Self, identity and the ethics of portraiture in photography and writing

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Statement of Authenticity

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in full or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.

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Gretchen Shirm
SELF, IDENTITY AND THE ETHICS OF PORTRAITURE IN PHOTOGRAPHY AND WRITING

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This thesis is comprised of two parts, a creative work of a full-length novel and a critical exegesis examining three separate but thematically linked texts.

**Novel: Where the Light Falls**

The creative work is a full-length contemporary novel written in the psychological realist style, dealing with a crisis of self. It is narrated in the third person free indirect style. The novel is deeply engaged with the formation of the self and identity, in particular the understanding of the self in relation to the other. Photographic portraiture is also considered at length as a means of representing others and of self-expression. Finally, the novel offers a sustained examination of grief as an emotion that impacts upon and shapes the self.

**Exegesis**

The exegesis considers three ideas: the self, identity and the ethics of portraiture. The nature of the exegesis is to examine the philosophical ideas that arise in the creative work. This thesis argues that the self is an inescapable presence in both photography and writing and that the fraught ethical dimension of portraiture arises because of the difficulties in representing the continuum of self.

The exegesis explores three separate texts in chapters related by theme. The first chapter considers the portrait photograph in Marguerite Duras’s *The Lover*, as a metaphor for writing the self. Chapter two explores Susan Sontag’s curiously emotional response the work of Diane Arbus and argues Sontag’s reluctance to acknowledge the affective power of Arbus’s photographic portraits undermines her critique of the photographs on ethical grounds. The final chapter argues that Hervé Guibert’s *Ghost*
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Image demonstrates that a degree of subjectivity underpins every photographic act. The thesis relates photography and writing as a means of representing the self and concludes that the ethical concerns that arise in portraiture are common to both forms.
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Where the light falls
In winter, the dark was terrible. He walked into his apartment at six and already it was pulled down over the city like a hood. The night had a texture, a thick woven fabric, fine as knitted wool. He could never have imagined it, a darkness more bitter than the cold. When he came home at night, he pressed the door of his apartment closed, aware each time that he was performing an act of resistance against it.

Inside their apartment, the light slanted upwards from lamps and bare bulbs. The wiring in the walls was old and precarious and the lights in the ceilings did not work. Still, it was welcoming. It gave the room a staged effect. Moving through the apartment was like walking through a theatre production, the light threw his shadows in different directions and as he passed a lamp, his shadow jumped on a wall crooked and threatening.

It was always a relief, this moment of returning home, of settling back into himself after a day at work in his studio. An hour later, Dominique walked in wearing a woollen cloche hat. It was a crimson hat that she often wore in winter, its colour a cry of protest in the grey Berlin streets. She pushed her hair up beneath it and it kept her warm that way she said, because no cold air could sneak up inside it. She moved with the appearance of gliding. When he watched her he often had the sense that he was seeing something being performed only once that somehow, instead of seeing her move, he was watching her pass.
That night she cooked a Spanish omelette for dinner and it was large and yellow in the pan like the face of a sun and he prepared the salad, removing the outer leaves from the lettuce, dismantling the heart and chopping the vegetables into strips. Dom poured the wine into two glasses that were generous and big enough for soup.

The next day was Dom’s last day in Berlin before she left for Cologne for two weeks. It was school holidays in Germany and she was teaching contemporary dance to a group of thirty twelve year olds. He had seen her with her students and he admired the way she spoke to them, as though they were no less than her, that their love of dance made them equal.

Dom no longer danced professionally. They say a dancer dies two deaths and her first death occurred before they’d even met. He saw when she spoke about it, the wound it had caused inside her, the sadness she felt at never having quite got the break she wanted. An irreversible sadness clung to her when she spoke of the career that was now lost to her, but he admired her ability to speak so openly about failure.

He’d seen footage of her, a film made of her last solo performance for a small company in Hamburg. She moved on stage as though possessed of another force and, at that moment, she was preoccupied only with her movements. He sat close to the screen and watched her face, her eyes open and her face clouded, not with concentration, but with the effort of physical strain. He had seen the same look on her face when they were in bed together and he thought it looked like she was searching for something inside herself that was just beyond her grasp. He had watched that film more times than he could count. He couldn’t help but think that the dancer he saw was a different to the woman he loved, now her features bore the trace of a wound, the knowledge of defeat. He loved her because of rather than in spite of it. She had found the limit of her own ability, which most people would never have had the courage to reach.
That night, before he went to bed, he checked his email. It was compulsive, his need to know if someone had made contact with him. He had grown used to making himself available for work, because he could never be sure where his money would come from or if he would have enough of it. From exhibition to exhibition, he somehow managed to survive. But that night there were no emails about work.

Instead, there was a message from his old friend Stewart Carey. He saw the name and an old life beckoned him. Stewart and he had been at high school together and he was the only person from that former life who Andrew still kept in touch with. The subject read, About Kirsten. Those two words swirled around him. It was a name he had not thought about for what now felt like aeons. It belonged to a past life, a version of himself he thought he had long ago left behind.

Hi Andrew,

I’m not sure if you already heard, but just in case you haven’t, I thought you would want to know. Kirsten Rothwell’s gone missing. It’s been three weeks now. They found her car beside Lake George. Sorry to tell you this way, mate.

Stewart

Andrew read the message through three times. His eyes skipped over the words and perhaps he thought if he read them quickly, he could reduce their impact. But it was too late. Missing, he thought. What did that mean? Perhaps it meant she simply didn’t want to be found. With Kirsten, something like that always seemed possible. Maybe she had decided she needed some time away from the world. And yet, there was a finality to Stewart’s words, they said one thing, but suggested another. He had the feeling as he read through the words for the final time, of their immensity, as though they meant much more to him than he was currently able to grasp.

Kirsten was an old girlfriend of Andrew’s from Sydney. He stood from his chair and his heart was beating fast, throbbing in a strange rhythm. What was the meaning of this sudden message from his past? It pulled at him with a certain, irresistible tug.
‘Are you okay?’ Dom asked.
‘No, just give me a moment and I’ll be fine. I just got some bad news, that’s all.’
‘What happened?’ Dom said, concerned. She looked up from the book she was reading.
He looked at her and he did not want to tell her.
‘I just. I got an email from Stewart,’ she took his hand as he spoke and he saw it was shaking. ‘A friend. An old friend of mine, who I knew at university. She’s missing.’
‘Oh no, that’s terrible.’
His first reaction to the news wasn’t even one of sadness, but of shock.
He walked to the kitchen and poured himself a glass of water, which he drank in a few, quick gulps.
‘What happened?’ she asked. Dom was looking at him with clear eyes, willing to absorb some of the hurt he felt.
‘I don’t know, exactly. Stewart didn’t say much.’ He looked at his watch.
‘Just that she’s been missing now for three weeks.’
On the opposite wall of his apartment, he’d pinned up an unframed photo he’d taken a few weeks before, the face of a young boy, looking up and smiling with his eyes closed. It was for an upcoming exhibition he was preparing for, in London, scheduled for March. It was an important exhibition for him, his first solo show in London and he was running out of time to prepare new work. He hadn’t been able to think of a title for that image, but sitting there, the words Smiling Alone occurred to him. He’d asked the boy to smile that way, with his teeth visible, but sitting there with this new information yet to settle inside him, it looked suddenly terrifying. It was something about his teeth, his second teeth had just come through and they were still jagged and yet to be worn down to a smooth edge.
‘Were you close to this woman?’ Dom asked. She ran a finger along his cheek in an upwards stroke. Her face was close to his and open to whatever his answer might be.
'We were, I suppose, while I was at art college. I suppose that is a long time ago now.' He didn't want to disclose to Dom that he had once loved this woman or that it had ended badly. He didn’t want her to think any less of him.

The next morning was a Sunday and they woke slowly, waking and sleeping and waking again. They had bought the sheets the week before that were stiff and folded around their bodies in pleats. Dom slipped out of bed first and made them coffee on the stove with the small espresso jug that fizzled as the water percolated. He watched her against the background of their kitchen, the white glow of the cupboards on her face. On her way back to bed, she walked across the floorboards that gave under her feet, small clicks, the friction of wood against wood. She walked with her feet turned out and he loved this fact that dancing had permanently shaped her.

Her body was sinuous and firm, still refusing to relinquish the strength it no longer needed for dancing. Her breasts were the only part of her that was soft, her nipples large and mauve on her brown skin. She had shown him how she used to have to strap them to her body when she danced. Along her arms and shoulders, a dusting of freckles dispersed across her skin like a bird’s egg.

