'll go to bed early and you can tell me about your trip.'

He arrived to face a lecture from Dave about his outdated attitudes to social reform; there was nothing for the Labor government to do but to tear down as much of the capitalist infrastructure as they could while they had some semblance of control: Martin, sure that Australian optimism would make the best of anything, laughed at him. If it came to a vote the people would reaffirm the magnificent ideals they'd endorsed in Gough's campaign of three years earlier.

Bullshit, said Dave. Margo wanted to know why not.

Because, Dave said, politics was all about power, not ideals or good intentions, and the rhetoric of three years ago had gone down the drain. People were set to destroy what they'd wanted, and the country was swinging to the right. It was only a question of whether the Left took what was coming, or risked a bitter fight. Martin thought he was mad, and Margo, bored by Dave, took Martin's side. Dave crushed them with a string of arguments based on the third world, the French Revolution, and the degeneration of the ideals of the American Constitution, and went to bed. Martin and Margo temporized over coffee, then kissed, pulling at each other's clothes. Margo told him to come around later in the week, when Dave would be at a conference in Sydney. Martin walked out of the house wondering how he could be as wholehearted about Margo as he'd been with Carol, and as excited, and yet his wife's memory, and her attraction, hung about his head like a halo he wanted to be rid of; it was all so perplexing, and Margo, confused and male-centred, was such a comfort.

He was lying in bed the next night when the phone rang. Carol, speaking on a bad line, wanted him to know that she'd spent five hundred francs on an antique hourglass. Martin, wondering if she'd be forced to come home before his affair with Margo was properly begun, asked her how much she had left, but Carol didn't want to talk about money, she wanted to ask him why, in his opinion, the wooden figures holding the little bulbs of sand had blindfolds on their eyes and telescopes in their hands? Martin said it was easy: they had the power to see more than their eyes could show them, but couldn't throw off their blinkers. Victims of their times, they were self-deluded! He felt he was challenging his wife. Carol, breaking off at a tangent, said that she'd been to Fontainebleau the day before, and would be exploring the Bois de Boulogne between bouts of work on the interplay between French classicism and dream. He asked what Fontainebleau was like, conversationally enough, and she rambled in her answer, thinking of the ordered paths, the ice-covered lake, the formality of entrances and gatekeepers; pressing through a long series of chambers decorated and redecorated for the rivalrous egos of France's rulers, she had come on an old doorkeeper, with runnels down his face as if his existence was a matter of fending off the seasons, who sat on a high seat between the last room and the exit. Carol, courteous and lonely, asked him if he had somewhere warm to go when he finished work, and he had replied with chilling formality:

‘Oui, mon cercueil sera doublé de feutre.’

The reference to a coffin startled her; she asked if his wife was still alive. ‘Ma femme,’ he said with skeletal finality, ‘n’est qu’une voleuse!’ ‘A thief?’ she said, wondering what she’d got herself into. ‘Une voleuse!’ he repeated with abandon. ‘Elle m’a volé toute ma vie entière.’

Martin felt her story condemning him, and knew that she saw him too as a man hostile to women for taking something he imagined he’d once had. He wanted to demand of her whether she felt the old man’s description of marriage fitted theirs when he heard a voice (Madame?) speaking rapidly in French, and sensed that Carol, in responding to this other, distant, voice, had wiped him from her attention. He was desperate to know why she thought the hourglass she’d bought was important, and whether she’d changed her plans for staying on, but Madame had distracted her to the point where he spoke to nothing but silence, and finally a series of clicks. Carol, who had needed to speak to him for reasons of her own, had need of him no more.

Or that was how he felt it - and two nights after, with a drunken Labor-professional left wing male night in between, he went to bed with Margo.

Sleeping badly with a stranger beside him, he wavered between wakefulness and dream. In a disconcerting passage of the night, he found himself on a vessel drawn mysteriously to an ever-receding island. The clicks of Carol’s phone call surrounded the ship’s figurehead like a sonic halo. His desire finally overcoming his agitation, he fucked Margo a third time before falling into a fitful rest which shattered, in the morning, when he woke feeling dismal. He’d made Margo obey his climaxes, and he’d woken wishing it was still night when atavistic urges didn’t have to face reality. He’d dressed quickly, told her he’d be back that night, and had gone to a hardware shop to buy paint for the bedroom, Margo rang three times in the morning - he knew who it was by the timing - but he let the phone ring itself out.

Women were a nuisance when you didn’t love them.

Carol walked when her concentration broke. One afternoon, in the Faubourg Saint Germain, she found herself blocked by a row of police staring down a narrow street at a joyously advancing column. Remembering the reputation of the French riot squads, she wondered what would happen to the protesters, but these flics were headed by an urbane super-cop murmuring reports into a microphone on the dash of his Citroën. When she asked him what it was about, he spoke tersely in an argot she couldn’t follow; knowing he’d intended to mystify her, she retreated into a bar where she placed herself at a window.

The column, which seemed never to end, was composed of professional-looking people, but the demands made on their banners meant nothing to her. She understood their strike, if it was one, by the way in which they sang, waved banners and released red, white and blue balloons. One truck went past, guarded at the corners by papier-mâché roosters and bearing a baby grand piano, at the keyboard of which sat a figure in harlequin costume, strumming something that might have been Satie’s Ragtime: Carol, pressed against the glass, felt that in searching to enter the spirit of the demonstration she was making herself as vulnerable as the protesters to the worldly, knowing police and their boss in his sleekly tailored coat; despite the danger, she longed to enter a dimension they appeared to inhabit easily but which was closed to her. For a while, sipping her drink, and watching the demonstrators with their helium filled balloons and their mocking yet passionate espousal of a cause she couldn’t understand, she attributed her separateness to the lack of a centralizing male, through whose more direct responses she could filter her own perceptions. Finally she accepted that her alienation was deeper-seated; it was the gap between an act which one could accept in the imagination but which one could not perform for oneself. Even the police, she thought, ruthless shits that they were, were closer to what they were looking at than she was. She left her drink half

finished, and allowed herself to be led by the same police into an even narrower street that pointed towards her hotel, the written evidence of her research, her borrowing card from the Bibliothèque Nationale - everything that gave her an identity in Paris.

Stretched on her bed, wondering how easy it was to manage without love, she fingered her notes on nineteenth century mediaevalism, the dream sources of legend and the stories of Poe. She found scholarship giving way to speculation about the eternal qualities of the human psyche, and its ways of rearranging itself from period to period, endlessly mystifying those who wanted to pin it down with descriptions. It seemed to her that the best portrayal of reality she knew was a sailing ship - a construction of reasonable solidity moving through treacherous elements that might at any moment overcome it, yet able to move only if it presented to the wind a flimsy, adjustable set of sails. Beliefs! And the poor crews, trapped between heaven and ocean, sweated out their fates the best way they could with lies, fantasies, cruelties and the endless boredom of captives. How odd, she observed suddenly, that *Tristan* and *Pelleas*, the quintessential operas of mediaevalism, had sailing ships at their decisive moments - love by its nature was a risky voyage, if you liked, and she'd boarded the vessel and been put off. At once, putting her notes on the floor, she felt free. She'd been trapped by the belief that her husband loved her, and that this could be the basis for a life. The shock of realization made her strangely uncomfortable - cages had their attractions! She walked to the balcony, feeling that even at this crucial moment of her life she was taking a false direction, and she opened the window, admitting the noise and the freezing air. She felt naked, though warmly dressed, and returned to the bedside for her notes; feeling like a preacher, or at best a self-conscious poet, she whispered to herself, with crowds swirling beneath:

Oui, je vois dans tes yeux
La divine promesse
Que ton coeur amoureux
Vient chercher ma caresse.
Enlacés pour toujours,
Brûlés des mêmes flammes,
Dans des rêves d'amour
Nous échangerons nos deux âmes.

She crumpled the paper and threw it in the traffic. She had to build on a better base than that. The air of the city seemed to accept the poem, but her own experience gave it the lie: souls were not equal, she'd been imposed on, and the really painful time was still to come, when she returned to fight off her husband's claim to be the meaning of her life. Egotistical shit! She had a feeling that in the next few days she'd be deluged by postcards, full of remorse but hard as steel, in which he would tell her, from every post box on his way to separation, how he loved her. We'll remember these nights as long as we live, he'd whispered, but his departure was impregnated with the intention of disproving what he'd said. She felt crushed. Women were supposed to embody integrity and duplicity, conscience, commonsense and everything that the regularities of life left out. Dream of the male!

Another song came to her mind, bitter as experience:

O porte de l'hotel avec deux plantes vertes,
Vertes qui jamais
Ne porteront de fleurs,
Ou sont mes fruits,
Ou me planté-je?

There was no answer. If children were life's fruit, and you had to have them on the terms she'd rejected, there was simply no answer, only a long drawn out campaign of emotional guerrilla warfare. I don't want to suffer, she told the traffic, I want everything I'm feeling available always ... but the parts of me won't coalesce ... Wondering what to do with the rest of her day, and why a demonstration had set her off, she lay on her bed enduring the agony of living without ambition, plan, hope, fantasy or other projection beyond her physical frame.

At a loss to know what to do with himself, Martin joined the counterlunch gang at the Railway. November 11th, and still no letter from Carol. Did he want it, or was Margo enough? He found the tables pushed together by Labor people talking about Fraser's downfall. Gough only had to tough it out a few more days and the Libs would crack. It'd be the end of Fraser and good fucking ridance. Martin nodded to Margo, keeping it low key so Dave King wouldn't notice, and headed for the bar. An inane western was being screened where the drinkers could stand if they had nothing better to do. Watching a half-hearted shootout, Martin wondered why he needed his country to be just. His optimism about Australia's future - his response to Gough's vision - surely stemmed from the fact that he couldn't look squarely at the present any more than he could face the past without misgivings. The chateaux of the Loire had thrilled him, yet left him frightened. A sombre bell in Barcelona reminding the city of unresolved, unforgotten agonies, had separated him from the things he was admiring. He felt lighter than his European past, and wanted it that way. Human passion didn't have to be taken so seriously that you spilt blood every time you wanted change. Dave King's talk about terrorism was hateful, Martin felt proud of himself for having attracted Margo from under the lecturer's nose. Suddenly the black and white cowboys gave way to a newsreader in full colour, but without the usual buttonhole: 'We have a news flash from Canberra,' said the telly-man. 'The Governor-General, Sir John Kerr, has dismissed the Prime Minister, Mr Whitlam, from office, and has asked the former Leader of the Opposition,' Mr Malcolm Fraser, to head a Caretaker Government.'

Martin's hands were shaking, he couldn't carry the tray. 'Seen a ghost, Marty?' said Dave King, eyeing him suspiciously. Margo wondered why he didn't sit beside her. 'I've seen the beginning and the end of everything,' said Martin. 'Hang on, someone get the drinks, I'll tell you what I heard!' The black and white western had taken over again from the newsroom; a black clad villain, clutching a woman beneath her breasts, was advancing, six-shooter in hand, on a sturdy looking Marshal. 'For Christ's sake,' one of the left-liberals called, 'bring us the grog and stop looking like a stunned mullet!'

It took them three hours to vilify Kerr, curse their own unpreparedness, and tear Fraser to pieces. What were the Governor-General's powers under the Constitution? None of them knew, except Dave, who reminded them that Kerr had reserve powers, and was Commander in Chief of the army. Seizing his advantage, since they were stunned while his worst predictions had been proved correct, he lectured them on the main weakness of the left - that it was unwilling to set up organizations for effective military training; their own feeble pacifism, he said, though correctly applied to wars of imperialism, was inadequate when preparation for revolutionary struggle was needed. Martin had never hated him more. 'There's an election in four weeks!' he said, swollen with passion. 'Just wait and see!' Dave sneered, Martin felt Margo siding with him, most of the group agreed: it would soon emerge that Fraser and Kerr had destroyed themselves. The people could be trusted!

The streets were quiet as Martin walked home. He spent the last hours of the afternoon listening to records, trying to hide from himself his state of shock. Once or twice he went outside

to look at the high, clear sky. He expected to hear a rumbling groundswell of fury, but there was nothing, only cars and trams grinding through the wide, pioneering streets. It would be a sickening moment to die, he thought, with everything in ruins. Watching Gough on the seven o'clock news, he wondered what Rome had been like when the conspirators killed Caesar, and why the political systems of Australia were so vulnerable, yet so impossible to alter.

He was thinking he might go back to the Railway when Margo came to the door. She wanted consolation, he wanted to be consoled. She wanted to come in, he wanted to go out. He had never felt more at odds with another person, and yet their desire urged them to a loveless engorgement which nearly took place under the eye of telly, until Margo, in underpants, fled to the bedroom, saying 'Sometimes women have to lead the way!' Martin, chasing her, felt he was a sad imitation of a satyr.

She left him in the crescent night, saying 'Dave's usually home by morning,' and making him wonder if he would have any use for anybody, even himself, when the sun rose, with its promise of a day as blandly serene as any that ever shone on the Acropolis. In a bleak hour before breakfast, he turned over the letters he'd written Carol, and she him, in the months before they'd married. Separation is supposed to be marvellous for romanticism, he thought, turning pages, but it hadn't been that way for him; he'd never felt more distant from anyone than in the previous night, when, lying sleepless, he'd argued to himself that if Carol had any spiritual connection with anyone, she'd sense his disastrous state, and ring ...

... but she hadn't, she'd had dinner with a Vietnamese man from two floors down who fancied her, and had danced with him, but had left him without a kiss at the turning of the stairs. Locking the door and crawling into bed, she'd felt she needed nothing but an income to let her swim through decades of private freedom: her notes, the darkness, her night out, and the sound of traffic which at any moment might subside in favour of people singing, enclosed her in the promise of a wholeness which she realized she hadn't even looked for since Martin left. Her body, her spirit, her plans for the time when the thesis was finished and she'd been awarded her Masters, were like a gathering of forces that needed only a visitor, an outsider, a voice de haut or en-bas, to solidify her identity: if she'd been an instrument, she felt, she'd be within an ace of perfect tuning.

In the street, a group walking home in the night was singing. As they reached the news stand below, one broke into something new. The party, some trying to follow her, others remaining with the old song, fell into confusion, but the new voice insisted, in thin soprano:

Ah! La charmante chose
Quitter un pays morose
Pour Paris
Paris joli
Qu'un jour
Dut créer l'amour.

Though the effect was ragged, it quickened Carol. She rushed to the window, wondering how the woman leading her friends across the Boulevard, and distanced already from Carol's balcony, had such confidence. She thought of ringing Martin, but it would cost the earth, and he'd abandoned her, and she might as well lie in bed, tense, restricted by her ideals and her repressions, trying to catch the last snatches of song as the voices faded into a night of icy mansard roofs. It troubled her that each night she took a deeper rest, as if her previous existence had been a breakdown from which she might recover, if only she could discover the secret of these singers who took their ease in nights that had no end but the arbitrary interruption of dawn. I will never return to

that *pays morose*, she told herself, yet the airline ticket was in her drawer, and the questions, so neatly outlined in her folder, were receiving answers, steadily, day by day ...

The Labor campaign opened at Festival Hall, home of wrestlers and rock groups. Martin strode through the West Melbourne streets as towards an apotheosis. He felt, in the streets, that it was going to be a gathering of all the strands of the last ten years - protest, earth garden, relationship people, democratic socialists, and the smart ones who'd overthrown the English-club values of their forebears in favor of a contemporary consciousness. They were a group well versed in the arts of public emotion. Rushing to the centre, hoping for a rhetoric to set the nation aflame, Martin was surprised by his own sense of solitariness. Others might know each other - and there were groups, arm in arm - but he, he saw, was one of the solitaries, rushing to the hall as if to a source, or spring.

The booming throng, crowding dusty steps under a high iron ceiling, had as their object, when they looked towards the light, a wide stage with chairs spread about two empty thrones where the former Prime Minister and his wife would take position. 'We want Gough! We want Gough!' yelled the crowd, eager as they might have been for Johnny Cash. Row after row of Labor dignitaries filed on - the Party President, the Premier of South Australia, and other more dubious lights who'd climbed on Labor's reformist bandwagon. Speech after speech was aimed at the nerves of the politicized audience. Kerr and Fraser took the brunt. The flag of Labor's idealism was draped wide across the stage. Gough's ministers, seated in the front row of the audience, took bows; most popular was the ex-treasurer, from the enemy state of Queensland, who waved delightedly at the tumultuous applause.

Speaker after speaker piled on the rhetoric. Labor could never be defeated while the faithful spread the word. The President hammered the table: the Liberal:, whose slogan was Turn On The Lights, would never be able to turn on the lights for the five hundred boys killed in Vietnam ...

... and that sent the crowd roar crashing into the iron roof; Vietnam was a symbol of all that had been wrong with the old, obedient, military-oriented society: the generation in front of him, used to dancing, singing hammering the aisles of the ironclad hall, knew they weren't backing off. No way was the country going back to those fusty days!

Prelims over, the chairman built up the audience for Gough, who appeared, mystic, rubric-faced, hair smeared, arms wide as Christ's, as he approached the stand which became, at his touch, a lectern to receive his notes, his historic thoughts ...

... the eagerly awaited word of a glorious bird at the end of its flight. 'Men and women of Australia!' said a sublimely confident Gough, timing this first and greatest pause of his address. Martin not only roared back, he noticed how deeply he wanted to roar: beefy people around him, less self-conscious, were shouting like fascisti as Gough, timing his splendid phrases, called them to their climax in the sullen progression of Australia's history: I am the hope of your generation, he seemed to promise, and if you make your voices heard your hopes won't be murdered by the ruthless materialists who want to replace me! An audience used to adulation and unused to dialectic, despite their shallow Marxism, roared, 'We want Gough! We want Gough!' at the climaxes written into his speech. The brick red leader, cresting on their waves of feedback, produced an exultant shout: 'The fundamental decency of the Australian people will not allow what has been done to be confirmed. The people will reject what has been done!'

Martin went home disappointed, despite the waves of singing and stamping that had launched Gough from the hall in an exultant rhythm to face the judgement of the Australian people, those putatively decent folk who were supposedly unable to ignore his message. Martin, longing to believe

Gough's every word, wondered if the blandly regulated air of Melbourne's streets could support the passion generated in the hall. His hopes, and his complementary fears, made him feel so vulnerable, that he hardly dared commit himself to the night. The warehouses of West Melbourne, as he made his way back to his car, seemed as negative as anything in the nation's history. Sullenly he considered - if the rhetoric of a Whitlam couldn't fire the city, what could he hope to do?

Margo was in his armchair when he got home; she said Dave was driving to Benalla, or Tallangatta, or somewhere, in the hope of saving a Labor member who'd be unseated by a swing of 2.7 per cent.

He looked at her - Diploma of Nursing, heavy breasts, over-willingness to please her men, softness, awe of power, yearning for praise - and cursed the gap she made in him. He wanted to be honourable and send her away, he wanted to be impulsive and take her to sexual climaxes which he could observe with malicious curiosity while he participated with all the pleasures of detachment. He despised her and he despised himself for wanting her. 'You must be thirsty,' she said, 'your voice is so hoarse!' and he noticed for the first time the cups, milk and sugar ready on a tray. The teapot, waiting to be filled, stood lidless on the kitchen table. She'd move into my life if I let her, he thought, and I'd treat her as badly as Dave does. So he drank tea beside her on the sofa, and tried to be sincere, knowing all the time that he was using her, so that he was momentarily relieved when she jerked the conversation from politics. 'That's enough about the Labor Party,' she said. 'I want to know what you think of love.'

A minefield! He sipped cautiously, giving himself time to think. 'It's a tricky business,' he said. 'Everyone wants love ... it's like a trip that can be a good one or a bad one ... or perhaps a great night that gives you an awful hangover ...' He stopped as she parted her lips, smiling. 'Is that what you really think?' she said, as if she'd watched someone skirting around a heap of gold, afraid to touch. 'You're keeping everything back. What did you feel when you married Carol?' This time, when he hesitated, she said, 'You must remember, it wasn't that long ago!'

She seemed to be gloating at having taken him from another woman, when he had every intention of abandoning her when Carol came home; sooner if possible. She smiled possessively. 'Do you remember the first time you met me?' He didn't. 'You had Carol on your knee at a party and I filled your glass. You didn't see me, I passed it over your shoulder, and you reached back to squeeze my hand.'

'I can't say I remember,' he said. 'It sounds like I was bit drunk.'

'You weren't drunk,' she said. 'When I came back to you later, you said you'd know my hand anywhere!' He felt sleazy; had he been as much on the make as that? 'I seem to have been a bit amorous that night,' he said, by way of defence. 'It wasn't just being amorous,' she said. 'I've had plenty of men approach me. I knew there was a bond between us, even before I saw your face.' Preposterous, he thought, wondering how to stop her. 'You knew?' he said, staring stupidly at her. 'Call it intuition,' she said, smiling on an ignorant male. 'Women have it, you know.' He decided he'd better make the best, or worst, of it; taking her hand, he kissed her. She reached her other hand inside his shirt. 'Still a little amorous,' she said. What a ridiculous charade, Martin thought, studying what he was doing and his pleasure in doing it.