She stretched on the floor while he drank his coffee in bed; she could still lay her body along her legs easily, taking her feet and folding herself in half like a soft doll. In the middle of winter she cursed when her muscles contracted and she couldn’t sit on the ground in the splits.

Watching her, he understood; was it for the first time? Or did the realisation grow, coming to him gradually, the words repeated in his head until it slowly became something he knew? She was the only person he had loved in his life without feeling that he was also losing part of himself. He couldn’t bear what some women had wanted of him, to share every single thought. When he allowed his mind to drift to Kirsten, those
thoughts disturbed him. For the moment, he didn’t want to think about it. He wanted to enjoy his last day with Dom. She came back to bed and spooned him, her skin cold against his warmth. She had done this often at night when he laid awake worrying, which was often, lately. In the early hours of the morning, she’d woken with him, drunk chamomile tea and shared his concerns. He was thirty-seven and his existence was still precarious; he lived from exhibition to exhibition. The basic anxiety of whether he would make enough money to live was constant. Those nights he couldn’t sleep, Dom talked to him through his fears, mostly she told him, no matter what, they would find a way through. She consoled him and his doubts and in that way she was more generous to him than he’d ever been to himself.

Lately, the upcoming show in London had caused him many sleepless nights. He still needed one more photograph, one more image that would make people notice, that would bring him the important acquisition of his work he needed. So badly, he wanted this exhibition to be a success that he thought it was doomed to end in failure. Things had gone badly before. He’d had exhibitions in which he hadn’t sold a single print. But if this show went badly, he would have to reckon with failure at a whole new level. London was an important market and this was his first real opening into it, after almost a decade of trying.

Andrew rolled over and he was so close to Dom’s face that he could see the freckles on her nose, diffuse and delicate, although her skin was dark. Her father, who he’d met many times, had immigrated to Germany from Ghana before she was born, although her mother was born in Bremen and her skin was a bluish white.

He pulled the sheet up over them as they laid together and the light around them was gauzy and white.

‘Did you sleep okay, last night?’ she asked, looking up at him. His arms were around, one under her neck. Her body flush against his.

‘Okay,’ he said.

‘You got up, at one point and turned on the light?’
He nodded. ‘Yes, I just couldn’t switch my mind off.’ The truth was he was thinking of Kirsten. He was fighting off memories, events from the past that had no place, here, in his life with Dom. But the more he tried not to think of those memories, the more they kept arriving. There was something about his relationship with Kirsten that had always felt unresolved. It hadn’t ended well and since they’d broken up, Kirsten had seemed increasingly troubled. Sometimes he thought he was what had caused it.

‘I didn’t wake you, did I?’ he asked. The unique discomfort of an insomniac’s broken sleep was something he wished he could shield Dom from.

‘No. I knew you woke up, but I went back to sleep again. Was it about the exhibition in London, again?’

But this time it wasn’t about London. ‘No, it was about the friend from Sydney who went missing. There was something about Stewart’s email that made me think it must be very serious. I don’t think he’d bother to contact me otherwise. Sorry for waking you.’

‘Don’t be sorry,’ she said and she wriggled back away from him, to give him a new perspective of her face, as though this distance would help him see how much she empathised with his concerns.

For so many years in his life, he’d only had to worry about disappointing himself, but now if things went wrong he felt he would let her down too. With Dom in his life, the stakes were much higher than they’d been when he was alone. Maybe he felt he could only expect her to love him when things were going well.

They rose and slipped into their jeans and took their heavy coats from the hangers. The fabric of his coat was stiff from being worn for too many winters and the material hung heavily from his body like the skin of a bear. They walked with their hands clasped to the café around the corner and slipped onto a bench seat, sitting side by side, thighs pressed against each other’s. Over breakfast they hardly spoke. Their best exchanges, he often thought were wordless, when all they shared between them was a
mood. Dom sat, absorbed in Die Welt, while he flicked through Der Spiegel, seeking out the few articles in English. He ordered muesli and it arrived with gooseberries on top and they burst between his teeth, their flavour bright and unusual.

Afterwards, they walked through Mitte together, down Alte Schönhauseallee, moving in and out of shops, the same shops they always went into, a path they often took, following a set of footprints they had laid many times before. This area had become familiar to him now, its streets and lanes and he walked through it with the feeling that he was somewhere he belonged. It was winter and the days had become thin and shadowy. At this time of year in Berlin, people stopped lingering, they moved briskly through streets, in a hurry to find themselves somewhere warm again.

That night they went to an exhibition opening of a friend of his and outside the cold had turned sharp. The severity of the change was always a shock, but they had been winding down towards it for months, a long dark tunnel of black nights and scantily lit days. They took the U-Bahn to Rosa Luxemberg Platz. Outside, they walked past the Volksbühne theatre and the Babylon cinema and waited on the street to be buzzed inside the gallery. He looked down through the lower window and saw people already milling in the basement. The light was orange and sparse, as though the room was lit by embers. Berlin was a place in which you needed to know the right doors to pass through and it came as a sudden surprise, standing there, to find himself in a position of knowledge.

Inside the gallery, Dom stood in front of him with her back pressed against his chest. The colour was the first thing about the paintings that he noticed, thick reds, oranges and browns, autumnal colours across the canvas, warm but with the sense of approaching darkness. The images started to take shape, landscapes, loosely formed hills and trees and the colours made them look burnt. The scenes of a world that was ending.
They moved between the canvasses and other people in the gallery turned and looked towards them and for a moment he wondered if they were doing something wrong, like standing too close to the work, or moving against the current of people. It took him some time to understand that there was a sort of jealousy about their gaze, that Dom and he shared something between them that these people actually envied. There are those occasional moments, when you love someone and you are aware of it and he stood in that room, feeling that small, bright miracle taking place between them.

But that feeling only lasted until their friends arrived and the awareness then passed, moving off behind him and into his wake. They stayed and drank and talked with friends and there was a simplicity to their conversation, a warmth and an ease. They were people Dom knew or who had a studio in the same building as his and who, over the years, he’d gradually come to know. Amongst their group of friends, no-one felt they needed to say anything complicated or profound. They spoke of things they had spoken of before and would speak of again, of that which was familiar to them and they knew they were able to share.

When they left that night a rain had started, icy wet drops that weren’t quite snow. The weather was unseasonable; in January the snow fell easily or it was too cold to snow at all. That night, it fell on the ground around them with a lisp, *thsst, thsst, thsst*. Later that night in bed they slept naked together, sharing the warmth of their bodies against the chill of winter that was slipping inside the gaps in the blankets around them.

The next morning, he drove Dom to Hauptbahnhof in the old car she’d had since she was twenty five. It was a small car and they sat in the front seats with their knees pressed up against the dashboard. They drove quietly together. In these moments after waking, his thoughts took some time to catch up to his movements. And when they began that morning, they were falling in two places, where he was with Dom, and on the news he had received about Kirsten.
It was 7am and Berlin was still dark, the streets mostly empty. They drove down Karl-Marx-Allee, where the buildings were grand and tiered like layer cakes. Most of Berlin was built too close to the ground from functional, sturdy structures and humble somehow. It was a city rebuilt from its ruins and it refused now to tower or impose. Physically, he was still with Dom, but his mind was racing off with the memory of Kirsten. He needed to be alone to process the information he’d received about her, to try to understand what it meant to him. They’d found her car beside Lake George. Stewart’s words were opaque, hiding something that was larger and much darker. He didn’t park at the train station, but dropped Dom at the entrance. She leant across to kiss him and her mouth was warm on his. Her warmth brought him back to where he was, with her. ‘The next two weeks will be a bit busy, but I’ll call you whenever I can,’ she said, extracting herself from the small car. He drove away and watched her in the rear view mirror as she wheeled her bag into the station, until she got smaller and he turned out onto the autobahn and could see her no longer.

He drove straight to his studio in Mitte and the large room was still and cold. He turned on the heating and sat down with his back against the wall, listening to the trickle of oil. He stayed there for what must have been an hour, thinking about his home. Sydney was the city he was born in and he had lived there for most of his life, but he hadn’t been back to visit in almost two years and he hadn’t seen his mother in as long. It was a city that belonged to a different era of his life, a period of struggle and hardship, when his existence had been a constant fight. It was a period of his life characterised more by failure than by success, when he woke up each morning and what he said to himself in order to get through the day were two small words, *keep going*. Those were the words he repeated to himself in the face of every adversity, of failures and set backs that would have caused most people to give up.
Sometimes, he had thought he would never go back, now that he had found a place here in Berlin, with Dom. But after hearing about Kirsten, the idea of Sydney had a pull to it, his thoughts dragged towards it. Around him, his studio looked temporary, furnished only with what was necessary. He had lived his life this way, lean and limited and without complication in order to do what he did with his life. He had taken the lease over two years ago from a Canadian painter who had moved back to Montreal.