He told Margo in the morning it had to stop. A week later, he wrote Carol an abject letter in which he said he was ashamed, not only of what he'd done to their marriage but also because of the link he'd discovered between his sexual desires and his obsession with political power. After pleading forgiveness and understanding, he wrote:

I've been offered a job at the Cooper oil and gas field. It'll be a hell I deserve. Men only. I'll be able to hate myself more thoroughly as I see myself reflected in the others at the camp. It's only a month, relieving for someone who's going to Iran. Then I have to face you. I hope I've been purified by then.

Oh Christ, she thought, a Parsifal, and stared out the window. Pedestrians and motorists were threading through each other under the benignly arrogant direction of policemen. A news poster demanded, 'Que veulent les flics?' She went to the bathroom mirror, which examined her with the same merciless interest as the people in the streets. I'm so interested in what others want of me, she thought; why don't I work out what I want for myself?

It was easier said than done. She went back to the balcony where she'd waved farewell to Martin; suddenly it seemed small, and the railing low. She wondered if anyone had ever thrown themselves over. She had a feeling that the step on to the balcony was one she'd not take again, and with the realization came a sickening outflow of confidence, as if a plug had been pulled, or a dynamo had failed in an unreachable basement of her being. I've been everyone else's person, she thought, and now I'm a shell, I'm only an awareness of my own emptiness. Slow as a sleepwalker, yet certain that what she was about to do was right, she picked up her bag and went to the mirror.

Farewell, nubble-nose, she said, and banished the obedience in her eyes, but they stared back, curious to see what she would do. The ovality of her face and the symmetry created by her evenly parted hair were obliterated by the scissors. In a series of brutal slashes, she revealed her face as unevenly contoured and red at the temple. A pimple stood forward of her ear. A heaviness hung about her collar. In a second series of slashes she bared her neck. Carol, she said to the mirror, tell us more about yourself!

Hardened, she trimmed her crown to a week-old crewcut. She darkened her lips with curves of oxblood, rubbed an emerald shadow into her shortened eyebrows and touched the surrounds of her eyes with kohl. Hello Carol, she said to the mirror. Hateful, aren't you? She carried scissors, make-up and tissues to the window, and threw them in the street. She had the satisfaction of hearing someone cry out before banging the window shut and picking up her husband's letter from the floor:

I don't even like her. I despise her. I must therefore despise that part of me that wants her, and if I idolize you, isn't that because you're unreal to me, and I don't want to see you for what you are?

Dead on, she thought. There was a knock at the door.

Silently as a panther, she whipped across the room, flung open the door, and took from Madame's hands a pair of scissors and a make-up bag. 'Je n'en ai plus besoin!' she snapped. 'Shall we just get rid of them?' But an angry Madame was saying something about her taking the attic room, or leaving the hotel. 'Oui! Bien! Je partirai tout de suite!' shouted Carol. 'Cinq minutes! And while we're about it, let's get rid of the offence!' She moved to the balcony windows for the last time, and threw the scissors and make-up out again, clumsily this time, because when Madame looked for protest in the street, she saw Carol's things on the awning above the news stand. In a flurry of anger she ordered Carol to make amends to the stallholders, friends who sent her customers, and Carol responded by packing her bag with icy calm, leaving what she thought was her bill on the bedside table, and throwing her keys after the articles of toilet.

And so Martin's second and third letters of repentance went into Madame's furnace, and Carol began her last weeks in France.

Her aloneness entered another stage as she moved through the streets; eyes observing her wanted to know what she meant by her appearance, and she wasn't ready to say. She found a room overlooking the river, spread her notes and finally asked herself why she'd chosen her thesis topic: was dream really an escape world, a therapy, a release, or was it a legitimate domain with rules of its own? With sickening certainty she reached the conclusion she'd been avoiding - that dreams, in their interplay with the 'real' world, were like the powerplay between male and female understanding, and the male understanding would forever incorporate what women perceived in their world-pictures and send women back to the margins to pick up what they could about things unknown. Like Hamlet watching for the ghost, she thought, wondering what the hell it meant. Suddenly she felt despair; trying to recall Shakespeare's opening lines, she realized that her position was not so very unlike her husband's, groping desperately at the frontiers of consciousness for what he needed to restore himself. Martin, she told him, I'll be back - but you may not know me when I come!

Three weeks after the election defeat, Martin took himself to the airport, wondering why she hadn't answered his letters. Uneasily conscious that his good intentions might be shredded by a few shrewdly placed questions, he stood at the customs doors. They surely wouldn't search Carol's little case? But she was slow to appear, and, squinting through the opening, he could see an altercation between a drab little customs man and someone who looked like an animated doll with blazing, mechanical eyes. He felt his guts turn over at the damage. Wanting to run in and claim her, he realized that their path to reconciliation, if it ever came, would have to be a shared one: she'd generalized the blame, inflicting it on others, and would need to be soothed, or steadied, by more hands than his before - he could only think of the cliché - she'd be *herself* again.

Herself, himself: he was one of a dwindling crowd of relatives, lovers, and friends calling to each other joyfully. In the excited crowd, only he and Carol, he felt, carried the burden. They alone knew what everyone did to each other in a world of power and weakness. 'Carol!' he whispered, weak at the knees, and backing off to a telephone booth to have something to hold on to; in his momentary glimpse of her debased, objectified self, he had also seen in her a piercing intensity which he recognized as superior to his own prevaricating nature. I let go that beauty, that honesty, he told himself, and reeled outside ...

... where Carol found him: 'How was the desert?' she began. 'Or should I say, the wilderness?' Unable even to pick up her case, he said, 'It's all around us, I don't know how to get out of it.' She smiled pitilessly. 'Were there any other consolations?'

'It wasn't as hot as I expected. And yes, there were flowers all over the sandhills.'

'Perhaps I'll go there some day,' she said. 'Drive me home.' The irony of the word reminded him of Paris - vines trailing from L'Ile de la Cité; certain windows at dawn, paisley patterned in an acerbic blue and silver; a dip in the ground that made the Arc de Triomphe nearer yet further away; the silk of flags; the new-oldness of everything; hedges shaped as carefully as beards; scarves; certain buttresses that had lost none of their daring in seven hundred years ...

'We have no home,' he told his wife. 'Only an address. You can stand in the back yard and look at a sky which is as stupid as a dead elephant, and much good may it do us!'

'You have become eloquent, Martin,' she said. 'Are you enjoying your ruin a little?' He had hopes that a little grandstanding for sympathy might appease her, but it was clearly not on. 'One must accept one's position,' he said, thinking she might have returned with some new definition. 'Or get out of it - and I don't even know where I am.'

'Then form links with other people,' she said. 'You'll still be where you are, but you'll be less alone.'

‘Did you form links with people in Paris?’ he said, hoping she might have been unfaithful. ‘Or were you alone?’

‘I found links with everyone I saw,’ she said. ‘Shall I tell you?’ In his guilt, and overwhelmed by the car parks, he could only say, ‘It might help us find each other.’ He hoped she felt his pain. Statuesquely silent, she considered her last weeks in Paris; a succession of incidents passed through her mind in which, wavering between hatred and indifference, she’d experienced mundane people as grotesque while remaining untouched by approaches she should have found loathsome. ‘A man bumped me in the street one day,’ she said. ‘I was carrying a parcel, and he wanted to rob me.’ ‘What was it?’

‘Books I’d bought you. I was on my way to post them.’

‘I never got them, Carol. I’m sorry.’ She ignored his penance. ‘No,’ she said. ‘I dropped the parcel.’

‘You dropped it?’

‘If he wanted to take it off me, I decided it had no value.’ She let her eyes rest on him, judging the weight of her words. ‘But if you’d chosen them for me,’ he said, ‘they must have had some value. For me at least.’

‘No doubt,’ she said, apparently fixed on the concrete foreshore of a road. ‘The car’s over here,’ he directed, as if leading someone in a trance. ‘I watched him,’ she said. ‘I stood behind a news stand till he came back.’ Pausing, she recollected the scene. A taxi, rushing past, hooted at them. ‘Fuck off!’ she shouted at his tail lights. Martin felt shocked. ‘Carol!’ he said. ‘Steady!’ and he found the strength to pick up her case. The concrete border, when they reached it, felt like a further shore, yet their previous conversation dogged them. ‘What happened to the parcel?’ Walking slowly, she stared at the sky. ‘He came back like a little street rat and picked it up,’ she said, wondering as she looked about her, how a scene so free of features could be healthy. ‘But my books!’ he gasped, trying to gauge the measure of his dismissal.

‘They were never your books,’ she said. ‘I gave them to the Quai des Célestins.’

Martin was amazed by her remoteness, her abstraction. ‘They were mine when you wrapped them,’ he said, trying to make her do penance. ‘No,’ she said, ‘they were your books if they reached you. The process is internal, you see.’ He didn’t see at all. He’d expected aggression, blame, and a struggle for reconciliation, but she was at some double remove, as if he’d caused her to disintegrate or dissolve, and now her existence, her wish to reconstruct herself, were on some plane he couldn’t reach.

Struggling to reassert himself and his sense of normality, he said, ‘You never answered my letters. I didn’t know what to make of the silence.’

‘There was no silence,’ she said. ‘I spoke to you every day.’ Trying to be reasonable, he said, ‘you only rang me once, how was I to know what you were saying?’ She opened her mouth to answer him, but was overtaken by the scream of a jet taking off. Martin felt the intensity of sound obliterating him. Carol began to walk backwards, as if she had only to track down the source of the sound and she would be again at the heart of the experience she’d come through. ‘Carol!’ he called, trying to wake her, but when she turned it was because the engine had quietened; she was as cold, touchable, and near as a statue. ‘Carol!’ he said. ‘For Christ’s sake don’t talk to me in riddles.’

She turned, they stared at each other. The delicacies of their position, they saw, wouldn’t outlast this first conversation. She wanted to strip him to his naked hypocrisy. He wanted to force her beautiful throat to utter something he could understand. In the next scream of the jet engine they shouted at each other, demanding understanding, but when the uncanny silence reinstated itself,

and they were left with nothing but themselves and the sounds of car doors closing, they looked weakly at each other, wondering if they had any future, until Carol said, as if they'd never intended to cause each other pain: 'There were days when I walked in a delirium of hatred. I wanted to kill this bloody Margo until I saw she was a victim too. When I realized she'd done nothing to me, she ceased to exist. Shall I tell you what I did then?' She touched a savagely trimmed grevillea. Martin winced. 'I'd better know,' he said, trying to be bold, but she said nothing; he studied the doll-like objectivity of her skull. It seemed to him that by crushing her own desires she was crushing any claim he might make on her. Determined to overwhelm this advantage of the wronged party, he loosed his frustration: 'You let a guttersnipe pick up my books,' he said. 'Have you anything else to give me?'

'Are there any letters?' she said, ignoring him. He knew that although he'd studied the envelopes he'd put on her bedside cabinet, he had no idea what they would mean for this new, unreachable Carol. 'A few things,' he said. 'I don't remember. You'll see when you get home.' Though she'd used the word herself she laughed when he said it, as if it were an outdated obscenity. 'My mail,' she said, 'is at our home address?' and she aimed her laughter at destroying him - or that was how he felt as he rushed her baggage to the car, and carried her homewards like an unresolvable problem. At the point where he nearly took a wrong exit from the freeway he tried to disguise his mistake, but she, having known he was going to make it, said, 'You're afraid of me. Your fear is a greater obstacle than your infidelity. Indeed, it explains it.' Martin, swearing at the driver in the next lane, showed how crushed he felt. 'Martin,' she said. 'Men dominate because they fear, don't they? It's a mutual problem. Or are you too scared to see?'

Gathering the rest of his strength as he turned the car into the Brunswick Street exit, he said, 'I don't want you to hammer me. I want you to find the way out.' A truck, rushing downwards, almost wiped them off. 'Don't make me plead,' he said, and added, scratching for words, 'and don't protest your bloody innocence and pain!' He took his hands off the wheel, she wondered if he wanted to end them. Rather than scream she clapped her hands to her head, quivering with rage too great for Martin to be its object. The sobriety of suburbia was like an anaesthetic against which she fought. 'Stop!' she said, choked with anger. He felt it wouldn't help. She was passing through a crisis he couldn't even comprehend, let alone deal with. Her hopes for a productive life died between a service station and a chicken bar. 'Why do people, when they're out to hurt you, say they're going to make you comfortable?' she said, writhing with her pain. Moving steadily between Brunswick and Carlton, he waited for her to relax a little; she appeared to feel his need, but sat on the seat beside him struggling with some inner urgency, most of her personality beyond control. 'We're going to drive home,' she said, her rage resolving itself. 'I'm going to get my mail, and go.'

He wanted to know where.

'Anywhere I'm wanted.'

'Is it too corny to say I still want you?'

'Yes it is. I don't mean to be manoeuvred, Martin, by protestations of how you feel. I'll judge by what I see you do.' Her glance into a concrete drain that had once been a creek suggested what the value of his offerings might be. Martin gathered himself for a final fling. Swinging right to pass a van, he said, 'I offer you the best of myself. I don't want any more of what I've just had.'

'People with hangovers are boring,' she said. 'You had your fucks.' As they entered Rathdowne Street he heard her singing quietly to herself; he caught the words '*un pays morose*', and something about a hotel with two pot-plants at the door. Arriving at their shared address, he said, trying to sound ironic. 'You'll recognize where we are.'

Their white fence glared in the morning. 'I belong nowhere,' she said. 'I'm only a process that I hate.' He could only understand her by her degrees of rejection. It seemed to him that the sheer fact of entering the first home of their marriage might move the problem into some other mode. 'Come inside, Carol,' he said, wanting to sound tender. 'You're jetlagged. When you've had a sleep, we can talk.' She studied his drawn forehead. 'We can talk,' she said, 'but we won't make anything better than we've already had. That, my dear, is the first law of relationships.' She stepped out of the car, leaving him to bring her case, and entered the house. Groping her way down the passage like a blind person, she found the bathroom, turned on the taps, and flung her clothing on the floor.

An hour later, she was asleep, and Martin, who found himself torn between relief and a wish to explode her perceptions, so threatening to his well-being, was answering phone calls with the message that Carol would call back in a day or two.

About noon, with Carol still asleep, and the friends who'd known of her return dealt with, Martin fought off a wish to get drunk at the Railway. Going, instead, into the backyard, he wondered what was left of his life. Docile suburbia gave him nothing but the sound of a power drill. From the sky, a jet plane, remote as eternity, flashed sunlight downwards. Somewhere, in suburbs to the south, its shadow would be chasing it over the backyards, barbecues and tennis courts of people who'd destroyed his hopes. The plane, as he studied it, banked a little, as if equipped with choice; he felt, touching a tree he'd planted that was already too big, that his range of choices had been whittled back to one. Lie down and bear it. Swallow it and grin.

Re-entering the house, he had the feeling that Carol's chances of recovering were better than his. I'd rather suffer, he thought, than cause suffering, and I've destroyed Carol, and done nothing for Margo, and the optimistic, forward-looking part of my life is over, and there's nothing, nothing I can do.

When she woke, he fenced her around with rye bread, caviare and tea. 'Something light,' he told her. 'They cram you full on planes.' The sun was below the rooftops, she'd slept all day. He could hardly swallow for the tension in his throat, but she ate quietly, staring at the sky. 'Is there wine?' she said, breaking into his agony. He rushed to get it. 'I won't sleep tonight,' she said. 'I'll read. I don't want you bothering me. Is there somewhere you could go?'

'You really want to leave me?' he said. 'It's going to be hard to face.' 'Yes, and it's getting harder,' she said. 'Habit and this place are getting to me.' He flinched. 'Where will you go?'

'That's the hard part. Walking out will be easy. But ...' He stared at her intently, she saw that he was curious, at last, instead of sorry. 'You're just an aggravation now,' she said. 'Not the problem.' A puzzled expression appeared so predictably on his face that she became angry. They argued, she said she didn't want to listen, she'd go for a walk. He said he'd go. He promised to be away an hour and he came back in ten minutes. She walked out the back. He stood in the passage, trying to get his mind around what was happening. He couldn't see it except in terms of blame. He resisted the temptation to ring Margo. He sat down and tried to read, but felt that his rottenness had gone beyond a sexual act to a philosophic dimension that he couldn't change because he hadn't the intellectual equipment. He needed someone to redeem him and of course there wasn't anyone, and he sat in the chair for what seemed hours until he heard the front door, then the phone; he wondered who she was ringing. The Gysberts took a long time to answer; Carol imagined them sitting at opposite ends of the sofa, arguing. The voice, when it came, belonged to Jack, but he handed over to Julie, whom he harried throughout the ensuing conversation. In the space of a minute Carol discovered that the Gysberts had migraines, their chihuahua had been put to sleep, they were opening a set of up-market kitchen shops, they adored Carol but they were leaving on a

cruise the following afternoon and hadn't packed a single bag, but if Carol wanted to use their flat they'd leave the key with Mrs McLintock who was a darling and didn't ask questions, and they'd let the milkman know she might want something, and if she wanted the paper delivered she only had to talk to the man at the corner shop ... and *how was she?* What did she do in Paris, and how (cough) was Martin?

Martin heard Carol say, 'Won't you be there?'

Julie said no, but Jack sang out that the way he felt, there was no way he'd be going anywhere, he'd much rather have Carol stay with them than see a lot of boring islands ... Julie said to take no notice, they were definitely going, she could have the flat, they had no hang-ups about her using their bed, it was more comfortable than the sofa ...

Martin could sense Carol's mood as she moved from the bedroom to the passage. There'd been some disappointment in her conversation, but her determination was unbroken. She was going. He slumped in his chair defeated.

She went out, carrying her purse. When she came back, he heard the rustling of paper. When she told him to go to bed, he obeyed, never having felt more neutered than in the moment before he put on his pyjamas. Lying under the sheet that was all the night required, he felt some comfort when she brought him a huge glass of whisky, and an equivalent distaste for letting himself be drugged. 'This is cruel,' he said. 'You knew I was finding it hard to face.' He meant the night they were going to spend in separate rooms, he feeling her presence as something in the air, like a question whispered just outside his hearing; and she feeling him as too solid, shut away in another room like the objectification of menace. Having supervised his first sip, she went to the front room and sat where the light from the street lit the wall and bookshelves in front of her.

There was a certain pleasure to be taken from the anger that accompanied the waves of bitterness and revulsion that swept over her in the early part of the night, but when these moods passed into a miserable passivity, the pointlessness of everything settled on her like dust. There was nothing worth doing or saying. Her bag was still packed - in the car, as far as she could remember. Tomorrow, if she could find any reason to move, she'd take it to the airport, but finding a reason was the problem. If she was moved only by forces external to herself, she was nothing. Why go anywhere when the problem was internal? The angry, bitter moods were better, because while they were with her she felt a soaring power to do things - organize, speak, write, crush the power-merchants with the energy she found inside herself. Above all, Martin.

Then came nostalgia for the time when she'd thought the things that happened to other people wouldn't happen to her, followed by an hour when she attempted an accounting of what she'd lost. None of it reduced her feeling that something had been done to her for which she had no adequate response; she had just decided she might as well get her papers and start the final draft of her ironically titled thesis, when she heard a click.

Martin had turned off his light. Their light.

It was his problem as well as hers, she had to go to him. She sat on the bed. He was sitting up, head against the wall. She took a big swallow of the whisky, he made a sound which was meant to indicate acceptance. She said, 'You've taken your things off?' She wondered if his nakedness implied some sensuality that might be dangerous. He said simply, 'I was hot.' His voice contained something more than the futile penitence of their dinner hour. She waited. For a moment he felt equal to her, there was some honesty in having stripped himself. Considering the mask his wife had inflicted on herself, he said, 'Did you feel better when you'd done it?'

'I wanted to wipe myself out,' she said. 'And I wanted people who looked at me to see nothing. Since it worked, I can say I felt less bad than I might have.'

'How long are you going to stay like that?'

'As long as I feel like this.'

She was wearing a white shift. 'We're like two corpses,' he said. She took a sip of the whisky and spat it on him. 'Speak for yourself,' she said, standing. 'Did you have to do that?' he shouted. 'No,' she said, sitting again. 'That gets us nowhere.' He pulled a hanky from under the pillow. 'I feel dirty,' he said, hoping she would take it, and wipe him, it might be the beginning of a reconciliation. 'You could have a shower,' she said. He continued to fiddle with the hanky though the moment when she might have responded was gone. She reached over and took it from him. 'It's no good,' she said. 'It's not just a matter of can I forgive you, or can we make a go of it if we try. What happened was bound to happen. If it hadn't happened to us it would have happened to someone else. So it can't be fixed in this room, by just the two of us.'