There were only a few personal items that he identified as his: an old aluminium lamp that he’d bought second hand at a market and used now, as a reading lamp. On the bench near the sink was a coffee grinder he found in an antique store in Charlottenberg one afternoon, while he was waiting for Dom to finish teaching a dance class. The pale wooden box was stained in places from ground coffee and it had a metal handle that wound around on top, grinding the beans as it twirled. And then there was the old Minolta he’d been given for his tenth birthday, the first camera he had ever owned that sat on the shelf, the lens cap lost, its eye now permanently open. He took that camera with him wherever he went, although it was old, scratched and dented and no longer of any real use to him, not for the type of photographs he took now. It took the world and flattened it, in its lens the world lost its depth. He kept it only because it reminded him of the things in life he wanted to hold onto, of the camera’s ability to take the world, collect its images and store them securely in its black and airless cavity.

He wanted to understand what had happened to Kirsten and it slowly occurred to him that he might have to return to Sydney to find out. Kirsten was a woman who, since he had known her had a flicker of panic in her eyes, the look of a person caught in a rip. This was where her life was leading, something had carried her towards this fate.

He couldn’t do any work that day, he was too distracted by his thoughts about Kirsten. Around lunch-time, when he was still in the studio but
had managed to achieve nothing, he decided he had fly back to Sydney. He could leave that day and be back again by the time Dom had returned from Cologne. The more he thought about it, he realised that the timing was actually ideal.

He left that afternoon, after packing a small suitcase with clothes. At the airport, while he was waiting at the gate for his flight to be called, he tried to call Dom’s mobile number, but the call went straight through to voicemail. He looked at his watch, it was late in the afternoon. He supposed she would already be with her class. The message bank beeped and he opened his mouth and then closed it again. But he said nothing and hung up and wondered later, how Dom would react when she heard this empty message on her phone. He thought of her, pressing the phone to her ear and hearing nothing but static, like the sound inside a shell.
Inside the aeroplane, he had no awareness of movement. With the shutters down and the lights dimmed, the plane felt still, as though suspended from a cord, mid-air, like a mobile above a child’s bed. Time was distorted around him. He slept deeply most of the way to Sydney and woke before they landed to find his breakfast laid out on the tray in front of him, sealed in plastic and foil. He had used his points to buy the flight, which meant a four-hour stop over in Bangkok between connecting flights, during which he’d managed a snatched conversation with Dom. He told her he’d be back in Berlin the day after her. Why was he going, she asked him, had this woman been important to him. He said that she wasn’t. That couldn’t really explain it, he just needed to understand what had happened to her. He told Dom he loved her.

When the plane landed in Sydney, he shuffled along behind the other passengers. There was a precariousness to the way he moved, hobbling along the concourse, teetering forward as he took the escalator down to the baggage hall. After so long on board the plane, sleeping and flying against time, it took him a while to become aware of his own edges again. Around him, the world looked colourless, bleached by the lights overhead like an old television set in which the colours aren’t quite right. After being out of the country for so long, hearing the Australian accent again made him bristle, the way the voices floated, uninvited into his head. The conversation behind him of the two women discussing
whether or not to go back and buy another bottle of duty free vodka and the man beside him asking the customs officer whether he should declare the chocolate he’d bought back with him from Switzerland. People became an amplified version of themselves when they travelled, their good and bad qualities turned up a few notches. He didn’t want to hear those conversations, he wanted to continue on with only his own thoughts to occupy him. He reached the taxi and barely helped the driver lift his suitcase into the boot, just held his hand on it, guiding it over the bumper bar. Inside, talk back radio blared from the front, the honeyed tones of a voice that seemed to be attempting to coax the world into outrage. Even if he’d wanted to, he couldn’t have mustered the energy for outrage just then. ‘Leichhardt please,’ he said as the car bumped over the speed hump and turned a corner to drive out of the airport. The taxi driver said something and looked around at him in the rear view mirror, his eyebrows one black and intent line. ‘Pardon?’ he leaned forward, starting to feel sick with the jerky movement of the cab changing lanes and stopping at the lights. Something about a toll. ‘Yes, yes,’ he said and waved his hand. ‘That’s fine.’

Along the expressway, the nature strips divided the lanes of traffic in two. Gymea lilies, their flowers already black sat like ravaged nests on stilts and the Kangaroo paws had turned dirty orange from exhaust fumes. Along the expressway, houses backed directly onto the road and through breaks in fences he caught glimpses of yards and swimming pools, small and private viewings into other people’s lives.

As they drove into the city, in the late January light, everything around him looked unreal. The light was different here to what it was in Europe, brighter, sharper and somehow crueler. He hadn’t prepared himself for it.
Along his mother’s fence hydrangeas had bloomed in purples, round heads like old women’s swimming caps. The first sound he heard after he knocked on the door was the squelch of her rubber-soled shoes on the wooden floor. Since he could remember his mother had worn flat shoes, like most nurses.

‘Andy,’ she said and walked straight into him, closing her arms around him. She was the only person who continued to call him by that name. He wasn’t sure, exactly, when most people stopped calling him that and started, instead, to call him ‘Andrew’. It had happened gradually, the further away he travelled from childhood, as though the innocence he had once had about him had thinned and faded and was now finally lost.

He rested a cheek on her head. She still used the same shampoo, that smelt of geraniums. When she let go, she took a step back and held his shoulders.

‘What happened? Why are you home so suddenly?’

His mother went through her life, always assuming the worst. He knew why this was. Although she had never acknowledged it, part of him knew his mother would always worry about him. What she worried about most was that he would die young, as his father had, that the greatest fear she lived with was outliving him.

A patch of hair near her temple had turned completely white, although the rest of her hair had remained dark like his. He’d only had time to send her a quick email before he left Berlin. Don’t worry about collecting me from the airport, he’d written, though he knew she wouldn’t. She hardly drove anywhere, anymore. She hadn’t been into the city in years. She walked from her house in Leichhardt to the hospital where she worked and if she ever had to go somewhere, she usually caught a bus. Leichhardt had become like a small town to her.

At one level, he couldn’t understand why she didn’t take advantage of the fact she lived in Sydney. If she wanted to live quietly why she didn’t move away somewhere coastal, or to the mountains where her sister lived. But part of him knew exactly why she stayed. Living in the same
house for so many years had always been about holding onto the memories of his father.

Andrew was twelve when his father died. That day, he came home from school to a silent house for the first time he could remember. All he could hear, as he opened the door and walked carefully down the hall were echoes of his own movements. Even before he was told he knew in that silence that something was irreversibly lost.

His mother had never told him how his father died, she sunk the knowledge inside of her like a stone in a well. As a child he kept thinking that one day, she would sit him down and explain everything. This was what he thought, until after the funeral and then a year had passed and another year. And he was never told a thing about it. The two facts he had heard were gleaned by him from overheard telephone conversations, were the words ‘collapsed’ and ‘the garden’. Those were the two sole details he knew about his father’s death. As a child, he’d never dared to ask, until not knowing about it seemed normal.

His mind, though, had filled in the blanks. The absences in his knowledge were transformed into pictures, a sequence of images that ran together in his head. He replayed those scenes so often they had become as familiar as something he’d witnessed for himself. His father must have come home early that afternoon to work on his vegetable garden. In his mind, his father stood, teetered among the tomato vines and collapsed like Marlon Brando in The Godfather.

His mother made him a pot of tea in the same striped teapot she’d always used, but the pattern was more faded each time he sat down to drink from it. He’d once bought her back a new teapot, a hand painted blue and white teapot from Delft, the porcelain so fine it felt soft in his hands like ivory. His mother used the things she owned until they had served their purpose. This was what losing someone you loved did to a person, it made it difficult for that person, in every other respect, to let go of
things. She would probably be serving tea from that teapot until the day it broke apart in her hands.

‘How’s Dom?’ she said, sliding onto the stool beside him. His mother’s movements had become smaller and more lateral as she’d aged.

‘She’s fine, mum,’ he said, not quite meeting her gaze.

‘So everything’s okay then?’ his mother asked again, her voice was awkward, like someone who is aware they are asking for too much. His eyes burnt from jet lag and his body craved sleep.

‘Yes, mum. There’s nothing wrong. I just had to come back, that’s all. I had to see to a few things back here before my exhibition in March. It has nothing to do with Dom and I,’ he said, with a hint of weariness.