Not understanding, he said limply, 'Where will you go?'

'You always focus on the place,' she said, 'and evade the point.' Each felt the other's readiness to wound; drawing back, they created a silence neither knew how to fill. After a minute in which, suspending hostilities, each felt they knew the other better than at any time in their marriage, she picked up the whisky. He rustled the sheet 'I remember how you slipped on the steps at Blois,' he said, searching for something about the way she expressed her pain. She threw it back at him. 'Was I an object, even then, for you to laugh at?'

'Oh, probably,' he said, not bothering to fight back.

'So?' she said, daring him to state himself in some way she could get at.

He sighed, she played with the glass, not drinking, the moments passed, each felt weaker; wanting to be cruel to each other, neither could find the energy to prise open a weakness. 'Have you ever thought of killing yourself, Martin?' Carol said, baring her hatred. 'I'm a pretty sturdy citizen,' he said. 'Boring, you might say. No I haven't. What about you?' 'If you think of it,' she said, 'we die every night, to wake the next day, or when our dreams are too painful.'

'Have you been having suicidal dreams?' he said, genuinely wanting to know.

'Some nasty ones,' she said, shaking her head. 'I'm being sucked down a giant pipe to the ocean. I'm drowning and I can't get out. And there's one where I'm being dragged behind a boat. The people in the boat don't know that they're dragging me over coral. It's a laceration dream. I don't know what they're supposed to mean. But they always stop before I get really hurt, so perhaps I'm a survivor, underneath it all.' She meant the anguish they were going through. 'Makes two of us,' he said. 'But can we do it together?'

'If you mean in a marriage,' she said, 'the answer's no. If you mean can we engage in some meaningful dialogue, the answer is we've started.' This time, when she sipped, he felt her less hostile. Carol, looking at him again, saw that the qualities she'd always loved in him were discernible in the general debris of male/female relations. He, watching her, reached out a hand. She, guarding their exact dispositions of strength and weakness, touched his hand as she handed him the whisky. 'I think I'm beginning to understand your side of it,' he said, but Carol, finding herself ready to rise again, said 'Don't decode every message I send you. Respond. If I wanted to have an interpreter, I'd've stayed in France!' She saw him wrestling with her admittedly obscure attack. 'To put it plainly,' she said, 'stop falling into the habit of being a man on the make. Just listen and see where it leads you. It mightn't get either of us out of a mess, but it's good enough for a start!' He settled under his sheet, too hot to sleep, as much appeased as he could hope to be, while Carol,

pulling open the front door and spreading herself in the hallway on a row of cushions and a battered doona they'd bought in an op-shop, wondered where she'd get to when she broadened her attack from loving, guilt-laden Martin to those parapets of thought she wanted to bring down, and what, when the embattled stage was over, the lives of men and women might look like. She thought of the nineteenth century artists who loved to paint lions lying down with lambs, and laughed: a bitter, lying dream, that one. Martin, hearing her tossing and turning, thought of offering to swap, but what was the use? It was the same night they had to face, separately and alone. 'Carol,' he called out ... and he wanted to tell her he loved her ... 'I'll visit you in Sydney. We can still be close.' He meant it as a message of pure affection, but Carol, on her impromptu bed, called back, 'What makes you think I'm going to stay within your understanding, Martin? You wanted all the freedom you could get, and you wanted me as an object at the centre of your thinking. That's how you defined me. You won't get away with that again.' Writhing under his sheet he cried out, 'I don't want you as an object and I never wanted to hold you back. And I know, somehow, that I'm not as bad as you've painted me!' She could hear him breathing heavily, half in love with his own ideas. 'And I'm not responsible for the way you feel about me,' he said. 'It's not even true to say I made the situation we're in. It walked in on me.' She rolled over to let her laughter flow easily from her throat, like a singer's vocalise. 'Still caught in the trap,' she said. 'Poor, poor afflicted Martin!' She listened, expecting him to rage at her, or at least to turn on the light to stare sullenly at the wall, but there was nothing. She'd got away with it. Pushing aside the fringe of a cushion cover which was tickling her, she called down the passage 'Sleep well, Martin. And if you feel like dreaming, try for something phallic.' He felt insulted, and she, drawing up her knees, and marvelling at her body which could switch from winter to summer between one night and the next, wondered if she should dress and walk again, or trust to the morning. Knowing she would sleep badly, she put her head in the pile of pillows, secure, resettled, and somehow justified for having tackled him as she had - and yet knowing that her position was short-lived, that Martin was the least of her problems, and that once she'd done a couple more weeks' work on her thesis, her life would be as pointlessly intertwining, and as transient, as the silver tracks of snails. Gone by breakfast were the snails, and gone by morning might be her resolve, unless she could act more importantly than she'd done with her husband, her former lover, a man as flawed as the understanding she'd hitherto had of herself. About two in the morning, when a cool drift of air made the passage too chilly, she took herself to the bedroom and lay beside her exhausted, defeated man; he, on his back, had the sleep of death appearance on him: Carol wondered what dreams were in that darkness, trying to tell this man she lay beside what he really was.

2

Carol studied Martin at the sink. Something about the dishwasher made her see him as the embodiment of muddy conscience. I have to get out, she reminded herself, but was on the verge of putting their cups at his elbow when she heard a whistle. The mail! She knew in a flash that there would be something for her, she suddenly had the advantage of Martin, his shirtsleeves rolled to the elbow and his guilt displayed like a wound. Without stopping to think of her cropped hair and fiercely pencilled brows, she went to the gate. Watching the postman approach, she wondered at the power of messages; he had her fate in his blue, vinyl bag!

‘Goodday miss,’ he said, averting his eyes. ‘Certainly been some changes in you.’ He gave her a bundle of envelopes. In a moment she found her letter. There were five for Martin. The postman was riding dourly around the corner as she opened her envelope from Sydney University. A Dr Lewis wanted her to give a lecture and perhaps a couple of tutorials to second year students on her thesis topic, asking her if she’d be able to stress any links between her researches and the liberation of the primitive in the unconscious which was, according to the lecturer who would follow her, the key to art/music/poetry/mime in the twenties. If you want it, people, she told the redbrick fronts of Rathdowne Street, I’ll find it! Strolling up to the husband she was about to abandon, she said, ‘If you’ve got anything to say, now’s the time.’ She showed him the letter. Leaving felt easy. ‘Sydney’s pretty expensive,’ he said. She countered. ‘Julie and Jack said I can stay at their place. If they go away, they leave the key with this old Scottish lady downstairs, in case any of their friends turn up. That,’ she said, ‘is the sort of people they are!’ Assertion rang confidently through the kitchen. ‘Paragons of virtue,’ said her weakened husband. ‘But what’s it all about?’

Freedom, she thought, redressing the balance and all the rest of it, didn’t he know? Retreating from her challenge, he picked at a letter from the Labor Party. ‘You’re not really leaving me,’ he said. ‘You’re just trying to continue your trip. We’ve got to come to terms with each other, it’s no good your running off.’ While he scanned the letter, she felt her strength gathering. ‘I’m going to come to terms with you,’ she said, ‘and I’ll be doing it a long way away.’ He ripped a second letter open. ‘There’s no point in going to Sydney or anywhere else,’ he said. ‘Not now. Power’s the only reality, and we’ve been fucked!’ For a moment she was sorry for him, then she looked harder at his words. Fucked! Power! Reality! ‘I’ll call a taxi,’ she told him. ‘I don’t need to pack. The Gysberts’ number is in the address book if you feel you have to call.’ She hoped he wouldn’t, but couldn’t close off his right. He waved his letter. ‘The New South Wales Coal Board’s giving me an interview,’ he said. ‘I’ll be in Sydney too!’

She smiled thinly, giving him no encouragement. ‘A fortnight’s time,’ he told her. She went to the phone. Organizing the taxi, she felt an elation she knew she’d have to pay for. It hit her as the plane took off, it wasn’t guilt she felt about Martin or suspicion she felt from a hostess, it was knowing that she was going into a void where nothing from the past except her research techniques could be of any use.

As the plane banked for Sydney airport, she had the feeling that the line between land and water paralleled a division in herself. The terminal might have been any city in the world, but when

she reached the harbour, with its blue water, ferries, and seagulls, she felt an excitement rising. One could so easily give in to sentimentality! Sternly reminding herself that she would need something to eat, she bought scallops - half a kilo, in case the Gysberts were home! Walking down the Quay, she came on a group listening to a busker singing Edwardian music hall songs. Stuffing the seafood in her bag, she stood on the outside of the circle, half listening, letting herself float in a mood of delicious release. 'Home James, and don't spare the horses,' the man sang in a light, mocking voice. 'This night has been ruined for me.' He must have made a gesture, the circle of listeners chuckled; Carol found his ridicule attractive. She could see her ferry approaching, but wanted to know what he'd sing next. People threw coins in his bag. He strummed idly, Carol had a feeling that what he did next depended on her. She found a coin in the bottom of her bag and flicked it over the heads of the listeners, she heard it hit the pavement as he launched into 'Yesterday'. With the boat coming, and the seagulls dittering about, she wanted to run, but couldn't. 'All my troubles were so far away,' he sang, then lowered his voice; it was a feeling she had of him that excited her, rather than the sound, which hardly broke clear of the lapping water. 'I believe in yesterday,' she heard, and then no more until the group broke up, and he put down his guitar to pick up a coin that had missed his bag. Mine, she thought, as he grinned slyly at her, and then she realized that it had been a two franc piece, and she felt awkward as she moved away, wanting to explain, and hating the fact that he was studying her from behind. Into her self-consciousness broke his voice, harder and drier than when he sang. 'Liberté! Egalité! Fraternité! That'd have to be a dream!' She turned, and in the moment of catching the singer's eyes, was again in that voluminous, rich, dimension she'd known in Paris. The city's facades were like curtains billowing at the edge of her mood. Trains rumbled on their way to destiny. The immense sky considered her benignly. And the mood stayed with her as the little ferry pulled out, and she looked back to where he'd stood, and she wondered if he had shared the moment with her, or merely watched her moment of elevation and wondered what he might do with it, given the chance. But he was gone now, and she wasn't sure, by the time the boat passed under the bridge, whether she'd recognize him if she saw him in another place. She went to the front of the boat, trying to pick out the flats where the Gysberts lived, still hoping they might be there to welcome her. Anything was better than nothing. In a moment of recognition, she saw that all six windows were closed.

It changed her journey from a reaching out to a withdrawal. She'd be alone. The ferry nosed into a bay where ketches, yachts and powerboats, isolated as suburban houses, sprinkled themselves on the water between Luna Park and two little jetties stepping over rocks and waterweed to welcome travellers. Her isolation deepened as she picked her way along the pier, aware of those empty windows from which her friends might have waved, and she knew, as she stared at a railway viaduct gloomy enough to exclude anyone but teenage lovers and graffitists, that in leaving her husband she'd entered on something limitless.

The act of coming ashore, whatever it meant, felt like some sort of determination of the future; facing the railway viaduct, she turned aside and walked along the path till she found a garage full of marine engines and disorderly clumps of docketts. 'Can I get through here?' she asked, eyes falling on a girly calendar. 'No miss,' said a man in overalls, kindly enough despite the evidence of his detritus. 'Gotta go through the arch, I'm afraid.'

So she went through the arch, and was rewarded by a magnolia flowering late, a bougainvillea blooming disregarded by the railway, and a hint, floating down from the streets where the Gysberts walked, of frangipani. Layers of restriction fell off her like scales. What a pity there's no one there, she thought: I could really rage tonight!

Mrs McLintock didn't like the look of her, and surrendered the key only after Carol described the leadlight thistles built into the flat's windows for the Scottish engineers who'd first owned it. Carol took the key, so grudgingly handed over, and responsibility for the Gysberts' cat, and climbed the stairs, weakened by a sense of impending destiny. Turning on the fridge, and dropping her bag at the foot of the brass-knobbed bed, she prepared herself for the sense of remoteness that would come when she sat in the front room, with nowhere further to go.

There was a change of level between the lounge and the front room, a step where Julie Gysberts was fond of teetering, glass in hand, as she told guests about the model she'd had dinner with who'd been found floating in the harbour, murdered by a drug gang. Carol hovered, unwilling to take the next step. Why was Julie so fascinated by the story? Carol decided that it was her cop-out for not taking responsibility for her life - see what they do if you try to break in! Carol didn't want to break in, she wanted an equal strength of her own. That too would have to be a dream, she told herself, considering the water; I'm alone, and if I wake up in the night I'll be so lonely I'll cry, and I'm thinking of taking on the world! She took the step, aware of fragments of her self reflected in the twelve-paned windows. The doppelganger problem with a vengeance! She sat at the Gysberts' table spreading her notes, relieved that she had a reason to be there. Studying her diary, she realized that there were only twelve days to her lecture, and that she hadn't notified anyone that she was willing to give it.

The phone rang. Picking it up as if it were an extension of her thought, she found a heavy breather. She banged it down, wondering if she'd been seen entering the flat, or if it was a regular burglar's checkout. Either way, she told herself, I lose: they try again, or they rush me!

Quelling her fears, she rang Dr Lewis, who told her that the lecture had been well advertised, making Carol feel she had something to live up to. She found the challenge exhilarating, and when a click at the other end told her he'd hung up, she called into the phone 'I'll be there with bells on!' She crossed the room confidently, almost raunchy in her movement, but found herself hesitating, again, at the step.

It was a cursed thing that step, it made her wonder whether she wanted to fight Julie or love her, it made her feel division-prone when she wanted to be unified. If Martin rang now, she thought, it'd tear me, I might start to backtrack on what I've done.

Martin didn't ring, she worked on her lecture, and when jetlag hit her she put her notes by the big bed in case she woke in the small hours, and lay on her back, hands on her thighs, awaiting the arrival of sleep. As if he were a lover, she realized, wondering why she needed something to deliver her from herself. Dreams! As if actuality wasn't rich enough, though painful. She felt like making a speech. She wanted to wake to a different world. She even wanted, in the moment when she felt like having someone rub her back, her husband. Shit! She drifted, tossing restlessly, till a train, vacuous as a drunken commuter, rumbled across the night, and she knew, turning downwards into night as a terminal patient might deliver herself to death, that she had no more use for the day.

Showering the next morning, she noticed a woman of her own age in the facing flat, padding about her kitchen naked. She was so serious about her tasks, and had her hair so carefully brushed while her body hung of its own accord, that Carol wanted to laugh, but was afraid of being caught prying. She moved aside from the window, but tried to imagine the other woman's movements, and sure enough, when she looked again, redhead was boiling an egg. She was so devotional about it that when a male voice boomed 'Jennifer!' she turned down the gas, touched her hair behind the ears and hurried from the room. Carol winced. She'd burned a saucepan too, making love one morning. Expecting the smell of burning toast at any minute, she pulled down the window and

stepped out of the shower. Water still clinging to her body, she walked down the passage, towel in one hand, nighty in the other, and stood by the window.

She was more confident than in Paris. Naked in the exultant light, she was aware, not only of her body's freedom, but of the myriad boats tethered to the harbour floor until masterful hands released them. She was also aware, as a container ship let itself be dragged through the strip of darkness under the bridge, of the reverse power of lesser vessels, guiding when brute strength was not enough. And she was uncomfortably conscious of the couple next door coupling while their breakfast burned. That way she wouldn't go again! She went to the bedroom to dress.

Digging in her bag for some knickers, she recalled a dream that had come to her just before she woke up: she and Julie had been doubles partners, playing tennis against a mysterious opponent, perhaps only a wind, who kept hitting the ball back while remaining invisible. This force drove the ball to the furthest corners of the court, making them run everywhere while missing none of their returns. Exhausted, they collapsed on a heap of sand at the back of court, where, while a hot wind blew against them, they squirmed on the sand until Julie brought her vagina against Carol's heel. This was when Carol had woken up. In the last moment of nakedness before she put on her clothes, she touched herself. What did it mean? For that matter, why did things have to have a meaning? There was something degrading about taking dreams as confessions from the psyche; much more attractive was a note she'd copied in the Bibliothèque Nationale:

C'est dans les nombreux projets que nous les trouverons, rêves caressés pendant toute une vie, rêves irréalisés dont pourtant l'oeuvre concrète ne cessa de se nourrir.

She was still asking herself what she could draw from the tennis dream when she went down to the ferry, but her thought was interrupted when she reached the arch under the railway. There were voices, one of which she recognised, on the other side. 'I don't mind what you do,' said the voice she felt she knew. 'I've got my mind made up and that's it.' The speaker was a man in a brown suit, balding, with, for some reason, a hat in his hand. Carol recognized him as the mechanic with the marine engines and the girly posters when he turned to face his wife, who was taking him to task for something to do with their son, a pimply boy who was the first of the trio to notice Carol. As she passed them, she could feel a tumescent interest taken in her, and at the same time caught the words of the wife, a fiftyish woman in blue polyester and black high heels who snapped at her son: 'Well, what are you going to do with your day if you won't come to the hospital with me?'

Something in the boy's footsteps as he followed her on to the jetty told Carol how he meant to spend his day, but his plans of women-watching were frustrated, or at least delayed, by his mother catching a shoe between two planks, losing the shoe, and knocking it, as she tried to get into it again, into the water. 'Louie!' cried the father, and 'Come here at once!' the mother; the last Carol saw of them as the ferry pulled away was of the father holding the son's coat, the mother advising volubly, and the boy, sleeve rolled up, groping in the water. Carol thought their mutual frustration well deserved, but her face stiffened as the boat turned and she could see the Gysberts' flat. She'd left the window open.

It was not that there was any danger of theft - the flat was unapproachable from that side - but the void behind the black rectangle disconcerted her. She wanted someone there, waving to her, not that emptiness, like an unadmitted need, reminding her of her vulnerability.

As an escape from the feeling, she studied the passengers. Two young men, tattooed and wearing tee-shirts advertising beer, caught her attention because of the respectful way they stared at an older man polishing a saxophone. She thought of her busker - she tried to guess his name - who'd

ended his music-hall bracket with 'Yesterday'. She wanted him to be at the quay, and would have moved to look for him, except that it meant breaking into the triangle of admiration around the instrument.

When the boat reversed into its mooring, she was first to get off. The ferry assistant, putting the plank down, said, 'There you go, roughnut!' It was accepting, it didn't make her self-conscious; it even gave her a little lift of hope, but when she got free of the ferry shed, she saw there were no groups on the Quay. Crushing her disappointment, and resigning herself to a day's research, she walked to the spot where she'd thrown her coin. Something must have shown, because she became aware of a priest watching her professionally, offering compassion. I don't need your help Charlie, she told herself, but noticed some element of admission in her thought; she determined to listen closely for the next response to things about herself that were on display.

But the day proved empty. The librarians were cool, the people in the sandwich shop noncommittal. No one spoke to her in the library, a paperboy was cheeky. Walking to the city through Glebe that night she wondered if she'd become invisible, she was so ignored. Finally she turned into a sidestreet of crudely renovated dwellings, feeling wary when she had to pass a two-storeyed terrace where males, perched on piles of threadbare carpet and broken brick, were drinking beer from cans. The house behind their conversation was gutted. She thought of crossing the road, but, touching her scalp, she chose to go on. It seemed best to stare at them as frankly as they at her; and she was amazed to recognize her busker strumming his guitar. She knew he recognized her by a tension breaking into his idleness. Embarrassed yet excited, she walked on, listening hard, but as soon as his excitement entered his playing, there was a shout from another of the men. She hated them for making her an object of comment, and might have hated her singer too, except that his voice followed her down the street:

'Liberté! Egalité! Fraternité!'

His voice, alcohol affected, was less dry than when he'd called to her the previous day, and it mocked himself as much as her, as if inviting her to recognize the stupidity of his situation. She wondered also why he thought himself anything but lucky. Two of his companions had also seemed familiar, but it was not until she'd reached the Quay and was boarding the ferry that she decided that they were the tattooed youths she'd seen that morning, admiring the saxophone. The circles were closing in! She went to the front of the ferry, leaning over the water. The journey seemed to have taken her over - her tiredness, her wish to be home, her elation. She wanted an end, and she wanted no end. She wanted to drift, and she wanted decision. She stared at the blocks of flats, brightly lit or black, half-circling her bay, and wondered what human patterns in this void would come to affect her. If the tattooed youths came home by ferry, they'd pass beneath her window. Did her singer come with them sometimes? She rubbed her scalp, wavering between beauty and destruction as the image she wished to present. She felt freedom in the air, and restriction built into her being. One had to grow! Scratching her scalp, she drew a drop of blood, which she examined, as one might examine a crushed ant, on her finger tip; how could she come to terms with herself, let alone a man? The blood grew black, as the boat drew into the bay. Her window was blacker still. She felt a stirring of sexual desire. A sensation without an object, it was an awareness that made her uncomfortable. She tried to put it down, it was better to have no entanglements, no aspirations beyond a lecture. She wanted to welcome the emptiness awaiting her as a void in which something good might grow.