His mother wanted news about Dom. She wanted him to reveal some small gap she could poke her hands through and prize open. His mother had never met Dom and he tried not to speak about her. It was one thing he had created in his life that he had managed to keep separate from her. He wanted to hold on to that.

He couldn’t bring himself to speak to her about Kirsten straight away. His mother was a person to whom he felt he could not mention death without reminding her of the death that had defined their lives.

She sighed heavily. ‘How long will you be here for?’

‘Just a week or two. Is that okay with you?’

‘Of course,’ she said.

He arranged to meet Stewart the following night at the Nag’s Head in Glebe, the pub they used to drink at when they were students, on the nights they had enough money to buy beer. If he had someone he could call a best friend, a friend who had travelled with him for life, Stewart was the closest thing he had to it, though they saw each other infrequently now. He tried to see Stewart whenever he was back in Sydney, it was the one thing he always did, even when he had very little time. Their lives had run at parallels and seeing Stewart each time he returned had become a way of somehow measuring himself.
When they were still at school, Stewart had lived on the other side of Norton Street in Petersham and, in their first few years of high school, they spent most afternoons together, until Andrew discovered photography and it changed the way he related to the people around him, it required some distance. Stewart was his only real friend from that former life, the time when he was still a young man, in which his life might have gone in any direction.

He walked in through the front bar, passed the sound of glasses shuddering together as the barman shunted a tray of schooners onto a stack and took a seat at a small table near the beer garden. On the wall above the table was a picture of an English hunting scene, of men riding horses in red coats with beagles trailing at their heels. Ahead of them, foxes ran with their heads turned back towards their pursuers, gaunt flashes of red, the whites of their eyes already holding an awareness of their fate.

Stewart walked in, wearing a business shirt with his top button undone and a tie dangling from his left pocket. Since he’d left university, Stewart looked to be permanently straining, the muscles around his neck were thick, giving him a top heavy appearance and he walked with his head down, as though looking down from the brink of some ledge. Stewart lifted his satchel bag over his shoulder and they hugged the way two men hug, with their chests together and their hips apart, patting each other forcefully on the back.

‘I wasn’t expecting you to come home so soon,’ Stewart said, when he came back to their table with two beers.

‘No, I just felt I had to. After I read your email.’

He had expected it to be this way, that the two of them would dance around the information Stewart had told him, that they would circle it until they could bring themselves to speak about it directly.

In the years since he’d known him, Stewart had turned slowly and prematurely grey, the head of an ageing man on the face of one who was relatively young. ‘How was the wedding?’ he asked without meeting
Stewart’s gaze. It had been six months since Stewart’s wedding and he had not flown back for it. Instead he’d sent an email apologising. *Break a leg*, he’d said in that email, as though the whole thing were a performance put on for his family and friends.

‘Oh great, man. It was just a big party. You know, an *expensive* party,’ he said and laughed. ‘It would have been great if you could have made it,’ Stewart said, looking up from his beer and wondered whether Stewart wanted a better explanation than the one he’d been given at the time.

‘And how’s…your wife?’ he couldn’t believe it, as the sentence left his mouth, he couldn’t recall her name, although he knew it; he’d known her since they were both teenagers.

There was a part of him. Some pocket deep inside him that envied people like Stewart, people who had fallen in love young and who’d given up other things in their lives in order to remain that way. Until he’d met Dom, he often wondered what it was about him that made him so bound up in himself.

‘Louise is great. You know, we’ve been together forever, so nothing really changed for us, but we bought a house in Stanmore.’

This was what happened to people like Stewart and Louise, their lives followed a certain pattern and it never deviated from the path other people expected them to take. There was a feeling that often took hold of him when Stewart and he were together now, that their lives had veered too far apart and what they were doing, with these dinners and drinks they shared, was trying to restore something that they’d already lost.

‘Good for you. Property is so expensive here. It would be much cheaper to buy something in Berlin. Dom and I are thinking about it.’

‘Really?’ Stewart’s eyes were alight at the mention of Berlin.

‘You don’t find the language a barrier?’

‘Oh no, not really. I know enough to get by.’ Which was something approaching the truth. He knew the names of things, but he had never learnt how to fit the words together into sentences and the truth was that being around Dom had made him lazy about learning it. When he was
alone, he moved through the city, pointing to what he wanted at shops and speaking in nouns and he didn’t mind not understanding the things being said around him. It afforded him a quietness in which he could be alone with his thoughts.

‘Do you think you’ll ever come back here permanently?’ Stewart asked, with an inflection, his voice scooting suddenly higher, wanting some sort of reassurance from him. He shook his head and watched the disappointment trickle through Stewart’s expression.

‘Well, I guess you can’t really with Dom, can you?’ He nodded an agreement and stroked his wet glass with his finger.

Stewart looked down and then back up again and there was a looseness to his expression, the face of a person who has information they are not quite sure how to share.

‘Have you heard any more about Kirsten since you got back?’ Stewart said softly, looking into his beer. There was a single line of bubbles floating to the surface.

‘No, I didn’t hear any more. I came straight back after I got your email,’ he said, wearily, not sure in the fug of his jet lag and now that he was all the way back here that he actually wanted to hear anything more about it. He felt himself recoiling in anticipation of more details.

Stewart leaned forward, bent over his beer, as though the words he spoke were very heavy and had dragged him there. ‘They stopped the search. For the body. Last week,’ he looked to be on the verge of tears. ‘Louise found out from Kirsten’s mother that there will be a service this Friday.’

‘The body?’ Stewart nodded. ‘Your mum didn’t hear anything about it? It was reported on the a few weeks back, as a suspected drowning in Lake George.’

‘Drowning?’ he said, distantly. ‘My mum doesn’t watch much television anymore.’ And he hadn’t told her, reverting to the familiar instinct he’d always had to protect his mother from the things that might upset her.
'So, she drowned?' he asked. He could hardly open his mouth around the word.

Stewart nodded his head, sadly. ‘They think so. Louise is going to the service. I will if I can,’ he said. ‘It’s just there’s something on at work this Friday. I’m not sure if I can get out of it,’ trying to offer Andrew more of an explanation with the movement of his hands.

‘Had you seen her? Did Louise and Kirsten keep in touch?’

Stewart licked his lips. ‘Louise tried, I think. She always made an effort. But they hadn’t seen each other in years. Sometimes Louise would organise something, but Kirsten always pulled out.’

He stood to go to the toilet and a space seemed to have opened at his feet, like a rupture in the earth’s crust. Around him, this old place was the same as it had always been, but his world had now changed. A part of it that had once meant something to him, a slice of his own personal history was now missing.

When he thought about Kirsten, what he thought of most were her silences. She was a woman who was always on the verge of speaking, of looking away and back towards him with the sense that there was something important she had to say to him. Her silences were intoxicating, there was some promise held inside them, that one day he might know what they kept hidden. But whatever it was she harboured inside her, their relationship had ended before he had discovered.

He still thought about her in the years since they parted. Sometimes he went through phases where he still thought about her every day. It was the sort of love, the way it can only ever be with first loves that was like falling, spreading his arms wide and allowing himself to dive, as though there was a pool of water waiting to break his fall. It was young love, the love you can only ever have when you are still finding yourself. He found himself thinking, in his young mind this is it. He tried to make himself believe those small words, but that sensation lasted only a short time. He loved her as best he could in that clumsy, incomplete way.
people do when they are too young to surrender themselves to another person. But he started to feel she needed more from him than he was able to give her. The day they broke up, the feeling he had was not one of sadness, but one of overwhelming relief, the sudden lightness of having dropped a weight. Sometimes, though, he thought he still loved her; other times he thought he loved the memory of her more than he even missed the relationship itself.

Later, when he came home from the pub, the house was still and his mother was already asleep in bed. As a shift worker, she had always taken her sleep when she needed it and he had learnt to be quiet and alone from a young age. He turned on his laptop and sat it on his lap, the spool of the hard drive whirred against his knees. Newspaper articles about Kirsten were what he went in search of, but this particular thing that had happened to the woman he once loved was described by the papers in ambiguous and inconclusive terms. A photograph in one article of Lake George, its surface mirrored, like a puddle of mercury that had settled on grass. The silvery stretch of water reflected the world the wrong way up. The abandoned car left beside the lake, cordoned off by yellow police tape. All these articles about Kirsten. Was this what she wanted, the world to pay attention to her? Maybe after years of silence, this had been her final scream. There was a quote from a man who had been there picnicking with his family and had seen her sitting in the car. He spoke about the glimpse the man had caught of her walking out through the vapoury haze towards the lake. At the time of the article, they were still in search of the body. These mysterious details of Kirsten’s death, the facts that didn’t tell any coherent story yet.

He turned off the computer and as it slowed and wheezed itself to sleep, he thought about what it would be like to disappear. To leave the past behind, to walk away from it and all the ways in which it tarnished you
and held you back. All you would have then, was a future. But fairly soon the future would become the past and like all things it too would eventually lose its lustre.

That night he spoke to Dom.
‘How are the kids? Sick of them yet?’
‘Of course I’m not. They’re wonderful. They try so hard, but I worry some of them try too hard. They want to grow up to be dancers. All of them. And all I want to do is to tell them how difficult it is, about the injuries and the hours and hours of practice, but of course, I can’t spoil their dreams. That would be too cruel.’
Dom always felt this sadness for the children she taught as though, in them what she saw was the girl she had once been, young and supple and too full of optimism.
Somehow in her own dancing career, she had always been on the verge of getting her big break, but it had never quite come about. And then she found herself at thirty-five, dancing as an extra in the stage show of The Lion King and she knew that it was too late. Her life would not be remembered for her dancing.
‘How is your mother?’ she said to him and he could tell that she was lying on her back because her voice was caught in her throat.
‘Not too bad. She’s glad to see me, I think,’ he said. ‘But I haven’t actually told her why I’m back yet.’
‘You haven’t told her?’
‘I guess I just don’t want to upset her, she can be a bit fragile sometimes.’
Dom laughed. ‘God, she probably thinks you’re back because we’re fighting or something. Say hello to her from me.’
They’d never met and he felt suddenly bad about it, wondering if she thought he’d purposely kept them apart.
The young wear their flaws easily

For a time they had been happy together. Kirsten, him, Louise and Stewart, the small group of them, their lives wound closely together. They studied at the same university, went out together and created a comfortable existence structured around the four of them. And he could see the future, their lives ahead of them as they grew old together, the dinners, the barbecues, the careers and families, stitching themselves into each other’s lives. It had given him a sort of comfort at the time, to have a future in which part of it, the people he would share it with at least, were known.

The day he met Kirsten there was a barbecue at Stewart’s house, on a bright spring Saturday that made everything appear new. Kirsten was a friend of Louise’s and what he had noticed about her was her smile. It was large and generous, so broad it seemed to be compensating for something. She was quick, stealthy, turning up at his elbow with a tray of meatballs and a jar of toothpicks in her spare hand. Her skin was white, and her hair a complete black that absorbed the sun’s light with a gleam. When she spoke, she spoke in runs of words, lodging them into the conversation between other people’s and looking upwards as she spoke, as though she was retrieving the words from somewhere over his head. Her voice had a lightness to it, so soft he sometimes missed the words she spoke. Even then he had the sense, in the way she seemed eager to please, to be liked by other people, that what she was hiding was a sort of emptiness inside her, a small black void. He knew something about that
feeling himself, he had realised that they were two people who had come
together because of what they both lacked.
At that time, he looked at Stewart and his relationship with Louise, the
warmth between them, sharing their lives, the comfort in certainty and it
was something he coveted for himself. And with Kirsten he thought he
had it. They fell inwards together. For almost two years, their existence
was a happy, domestic routine, they were creating a new life for
themselves, the buoyant existence of two people in love. The happiness
that for different reasons, neither of them had in their own homes.
It had been Kirsten who suggested they move in together. He’d always
had the feeling that her childhood had been troubled, although she had
never spoken of it to him and he had never invited her to speak of those
things. There was a stiffness about her when she spoke of her childhood
and a limitation to her words, her body became tense, her posture
cropped, fighting something inside her, perhaps an urge to let everything
out. She was always in such a hurry to move their relationship along, to
fortify their intimacy and make what they had into something
permanent, wanting to bind them together at an age when nothing is
fixed. She rushed to bring them together, to have them live in the same
apartment, to commit to him, the way people usually are when they are
in a hurry to leave something behind. He didn’t know about it then, that
there is a danger to going about life too fast.
He left his mother’s and moved in with Kirsten. It was only when he left
that environment that he understood the sadness that had clung to his
mother’s existence. He had lived with it for so long that he had stopped
noticing how it affected him, this sadness they both had, a thin white
membrane around them, sticky and wet as a caul. When he went back
home to visit her, he experienced a sudden claustrophobia. The unspoken
grief they both had for his father’s death had taken something from him.
As he had grown older he’d realised that the crucial ways that most
people built their lives out of sharing and friendship were more difficult
for him.
The love Kirsten and he had made in that time together was unlike anything he had experienced with anyone since. When they made love together, they seemed to be searching inside each other for something, as though they wanted to push each other’s flesh apart and crawl inside. They wanted what was beneath the skin they rubbed against each other’s, to forget their own surfaces. It became something dark and suffocating, an obsession and for a while nothing else in his life had the power over him that Kirsten had in bed.

There was a window in that apartment they shared, facing onto the street, where the streetlight thrummed its orange light into the darkness. Kirsten went and stood there, sometimes, naked. They couldn’t afford curtains on their windows and through the bare glass, the room permanently illuminated, even at night. He remembers that first time one morning when they woke together, the length of their bodies pressed against each other’s and he rolled over and kissed her breast. The skin on her nipples was fragile and whenever he touched it, he had the feeling that it could have been easily torn. She stood that morning, sitting and slipping her legs from the bed, walking to the window, exposing her naked body to the glass. She stood there and wanted the world to see her that way, to reveal herself to it in a way that, in conversations with people and in groups she felt herself unable to.

Then she turned towards him and he knew her well enough to know the look on her face said come. Her stomach was round and plump, womanly in this place on her body she seemed to carry all her weight. Her body bulged there, pushing the skin into a generous round shape, like a renaissance nude. She seemed hardly aware of it and it didn’t matter, to him or to her, because she was still young. He hadn’t known it then, the way the young wear their flaws so easily.

They made love by that window more times than he could count, him behind her and her looking out and there was something erotic to him about being inside her and being unable to see the expression on her face.
She stood and walked to the window, beckoning him to follow. Kirsten could always pick her moments, just when he found himself wondering, when he looked at her and felt a cool flicker of disdain and the shine of their relationship had worn away, she would walk to the window and reel him in. There was something about Kirsten that was like that, she wanted to reveal and she wanted to remain a mystery. She wanted the world to know her, but the urge that was stronger was the one that made her withhold. And it had stayed with her it seemed, until her death.

He had asked other women later, to stand the same way, beside a window, naked and to turn back to face him, in an effort to recreate the feeling it produced inside him, for her to be exposed but to be his. The slippery sensation it created in him was one of ownership and control. But it never produced the same urge inside him as it had with Kirsten. He had looked at those women, trying to feel something, but whatever he felt, it was always something less than desire. He even asked Dom once at the start of their relationship, when they were in his apartment with the window that faced onto the park.

‘Move over to the window,’ he’d said that day, when she slipped from bed naked, ready to stretch one morning. The windows in his apartment were large, European windows, designed to catch as much light as they could.

‘To the window?’ she said. Her face was still marked with the creases of her pillow. He nodded. ‘I’m naked and it’s cold,’ she said, gesturing at her body and laughing lightly at him. And with those words, she broke the spell. His relationship with Dom became something new; from that moment onwards he stopped looking behind him for love.

They day his relationship with Kirsten ended was a hot day. It was the dense sort of heat that causes only discomfort. He’d come home to their apartment one afternoon after a photo shoot, finishing the major project for his degree in fine arts. He was photographing a still life, an image of a delicate porcelain teacup that he had broken along one side and glued
back together again with araldite. It was a Wedgewood teacup he’d bought new at David Jones for far more money than he could afford at the time and he made the break carefully, one day, with a chisel and vice in the sculpture room at his art school. He was pleased with how neatly it had broken in two, there had always been the danger that it would shatter or that the break would not be clean.

He’d been at it for days trying to take the photograph, arranging the lights so they caught the fine break in the porcelain, using wire and tape to lever the light in different directions. He photographed it hundreds of times and when he had to take that many photographs of something, he had the feeling that he wasn’t recording it on film, but somehow destroying it. Eventually, he took the image he wanted, so that the crack in the china was only just visible, but the cup still looked delicate and whole.

Some people would look at that photo and see a beautiful piece of china and others would see only what was wrong with it. He was speaking to two audiences and every piece of art he had produced since spoke this way, with a forked tongue. These were the small ruptures that came over the years, to characterise his photographs.