As she opened the flat, and settled into bed with Proust, she felt she was not so much negating herself as placing herself in reserve - pending, she told herself, wily remembering her files. And

Proust had for her a message when he described how he sent his Gilberte a telegram, and found it hard to recognize, when he saw it next, beneath 'the circles stamped on it at the post office, the inscriptions added by a postman, signs of effectual realization, seals of the external world, violet bands symbolical of life itself, which for the first time came to espouse, to maintain, to raise, to rejoice my dream.' She turned off the light with a fair degree of confidence, in expectation of the morning, and the night.

She was almost asleep when she heard raucous voices. Somewhere outside, there were males in drunken play. The sound attracted her, she felt she had to see. Walking down the passage, she heard a splash, and, as she stepped into the bow room, cries of 'I might drown' and 'Sink without a trace ya bastard!' Then there was laughter. Looking out, she took in a scene illuminated by the fluorescent at the end of the jetty. One male was swimming towards a ketch. A second was trying to drag his friend into the water. The fourth stood naked at the beginning of the jetty, preparing for a running dive. Two of them had tattoos. Carol looked in vain for her singer. They were yelling to each other as if they owned the world.

She felt an accord with her window. It was like the pinpoint in early cameras - a frame, a point through which one reality became its transmutation inside a darkened box. She looked behind her. A shaft of light from redhead's flat caused her to be reflected in a book case. She laughed. The running-dive man slipped on wet boards and smashed his face on a rail. Blood stained his body. His mates swam in to help him. Carol stood, shocked, yet secretly excited. She watched them trying to dress him, naked themselves, and stop his bleeding. She was in bed by the time a cab came to get him, but knew it was there, by the voices floating to her window, and by the feeling of sustenance that supported her, like a cushion, or cloud, as she let one side of her mind give way to the other.

Carol dreamed of a golden ball making her laugh until it settled on her shoulders, when she felt afraid. 'You're stifling me!' she cried out, and woke to find herself pulling a pillow away from her face. She went back to sleep, distantly aware of shouting. The man's voice was loud, and there was a woman too. The ball in her earlier dream had changed into a balloon, bouncing, teasing. She chased it, but it kept leading her to rivers. Even in her sleep she mustered determination. She walked away from it, trying to sing. She knew that no words would come from her mouth but she felt that as long as she tried, or pretended, the thing would keep back. The balloon, changing to a cloud, turned bright orange as it settled on her shoulders. It was cold, but the effect of transfiguration was so intense that she wanted to cry. She woke to the sound of sobs, thinking they were her own, but, touching herself, she found her eyes were dry. She got up to go to the toilet, not knowing whether she was awake or asleep, because she could still hear the sobbing that had been part of her dream. Passing the bathroom door, she noticed a light in the kitchen of the facing flat, and saw the redheaded woman bent over the sink, distressed. The man shouted something, then she heard footsteps pounding heavily down the passage. It was impossible to watch, yet going back to her bed meant betraying another woman. She went to the front room and waited. In the silence of the night, she heard the slip-slap of wires on aluminium masts, and the idle splash of a tide preparing to turn. Powerless, she considered the notion of power. Men thought life came out of their penises, astronomers said it came from the sun. Why did it have to have a source? The ability to create was the underlying condition of the universe. She had it in herself. Martin had been a misjudgement she could put down to immaturity. From next door came shouts and shrieks, whether of terror or sexual excitement she was unable to decide. Why did men think violence proved their power? Why did women believe it? She tried to listen to the water, but it was somnolent. When would it lap in

the other direction? The shouts next door took on an interrogative lift. Like teenagers, she decided, and took herself down the passage for bedding. She spread herself on the sofa and slept.

She dreamed of clouds and submarines. Nets fell out of the clouds, trapping the submarines, which were too cumbersome to escape. Then the clouds, which might have drifted out of sight, fell into the tangle. She woke up to hear herself shouting, and wondered, as she stared at the infinity of blue invading her darkly panelled rooms, how anything could make things easier.

When she opened the little box at the head of the stairs where she'd put her milk bottle, and found her request unanswered, she felt there was no limit to her prison. No one was talking, and there was no way out. How could anything so trivial bring her down?

In her despair, she felt a claw gripping a shoulder. The Gysberts' puss had leapt from the hall-stand to where, nuzzling the hair starting to curl around her ears, he could see into the box. The milkman hadn't been. Puss jumped swiftly to the floor, commanding Carol to get something for his bowl. 'Okay Didgie,' Carol said, 'we'll go up to the shop.' Halfway across the street, at the point where the frangipani hit one's nostrils, Carol felt the cat desert her. Miaowing piteously, it refused to cross the road, where expensive cars trusted their handbrakes on the hill. 'Manipulator,' said Carol, but the cat, seeing itself obeyed, sharpened its claws on a melaleuca. 'You win,' she said, and swung her bag as she entered the corner shop, with its jars of tomato paste, knitting patterns, and weekly magazines. 'A dollar twenty,' said the Lebanese shopkeeper. 'You're looking nice today.'

Since she was sure she wasn't, it was puzzling. What did he mean? Puss wasn't saying, he scampered in front of her, stopping once to rub her leg. 'There's got to be something in it for you, hasn't there?' she said. 'Or you ignore me.' Didgie dropped respectfully behind. Carol was still smiling when she filled the bowl. 'Soak it up you little opportunist.' When she boarded the ferry she thought about the swimmers and the saxophone. There was something misguided about those men, so deeply into false magic. The water was rougher this crossing, as if she was starting on something new. She wondered why one felt freer on water than in a train. Her busker's spot was empty. Passing it with a twinge of regret, she also noticed her confidence; a case of no way to go but up? She looked at her watch. Interview with lecturer, home by noon. If she dawdled through the shops, she could pass the spot when - what was his name? - was performing. *Yesterday*. She hadn't even looked up, this morning, at the blackness behind her window. I'm not afraid of emptiness, she thought: it can be filled. She noticed that she was standing where her coin had fallen. What signal had she sent the singer? She wouldn't know unless something developed. She had a feeling of events about to happen, as if she was swimming at the edge of a current, unaware that with a few more strokes she would be in a movement she couldn't control.

Dr Lewis was late. The department secretary showed her into the lecturer's study and brought her instant coffee. Carol put it aside. Lewis, according to his bookshelves, was as interested in Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland as he was in Leavis and literature. She wondered how the only paper she'd published could have attracted his attention. Perhaps he was an ex-communist who wanted to show how broadminded he'd become.

When he entered the room, a heavy man whose paunch and white mane showed how carefully he tended himself, he shook hands, man to man. 'That the latest thing in France?' he said abruptly, acknowledging her hair. 'I did it in a rage,' she said, wondering when he would sit down and stop towering over her. 'Self inflicted, eh?' he said, not noticing the set of her lips. 'I'll put on the percolator, and when we've had some coffee, we can get down to business.' He sat, rolling his chair forward, and planting his elbows on the desk, then, as if remembering to ask after a mutual friend, said, 'And how was Paris?'

She mentioned the Place Vendôme. 'I bought Lina a bag in the Place Vendôme,' he said, institutionalizing Paris and his wife. 'House of Pucci. Bargain, actually. She used it for years.' Carol wondered how long he'd been talking about his triumph. 'What happened to the bag?' Lewis grew professionally reflective. 'Our daughter Louise has it now,' he said. 'Cambridge.' He flung a glance at the coffee pot. 'She's working on Pound, of all people.' Carol felt the softness of wanting to help him, then pulled back. 'Doesn't it worry you that your daughter's fixed on a fascist and a lunatic?'

They argued. She wanted to crush the hypocrisy of professional lefties, fighting her husband through the man in front of her. 'I think Pound's a fascinating figure,' said Lewis, gazing on her as if she was his daughter. 'You have to know fascism before you can get socialism clear.' She felt she'd been adopted, he stared so tenderly in her direction. Wanting to undercut him, and what she felt would be a sentimentality in his politics, she said, 'Was your wife a communist when you married her?' Lewis threw back his head. 'Lina,' he said, with the emphasis due to a goddess, 'was the product of the most exclusive schooling Australian privilege could buy. She'd had the grand tour and the finishing schools of France and Switzerland. And she was bored. We met in Lucerne when she was ready to walk out - and she did!' He made it sound like the romance of the century. The percolator stirred. 'Something doing at last,' Lewis said. 'I'm delighted you've come. I've wanted to meet you since I read your piece on ... what was it ... don't tell me ...'

While he fumbled, Carol opened her notes. He stirred his bulk to search for a cup. Carol expected pipe or cigarette ash to fall from him like dust. 'I'd better take you through my lecture plan,' she said. She wondered how incestuously he regarded his daughter, how bored he was with his wife. 'Do that!' said Lewis. 'I'm eager for everything you offer me!' He put before her a thick-rimmed K Mart mug, rubbed his hands, and fixed his attention on the red light bubbling on top of the percolator.

Leaving the university, she felt bereft. If she'd thought learning was any escape she'd been mistaken. Lewis had told her she must publish. Since ideas were currency, he said, she had to use them to establish a career. It made her feel her thesis was a form of deceit. When her bus entered the city, she got off prematurely, hoping that the shops might revive her interest in what people unlike herself were doing, but found herself, coolly and consciously, despite caution urging her to the contrary, hurrying to the Quay.

He was singing 'Norwegian Wood' to a thin semicircle who had nothing better to do. It was a song she hated. She scooped the bottom of her purse for him. One and two cent coins. 'Merçi, madame!' he cried. She glared at him, wanting to bring him undone. Catching her mood, he flicked his head aside as if an arrow had passed his ear. 'Ptttchiaouuuwwww!' he whistled, sending it on its way. She studied him contemptuously. Someone laughed. He put his head down and strummed his guitar as if searching for sincerity. She turned on her heel and walked to her jetty; a twenty minute wait was better than this treatment!

She was sitting sullenly in the stern of the ferry when she became aware of a little boat put-putting beside her, 'Hi!' said her busker. 'This'll be slower, but more fun!' She looked at him, bobbing and grinning, and said, 'You're mad!' He took it as a compliment. 'Have a look at the sane ones,' he said. 'See how much better off you'll be!' The ferry passengers bore him out. She had a suspicion that the young man with his back to her was the boy who'd had to pull his mother's shoe out of the water. 'How do I get in?' she asked.

As she was stepping off the ferry, a man with a grubby cap called out 'Don'tya like us any more?' She looked back. It was the man who'd called her roughnut. She felt an appreciation in his

eyes, and a need, that she respected. 'Next time,' she told him. 'This won't be a regular thing.' Her busker heard her. 'What makes you say that?' he demanded. She looked at the boat - guitar, Carlos Castaneda, can of fuel - and laughed. 'It'll be a one way journey, won't it?' She wondered what she'd intended her words to mean. He looked a little shocked. 'Get in,' he said, 'and see.'

They put off, getting a start on the ferry. The engine cut out once, leaving them tossing as the bigger boat pulled into the harbour. It was almost on them before Gary - she'd demanded his name - got them going again. The man who'd called her roughnut made excited gestures; he seemed to think it was a race. Gary laughed, taking up the challenge, and Carol found herself elated as she saw that they were pulling away. Then she realized that the ferry was veering to the right. She was wondering why they were giving up the contest when she saw the man with the cap pointing urgently. She looked. A tugboat was dragging a container ship down the harbour, and they were heading into its path. She pulled Gary's shirt. He gave a cheeky grin. 'It's miles away.' But he increased the engine revs and shifted rope from on top of the paddle. She wanted to say 'Why are you doing this?' but nothing came out of her throat. She found herself hating Gary; making her afraid was a trick, aimed at making her dependent. An old device! But when Gary became frightened, and lunged at the water with his paddle, she didn't scream *turn back!* but moved to the front of the boat, paddling with her hands, as much afraid of sharks as of the vessels bearing down on them. They cleared the bow of the tugboat by fifty metres, the crew gesticulating angrily. By the time the ship drew level, they could afford to stop paddling and let the engine do the work. Japanese sailors looked down coldly. Carol felt too ashamed to wave. She was wondering how Gary would explain when the engine cut out again. She wanted to be sick. What if it had stopped a few seconds earlier? They sat in silence, waiting to be tossed by the bow wave, unable to confront each other. When it came, they were thrown about roughly. They clung to the sides of the boat, keeping well apart. When the water steadied, Carol looked at the huge steel side rather than face what she might see in Gary's eyes. The scale of the ship was horrifying. It could have pushed them under without a bump. When it passed, there were more waves, and general turbulence. The ferry Carol had abandoned for Gary's boat was nearing a north shore jetty. 'It cuts out sometimes,' Gary said. 'We just have to wait.'

There seemed little point in reproaching him, though she wanted a better explanation. 'I suppose you could say we're adrift,' she said, wanting to sound cutting. 'No,' he said, and he leaned a little closer so that she felt she had to look at him. 'We're stuck.' She looked at the engine. 'You mean it won't start?' He looked at the stern of the ship, moving steadily down the harbour. 'It'll start in a minute,' he murmured. 'No, I mean that if we keep seeing each other, we've got that fiasco right at the basis. That has to remain as the first thing we did together, apart from your coin.' His voice trailed away. He seemed to comprehend his error better than she did. He sat glumly, looking at the water. She had never been seasick - but then she'd never been put to the test. The boat tossed stupidly. The water seemed incredibly dreary. The ferry had pulled in to its first stop. She wanted him to try the engine, but he sat, apparently in despair. 'It's not that I mind my life being a mess,' he said. 'It's just that I ought to do better for someone else!' She felt that the vehemence in his voice would be unusual for him. 'We didn't kill ourselves that time,' she said. 'I don't mind going on a bit longer. Besides, you've got to get me home!'

He lurched down to the engine. 'I'm not sure why you're giving me another chance,' he said. 'We mightn't like what we find out.' She pointed to the engine, meaning she didn't want to talk. He got it going after a minute, though it ran roughly, and he kept the speed down. A depression had settled on them. As they entered Lavender Bay, the ferry pulled away from the jetty - *her* jetty, she

thought, whenever she looked out the window. As it passed them, chugging despondently towards the Quay, the man in the cap yelled sourly: 'Wanta be careful of the company ya keep!'

She looked at Gary, and he at her. Each felt an affirmation in the other. 'Will you go back to the Quay?' she said. He shook his head. 'I'll go home,' he said. 'But I'll be there tomorrow.' She pointed to the Gysberts' flat. 'That's my window. The one that's open.' He nodded, she felt he already knew. As they came to the jetty, she asked him if she could step out without him having to tie up. She managed it quickly, if a little clumsily. His boat lapped up and down on the waves as they looked at each other. 'See you tomorrow,' he said. She didn't bother to agree. He handed her her folder of notes, and her bag. They no longer felt personal, only cargo. An odour of weed and salt water clung around the scene. 'You leave first,' she said. 'I don't like you looking at my back.' He sat by his engine and looked away as his boat drew out. She walked through the railway arch, scarcely noticing the graffiti and the soft drink cans spilling out of the rubbish bin, and climbed the steps to the frangipani-scented streets, the bougainvillea and the magnolia grandiflora. She fondled the cat in an abstracted way, drawing from it a plaintive cry for more attention, and remained in the breakfast room until she judged him to be well out of sight.

Had she been the prize in a race between two men? That was certainly one way of seeing it. A woman distraught in a field of male danger? Perhaps; she felt irritated. They were ways of defining what had happened, not how she'd experienced it. If she was honest with herself, she had to admit she'd enjoyed the whole thing, though scared, until Gary had withdrawn into his private gloom. It was being shut out that made her angry; as for the engine, he'd probably deceived himself as much as her. Heading in front of the big boat had been an opportunity ... until he'd withdrawn. She tried to remember the events of those crowded seconds, and recalled, to her shame, that when Gary had not been able to look at her, she'd been unwilling to look at him. She hadn't wanted to know - and he hadn't wanted to know either. That, she felt, had been the heart of the experience. She needed to see him soon.

The next day, though his circle was sparse, she went past. She knew he'd seen her. She had dinner with some university people, and got home, by taxi, at 2 am. A little drunk, she expected to go to sleep straight away, but found herself lying awake. After what seemed hours, and a period of dozing, she heard a knock. She held herself down. She felt he'd hear the least movement. She hoped he wouldn't call out, he'd wake Mrs McLintock ... not that she mattered ... but ...

Another knock. Entry? Still as stone, she shook her head. She heard the cat miaowing; she'd forgotten to call Didgie. Gary would see him and deduce - she hoped - that she wasn't there. She wished she hadn't shown him where she lived, then remembered her surmise that he already knew. The tattooed man? The swimmers? She felt exposed. Lying in her bed, she felt she'd been explored by an obscene question. That was Gary's second mistake of the day. She wondered if he could do better, hoping that he could.

A third knock. Half-hearted. If she kept still, he'd go away. She lay still, pleased at the sounds of the cat pleading loneliness, and a need for entry. There was a lull, she imagined Gary fondling the cat but offering it, ultimately, nothing that mattered.

She heard footsteps on the stairs. Gone. Miaowing, for minutes, it seemed, miaowing. She crept, barefooted, to the kitchen and looked out. Gone? She moved swiftly to the door, opened it for a second, and closed it behind an ever-watchful Didgie. The cat leapt on to the hallstand, she took it on her shoulder; in a second they were conspirators. 'I'm sorry Didgie,' she said, 'but I'm glad I locked you out. I needed you out there tonight.'

Didgie would sleep nowhere but at her feet; she felt like an old widow lady ... but that was the price you paid for deception and autonomy. She wanted to wound Gary for breaking into her night, and yet he'd crept away from her silence; it was, in its way, a courteous answer to her reply.

Men ask, women answer: that was another cliché. She was sick of situations she didn't make herself, yet found it amazing that her lecture, coming up in a few days, was a matter of indifference. Unable to sleep, let alone dream, she sat upright in the Gysberts' bed telling herself she wanted an end to one-sided discussions - then remembered she'd never tried to answer Martin's attempts to expiate his guilt. Poor Martin ... she didn't want to be responsible for him, but she couldn't bear to think of him not knowing where he was. The double bind! She determined to take it one step at a time. She lay back, the pillow softer than she'd imagined a pillow could be, and asked herself about Martin's guilt ...

... and woke, sunlight streaming through her window. Didgie was watching from the chest of drawers. She broke free of sleep, as from a drug. She wondered where he was. Gary.

She hated people who fell in love the moment a relationship ended. Not on! The terms had to be right - or so she told herself. She picked up Proust and spent the morning in bed. She walked down L'Allée de la Reine Marguerite, watching the carriages of noblemen attracted to her. She met them in delicious rendezvous. She dismissed them when they exhausted her interest. She shuttered her windows when she had someone with her. She took herself down the passage to look at the day's comings and goings. The bridge rumbled, deeply sonorous with the weight of trains. The water altered colour in accordance with the sky. Sky and water struck her as one of the better marriages she knew. She didn't want Martin, he needed other people to embody his ideals. Women, politicians, they were all projections. Was Gary, then, a projection of hers? Yes, and a sweaty, unprotected opposite who challenged her to give herself into the sexual commerce of his group. No way. She was glad to be alone.

It couldn't last. At noon, she showered, dressed in white cotton, and caught the ferry. She stood near him. He sang. She watched people throw coins. Against her will, she picked up strays that missed the guitar case. They had lunch. Over fish in an indeterminate sauce, she told him she didn't want him moving out of his life to court her, because it would be a distortion. She said that making approaches was to be her decision. He nodded, as young men nod to women's stipulations. She saw through him, but some humility about a man who dressed in an op-shop waistcoat attracted her. She said, 'If I get a job, I'll buy you a new engine.' He asked what work she wanted to do. She couldn't answer.

She didn't want to be defined by anything external. But she wasn't ready to talk about her inner experience either. She touched her hair. 'What are you going to do with it?' he said. She didn't know whether or not to feel pleased: 'You've just asked me the same question twice.' He looked puzzled. 'Two ways of defining myself,' she said. 'I'm not sure that I like either.'

'That study's getting to your brain,' he said. 'Who wants to be defining themselves all the time?' It was what she wanted to hear. 'That's all very well,' she said, 'but I've got to discipline myself for a while. I'm giving a lecture on Tuesday, would you believe? He seemed relieved. 'I'm going out to Bathurst to help a bloke fix his house,' he said. 'Till the end of next week.' She laughed, he looked sheepish. 'You don't want to look up and see me, do you?' She wondered how out of place he'd look. 'I might stop and not be able to start again,' she said. This time they both laughed. 'This stuff's lousy,' he said, referring to the food. 'Do you want to come back to my place?'

He made it sound simple, but as they passed the gutted terrace where they'd seen each other the second time, she felt she was entering into a devastation he wasn't aware of, or regarded as

natural. He lived in a warehouse that was in an unfinished state of renovation. An architect had tried to marshal its spaces into orderly living areas, but had run out of money, and the new owner had leased the unfinished job to tenants. 'I was getting ready to ask you,' she said, looking through a maze of hangings, wardrobes and boxes full of newspapers and orange juice containers, 'which was your room?' He felt the implied criticism. 'We don't all sit in here listening to each other,' Gary said. 'Just come and go. Sort of revolve around each other at an easy distance.' She considered. 'This is my space, actually,' he said. 'If you care to enter.'

He stepped around a screen. She found herself facing a large print of Marilyn Monroe, skirt lifted by a wind. The lips, and the hand between the legs, were boringly familiar. Gary's bed was a huge sleeping bag, sprawled across a mattress like a crumpled parachute. Disconcerted, she examined the screen. Sullen grey paintings of storms and froth-tossed sailing ships faced Gary's bed, but when she moved to the other side, Carol found herself looking at a row of portraits - she sensed that they were self-portraits - of a serious, heavy-browed woman of her own age. They were oppressive, yet somehow more alive than the reflections she saw in the windows of the Gysberts' room. Strange that a woman long dead should seem more real than herself. Wondering what troubles had given the face its intensity, she looked at the rest of the thing, a set of brown panels covered with a gumleaf pattern in orange and yellow. 'Pokerwork,' Gary said. 'Quite an amazing craft. A lost art these days, of course. She stared at him, not believing his offhand tone. 'I notice,' she said, 'you've got the difficult side away from you. And that above your head!' She thought she had him cornered.

'All a set-up,' he said. 'Actually. Marilyn doesn't belong to me. And the screen's usually the other way around, but Rick and Tony set it up like this.' He spoke as if they were seasonal problems, like mosquitos, or ants. Didn't he value his friends? 'They walked past us on the Quay,' he said. 'You wouldn't have seen them. They must have guessed we'd finish up here, so they played a few games.' He said it flatly, as if they couldn't help themselves. Guessed we'd finish up here! Played a few games! She hated this man's world, and the implication that women could be lured, then persuaded to act on an attraction. 'Hang on,' he said, studying her face. 'I didn't ask them to do it.'

She studied him carefully, trying to judge the depth of his deception. He was part of their scene, did he expect her to pluck him, wondrously, out of it, and change his life? 'Are you trying to tell me you don't belong?' she said. His bedding looked as if he'd been there for months. She felt, watching him straighten, that he wanted to get his dignity together. 'I belong,' he said, 'in what I'm doing, not in what's done to me. If they ...' he waved at other parts of the warehouse '... want to play games, I don't need to feel convicted. Water runs off a duck's back, you know.' The lame conclusion showed he'd been hurt. 'Okay,' she said. 'Tell me what you're doing in this place. It's chaos.' He said nothing. 'Who lives with you?' He looked about. 'Tony. Rick. Danny left last week. Me.' Smiling. 'The survivors.' She felt he was taunting her; survivors of what? 'Were there more?' He shook his head. 'How did you find it?' she said, still trying to draw him out. 'You could say it found me,' he said. She controlled herself. 'An old biddy who it turned out bought the place walked up to me in the street and called me Tony. I didn't know who Tony was then, I didn't even know a Tony.' The love of two males, she thought: 'But you got to know him?'

Gary put his hand on the table as if taking an oath. 'The fact of the matter is, this old lady saw Tony in a pub and bought the place for him. Thought she could fill it with exciting lives. Sort of recapturing her youth.' Carol wondered how old the lady was. Forty? 'Where did you come into it?' Gary wanted to describe the thing in a way that reflected credit, but couldn't manage. 'She marched up to me outside a milk bar,' he said. 'Gave me my whole background, places I'd been

to, people I'd slept with. It was unreal, just a fantasy.' Carol winced. 'She wanted something from you,' she said. Gary became more animated. 'Mistook me for Tony. I don't know how she did it, he's nothing like me. A case of need overcoming the brain. Anyway she showed me the place and I didn't know what she was on about. Fortnight later, I met Rick and Tony. Heard them skiting in a pub about this woman who was going to buy 'em a house. She's already done it, I told 'em. That's how we came to be here.'

'You let this person delude herself.'

Gary nodded. 'It's the way Tony lives. Rick's just as bad. Gets ideas, lives in a dream.' Carol felt her area of study degraded. 'But you're still with them, and the other one left.'

He looked at her. 'That's what I can't figure out. They're good to be with.' He touched her. 'What do you think?' It would have been easy for her to draw closer to him, letting his mystery, or confusion, take control, but she resisted. There was something corrupting about being explored by another's weakness because it became your responsibility. A fortnight before, in Paris, she'd had poise; now she felt a captive. Paris! She recalled the flèches of Notre Dame and Sainte Chapelle under snow, and the sky, brown as dirt, pressing on the sublime sharpness of buildings. She realized Gary was talking, and she wasn't listening. 'The worst part is when she comes here,' he was saying, 'and goes on about my fascinating family history, which Tony's made up, of course, and I have to supply a few extra details when she asks me.' A deflated Gary added, 'Like inventing a pedigree for a carthorse.'

That was when she started to take him seriously. No one should see themselves so anonymously. If you didn't know who you were, you didn't know what you could demand, or offer, 'Give me your hand,' she said. 'I want to know what you are.'

It was the hand that had knocked at her door: a questioning, disarming, mocking hand, she felt; sensuous, unassertive, a sly hand that wanted to pretend that its owner knew nothing when in fact he believed in nothing. 'You're not a Tony,' she said. 'You won't have a charmed life.' He let go her hand, and walked to the Marilyn Monroe picture. With a controlled hostility she found disquieting, he took out the drawing pins and tossed the picture over the battered bookcase that bordered his space. 'That joke's gone on long enough,' he said; she wondered what, exactly, he was referring to. 'Now let's have a look at you,' he said. 'At a loose end. Sick of what you've been doing. Nowhere to go when you've finished. Only half here because you haven't finished your fight with your husband. Wondering if you'll be weak enough to go back. Doing penance publicly because you want to inflict your pain on others instead of using it to sort yourself out.' He meant her hair: she flushed. But if she'd been hurt, and didn't strike back at someone, what could she have done but withdraw, as she had to the Gysberts' flat? In fact she'd done both. She felt dishonoured, and as much in need as Gary had been a moment before to regather her dignity. They looked at each other, scared. 'I suppose Lady Godiva needed her hair,' Gary said, hoping she'd see what he was about. 'One tress for each tit,' Carol said, and they burst out laughing, together, properly, at last. 'I'm dreaming of a white Christmas,' he crooned, Crosby style, and swept her, a la Hollywood, into his arms. 'Don't foxtrot me,' she said, kicking at his ankle. He grinned. 'How can Glebe match Paris?' he said, as if that was all she was rejecting. 'We don't need any comparisons,' she said, wondering when he'd start talking about Martin. 'That's a tall order,' he said, 'when you come to think of it. Come on the balcony.'

The backyard contained the hull and half-built cabin of a boat, sitting high above its keel in a concrete yard littered with cars. Gary explained before Carol had a chance to comment; 'Tony's got a craze on Daimlers. Boat belongs to Rick.' There was something too matter-of-fact in the way

he said it, she felt he was testing her perception. 'Where's the water?' she said. He looked at her with respect. 'That's it,' he said. 'It's never gonna float!' She felt him gloating, as if the mistakes - disasters, if he was right - of other people validated him. 'Why did they build it?' she said. 'And what do you mean? Has it got a hole in it?' He waved his hands across each other, not so much rejecting what she'd said as negating the idea of achievement. 'Just study the yard,' he said.

The cars were all the same, except for the colour; that, she gathered, was the idea. Engines dangled from blocks and tackle, and scaffolding supported the boat; her first impression was of a shipyard without a launching bay, and then she realized that she'd grasped Gary's point. The boat was too big for the gate and the back alley, and far too big for the lane beside the warehouse. 'Stuck!' he said when he saw that she saw, and waved a hand in a gesture of self-justification. 'But Gary ...' she said, 'why do you have to put your friends down?' But Gary was looking at her with satisfaction. 'I told them the day they started,' he said. 'I showed them on the plans. I stepped out the yard, the lane, the lot!' She felt he wanted to tear down their reputations, their ambitions, as he had torn down the poster they'd pinned over his bed. 'Am I the way out?' she said. 'Is that why you've brought me here?'

'Don't talk to me as if I've got a problem,' he said. 'That's the oldest trick in the world. People who are sick run around telling other people they're sick. Then they try to help them!' He laughed. She didn't know how to counterattack. 'Well, how did they think they were going to get the boat out,' she asked. 'After you told them?' He smiled. 'They were going to get a crane up the alley,' he said. 'and they might have done it, but someone built that shed right on the corner, and the only way they'd have got a vehicle around the corner would be if they could pull the shed down. So ...' He waved his hands again, erasing the last possibility. 'Stuffed,' he said. 'It was never on.' She tried to see that part of his position which he couldn't express. 'But you said they might have done it?' He stared morosely at his surroundings. 'Gary? What did you mean?' She was annoyed at having to feed him questions when he owed it to her to explain. She was about to walk inside, and perhaps out of the warehouse, when he attached himself to her arm. 'It's just that the wrong thing will always happen,' he said, 'unless you've got every eventuality covered. And you can't. No one can. It's quite simple really. If you can't know everything, you're within one step of being powerless. I love watching despots fall.' Despots? He'd spoken without mockery, she felt he was sincere. She wondered if he felt he was superior to other people, or had she involved herself with someone so idiosyncratic as to be uncontrollable? She studied him. Would he be able to find any meaning in a woman? He was good at feigning affection, but did he have anything he needed to give? She wanted to be away from his warehouse full of junk, it nauseated her, yet Gary, who lived in it, and perhaps belonged in it, emerged daily to face the public. That was where he had it over her, and she wondered where the superiority - yes, she supposed it was that - actually lay. He sang, while she arranged the thoughts of others. 'Despots,' she said, 'are other versions of ourselves. That's why we put them up, and that's why we tear them down, we have to find which of our selves deserves to stand.' She had no idea if it meant anything to Gary, but she felt the statement marked some point on the long journey she'd begun in Paris. Which of our selves deserves to stand? A question to gag on! The one you could approve of - what other answer? 'If you don't mind, Gary,' she said, 'I'll go. I need to do some thinking.' He nodded, not posing difficulties. 'I'll see you tomorrow,' she said, as if nothing could be simpler. 'We can talk.'

The water welcomed her. Transit was comfortable. But trudging up the steps to the Gysberts' flat, she felt heavy. She needed work because her money was running out, but she was afraid that once her life was organized around a job, she'd be taken over by externals, and the inner pain she

felt would merely be deadened, not resolved or confronted. But how could you confront, on your own, something involving bad interaction with others? When she opened the door of the flat, the cat came scampering down the passage. 'Silly Didgie,' she said. 'Did you think I was Jack and Julie? Mmm?' Didgie nuzzled her throat. Carol fussed. Didgie needed milk, Didgie'd been cooped up inside. 'Come and we'll see if there's any mail,' she suggested, but Didgie wasn't going beyond the bottom step, so, retracing her entry through the garden, she was both alone and watched. When she turned, halfway down the path, and called, the cat scratched his ear, happy to be fussed over. Carol smiled a little ruefully. There was a card from the Gysberts to Mrs McLintock, showing a Fijian scene, and a letter from Martin. Her condition of heaviness, or sullenness, improved slightly; this was a pressure she was used to.

He was coming up - for an interview, he said - the day before her lecture. Dream and too-present reality! She felt she owed it to him to let him hear her talk. It would be odd to be a public figure in Martin's presence, but it would be a way of giving him something without having him too close. She felt ashamed of a cunning streak. 'Didgie,' she said to the cat, which had taken a step or two down the path, 'I have a presentation to prepare!' The cat dawdled into the bushes.

At the desk, she felt sleepy, and didn't want to work. She asked herself how her thesis related to her life. Was she a dream still waiting for its hour to happen? Did she too want to be espoused, maintained, raised and rejoiced on terms peculiarly her own? Martin's letter was notable for what it didn't say - that he'd expect lunch, hand holding, conversations as intense as they would be unproductive; tears, promises, eyes deeply engaged. She wrote, 'The lecture will round off that part of my life. In that sense I'm glad you'll be there. I don't know if I can give you much else. I haven't achieved a valid position of my own, either here or in Paris after you left. If you're interested in what I'm thinking, we can talk, but if you want me to carry your burden it will have to be a short meeting. I know that sounds abrupt, and I'm sorry, but the whole thing's pretty desperate.' She wanted to say more, but nothing came. She stared at the water.

Obedient to a breeze, it rocked the tethered boats, rippling the sky reflected on its surface. Carol felt it wanted to charm her, in a capricious, indifferent way. She wondered at its power to attract the tall buildings massed along its edges. She saw them as blocks of cells; rocks exposed by the receding tide reached under the foundations of these gaols. Jetties implored the tide to come back. Ferries scuttled along their watery corridors, happier on a voyage than at their moorings. Yachts saluted the morning with unfurled sails. Architects had dressed the city towers in white to match the blues before and above them. Clouds, made straggly by another wind, sprawled in the upper atmosphere. She felt her tension draining away. She put 'With love, Carol,' beneath her brief letter, added kisses and sealed the envelope. She supposed she ought to post it, but felt unwilling to leave her chair. Pushing her typewriter to the back of the table, she noticed four people who'd put out from Luna Park dragging themselves on to an ocean-going ketch; she was trying to equip them with a purpose - drug runners? A race across the Tasman? - when a diver in a wetsuit, a slippery black figure, surfaced beside their vessel. The four were hostile to the new arrival. One of them hurled something which splashed as the diver flung himself backwards, disappearing. The four took up watching positions. After a minute Carol saw, though the crew of the ketch could not, that the diver had surfaced at the stern of a cabin cruiser halfway between Carol's window and the ketch, and had crawled stealthily aboard. As he hid himself in the cabin, two of the four abandoned their lookout in order to cast off and to start the engine. The ketch, moving away, spread a gentle wake behind. Carol felt troubled by a feeling that her connection with this scene went beyond the accident of her observing it; the diver, slipping into his hideout, had been the embodiment of every-

thing rapacious and immoral. She felt surprised by the strength of her reaction, she wanted to strip him of his cover and crush him, it was as if she'd found a spider in her bag. She decided to ring the police, and was turning over the pages of the phone book when there was a knock at the door.

Gary. She took him to the front room and told him what had happened. Showed him the cabin cruiser. 'No use ringing the cops,' Gary said. 'He'll be gone in a minute, now he's been sprung.' She said she hadn't understood the scene she'd witnessed. 'Stripping boats,' Gary said. 'They watch an area for a while, see which moorings are never used. Then they move in one night and tie up. Watch the boats, see who uses 'em. See if they drive up in cars, or just come down a path. When they know what they want, they strip the boats and clear out. Do it all at night.' She felt needed by his lack of condemnation: it was more than an oversight, she felt he had more in common with the strippers than the owners. 'How would you feel if someone did that to your boat?' she said, feeling painfully self-righteous. 'Little *Bertha*?' he said. 'You'd have to be joking.'

She felt he knew who the man was - or at least, among his connections, someone it might be. She wondered why she'd let him in. 'He doesn't know we've seen him, though,' she said. 'Ring the police, Gary.' She waited.

'I've got a little rule,' he said. 'When in doubt, keep back. This isn't any of my business.' He watched her coolly.

'But it's mine,' she said, 'because I saw it. There are water police in this city aren't there? They could be there in a couple of minutes.'

'Gotta be joking,' he said. 'Cops are just as likely to put you in to the people this guy works with. I tell you, I've got a rule, you want to stick with it.'

'But I'm not in doubt,' she said, testing him.

'Then you're you and I'm me. If you want to put him in, you do it. There's your phone.' She nodded, still watching him. 'Make an anonymous call,' he said. 'They might come. We've got a grandstand seat.' He equated morality with foolishness, sense with power. 'Okay,' she said. 'I'll ring. Now off you go. When you get back to the warehouse, ring me. I'll let you know what's happening.' She gave him the number, watching to see if he could bear to lose control. He headed down the passage as if being in her flat had meant nothing at all. 'Casual, aren't you?' she said, letting him out. 'Are you scared of knowing me?' He kept on down the stairs, not turning. 'I'll ring when I get back,' he called. 'You can tell me how you're managing!' She was gratified, yet frightened, to see Didgie flee before him. When he'd gone, it seemed more important to get the cat inside than to ring the police, or to watch the cabin cruiser where the diver, she presumed, was biding his time. Finally she rang the police and asked how long they'd be. They said fifteen minutes, but an hour passed. No one left the cruiser. The police boat didn't come. Gary didn't ring. She felt she'd caused a series of events which were not only out of control, but were having effects so far beyond her perception that she couldn't know by whom or when they might return to affect her. She felt exposed as the water darkened, the flats lengthened their shadows, and ferry-loads of business people came home. The problematical areas of her life had been increased for no reward. Moral responsibility, which should be a strand in life, had become a restriction. She felt herself toughening. A police boat headed towards her bay. The phone rang. She told Gary, 'Ring back in half an hour if you feel you need to.' The police boarded the cruiser. She could see them picking up objects. There was no one to resist, he must have slipped overboard when she wasn't looking. For a moment she pictured him in his gleaming wetsuit clambering up the wall of her building to stare in at the window, confronting. Was he in another boat? Or in a car on the other side of the city? He'd got away, that was clear; she wondered if Gary had somehow helped him. Overtaken by fear and distrust, she saw

why Gary preferred to operate in a moral vacuum, it was so much easier to dodge warily through events than to take a stand. The phone rang. She told him what had happened. 'I admire you,' he said. It came as a relief. He didn't ask to see her, just hung up quietly.

The next day, when she passed him, he was singing West Indian work songs. He had his circle laughing as he groaned:

Ooooooooooaaahh, what a night,
What a night! What a Saturday night!

He was clutching his head as if he had a hangover. She smiled thinly. Two days to her lecture. She caught the university bus. Proust's words kept coming to her as she rushed up George Street: 'to espouse, to maintain, to raise, to rejoice my dream'. For a moment it threatened to overtake her lecture, then she saw it as a resurgence of confidence in herself. It would be a springboard from what she'd been doing, and was about to conclude. Dreams! She supposed the city towers, now set in cement, had once been dreams. And the people, in their shabby Sydney clothing? They were dreams of their parents, or accidents that had gone astray, dried out and set, as it were, in unsuitable shapes because no one had taken the trouble to reshape them. The ideas sustaining them were like clouds of illusion they had to believe in if they were to keep going. Dreams! The romantic world-view had been cut sharply back to size in the twentieth century but the need for things beyond the actual lived on. She found herself listening to conversations on the bus. An old man was leaning across the aisle excitedly, showing a girl who might have been his granddaughter a lottery ticket; he said he'd take her to Fiji if he won. Carol thought of the Gysberts, who fought when they were home and loved when they were travelling. She wondered where she'd go when they got back; they wouldn't want her to move but she wouldn't be able to stand it.

Not to the warehouse! Though the attraction was there, it would be fatal. The Gysberts had plenty of friends, or they could set her up above one of their shops, she was going to have to float for a while ... The old man had taken a young woman by the sleeve as she moved up the aisle, to ask her what she thought he should do if he won half a million dollars. He flourished his ticket. The woman, of Carol's age, and looking as if she might be a freshly appointed tutor, pulled away, saying, 'I think I'd reinvest.' The old man turned to find Carol looking in his direction. He spoke to her as if she were the same woman. 'I'm too old for that,' he said. 'I want it here and now!' Cautiously he folded the ticket and put it in his wallet. The child turned to stare at Carol, who wondered why she had to bear the brunt of their attention when the young tutor was only two seats behind.

They got off together at the university, Carol leading by half a pace. She could turn her head and recognize, or walk faster. She slowed, and looked. Body language. Hi, I'm Carol, she said; I'm Coral, said the other. Surprise. More body language. Coral? Carol? They looked at each other.