Kirsten had deferred her university degree for a year and took a job in an office in the city. She seemed to derive a sort of pleasure from the routine, of waking up early each morning and preparing herself for the working day. He watched her sometimes, from bed, one eye open in the mornings, the way she eased herself into her skirt and slipped her legs into stockings. She had the look about her of performance, that she was acting out a role, like an actor who enters a stage and leaves their real selves in the wings. She took a year off to think things over. She wasn’t sure she was studying the right degree and she needed some time to make a decision, although she was already two years through her degree. It was almost as though she was afraid of reaching the end of it, because it would mean she would have to confront what came next; she would
have to take her art out into the world and allow herself to be judged for it.

That day, Kirsten had come home not long after he’d walked in. He was in the kitchen, drinking a glass of water. Outside, the clouds were dense in the sky, a dusty grey, the air still, a storm was about to break. He thought he heard a rumble from outside, but one so distant it might have been mistaken for a passing truck. She sat down on their couch.

‘I’m not feeling well,’ she said, leaning back on the lounge, holding the back of her hand to her forehead.

That was another thing about Kirsten, there was always something wrong with her. She never complained very strenuously and her words were always light, but almost always she had to tell him that in some small way she was ill. Sometimes it was her throat. At other times she had pains in her back. Once she even told him she thought the pain in her stomach might be an ulcer, that her father had once had a stomach ulcer and maybe she was getting one now too. In the end, he ignored it; it wasn’t that he didn’t care about her as much as he simply never knew what he could do or say to help her.

‘Oh yeah?’ he washed out the glass he’d been drinking from and started to dry it. The glass made a small squeak of protest against the moist tea towel.

‘I’ve got a sore throat. Do I feel hot to you?’

‘It’s a hot day,’ he said, still twisting the cloth inside the glass.

‘Yeah, but hot, like I’ve got a temperature.’ He put the glass in the cupboard and opened the fridge.

‘What do you feel like for dinner?’

‘Why do you always do that?’ she stood and walked towards him. ‘Whenever I’m feeling sick you just completely ignore me. It’s really inconsiderate.’ He didn’t say anything and Kirsten dropped her hands.

‘Don’t you care if I’m not well?’

‘Of course, I just,’ he said. A hot feeling crept up his windpipe.
Kirsten walked towards him. ‘What?’ she took his hand and held the back of it to her forehead. He could feel the warmth of her skin and retracted it quickly.

‘It’s just,’ he started to say again. But what could he say? How could he tell her that all these things that were wrong with her, what she needed from him, was just too much? He went to their bedroom.

Kirsten’s clothes were tossed across the bedroom floor. One shoe stuck out from underneath the bed, the bedclothes were crumpled and unmade and there was the smell of body odour in the room. He opened the windows to their bedroom, flicking the lock and pushing them up so quickly they screamed as they retracted. He started picking up clothes and throwing them into the dirty-clothes basket, surprised at how suddenly angry he was. And what he realised as he walked through their room, picking up stray items of clothing, was that what he wanted, more than to be loved by her, was to be alone again.

He didn’t do it straight away, though. He didn’t have the courage and instead he became quieter, withdrawing into himself until what they had was no longer a relationship, but two people who had the appearance of one, eating meals at the same table and sharing a bed, laying quietly together each night as though there were tombstones at their heads rather than pillows. Kirsten knew though, before he’d said a word, her expression around him became sore. When it came down to it, he found himself cowardly and wanting.

The day it happened, he came home late. Kirsten was in the kitchen and he stopped in the middle of the lounge room, standing there with his bag over one shoulder. She was still made up from work, with fissures in her lipstick and the residue of red. He hardly needed to say anything at all. It was the week after his final year show had opened and a gallery had contacted him to express an interest in representing him. He had an interview the following week and he spent the day assembling his portfolio. From then on he thought his life would follow the clear and
silver line of success and that everything that might hold him back from what he wanted would have to be cast aside.
He could remember very few of the words he actually used, but the ones he still remembers are, I can’t take you with me. They were words he thought about, that sounded reasonable to him, until they left his mouth and all he heard was their cruelty. After he delivered them Kirsten stood in the kitchen with her red mouth open, flaring like a wound.
Stewart gave him the details of the memorial service. It was being held at a Catholic church in Lavender Bay, on the other side of the harbour. He knew her mother was religious, but in their time together Kirsten and he had never been into a church and he’d never heard her speak of god. The church service was for her mother rather than for Kirsten herself. He arrived to the church in a taxi, late, and the service had already started. The church was dark inside and he stood in the aisle for a moment waiting for his eyes to adjust to the lack of light. He took a seat on the last pew, with several vacant rows in front of him. All he saw from where he sat were the backs of heads he didn’t recognise, all tilted slightly down. At the front of the church the minister read from a bible. He spoke in waves of words, dense language, spoken hundreds of times before, about people who were now buried in the earth. They were words that knew nothing of Kirsten, about the way she lived or died. Behind him, the stain glass windows glowed in greens and red. He scanned the bodies in front of him to see if he could see Stewart’s wife Louise, or if he might recognise Kirsten’s mother or stepfather who he’d only met once. What would he say to them, now? He was sorry for their loss? But they had been losing Kirsten for years, since he’d known her and probably before then. He hadn’t come here to express his condolences; he had come here to understand what had happened to her. To pick it apart and trace it and know exactly where things had gone
wrong. He felt he had to understand it in order to distance himself from it.

At the front of the church was the casket made from polished blond wood. The lilies on top were sullen and dark. The coffin must have been empty, though it looked gleaming and elaborate. He wondered what would happen, at the end of the service, whether they would pick up this weightless box and carry it down the aisle, going through those motions, pretending that this death was just like any other, although there were no bones to grieve over.

With a sudden spasm of memory, Andrew thought of his own father’s funeral. This was the first funeral he’d been to since; in his life he’d made excuses, he’d even told lies in order to avoid them. At his father’s funeral, he’d been a pallbearer and he’d carried his father’s coffin through the church as a twelve year old. He’d held the brass handles and helped carry it from the church. He remembered feeling the gaze of the whole church upon him, a congregation of white faces, walking unsteadily down the aisle and feeling as though he had to smile, that he was expected to look like he was coping and that by gritting his teeth and wishing for all this attention to be behind him, that he was letting his father down.

The only other coherent memory he had of that day was later when his father’s coffin was lowered into the ground. He remembered thinking how shiny the casket was, that it was such new wood and how strange it was that it would now be buried in dirt and whether it would stay that way, the wood pale and gleaming like a freshly varnished violin. He can’t even locate his mother in that memory, although she must have been there somewhere, stern, steely, fending off grief with her arms crossed below her chest.

He hadn’t thought about his father’s death now in years, though for a long time it was all he could think about, at school and when he was with his friends. He was constantly distracted by his thoughts, though nobody else seemed to notice this. At school, he became the boy who had lost his
father; his father’s death had defined him. It was a strange thing, to be
defined by a loss. He remembered looking at himself in his school
photographs and thinking how different he looked to his peers, that there
was an awareness about him that had not yet impressed itself on any of
his classmates. It was for that reason that he felt more comfortable alone
than he did with other people.

His father’s death divided his life neatly in half; the time before he knew
about death and afterwards.

Sitting at the back of the church, he sneezed without warning. Once,
twice, three times in succession. It must have been the dust in the hall. A
few people turned around and looked at him with dark eyes. He sat
completely still, but there was a tickle in his nose and he worried it might
happen again. The rest of the room stood to sing a hymn and he tripped
over the footrest in his hurry to exit the church with his fingers pinching
his nose to suppress another sneeze. The church organ sounded distant
and mournful, full of warm air. Outside the sunlight was brash, a heavy
light and a thick warm air that made movement difficult. He sat down on
a seat in the park nearby and stayed there for a moment with his head
between his knees. He loosened his tie and saw, behind him, the church
starting to empty, bodies spilling out onto the grass. He tried to identify
Kirsten’s parents amongst the bodies clad in funeral tones, blacks,
charcoals and greys. In the sunlight those colours gave the mourners a
definite shape. Their movements were slow with grief and respect. There
was a woman standing next to the minister and shaking people’s hands,
who might have been Kirsten’s mother, but from this distance he couldn’t
be sure. From where he stood she looked to be swaying on her feet,
swooning with emotion.

He looked at the people. Stewart’s wife would be there somewhere
amongst them, but she was the only person he would really know. If he
walked over he would stand there awkwardly, trying to find someone to
talk to him. A shadow fell on him. He’d had this experience often; it
seemed to follow him wherever he settled, him standing apart from a
larger group, unable to join in. The things that were so effortless to other people, always seemed more difficult for him.

He decided he would wait until the crowd had dispersed and then he would approach the figure he thought was Kirsten’s mother. He would explain who he was and that they had met before. Perhaps she would remember and be glad to see him there.

Between the buildings, he could see a thin sliver of the harbour and he sat and watched the windswept blue. That was something he missed when he was in Berlin; he never saw the sea. Sometimes, amongst that dense metropolis all he longed for was the definite blue of the ocean, something that helped him understand where he was in relation to other things.

Beneath his feet, the grass was worn, thin and balding; it hadn’t taken well to the clay soil. He looked up and a hearse drove by in front of him and when he turned back to the church, the people were gone, they were unlocking the doors of their cars and were following Kirsten’s body down the road towards the place she would be laid to rest. He found himself hoping she would be buried near water. He stood and watched the procession drive down the road and away from him.
Andrew woke early the next morning, stood and the wooden floor shifted beneath him. It was just before six and the light outside his window was sheer. He dressed into his jeans and a t-shirt and walked out to the lounge room. On the kitchen bench, petals slipped suddenly from the roses in the vase. Through the kitchen window, the shadows were narrow and long in the backyard, stretched geometric shapes that might have been cast by tall buildings. He loved this time of the day in Sydney, when the city was still quiet, hushed, he could almost pretend in those moments that he had it to himself. Later, when it awoke and its daily noises rose to a clamour, he was aware that he would have to complete for space and quiet with the city’s other inhabitants.

No matter how long he spent away from his mother’s house, he would always feel it was where he belonged. His body knew how to navigate its way through that house, he might have walked through its rooms asleep. In all the years he’d lived there, the space had been mapped out inside him and grafted onto his bones. Despite the elapse of time, this was the house his dreams inserted themselves into.

His camera was still inside its bag, on top of his suitcase. He remained aware that photography was what formed the bridge between his old life and his new one. It connected what he had been to what he had now become. When he took photography as a subject at high school, photographs were still taken on film and he preferred that to the way he worked now. He loved the smell of film, the feeling of the emulsion on
his fingers, that it was actually something that could be held, rather than an amount of data that could be measured in bytes. Digital photography had made things easier and less messy, it had made the whole process quicker and more efficient, but he couldn’t help but think that some of its mystery had been lost.

At high school, the dark-room was his domain. His teacher had given him the key and nobody but him went there outside class. It was downstairs in the basement and he had always liked descending those stairs, knowing that he was entering a space in which all the rules were known to him. They only ever printed in black and white at school, but somehow he enjoyed the limitation of it, he liked the way it took everything in the world that was bright and alive and reduced it to something less. He loved the warm chemical baths that he submerged his photos in, they smelt personal to him, like bodily fluids. There was always the moment of anticipation when the pictures started to emerge evenly, poured across the paper. He sometimes wished he could prolong that moment, the instant before the image was set, before he knew whether what had been recorded on paper had lived up to the idea he had had for it.

Afterwards, he hung the photos up with pegs, like socks on a clothesline. He sometimes wished that his life had remained that simple, that he could spend hours alone in the darkroom, away from other people and emerge blinking, into the sunlight, more sure of himself and better able to face the world. He’d never lost the need he had to remove himself from the world in order to understand it.

In his last years of high school, he became known as a photographer and those years had shaped him, formed his identity; laid down inside him like sedimentary rocks. He took and developed all the photos for his yearbook. His last year of high school was spent mostly in the dark-room, sinking photographic paper into fluid and he already understood at seventeen, that people looked at him differently when he was behind a camera, as though he was able to take something from them. Perhaps
he’d become a photographer because he never wanted to relinquish that feeling, the power it gave him, the sense of the importance of his task. Later, he went to art school and he sharpened himself on learning his craft, becoming lean and serious about photography, like an athlete, he became efficient at just that one thing; it had become the only thing he could do well. By pursuing it so exclusively, he had eliminated any other possibility for himself.

He walked down the back steps outside into his mother’s yard and the cold air pricked his skin. He usually avoided coming out here. This was where his father had died and, from the age of fifteen until he left home, he spent most of his time indoors. He wasn’t superstitious. He didn’t believe in ghosts. He’d had to contemplate death from a young age and he knew that there was nothing left after death that with it, a person slipped beneath the surface of a vast black sea and were gone. It wasn’t his father’s ghost that had done the haunting, but his own memories of him. When he was younger he’d wished that since his father was gone, his memories of his father would leave him too. At that age it seemed unfair, even cruel that his father could be dead, but the memories remained as though his father still lived. He wanted to push the memories aside, to expel them, to sink them into the same unreachable place his father now laid.

The vegetable patch took up almost half the yard and the plants had grown larger than he remembered them, a knotted mass growing into one another, tangles of tomatoes and a pumpkin vine crept across the yard towards the garden shed in search of new territory. He pushed his way through the aisle between the rows, the wet leaves brushed against his legs as he passed through. Hidden between the leaves of one plant was the curved shape of an eggplant, its skin secretive and dark. Along the back fence the old passionfruit clung to the palings, green fruit tugged at the vine and the flowers were delicate tendrils of white and purple, concentric circles, like pretty eyes that shifted in the breeze.
'Andrew?' His mother’s voice behind him. He climbed down the fence with the same sick feeling he’d had when she used to catch him up there eating passionfruit as a boy. Parents never lost their power to make their children feel small.

‘I made us a pot of coffee,’ she said from the back veranda, standing in her dressing gown. Dressed that way she looked small and frail, depleted as she’d aged. He walked up to the back steps, went inside and stood on the other side of the kitchen bench as his mother finished preparing their breakfast. The kitchen cupboards were painted a shiny lime green and the drawers were wooden without rails to slide in and out on and jammed halfway, having to be eased in and out with a wriggle.

‘Oh, I forgot. This came for you,’ his mother said, pushing an envelope addressed to him across the bench. Normally, she sent anything that came in the post for him over to Berlin. This letter was clean and white and bore all the markings of a bill. But when he opened it, it was a letter from the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney advising him in very formal terms, that two of his photographs would be included in an exhibition that was opening in February. He was invited to the opening. They had acquired two of his photographs several years ago, but there had been no interest from then in his work since. He wouldn’t be here anyway by next month, he would be back in Berlin with Dom. He wondered if he should tell his mother to go in his place, but he knew she wouldn’t. Like him, his mother always felt uncomfortable in a crowd.

The electric stove in the kitchen was old, the hot element glowed in a coil of red. Steam from the saucepan had misted the kitchen windows. She turned the stove off and lifted the pan into the kitchen sink. She’d made him hard boiled eggs and toast, the meal she’d often made for breakfast for him as a boy a nurse’s meal, quick, easy and nourishing.

‘How’s work?’ he asked

‘Oh, I only work a few shifts at the hospital now. I’m just waiting until I can get my superannuation. And I think it’s good at my age, to keep your brain occupied. Although the work is draining, being on my feet all day.
Maybe I’d be better off working in administration, but making a change at my age seems like too much effort.’

‘But you’re good at what you do.’ His instant reaction was to defend her from herself.

‘I’ve done it now for thirty years, I hope so.’

His mother had not remarried. When he was a teenager, there had been occasional nights when his mother went out and he always understood where she was going, because she wore pearls and pressed her lips together to even out her lipstick before she walked out the front door those small, anxious movements that disclosed her nerves. He spent those nights with a babysitter, always nursing a stomach-ache, although his mother never spoke of where she’d been to him. He heard her say once, a day after she’d been out, talking to her sister on the telephone while he was supposed to be in his bedroom doing homework. He stood at the door to his room, listening.

‘It’s too hard. It just hurts too much. I’m not sure I can do it all over again.’ Then he heard, ‘And Andy’s all I need now, anyway.’

And a warm feeling flooded through him when he heard his mother say it, the feeling of standing in a draught of warm air.

That night, he dialed Dom’s number and took the phone out to the back veranda so that he wouldn’t disturb his mother as she slept.

‘Hi. It’s Andrew.’ He thought of her strong jaw and her dark coiled hair. The way it smelt of lavender on that first night they’d spent together and ever since. The scent she carried with her and left on the pillow behind him even when she wasn’t there.

‘Hi,’ she said. ‘How are you?’ He could hear her breathing over the phone; she might have been standing at his shoulder, though he knew she was very far away.