Carol saw a supercilious semi-adult, degreed but not wise, sexually experienced but psychically unopened, and combative with people not in her group. Self-seeking? She hadn't learned, or hadn't been forced, to seek satisfaction except by going in hard for what she wanted. Self-validating? Carol suspected that this other woman, this Coral, would be bored by anything that didn't directly affect her advancement. Self-defeating, then? Carol wondered what circle of influence and control would satisfy this woman she found herself disliking. Too close for comfort? She wondered if any of the students walking up the drive would be at her lecture, and noticed how distantly the other woman acknowledged recognition from those younger than herself. So desperate for status! Carol started to talk about her lecture, saying 'I think it's my last academic fling,' but couldn't answer when asked what she'd do next. That was in abeyance, she said, or rather, it would happen on a plane

that was not, now, the most important. Coral, on the other hand, was converting her masters into a doctorate, and would be going to Pittsburgh at the start of their academic year. Organized and ambitious! Leaving nothing behind! Carol tried to trace herself through France; had strands of her psyche been caught on the spires of that sharply turreted land? Yes: gasps of laughter in the frozen air of Chartres; tears in the Gothic nave; and coins in the palm of a hooded beggar, younger than herself, with all the French sharpness in her features: Carol had walked away from her desperate to know why she was squatting in a doorway, pulling at the thing in Carol that wanted to know what others' lives were like. The tutor was saying, 'I tried to crack Princeton, but Pittsburgh was the best I could do.' It would be a rare admission, Carol saw, and a moment of honesty only possible with a stranger. She slowed, looking at the other. 'Anyway, you're still travelling,' she said. 'It postpones decisions. I'm really floundering.' The tutor's expression showed she'd gone too far, and their embarrassment might have become stifling, but they were diverted by the sight of Dr Lewis of the Literature department bearing down on them. By way of greeting he grunted, 'I don't know how I'll get all this to the car,' referring to a pile of books and a leather bag stuffed with essays and the minutes of meetings. 'You two know each other, I take it,' he added; when they said they didn't, he forged ahead. 'This is Carol ... I'm sorry, I've forgotten your other name ... and Coral Johnston. Two remarkable talents, I'm not surprised you latched on to each other.'

So they had an overbearing male to deal with, as well as each other. Carol observed with shame their behaviour in the next second; she, demurring, allowed his insolence to pass through a gap in the conversation to Coral, who, dependent on her supervisor, presented Carol with a smile of duplicitous diffidence, as if male beneficence could resolve the things they felt about each other. While, with their eyes, they tried to ascertain how much of each other they would be willing to trade away, Lewis was playing with their mutual destinies:

'Carol's got this intriguing idea that the dream world is somehow a female prerogative, so that even the great male nineteenth century figures who drifted into subjectivism were somehow abandoning old certainties in favor of excitement, without knowing what sorts of forces they were loosing ...'

She wanted to tell him he'd got it wrong, but he was already into a paraphrase of Coral's ideas for her benefit, and before they could begin to sort him out he was huffing and puffing down the slope, pipe clenched firmly between his teeth. They looked sideways, wanting to hate, not knowing each other well enough to laugh. Intellectuality stiffened them. Coral said, 'Let's have coffee, I'd like to hear what you're really saying.'

Coral's room had a coffee device and shelves of books. Her desk was more orderly than Lewis's. In the corner of the room, a low table and two chairs awaited conversation. Carol felt like sitting on the floor; found herself wanting Gary. Coral asked about funding for her research. Carol steered the talk to Lewis, Coral made a passing inquiry about her husband. Coral smoked, Carol didn't. Coral noticed Carol's hair, Carol saw that the tutor bit her nails. Carol feared for her peer's rigidity. They discussed the non-academic job market, Carol displaying an indifference which disturbed the tutor; did Carol think she could beachcomb in Sydney? They differed over Jane Austen and Joan Sutherland, Carol remembering the effortless bravura of a Spanish voice in Paris, and her response to that richly articulated pain. It had given her an openness in which she felt, not only a kinship with all who suffered, but the availability of other lives she could use to shape her own. No defences needed! Resisting Coral's probes into the area of her thesis, she felt desiccated by the other woman. Methodology, when not worn lightly, could strangle! Carol wondered if her own ideal of a lambent intellect aligning the whole personality could ever be realized, and - supposing she achieved it -

could it be sustained in a male-female relationship? She'd never told Martin how much the voice beneath their window had meant to her; thus far, then, she'd been dishonest, she hadn't tried to turn him into the thing she wanted, she'd simply rejected him as he'd rejected her.

Why?

She stood up. 'I have to go,' she said. 'Time's running out.' Coral, thinking she wanted to work on her lecture, was understanding. Smoothed over the abruptness. Lent her a book. Walked to the lift. Invited her to lunch before the lecture: 'You'll need something to soothe your nerves,' said the tutor. 'I know I did.'

'I think that belongs to my husband,' Carol said, relieved when the doors closed. Relieved to get away. Wishing she could as easily escape herself; why was self-hatred buried so deeply?

After an hour in the library she closed her folders. Nothing new. The lecture was as written as it would ever be. She didn't much care if she submitted the thesis or not. The world didn't need it, why should she care.?

When she got to the Quay, she found Gary done out as a negro version of Uncle Sam - spindly beard and black face beneath a red, white and blue hat. 'Rolling *free* as the *breeze*,' he was singing. 'What's to *stop* me and *why*! I can *do* as I *please*! Open road, open sky!' He pleaded cravenly for money. Embarrassed onlookers didn't give. He launched into 'Nobody knows da trubble I've seen', turning his back to reveal a photo, stitched to his jacket, of a murdered peasant. When he finished, he said 'That's all folks,' and squatted indifferently. People drifted away. Water lapped at the edge of her consciousness. Gary packed up, unnoticing. 'You do believe in something, then,' she said.

He looked around. 'I believe in foolishness. You don't have to look very far.' She wondered how his feeling of negation differed from hers. 'You can say what you condemn,' she said. 'Can you say what you stand for?' Grinning slyly, he closed his empty guitar case, and stood on his head. She took it for a minute, wanting to push him over, then walked away. Some weakness or incompleteness, made her stop. 'You like to see things that way?'

'Crazy,' he said.

There was a hole in one of his shoes. 'All that blood rushing to your head ...' she proposed. 'Nothing there to damage,' he replied. She sensed that the bottom of her despair, when she reached it, would be a long agony in which she waited for something to appear; his emptiness was more bitter, as if the process of self renewal had stopped. 'Get up,' she said, 'for God's sake. I'm not going to talk to you like this.' He turned himself over, meekly enough, and slapped the legs of his boiler suit. 'Hi!' he said, as if their connection had no history. She sighed, the brightness was so artificial. 'You've got nowhere left to go,' she said.

'Two of a kind,' he said. 'Got anything else to say?'

They stared at each other, balancing attraction, despair, and mutual hostility. 'Some world,' she said. 'A shit heap,' he answered, voice confident, though scornful, as though the holocaust had already begun. She realized she'd entered an area of despair where he had the advantage, because it was publicly defined. Striving to reinstate herself, she said, 'I'm not very imaginative. I'm too easily conditioned.' He had a reinterpretation ready. 'You mean other bastards shape you when you don't want to be shaped.' He felt virtuous at espousing what he took to be her cause. 'No,' she said. 'Don't change what I say. I mean what I mean.'

They looked at each other. She wanted to make love with him. 'I'm not finishing my masters. I don't even know if I'll front for my talk. Probably not, the way I feel.' He drummed his fingers on the guitar case, unwilling to grapple. 'You're on your own in that. I'll be in Bathurst.' He stared at the water, rippling as if blue and white had been chosen for it by some mother of all mothers.

'That's your scene, not mine.' She felt he was trying to needle her. He turned his back. The murdered peasant faded in the blue-white air. He wanted to shout 'Do what you have to, I'll always be here,' but felt too proud. She felt his wish to challenge, and walked away. Then turned. Sizing up the weariness of his stance, she pushed two fingers in the direction of his arse. 'Up you,' she said, but by the time she was on the jetty she shared with the likes, peers, and admirers of Gary, she was weakening. Defiance was a crag from which you could only fall. Her persona, bruised and distraught, trembled in her seated body, ready to scream if he didn't come. He came, fumbling for the money to buy a token. He pushed through the turnstiles. 'Don't think you're coming home with me,' she said. 'I wasn't planning anything,' he said. 'You're only saying it to make me feel coarse.' She looked at his gear, torn under the armpits and patched at the knees. 'You're a wreck,' she said. 'The opposite of what I need.' She tried to stare him down, but he was in a characteristic lake of misery. 'Share,' he said. 'There's nothing else to do.' It was simple to reply. 'Share what?' she said, waiting. 'Give,' he said.

'On my terms.'

'What are they?'

She shrugged. 'Where can we go?' he said.

'We're already there'

The jetty needed sweeping. Someone had spilt a takeaway milkshake. He twisted his lips. 'True enough,' he said, looking at her, trying, she felt, to draw her out. She didn't want to resist, but felt she had nothing to offer. 'You're right,' she said. 'It *is* all meaningless.'

'That's the base,' he said, gripping her arm. 'We start from there.'

She withdrew. 'No we don't,' she said. 'I'm not meaningless. I'm so full of things it hurts. And why? Because I'm all bottled up, and I don't want to be.' He studied the seagulls, swooping and scavenging. 'You want to run along beaches?' he said. 'Toss your hair in the wind? They could use you in a commercial.'

'Poor man,' she said. 'That's the mockery of what I mean. She half-smiled, unsure whether he was teasing, or could only think in clichés. 'Can you say it?' he said. She shook her head. 'Can you see it in anyone, can you show me?' She stood up, ignoring him. He walked to the edge of the jetty, staring morosely at the water, as if it owed him something. She pushed through the turnstiles and walked on to the Quay; they'd explored that cul de sac, she had to get out. She walked to the spot where Gary sang; she was aware of him watching. She had a moment's peace, dwarfed by a city; her insignificance was reassuring, it gave her back her sense of scale. Why had she wanted to scream at him? He wasn't worth it. Was anyone? She walked on. She supposed he was following, but didn't look.

She thought of her flat, but going there meant passing Gary, and she wasn't sure that she wanted to; she had a feeling that the Gysberts were about to return from their cruise, and she didn't care to face their scrutiny, nor to get caught in their crossfire. She walked to the terminal in Phillip Street and boarded the first bus. Destination unknown! She wondered if Gary would hitch a ride to Bathurst, or dress up as a railway guard, it was the sort of thing she imagined him doing. Paying her fare, she said 'Terminus!' with a simple finality that amused her; she had a feeling that the driver knew she didn't know where she was going.

When she smelt the salt water, she had a feeling of being drawn, as if by a mysterious lodestone. She sensed that her detachment was about to be invaded; that the process of severance which had begun in Paris was coming to an end. When an expensively dressed Italian woman moved up to speak to the driver, she felt they were talking about her, and when the bus turned into Campbell

Parade, giving her a view of the sea, she felt sure she was being led to intentions other than her own. Passivity felt satisfying; when the bus made an unscheduled stop and the driver came back to speak to her, she felt almost queenly; acted upon yet elevated. The woman stepped off. The Italian driver suggested to her in a *mezza voce* inaudible to the other passengers that if she had no other destination she might like to try La Gioconda. 'It looks humble,' he said, shaking his head, 'but they are well connected. Go through!' He waved imperiously. 'Go through!'

La Gioconda was a pizza parlour, with a rear section screened from takeaway customers by plastic strips; La Gioconda was represented by a framed teatowel depicting the famous countenance. A teenager brought her coffee and, since there was no one else in the place, Carol felt obliged to show interest when the girl said to her 'Do you know why La Gioconda is smiling?' A weak joke, Carol saw, but shook her head. 'She's not smiling very much.' 'He's only a little man,' said the girl. 'Do you know what the elf said to the elephant?' Carol said, 'It wouldn't be something to do with the elephant's trunk, would it?' The girl's face fell. 'I'll get you some cake,' she said. 'It's all right, I'm in charge of the shop, you don't have to pay.' A minute later she was sitting with Carol, drinking coffee and asking if Carol smoked. Her name, she said, was Emilia. 'Emilia,' Carol said, 'in Italy you wouldn't be doing this.' 'In Italy,' Emilia replied, 'you wouldn't be doing what you're doing either.'

Carol felt that some inventory of their freedoms was required. 'Aren't you still at school?' she asked. Emilia nodded, showing her dislike of restriction. The sound of waves, and traffic, came through the door. Carol wondered what lies the girl told to stay home. 'What's wrong with it?' she said.

'They don't let you do what you like.' Voices rose angrily, further back in the building. The girl smiled secretly, as if being home gave greater scope for manipulation. 'I'm getting a flat next year,' she said, hoping that confiding in someone else could help bring it about. Carol shook her head. 'We're never free,' she said. 'We get out of our cage and we're in a net. We break free of the net, and we're in a web. At each stage the restrictions are subtler, but they're wider. We think we're getting out of things and we're getting further in.' The water was deeper than teenage Emilia had intended, but she said brightly: 'Like a fish hook.'

'What?'

Emilia looked at her as at a dull pupil. 'The more they struggle, the deeper it digs in their jaw,' she said with evident satisfaction. Carol wondered if she could afford to renounce cruelty; Emilia obviously saw it as a useful weapon. 'Do you know what my dad does?' she said. Carol didn't want to hear about the real or imagined cruelties of the Gioconda family, whatever they were called, and was relieved when an older woman came in and indicated, by a lowering of her brows, that Emilia should remove herself. 'You mustn't believe all she says,' the woman said sombrely, then took herself away. Carol heard raised voices in another room. She wanted to leave, but felt trapped by the cake, another of the things she wouldn't have been called on to experience in Italy. It sat before her, bloated with cream and crowned by a senile strawberry. Whoever swallowed that, Carol thought, would swallow anything. The woman returned, and took the cake. 'You don't want that,' she said. 'She was told to throw it out yesterday.'

'What's your name?' Carol asked, wanting to cut across all this. 'Bongiorno,' said the old woman with pride. 'Francesca.' She let the word resonate for a moment before stacking cups on the coffee machine. Bongiorno and Gioconda - Carol felt she was the victim of a joke. 'What is your name?' said the woman. 'I think you are Australian?'

'Carol.'

'But what is your family name?'

'I don't think I've got one. I've left my husband.'

The eyebrows came down. 'Did he beat you?'

'He made an excuse to get away from me. He had an affair with someone he didn't respect. It disgusted me.'

'Men,' the older woman said. 'Forgive. You will soon be beautiful again.' She meant the hair, Carol presumed, or could she see into the misalignment that had warped her since she saw her position clearly? Francesca Bongiorno took down the slate on which the chef's specials were chalked, and wiped it with a rag, smiling as she did so, head high, as if her action amounted to a gesture of moral advice. 'There will be beautiful fish this evening,' she said expansively. 'Are you going somewhere?' Carol showed she didn't know. 'Are you lost?' Francesca said. 'Where is your husband?'

'He'll be in Sydney in a few days,' Carol said. 'He's applying for a job.'

'Bring him to try our fish,' Francesca said. 'Barramundi. Sand lobster. Scallops. Anything you can think of.' Carol envied her certainty, rejecting it; the woman might be contemptuous of men, but accepted their domination. 'I won't be doing that,' she said, not bothering to hide her aggression. The older woman tossed a teatowel over her shoulder. 'What's the difference if you get someone else?' she said. 'We never get it on a plate. I tell you what I know. We have to be cunning if we want something. Make fools think we admire them. Tell lies.' She waved her hands. Carol took up the challenge. 'And what price do you pay for doing that all your life?' Francesca knew it was meant personally. Gripping the bench with both hands as if facing a judge, she declared, 'Simple people know more than clever people. You look around!' Carol flushed, but restrained herself; she'd done too much walking out. She stood, wishing she could be taken in, instead of having to make her way alone. Trying to bridge the gap, she said, 'A woman on the bus said something to the driver and he sent me here. Who was she?'

'It would be Giovanni's mother,' said Francesca Bongiorno. 'She owns us.' She assumed an expression of pious respect. 'Giovanni?' said Carol. 'Who's Giovanni?' There was a sound of footsteps in the room behind the sink. Francesca flicked her eyes in warning. Carol was aware of someone listening. She asked if the restaurant was busy, she was looking for a job. The footsteps went away. 'She is pleased,' Francesca said of the mysterious presence; 'sometimes she will stand there for an hour.' Feeling that other people's intentions were preparing to fill the vacuum of her life, Carol paid and pressed through the plastic strips. Would she give her talk? Could she even make a move, once she reached the turmoil of the street? She heard someone behind her; a voice, unfamiliar yet not unexpected, said, 'I need you. Will you come back and talk?'

An hour later Carol was in a luxurious apartment overlooking the harbour. 'You will have a separate apartment,' Mrs Psalti was saying. 'It is small but more than enough for one person. Giovanni's bedroom is next to it, but he cannot beat on the wall. I have had a special door put through so you can come through when you hear him. There is one way glass in his door.' She spoke as if Carol's acceptance was assured. 'I will pay you the salary of a first class teacher,' she continued. 'When he has had his tea, you will put him to bed, and you will be free. What do you say?' Carol knew she would never be free in the lifetime of the boy. Three or four years at most, Mrs Psalti had said. On the other hand, there was the mother's challenge that she would grow in the job. 'Let me meet your son,' Carol said. Mrs Psalti left the room.

Carol wanted to run. If ever a walkout was justified, she thought, it was now. Yet she knew she wouldn't. She would look, and she would decide. She'd still be in her twenties when the boy's

increasing weight overtaxed his heart. By then she would be Mrs Psalti's daughter and co-mother of her child. They'd quarrel over what was best for him, the real mother trying to assert herself over the woman who'd made her son a little more acceptably human. Carol heard a grunt: her charge - her *charge?* - didn't want to come down the passage. Mrs Psalti reentered the lounge to take a biscuit from the table, calling encouragement. There was a shuffling sound, a gleeful grunting, then a hand appeared at the door. Mrs Psalti stepped swiftly backwards, a figure followed, she released the biscuit: framed in the doorway stood, or rather stooped, an abject, putty-faced, incipiently-moustached caricature of a man who, despite his ecstatic reception of the wafer to his mouth, contrived to look older than his eighteen years; it struck Carol that there had been thus far no mention of the boy's father, despite the evidence, in photos and trophies, of a prosperous, property-owning male. 'This is Giovanni,' Mrs Psalti announced. 'My son.'

La Gioconda had been a trap; yet necessary, Carol felt; she was face to face with something she needed to see. The boy pleaded for another biscuit. Mrs Psalti put them in a drawer, keeping one in her hand. She sat on the sofa, leaving a space next to Carol. 'Giovanni,' she said tenderly, 'come.'

The boy swayed forward, as if butting his head on the unknown. 'Come,' said Mrs Psalti, 'she is a friend.' The boy held out a hand. 'Smile at him,' Mrs Psalti said. 'Offer him the biscuit.' Carol felt the heaviness of a human life. She held up the wafer, calling, and Giovanni shuffled awkwardly forward, feet turned in at the toes. He was wearing costly shoes. He wanted to take the biscuit while standing behind the sofa, but Carol held it, carrot to a donkey, so he had to come around. Giovanni began his rumble of oral pleasure. She made him sit before she gave it. Mrs Psalti beamed. The two women flanking him, he held the biscuit before his gleaming eyes. 'He delays the pleasure,' Mrs Psalti said. 'There are many signs of development.' Carol realized that the mother would be happy if the boy could be made to express in words his filial love. Mrs Psalti saw that Carol was studying his satin jacket. 'He is dressed,' she said, 'by the people who dress my husband. They send us everything we need.' Giovanni held a hand in front of his face while he gobbled greedily. 'He has so many aspects of a man,' his mother said. 'Unfortunately, he has learned to masturbate. One of our jobs is to clean him up.'

Their eyes met. Mrs Psalti's chequebook lay on the chiffonier, one girl paid off, another to be taken on. Carol stiffened. 'It will not be long,' Mrs Psalti said, alluding to their earlier conversation. 'I want something for my efforts.' She saw that her pleading was distasteful to Carol. 'Should he die,' she said, 'with no achievement, no contact except his parents, no idea that he is someone in the eyes of someone else?' The pressure of the appeal, even more than the effect of the boy's proximity, told Carol she'd be warped, or distorted, if she succumbed. Sensing the rejection, the mother added angrily, 'If I cannot share him I will go mad! Don't I deserve something? Is that too much to ask?'

It was too practised. Carol looked at the boy, whose greedy eyes were fixed on the biscuit drawer. Between his death and his present state, she guessed, there might be half a dozen moments when he offered those nearest him some recognition, some awareness of them as more than the means to satisfy his needs. For those rewards Mrs Psalti would be ruthless enough to swallow three or four years of her life; but it was even more selfish, Carol saw, to use the power she had and Mrs Psalti hadn't. She could walk away. 'I don't know what to say to you,' she said. 'I'll let you know tomorrow.'

Copout, self-defence, or courtesy? She took the simpleton lovingly by his soft, childlike paw, blessed him for the spiritual thing she saw yearning in him, more needful than his want of biscuits and post-masturbatory cleansing, and left.

The sadness she felt, leaving Mrs Psalti's flat, was deeper and more wretched than she'd felt in Paris. It hit her, walking through the shops of Double Bay, that she wanted an end to rejection, but there was nothing positive in sight, only crude Australian paving and clothing dummies in contorted poses. God, or someone, she pleaded, give me confidence; after that desertion there must be something hopeful, lucky, a lead? She slumped on a bench, hating the presence, on a garden bed behind her, of a metal sculpture craning about her neck like Leda's lustful swan. The shoppers thronging about her looked like caricatures of Giovanni; it's compassion, she saw, that makes people acceptable, but compassion is an emotion, a judgement, that thrives on what we want to reject, not what we want to be.

A man bumped her, then apologized, his smile offering what he presented as charm. She greeted the approach indifferently. He disappeared into an office, leaving her with a feeling that she'd seen him before; was he the face that had looked from Mrs Psalti's walls? A moment later the man was back, with an animated group brandishing briefcases as they slid into a glossy Ford. Carol felt purposeless; they seemed to think they had a fortune in their grasp. But a minute later they were back, angry and quarrelling; one dashed into the office but came out empty-handed, followed by a puzzled, apologetic secretary. The carload drew away a second time, the Ford surging into the traffic as if going to war. The secretary caught Carol's eye. 'You look a bit down,' she said. 'Someone been putting it on you?'

Confronted once again by an opposite, or was it a likeness, Carol could only say, 'I don't know where to go next.' The secretary suggested she come in for coffee. 'Things'll be pretty slack till they get back,' she offered, 'and that won't be for hours. Hopefully.' Carol picked herself up as if her existence was something to be endured. A map of the city covered one wall of the office. By the time her cup had been refilled, she'd discovered that the secretary's name was Camilla and that her boss, a property developer, was a Mr Psalti who had a son he couldn't acknowledge. Carol had been questioned about her hair, and her presence in Sydney. 'Don't you want to see your husband again?' Camilla asked. 'I mean, don't you need him? Or have you got someone else?'

She can't bear me to be without a partner, Carol thought, feeling the questions as intrusive, even aggressive in their definition of normality. Only once, in her weeks alone in France, had she wanted that degree of intimacy with a man. Coming out of Notre Dame, snow everywhere, she'd been given a pamphlet by a Filipino with disturbed eyes and a fat tongue lolling on his lips. His broad forehead, reflecting a spotlight, shone like an alien moon. Masculine, unknown, his presence before the cathedral pleaded for the redress of injustice to be discoverable in Europe. He'd touched her in a realm where souls weighed each other, discarding burdens. She needed to get away from that idea of soul, it chased her out of her body.

Camilla was studying her, waiting for an answer. 'That man I was telling you about,' Carol began. Camilla's face assumed an expression of patient scepticism which must, Carol saw, be her defence against Mr Psalti's clients. 'Sorry,' she said, realizing that she hadn't expressed, aloud, her feelings about the figure who'd plodded behind her, solemn as Wenceslas, to stand beneath her room in the Quai d'Anjou. 'A man followed me home,' she said. 'In Paris.' Camilla rolled her eyes. 'The old story.' Insisting on the singularity of her experience, Carol said, 'I could hear him beating his hands on the wall of the hotel. I put the catch on the shutters and I double-checked the door. I didn't sleep till I was sure he'd gone. But he came back in the morning, gentle as a mouse, and we had breakfast together. It was Sunday morning and the people in the cafe thought we were lovers. The French have a special way of treating lovers, and we'd cheated. We'd slept apart, and we'd cheated.'

'The screw you never had,' Camilla said, dismissing it to start on her problem; she had a fiancé she'd met in Italy. He'd been out to stay with her parents, and she'd stayed with his uncle and aunt in Verona, but her mother was insisting that she live in Sydney when she'd married. The trouble was that her fiancé was well up in the Banco di Milano while his English wasn't good enough for a career in Australia. 'I'm getting pulled both ways,' she said. 'When I tell Mum she can come and visit us, she puts on a performance.' She shrugged. 'I know what Ricco expects.' Carol found her conventionality off-putting. 'Can't you decide for yourself?' The secretary smiled. 'I guess I am.' She took a call, pushing the percolator towards Carol's cup. 'He's out at the moment,' she said, 'can I take a message?' She repeated the details to the caller. 'Thank you,' she said, tearing a sheet off the pad. 'I'll see he gets back to you.' The dutiful actions stirred a fear in Carol that there might be no escape. Panicking at the realization that hatred of Camilla could be the next step from the self-hatred and the ideological hatred seething inside her, she said, 'Tear it to pieces. That fucking message. And the pad. The phone book. Chuck the lot of them ...' She heard her voice grow shrill. 'Chuck them ... anywhere you can chuck them!' Camilla's eyes told her how close she was to collapse. 'Take it easy,' the secretary said. 'Things aren't all that bad. What's getting you so stirred up?'

Carol felt cold and frightened. She'd put herself where she couldn't get back. 'Someone walk out on you?' the secretary suggested. 'I've walked out on everything,' Carol said; it felt like a confession, or perhaps a final resignation. The phone buzzed again, Camilla ignored it.

'Something'll turn up.'

'That was my husband's idea,' Carol said; was she stuck? She wondered how much more pain her transformation, if it happened, would involve. Camilla took the call. A man's voice demanded Mr Psalti. Carol listened as the secretary got rid of him. Mr Psalti was seeing the Minister about a change in zoning, and he couldn't be contacted that evening because he was meeting his partners ...

'He's on a silent line,' Camilla said when she'd put down the phone. 'As a matter of fact, I don't think he contributes much at home. Just a humanoid. You ought to hear what he says about his son.' Carol felt intensely curious, but Camilla was staring at the switchboard. 'He's a very nasty piece of work,' she said quietly. 'Do you know, the day Ricco went back to Italy ...'

Mr Psalti's indecencies were the last straw. 'Don't you want to kill them?' Carol said. 'No, really, don't you want to see how much you can hurt them?' She could hear the shrillness returning. 'Not really,' said Camilla, more phlegmatic than resigned. 'I think they're fools. Honestly, if you could see the things that go on here. The stuff-ups, the lying ... no, I mean, really ... if you could see what I see, you'd think they were the greatest bunch of idiots, just living out a fantasy. No, really.' She lit a cigarette. 'It makes me laugh. Actually.' Carol couldn't tell whether the contempt was deeply felt, or a front. 'But you obey them,' she said.

'I don't obey anyone,' Camilla said. 'I do what they say, but they don't know what I'm thinking.' She narrowed her eyes to give an impression of shrewdness. 'What about when you're married?' Carol said. 'You won't be able to stand back from that.'

Camilla drew on her cigarette. 'I'm married already, in my mind. If my parents knew the things we did when they thought we were at church, or visiting relatives ... Boy, it's unreal!' A look of triumph came into her eyes which she seemed to be inviting Carol to share. Carol felt depressed; she gets her strength from convention, she thought, she bucks it but it's there. 'What sort of a wedding are you going to have?'

Camilla smiled. 'It'll be in Verona, that's about all I know. My mum wants them to have the service in Latin, like hers was, but as far as I'm concerned, they can say it in pidgin, it's just a big get together and an excuse for the old aunts to have a cry!' She flicked ash in a tray. 'That's all it is as far as I'm concerned.'

Carol wondered how wealthy, and cynical, Ricco's parents were, and why they hadn't been mentioned. 'You're going to be lonely,' she said. 'Oh Ricco's got plenty of friends,' Camilla said, 'and my Italian's not too bad.' Carol felt disappointed, but didn't want to lose the other's warmth. 'You do obey them,' she said. 'Ricco, his parents ...' She looked around the office. 'The whole lot.' Camilla put the cigarette down. 'If your mind says no,' she said, 'you can do anything you have to.' She looked intently at the stranger in her office. 'You probably think that's negative, but it isn't. Bit by bit you accept the things you hated and then they're your own. It isn't hard, it just takes time!' Carol stood, the secretary's eyes still on her. Unless she could answer, she'd be defeated, and she'd have to go. 'That's just a long slow way of giving in,' she said; Camilla threw it back. 'You know something you haven't told me?' Carol stared at the map, wondering how soon the Gysberts would be back to drive her out. The phone sounded, Camilla wrote on her pad. I love that flat, thought Carol. In that window I find security. If I could have it a bit longer, before they ruin it with their quarrels, it might fix me. She tried to trace the journey she'd made that day. 'It's endless, isn't it,' Camilla said, releasing and forgiving. 'Just about everyone who comes here looks at it some time or another. I don't know why.' The walls held nothing else. 'Trying to locate themselves, I guess,' the secretary said.

When Carol got back to the Quay, Gary had gone. She went home - this was how she felt now about the flat, perched above its tremulous water. It was hot. Frangipani hung heavily in the streets as she made her way up the steps. She felt a change was brewing. The pathetic fallacy of my life, she told herself, teetering, as Julie did, glass in hand, on the step between lounge and window. A view and a glass of gin. Decision? When she went downstairs for Didgie, Mrs McLintock came out to say that she'd had another card from the Gysberts - they were doing the Barrier Reef before they came home. 'When was it written?' Carol asked. Mrs McLintock wasn't sure, but Carol knew her time was up. She fed the cat downstairs, needing an hour of solitude, and went back. Now or never, she thought, knowing that nothing came when you wanted it. In earlier centuries, prayer. Majestic Jesus on the pediment of Saint Peters. God, Mary and the Holy Spirit still floating about the spires of France. They held nothing for the future. Technology ruled the world and Gary's despair put a gloom on everything. So much for men. She found herself looking at the water, wondering if another wetsuit would surface. Nothing happened. A yearning filled her. She felt like a pilgrim, worn out by travel, awaiting grace. On the bridge, two trains crossed each other: in silhouette, they merged, lengthened, pulled apart; as the gap between them widened, Carol felt some relief break free inside her. The trucks and buses speeding along the carriageway were like ducks in a shooting gallery, she felt she could pick them off with a thought. She tried to find a meaning in the scene; were the city towers, the fun park, the opera house, the disused railways, assertions of power? Creations of need? Embodiments of faith? It was lonely being a spectator, watching the scene subversively, but what else? One could live in the past, like Proust, or wait for the future, the dream, to come into being - Martin's position in politics, she saw. The alternative was to have another knowledge, seeing what others saw, but through other eyes. She saw heat and a waiting water, boats darting nervously as if a storm might rush in and catch them.

She watched. Nothing happened. Boats darted nervously across a sullen water as if expecting to be capsized. On the bridge, two trains devoured each other - two lengths, devolving into one

length, became two lengths before they split. Carol tipped her ice blocks out the window. A libation? She sat at her desk, despite the heat, and wrote the conclusion of the lecture she had determined to give: 'Artists,' she wrote, 'who do not lead, must follow. Once artists no longer expressed the wishes of those who ruled society, they were forced back on themselves. Making the individual sensibility into a totem, an object of mystique, of worship, they were forced into the position of making seers of themselves, consciences, crystal balls: in short, they were forced into the feminine position, which role, by and large, they attempted to satisfy in masculine ways.' She stared at the harbour. Commuters streamed homewards, by ferry, hydrofoil, and the rest. Two trains, et cetera. 'Playing with rejection,' she wrote, 'they did not, for the most part, expect to be rejected. How could they be rejected, they asked, when the future - a territory of the romantic artist - belonged to them? But rejection,' she wrote, 'was always on the cards, once they'd given the lie to the world they knew, the world that listened to them. They were relegated to the position of dreamers, poseurs, visionaries, flâneurs . . . they were moved into the position of those who'd had unaccountable experiences, whose stories, dreams, pictures, songs and memories would be trampled into the ground, in one generation, like the economies of the third world, so that they could be regenerated, like the agricultures of the third world, once the advertising forefront of today's consumer society had need of them.' Resisting the temptation to add a flurry of exclamation marks, she stared upon her paper and the reflecting water. I would give my life, she thought, my thesis, for a happy moment. I would even like to see my husband.

'I don't believe,' she told herself, 'a word of what I've written.'

She added a few notes of thanks, respectful obituaries to the woman she'd been. She touched her scalp. This will be my last hypocrisy, she thought. She filled her glass with tonic, added gin. She drank it, staring at the water. She slept, dreamless, except, as the sun sent his first messengers into the sky, for a momentary skirmish between sleep and illumination, in which she saw herself selling tickets on a tram with passengers paying in currencies she'd never seen.

She slept. When Gary tapped at her door in the small hours, she heard nothing. When Didgie whined at the top of the stairs, she heard nothing. When Mrs McLintock tottered upstairs with the Gysberts' card, she was sleeping still. The sun rose. Trucks and buses rattled across the enormous, booming carriageway of the bridge, and she slept. Trains, rushing towards each other, overlapped, lengthened, and broke apart. Yacht owners who'd held parties, fighting their way through relationships, came down at dawn to take their boats on the water. Hydrofoils churned waves to foam. Ferries churned. Tankers hooted. Tugs tugged. Towers gleamed. A sky of gelid blue, wide as the problems of philosophy, filled itself with the light of a distant sun. And Carol slept.

3

Carol was pouring tea in the breakfast room when she heard the postman's whistle. Looking out, she saw him leaning against the corner of the garage, bag straddling the handlebars. Whistle on his chest. Mrs McLintock, doggedly curious, was struggling across the lawn for news. The postman, Carol saw, was more involved with someone out of sight, waving his arm upwards as if there was some decision coming to a head. Who'd buttonholed the posty? Idly sipping from her cup, Carol wondered how men kept their trousers in their socks when they pedalled.

It was Martin. He came confidently around the corner, like Faust, or the Chevalier des Grieux, looking upward, nervously balancing sexual confidence and personal ineptitude as he searched for her window. No, she thought, loving him dearly, but no no no. He saw a shaded figure, arm drooped across a table, fingers curled around a delicately handled bowl - a temptation, goal, decision centre, conscience, and source of delicious pleasure-providing pain. He saw her as beautiful, unattainable, and pushed noisily up the stairs.

She opened the door.

He said, 'I hope I'm not unexpected, but when I've rung, you've not been home.'

She confronted his negativism with a show of welcome. 'Come in, I'm having tea!'

She poured, he drank. They talked. When it was time for him to go to his interview, she went with him. On the ferry, she pointed back. 'See that window above the magnolia? That's mine. I sit there and look out.' He said, testing her, 'I'll bet you've been getting about.' She thought of Gary, the Psaltis. 'Not much,' she said. 'I actually feel freer up there than when I'm moving around the city.' They looked into the black rectangle, Carol half expecting to see herself looking shrewdly down, waiting for Martin and her alter ego to disappear before she got

on with ...

'I wonder what I'd think of you if I was up there now,' she said, studying her husband, animosity lost in curiosity. 'What do you think of me?' he said. 'I need to know.' He wondered if he was sincere. He was getting ready to resume an affair in Melbourne. 'I think if I was meeting you for the first time,' she said, 'I might like you. But we've got a history. When are you going back?' He slumped. 'Tomorrow. I thought you might ask me to stay one night. You've got a sofa,' he added.

'I'll sleep on the sofa,' she said. 'I'm shorter.' He protested that he couldn't put her out of her bed, she wondered why he bothered. But he did bother, and it was just these protestations on small things and disregard for her in large ones that intrigued her: he was truly blind. She stared down the harbour. A tanker was approaching. 'Get a move on little ferry,' Martin said, trying to be jovial. 'We're right in line.'

She looked in the direction of the Quay; she hoped Gary would be singing. She knew Martin hadn't for a moment doubted the ferry's engine, it was just that he liked to make a display of nervousness, it was a fiction he put out to cover his lack of self-questioning. The ship, which passed well behind them, was flying the hammer and sickle; to Carol's surprise, Martin sang lightly: 'The working class/can kiss my arse/I've got the boss's job at last!' Sailors on the bow looked down. 'You are confident,' Carol said. 'You really want this job?'

‘Would it worry you if I was living up here?’ he asked. ‘No,’ she said. ‘I wouldn’t expect to see you very often.’ He thought her cruel. ‘Was it as bad as all that?’ It occurred to her that he had no suitcase. ‘I left it at the airline office,’ he said. ‘I knew I’d be coming back. It seemed pointless to cart it all that way if ...’

If I refused to have him, she saw; his pride, and his convenience, were still the first things in his life, and the inability to venture himself. He had to be certain of winning before he took a risk. She stayed silent until they reached the Quay. Martin would have gone to the street to look for a taxi, but she headed for the crowd gathered around a busker, forcing him to follow.

Gary had his mouth organ held before him by an attachment to his neck, leaving his hands free for puppets; one was a drunk, leaning bowler-hatted on a bar, the other was a Siamese triplet of chorus girls, kicking to reveal wooden thighs. In falsetto, Gary sang:

Wherever you may wander,
On land or sea or foam,
You’ll always hear me singin’ this song:
Show me the way to go home!

He craned forward to play a few bars on the mouth organ before dropping into:

Show me the way to go home!
I’m tired and I want to go to bed.
I had a little drink about an hour ago,
And it’s gone right to my head.

The puppet wiggled his glass. Gary pumped his foot on something behind his bag. The bottle beside the drunk began to sprout a huge balloon on which, in dripping yellow letters, was written Atomic Cocktail! Something demonic in Gary’s voice dampened the crowd’s humor. Carol saw he was going to burst the balloon. The puppet wiggled his glass. Gary’s foot pumped more slowly. She kept back, not wanting him to see her. His voice lowered. The chorus jiggled madly, the drunk jerked his glass, while Gary whispered:

Show me the way to go home!
I’m tired and I want to go to bed.
I had a little drink about an hour ago,
And it’s gone right to my head.

The mouth organ picked up speed. The pumping followed it. The balloon grew. People put hands to their ears. Someone threw a coin to make him stop. Another. More. Carol felt afraid. ‘He often do this?’ said Martin, pushing beside her. She ignored him. She ran out to pull the pump away. Gary stopped. People stared. It was unforgivable to break into his act. ‘Join in the chorus!’ he called. She shook her head. ‘Make a donation!’ It was her only way out. She dropped a coin in his hat. ‘Another dream?’ he asked. Bitterness overtook her. Whether he was cowed by her, or had been prepared to stop, she wasn’t sure, but he kicked his pumping device and the balloon began to crumple. The letters went slack. Gary sang raucously. The drunk hopped up and down, glass at his lips. The chorus did their legshow. Carol went back to Martin. ‘You know this bloke?’ he said. ‘What’s he on about?’

‘Go to your interview,’ she said. ‘I’ll be here when you get back. No.’ She fumbled in her bag again. ‘Here’s the key.’ He resisted. ‘What’s going on? I could be ages. It’s more than an interview, they could be taking me to lunch!’ She pressed the key on him. ‘Take it. You’ll want it before I do.’ She took a step towards Gary. The crowd was breaking up. The balloon had settled like a surrealist watch on the papier-mâché bottle. ‘So that’s the husband,’ Gary said, his contempt obvious. ‘In

Bathurst tomorrow folks!' he called, looking at his takings. 'Back next week!' She gripped his arm. 'You're not going anywhere,' she said. 'How can you back out on what you just did?'

He started to defend himself, she saw sheepish Martin standing near, jiggling the key in his hands. Had she nothing better than to move between them? Was walking out the only way? Towards both, they only saw what she was thinking. 'Martin,' she said. 'You seem to have some money. Take us to a restaurant.' He protested his interview. 'Gary,' she said, 'where are you going to store your stuff?' The busker, quickly obedient, picked up his puppets and headed for a souvenir stall. 'Mate of mine,' he mumbled. Martin pushed up close to her. 'Carol,' he demanded, voice imperative, yet cracking. 'Carol?' She pointed to the pump and the papier-mâché bottle. 'Why don't you help him? You'll find him interesting.' It was Martin's turn to walk out. Clutching the key, he said 'I'll see you tonight. I might have some good news by then.' Feeling him weakening, appealing, she looked at the sky; if he stayed another minute he'd be offering her half his income, he'd want to see her regularly, they'd be trying for a reconciliation ... it was more than not on, it was amazing that anyone might think it conceivable. Gary came back with the souvenir shop Greek, she walked to the edge of the water; it looked like oil, supporting Coke tins and takeaway plastic cups. A seagull darted for something she hadn't noticed. She liked the bird, perched coolly on a plastic milk crate, it was a scavenger that had retained its dignity. Not a bad achievement, she thought, turning to watch Gary cart his things to the kiosk. When he came out, she watched him; he stood, shaded, head down. Her move. 'Comfortable?' she called, mocking his defence. He spread his hands, showing emptiness. In a flash of cruelty, she wanted to damage him, but in the same moment she saw he'd yielded his moral responsibility; it was too much of a burden to carry, but what a capture! She wanted to toy with him, explore him, before handing him back to himself. 'Come here,' she said, and watched him walking, beaten, to stand beside her. It was hot, she felt a mischievous impulse; fixing his eyes with her own, she took a step to one side, then lunged forward. Pushed him in. He splashed under, came up. Hair wet, draining from his scalp. Plucking a can off the scum and throwing it. 'You'll be dry when you get home,' she said, not minding if he threw another. 'Boat's over here,' he said. 'Walk around.'

She walked around, lowered herself, he pulled himself aboard. He undid his shirt. She said, 'Leave it on, it'll dry more quickly.' He started the motor. Her ferry was pulling out. The man who'd called her roughnut watched them appraisingly. In the clear air she felt as close to him as to Gary. Roughnut doffed his cap, she felt a complex irony in his gesture. She rubbed her hands softly over her tightly flourishing hair, and smiled at him. He leaned forward to show that the spot he was scratching was bald. They laughed at each other. He waved.

It startled her, that second gesture, it signalled that she'd done more than she knew. As they rounded the point, tossing in the wake of a Balmain ferry, Gary called above his engine: 'You ever see *Death in Venice*?' She nodded, examining him. 'Ever been there?' he continued.

'What about it?' she said.

'Don't you think it'd be a beautiful way to die?'

'Shithouse way to live,' she said.

He stared at her. 'I think,' he said, 'we've got the beginning of a quarrel.' She waved at the water. 'Let me know when you know what you think.' He recognized a queenly dimension in her, innately proud, and placed as easily on the seat of his boat as kings and their consorts once sat on horses, and on the populations that supported them. 'You know that boat the boys were building in the backyard?' he said, unsurely. 'It's still there. You think they'll ever launch it?'

'You know they won't. I can tell from the way you talk about it.'

“What do you think I ought to do about it?”

“You could always blow it up,” she said, teasing. “Have a few drinks ... She hummed a few bars of the song he’d sung; he joined her in eerie falsetto, their sounds mocking each other and their situation as they journeyed through the swaddling waves beneath the sky of jewelled perfection. For a bar or two, hostilely, they looked down the boat at each other, remembering their joint and various experience of his latest effort to alienate the people who threw money in his hat. “You can’t go on much longer the way you do,” she said. “Nor can you, you’ve told me,” he replied. Their imprisonment was mutual, gratifying, almost a relief, a moment of truth long avoided, long desired.

They found their wharf, tied the boat, walked to Gary’s place. The vessel trapped in the backyard was rustier and more decrepit than she remembered. Gary was ashamed. “I don’t have any support systems,” he said. “I’m on my own.”

“Welcome to the club,” she said.

He showed her the gear he was taking to Bathurst, a squatter’s outfit and a woolly jumbuck. “But I don’t have to go if you want me.”

“That’s up to you.”

“Can I hear your talk?”

She shook her head. “That’s Martin’s.”

“Why’d you marry him? He’s so dull.”

“I wasn’t any better.”

“When did you change?”

“It’s happening now.”

He led her through the spaces a second time. Bookshelves, wardrobes, sideboards laden with engine parts. Philosophy on the floor. Marilyn Monroe where he’d thrown her. “I hate this place,” she said. Wanting to take her hand, he felt strong enough to lift his chin. “I’m not gonna stay much longer.”

“Where will you go?”

“Down.” It was all there was to be said, as far as he was concerned. “Tell me about your parents,” she said, stripping a filthy pillowslip from its cushion, and settling herself on something that looked like velvet. “I was conceived in the back garden,” he said. “Mum and dad had just finished fucking when the old boy was hit on the neck by an apple.” She laughed: “Missionary position. Serves him right.” He made a gesture. “I don’t think he knew any other.” She stared at him. “Martin doesn’t either, when you look at it. Really.” She found it odd to be discussing sexual intercourse with someone she might want to fuck. She felt cold, tingling on the skin, but cold within: dry, yet excited. There were sounds elsewhere in the warehouse, she hoped no one would burst in. “Don’t tell me you’re one of those people,” she said, “who can remember being born?”

“More than that,” he said. “I can remember dying.” He studied her triumphantly. “It must have been quite an experience,” she said, waiting for him to prove he wasn’t a fool. “I was a child of the Yangtze River,” he said, “when it came down in flood. I was swept out to sea!” He stared with the ferocity of lifetimes at his wall-dividers - a thirties sideboard, and a vast bookshelf pilfered from a rural railway station. “Drowned!” He stated the word as if it was the joker in his pack. “Not exploded?” she said. “Not a child of Hiroshima?” She wanted to belittle him till there were no pretensions left to destroy. “No,” he said, “I missed that scene. All that shit!” he added, as if his understanding had missed a beat.

“You are not the heir to the ages, Gary,” she said, wanting to break him again. “Not even a good singer. Just a performer who wants his takings.” He fought back. “I’m way out in front. As

usual. You're taking your readings off a husband who's dead already, in case you hadn't noticed.' She found his condemnations tedious, but he was away ... 'We're heading for the catastrophe, and people are frightened, I wouldn't know why. The fact is, it's already happened. The whole world's fucked. We're not getting out of this. The big bang's coming. It's all a matter of whether there'll be anything afterwards, or a long night.' He smacked his lips, delighted to have negated everything she might use to challenge him.

Clutching his own death, he felt he had the upper hand.

'You're afraid,' she said. 'You're using your fear to make you brave. You'd make a good soldier.'

'I'm a pacifist. Make love not war.' Why then, she wondered, were relations between the sexes such a struggle? 'Tell me,' she said, 'what you want? Tell me your dream?'

'I don't have one,' he said. 'I want peace. Not war. I want a rest from violence. I want order. I like toast and marmalade for breakfast. In bed, with a long quiet day to follow. You know? Peace. Trucks drumming down the highway. Clouds sailing around the sky like soup plates. Peace, I'm sure you've heard of it!' She picked up his words, seeing him as derelict, and demanding compassion: 'Your peace is the established order reestablished. Your peace is oppression. I'm sorry Gary, I want your peace blown wide apart!'

Deeply inimical, they considered each other. 'Even marmalade?' he said, trying, by being humorously pathetic, to make her accept him. 'Marmalade, my dear,' she said, 'can stay till there shall be no more toast. Happy?'

'If you kiss me,' he said, feebly smiling. She kissed him, savoring his attraction, and the likelihood of him pulling her out of her spot. Wondering how much they needed each other, she drew back. 'Tell me about yourself.'

'Not here. Let's walk.'

In Ultimo, when she talked of Verlaine, he railed against poets who evaded political commitment. Mounting the Pymont Bridge, and deafened by tumultuous traffic, they shared an awkwardness over anti-nuclear graffiti, but in the darkened canyons of the city he revealed that he had a cache of sleeping pills for the day the superpowers launched their missiles. Instead of disturbing her, this confession brought an enforced contentment; facing the worst, she thought, and being prepared to live through it, might concentrate one's powers. She felt immensely richer than Gary. Taking his hand, and sitting him on the grass before a war memorial, she said, speaking without the Gallic intensity:

Un vaste et tendre
Apaisement
Semble descendre
Du firmament
Que l'astre irise ...
C'est l'heure exquise.

But he would not have it. She saw that he had lost control, and all his faith. Reduced to an awareness of other men's madness, he had nothing to give except his problem, and a memory of what might have been. She put an arm around him and led him, like blind Lear, in a direction which, despite her ignorance of the city, she sensed to be important. In Darlinghurst, rubbing against stoned teenagers and shrunken men clutching flagons, they reached the nadir of their trip. He refused to go on. She was destroying him. They compromised by entering a gallery where they found themselves appraised by a benign Chinese who held the door, and a second man, seated at a

desk and turning over papers suspiciously. The seated man, who looked like a Nixon aide, pointed to the catalogue on a low table without taking his eyes off them. Carol felt uncomfortable until she found a painting she could examine with equal intensity. It depicted a bowl and ginger jar on a luminous field, the objects blurred as if they had been reduced from corporeality to their numinous presence. A powerful spotlight on the ceiling heightened the painter's backlighting. The two painted objects showed a silent awareness of each other. It was a hard communion to break into, but when Carol forgot the gallery owner staring at her, and Gary wandering disconsolately among ovoid wooden sculptures of vaguely female forms, she was able to turn the duality of contemplation into a trio; then, having caught, with her psychic ear, the dialogue of the objects, she was able to relate to the painting as a unity. The trinity returned to a duo. She felt the gallery owner admiring her. The Chinese waited until she stepped back a pace before saying, 'Unusual isn't it? Not many of our painters are interested in inner harmony.' He seemed pleased with himself. She wondered how much he thought she was worth. When she had a job, she told him, she would come back, hoping to find it still unsold. Noticeably, the Chinese didn't reach for his red stickers, nor did the Nixon aide rise from his seat. Piqued, she took their catalogue, marked the painting that had affected her, and put it back on the low table. Gary showed his contempt. Walking east, when they had left the gallery, he showed that he thought he had the upper hand again. He gave his views on high culture, consumer art, and the bourgeois need to decorate. Denying nothing, she told him that the painting had touched her, and that she would like to have it near her: at times when she might feel unsteady, or vulnerable, it would stand as an embodiment of a moment of extraordinary unity, all the more gratifying because it had been, despite the inspection of the gallery men, a moment of pure autonomy.

They walked in silence, each wondering how to end their entwinement, since it had been shown to be impossible. In Paddington he confessed that he had wanted her to fall wildly in love with him; he, as object of her passion, could close over her emotions like a tree binding itself by the roots to a rocky crag, drawing nourishment where it would otherwise be impossible for life to cling. He said he'd wanted her to make him whole. She said she had no intention of being earth, or Mother Earth, for him, Martin, anybody.

In Paddington, they hated each other; in Woollahra they drew together again, lonely, loving, their only barriers the tensions and frustrations of being what they were. Outside a quaint, many-gabled Edwardian house, its palm trees quiescent for want of a Pacific wind, they told each other that in other circumstances they might have loved: this mutual enslavement by preoccupations bonded them more closely. Nearing Bondi, they had another dispute, leaning on the gateposts of a duplex block of flats - The Stadler: The Hopes. The names of these speculative constructions, presented to the sea breezes and thunderstorms in Bauhaus lettering, dominated a futile, bickering conversation in which neither knew how to give ground. She was trapped in resentment, he was nothing but negative - so they said. But their body language was warmer, and when Carol, faced by an open ocean, and the sign on a street corner pizza joint *La Gioconda*, burst into laughter, joyous in her discovery of where she was and where she'd been, Gary laughed too, dismissing his claims, and signifying that he was hers to direct.

They had dinner. It grew dark. He went to the hotel for wine and came back. They talked. She went to the hotel for more wine. Francesca Bongiorno pretended she'd never seen either of them until they let on that it was okay. Then Mrs Bongiorno smiled, professionally delighted that two of her clients had found each other. Gary and Carol were happy. She had sand lobster tails, he barramundi. There were no footsteps in the next room. They told each other their parents' jokes,

and incidents of childhood. She told Gary she'd thought that the first time someone touched her clitoris she'd piss herself, it would mean such a loss of control. He told her that the first time he'd masturbated he'd been afraid he'd go blind - he'd read this in a book in a Cobar op-shop. She didn't know where Cobar was, and he told her about his year in the mines, and the characters there, until, their coffee sipped, they promenaded on the beach. A change was on the way, though the night was warm. They buried each other in sand, each wanting to put the other away, each wanting to be led to freedom. She asked him to sing. He said she had to sing with him; she said she hadn't sung since school, but if listening to him brought anything into her mind, she'd break in, and he'd have to stop. He accused her of making rules when she ought to have been spontaneous. She walked towards the water, a song hovering about her mind. She couldn't think how it went, nor what it was, but she needed it both for herself and as a response to Gary. He, meanwhile, skipped in a room-sized circle, dragging his heel to make a furrow in the sand. 'This is the charmed circle!' he shouted. 'I'm in it!' He strutted around his kingdom like a pop star in performance, microphone in hand. She waved her arms like a crazy teenager, laughing with him, but kept walking until she felt the water.

Then it came. A wavering, soaring, melisma threaded through her mind; she stepped backwards, trying to recall the verse and the singer, until the sea covered her ankles. It was a song about sleep, a cradle song, that much she knew. Gary called to her, in mock alarm, that if she went any further she'd be swept away. He broke out of his circle to rush towards her receding, darkening figure; the notes, which she could hear now in white soprano, made her indifferent to him, and to her fate, yet more confident. A delicious mood of acceptance coupled with rejection had settled in her mind as accompaniment to the voice, her own and not her own. The air was alive with warmth, nurtured by the restorative sea and sand. Clouds, prominent as aeroplanes, swooped in low. The void they inhabited drew back from the circle of lights burning over Bondi Beach. Carol remembered her sensations on pushing Gary into the water. This time she accepted him. He was one of the small band of naked or near-naked figures on or about the beach - the joggers, lovers, late swimmers, health fanatics. She threw her clothes towards the shore, a ripple threw them up. Letting the sea be its own determinant, she watched them run in and out a few times before one curving finger of foam, more energetic than those coming before or after, settled her soggy garments at the line of seashells. She took Gary in her arms. He said 'So I'm no use?'

She told him to sing. He knelt in the water, watching the blackness as if it were someone's or something's agent, and sang 'Here comes the sun ... it's all right.' He flicked the water as if it were a stringed instrument. She lifted him by the shoulders and walked him to shore. They dressed, he dry, she streaming wet. 'Funniest fuck I never had,' he said, knowing, before even trying to read her eyes, that his crassness condemned him to a lifetime in Marlboro Country. She liked being wet. A taxi driver said that if she paid him five dollars he'd let her wrap herself in some old blankets he had in the boot, otherwise she couldn't travel in his car. She said she'd rather walk, but Gary insisted on paying, and Carol felt she had to let him, having brought him, not only to his knees in the water, but to the state of mind where he'd walked through his charmed circle in the sand so engrossed in understanding her that he hadn't seen where he was treading. She smiled thinly at the encircling lights, and the blackness pouring towards the land: the ecstatic, soaring melisma was striving for the words which would tell Gary how to adjust himself, but she couldn't place the music, it lingered like a possibility unlocated in the culture. Who sang it? When? Great loves had had their music, rebirths should have it too. When they got to the Quay, Gary insisted on getting out; he had his boat moored, he said, and since he had no more money and she had little, she

shouldn't be expected to pay for taking him home. Her determination broke, momentarily, before the thought of Gary, with his coronary-prone engine, stealing his way through the night, with a storm, or change, advancing, but he was so anxious, and so certain of getting home, that she gave in. As her taxi rushed over the Coathanger, she thought of him, puerile, skilled to a certain extent in survival, coaxing his put-put around the coves and headlands to his warehouse encumbered by a vessel doomed never to sail.

She fell asleep in the taxi, waking only when the driver tapped her shoulder and pointed to her gateway. As if in a trance, she paid him, checked the empty mailbox, climbed the stairs, fumbled for her key, and looked wearily for Didgie. But the door was unlocked, and the cat was nowhere to be seen. An argument was in full swing. The Gysberts were home. Jack, theatrically naked, back pressed against the passage wall, was abusing the darkness where his wife, Julie, sat screaming in her pain. Bitch. Cunt. Shit. Pervert, Chauvinist. Pig. Swine. Rat. Arselicker. Motherfucker. Seeing Carol arrive, Jack wiggled his hips, folded her in his arms and told her how marvellous it was to see her. Julie sulked, Martin, miserably sipping beer in the breakfast room, called out that he wanted someone sane to talk to. Carol pushed past Jack, and Julie's hypocritical sisterhood, to the front room. The window was open. She went back to Martin. He was slightly drunk. Seeing that she saw this, he explained that he'd been humiliated by the owners of the flat, who thought him of no significance. He himself thought, he said, that he was of no significance, but he was buggered if two neurotic, self-destructive people of opposite sex were going to tip that can on his head. He had his pride, he said.

She asked him where it was.

When he tried to answer, he gagged. His shame was too deep. She led him past the warring Gysberts to the front room. He tried to scoff at her, shrouded in sodden, salt-smelling blankets, but she stood, back to the computer-banks of lights, like a being with absolute confidence. She shrugged her wet things to the floor. When he grumbled that they didn't smell any the less of whatever she'd been swimming in, she threw them out the window. This, at last, made him reconsider. He ventured into the screaming match of Jack and Julie to find her case, and bring it forward. Searching among her clothes, he found a nighty. She put it on, unaccustomed to a protective Martin. He put a sheet on the sofa, spread a blanket, and laid a towel over the pile of cushions that would have to serve as her pillow. When she concerned himself with his comfort, he dragged an air mattress out of his case, and blew it up. 'I predicted something like this,' he said, whether truthfully or not. She stretched on the sofa, affectionate, indifferent, and wondering if Gary was safely home, or adrift, engine failing in a world too dark. It was dawn before she remembered her talk. Waking, she made Martin face her while she rehearsed what she was going to say. The Gysberts, having fought till they fucked, were inert beneath their Danish eiderdown. Martin brewed coffee while she made corrections, and brought it to her in the burgeoning light of morning. Feeling her release her grip on him, he could love her close-cropped head, so exciting, so honest, and could accept the way she was going to go.

They ferried to the university. She gave her talk, substituting for her rhetoric-filled finale some lines of Rimbaud - 'When the eternal servitude of women shall have ended ... woman will discover the unknown ... she will discover strange, unfathomable things ...' A group gathered around her afterwards. She introduced them to Martin, who was intensely proud of her, and contrite, at last, in his freedom from shame. For, as she said on their last mutual journey, their ferry trip to the Gysberts' flat, where they expected either screaming or a deathly absence of conflict, he had, in his guilt-ridden support of her, and his abandonment of her, made possible the first steps of the release

she'd shown publicly that day. He, wrongly, felt it was her first softening towards him; overcome, he looked over the side. The boat shuddered through the water where drug gangs threw their victims. They walked through the streets of frangipani, magnolia and bougainvillea, past graffitied walls and the repair shop of the desperate technologist whose wife and son were too much for him, to the flat above Mrs McLintock, in a building constructed for the dour Scots who'd masterminded the Bridge. The Pacific breathed through the open window. The Gysberts, ensnared in sexuality and mutual forgiveness, lay locked in sleep. Martin, examining his plane ticket, said he had two hours left. Carol busied herself with scallops. Martin didn't know whether to leave her alone while he stared at the resplendent view, or to hop from foot to foot in the breakfast room, there being no room in the kitchen. He opted for the water. It would be gleaming after he'd gone back to the muddy, conscience-stricken city of the south where he'd be sleeping that night with Margo, if he rang her on his return. She wanted to unload her sickening woes, and he, purified by Carol's rejection, didn't want to hear them, but didn't know what else there was for him to exploit. He went back to the breakfast room and had lunch, one last time, with his wife.

Saying goodbye, she felt her life opening out as much as closing. Courtesy slowed her wish to dismiss him, yet she could hardly wait for the moment when, her chair commanding the retreating ferry growing smaller on the harbour, she saw him disappear. Martin's presence still affected her but Martin the meaning she was more than ready to banish. When the door slammed, she measured out the moments till he'd be passing the magnolia, the frangipani, the bougainvillea; the graffiti-filled underpass; the spot where a neurotic, over-dominant mother had jammed the heel of her shoe between the planks. She toyed with the dishes till she could bear it no longer, then rushed forward. Martin, not wanting to be observed, was skulking beneath the railway till the ferry came, when, she saw, he planned to stride boldly forward. The ferry was already passing through the shadow of the bridge. It came closer, Martin stepped out. On the spot where the woman lost her shoe, he wavered, looking up: Carol stepped back. When the boat came in, he waited till Roughnut flung the plank at his feet, then boarded. She fingered the catches of the windows, turning them. In the moments when, out of sight, he was making his way to the stern, she flung the windows open, one after the other, like options. He would see them, when he looked, up, and would wonder in which, or whether, she would appear. But she was loyal; as the boat turned, and Martin came into view, waving feebly a blood red hanky, she considered him: the ecstatic, soaring melisma came to her mind again, and this time she knew it to be Greig. Solveig's song. 'I will cradle you. I will watch you. Sleep and dream, my dearest boy!' Knowing that she had outgrown the man and the song, she stepped confidently to the window, and waved to her vanishing husband, a man borne across the waters of his choosing. The white soprano sang in her head, a wavering voice to which she joined her own inadequately trained production. Notes poured from her until she wondered if Martin could hear them as a clearer message than the valediction, the blessing, she poured through the window as she stroked the afternoon air with a white, warm, naked arm, sweeping the sky like an Antarctic bird in search of an ice-tipped island, an arm, pure against the blackness which would be all that Martin would be able to see of that context, rich as infinity, which she sensed in the room behind her where she had dropped the notes of her lecture and where, packed and ready for the next stage of her life, was her case. Martin, she saw, was self-conscious, unable to know how an ending could be made a beginning. She leaned out the window and spread her arms, wide as Christ's, in a gesture which embraced Gary, Mrs Psalti and Martin, an enveloping movement showing that she could, while treating the world as the disastrous mockery it had become, look to it as a thing that might at any moment be reborn. The dimension of dream, which had been

her object of study, was an imaginative flood waiting to burst over the sterilities she was abandoning. Martin shrank, though his hanky, brighter than his palms in Paris, held her attention like the memory of a crime until, lifting her eyes, she forgot the ferry in the drama of a rumbling, ebbing city, towers poised, yachts complacent, where sky and water cradled each other like the besotted Solveig, taking to herself the hopelessness of immature mankind:

I will rock you and watch beside you.
Sleep and dream, my own dear love!

Wondering when the diver in his wetsuit would emerge from the blissful water, Carol closed the windows of the Gysberts' bow room, turned the catches till they gripped, drew the blinds on her sleeping hosts, took up her case, patted a puzzled Didgie, and opened the door.