‘I’m fine. I still feel a bit jet-lagged though. I went to the funeral service yesterday.’
Self, identity and the ethics of portraiture in photography and writing

There was a noise on her end of the line a small, sudden sip of air. ‘Was it sad?’
‘It was sad, although it still all feels a bit unreal to me.’
‘I suppose you only found out a few days ago and now you are on the other side of the world. It must be very disorientating.’ Dom had always possessed this clarity he lack, the ability to understand how another person might feel.
‘I know. It’s also because they didn’t find the body. I’m not sure it will really sink in until I find out what happened to her. I haven’t really been able to speak to anyone about it yet. They didn’t say anything at the funeral.’
There was a pause. ‘Hey, I was thinking, would you like me to come out? Over to Australia, I mean. I can get some time off. I’m sure I’ll find someone who can cover the rest of my classes here. I’ve actually never been to Sydney,’ as she spoke, she put the accent in the wrong places. Her words were tentative, halting. ‘I’ve never met your mother, either.’
Somehow, he didn’t want her to come. It was something he was sure about. He wanted her to stay where she was.
‘I don’t know.’
‘You don’t know?’ she said, articulating each word carefully. After three years together, this was all he had to offer her. This ambivalence.
He wanted to find out what had happened to Kirsten, that was all. He didn’t want the additional complication of having Dom there with him as well. He wanted to preserve their life as it was in Berlin, so that he could return to it.
Maybe in truth, he didn’t want her to know this part of him, the part that belonged in Sydney. The version of him that had struggled for years without success, who’d done things he regretted and treated other people badly, in order to get ahead himself. He wanted to quarantine that part of himself from her, to protect Dom from it. In Berlin he could live with everything he’d made with his life; in Sydney he was aware of all the ways in which he’d fallen short.
At the end of the conversation she’d asked him.
‘Tell me this, do you love me?’ The word was soft in her mouth, the ‘v’ pronounced as an ‘f’. Lofe, she always said; what she had for him was lofe.
‘Come on, Dom. Of course I love you. This isn’t about love. I’m coming back soon – I’ll be in Berlin the day after you get back. There’s no need for you to come all this way. If I can just speak to a few people here, I’m sure I can find out what happened in a few more days. After that I can come home again.’

Home, he heard the word as he spoke it and realised that something about the way he viewed the world had shifted. He understood that the place where he stood was no longer where he belonged; his home was the place that he and Dom had created for themselves. And now he had said something that threatened it. He found himself wishing he could be a bigger person, someone who could be less caught up in himself.

She breathed out slowly, audibly, a low heave that sounded as though she was dislodging something from her chest. ‘I don’t know. You don’t even want me there. What am I supposed to think? I’ve never met your mother. Sometimes I feel like I don’t know you at all. Sometimes I think that’s the way you prefer it.’
He called Dom’s phone again, hoping he could provide her with a better explanation for why he didn’t want her to fly to Sydney, but she wasn’t answering his calls. He left another message for her. ‘Sorry,’ he kept saying to her voicemail, as though the more often he said it, the more force it would give to the word. But when it came from his mouth it had a hollow quality to it, it was a husk of a word that covered what he really felt. Dom didn’t return his calls. He needed to speak to her, to reassure himself that he would be back in Berlin soon and confirmation that when he was, they could resume their life together, the good life he had stumbled into and maybe he thought, if he could convince her he’d be back soon and nothing would be different, he could feel more sure of it himself.

He hadn’t explained his relationship with Kirsten to her. They hadn’t spoken of old lovers, not in any real details only briefly, of names. For Dom he knew there had been someone called Dirk.

‘Six years,’ she had said to him in the dark of her bedroom soon after they met. ‘Six years, four years ago.’ She spoke that word and he heard, caught up with the name, a knot of feeling that was hidden to him, some old pain was attached to it, a hurt he could tell from the way she spoke it and didn’t want to say it that had once engulfed her. So they didn’t speak of their pasts to each other and perhaps he thought that it didn’t matter what was behind them, only where they would go now. He wanted to tell Dom about Kirsten, how his relationship with her, as brief as it was,
had coloured everything that came after. He wanted to tell Dom because her love was the only thing that could wash away this terrible feeling he had about it, that what had now happened could somehow be traced back to him.

That afternoon, he walked through Leichhardt. He enjoyed walking. Sometimes he solved his problems this way when he was in his studio, pacing and listening to the rhythm of his own heart. There was something about the movement of walking, one foot in front of the other, the off-kilter thudding of his feet, the sense that he was putting a physical distance between himself and his concerns.

The streets around Leichhardt were so familiar to him that he didn’t even have to concentrate on where he was going. Without looking up he knew how far and in what direction he’d come from his mother’s house. He felt comfortable walking through those streets, past houses that had always been familiar to him, of knowing what to expect as he moved, passing through familiar scenery. He could walk through this suburb he knew and see that the streets of his childhood were as he had remembered them.

He lost track of where he was, listening to the internal sounds of his body, his breath, his heartbeat became steady and rhythmic. As he walked, his thoughts scattered out like tossed coins. He found himself in front of a school. The buildings were tall structures, thick walls built of red clay bricks. Inside a window pictures were taped to the glass facing outwards, pictures drawn in crayon by small and imprecise hands. He read the sign, ‘Leichhardt Public School’ and had the sensation of moving back into himself, understanding that this was his old primary school, but it looked somehow more exposed than his memory of it, too close to the street and the chaos of the city. When he had been there, it had felt secluded, a place where he had been protected.

Mostly, his memories of it were the view from inside, looking out through the windows during classes and realising, as other students put
their heads down to work that he hadn’t been listening to what he had been said and not knowing what he was supposed to be doing.

As he looked at the building, the playground was now empty and he assumed that school must be over for the day. It was a quarter past three, but a bell rang and suddenly the school was swarming with green bodies moving towards him. He stayed there gripping the fence, watching the bodies, small and busy, forming groups and separating, moving like ants. Across the playground, he saw a young girl walking with her bag slung over one shoulder. At first he noticed her because her hat wasn’t on her head, but dangling from a finger as she walked and bobbing on its elasticised band. Her hair was blonde, a soft blonde the colour of a grain like pearled barley. When she came closer he thought at first, she was pulling a face because the left side of her mouth was slack. When she smiled at one of her friends, he noticed that she smiled only with the right side of her mouth. From where he stood, that part of her face looked melted. She moved slowly around to his side of the fence, looking at her feet and up from time to time in the direction of Norton Street, waiting for someone to arrive. She was only a few metres away from him and if she hadn’t been standing so close, he might have said nothing. He might have walked away and let the idea he was suddenly possessed with pass. He took a step. ‘Hi,’ he said. Growing up, he hadn’t had any younger siblings or nieces and nephews and he’d played virtually no role in the lives of his friend’s children. He’d had no training in talking to children, apart from the occasional model he’d used for photographs and the young girl seemed to sense his nerves.

‘Is your mum or dad coming to pick you up this afternoon?’ He could hardly hear her when she looked at her feet and said something to him about her mother coming from work.

‘Okay,’ he said, not quite sure how he should proceed. They stood beside each other without speaking and he kept wondering what he should do with his hands.
A woman walked towards them with long, dark hair that had a silvery sheen in the sun, already starting to grey. She had an olive complexion, although the pigment in it had grown uneven with age, settling on her skin like a sediment. She wore jeans and a long shirt-dress that reached her knees with flat, practical sandals. She took the girl’s head in her hands and kissed her hair. It was a firm gesture that seemed to almost be an expression of relief at having found the young girl still there waiting for her. He wondered where the girl’s blonde hair had come from. She held her hat up to her mother, who frowned and he saw the word ‘broken’ pass over the young girl’s lips. He moved towards them, a sideways movement like a crab. ‘I’m sorry to interrupt you,’ he said. He hated scouting for subjects. It was like asking someone he didn’t know very well for a favour, even though he paid for it and most people were glad to be involved.

The woman moved her hair and lifted it over her shoulder, as though she had perform this movement in order to consider his request properly.

‘I’m a photographer. I noticed your daughter as I was walking past. I wondered if you would let me take her photograph?’

The woman frowned. ‘What sort of a photograph?’ she said, moving her arm around her daughter’s waist and pulling her closer. The inside of her arm was pale, the two bones in her wrist visible like the underside of a wing. Behind him, the chatter of children peppered his thoughts.

‘I’m a photographic artist. You can look me up online. It would be a portrait. I’ll pay her. Your daughter has the right look.’

*Look.* The word repulsed him. It was a word that photographers used, but he didn’t like the way it implied that a person’s appearance could be slotted into a category. He hadn’t really been thinking about photographs at all, until he’d seen her there and an image of her flashed up before him against a soft, white background, her hair falling evenly around her face. Behind the woman he was talking to, he noticed a figure moving towards them. It was a teacher who he actually recognised wearing a red shirt and shorts. His socks were pulled up to his knees.
‘Can I help you?’ he said, his words terse, his lips pursed in a great effort at control. A vein in his neck bulged and his face had a slightly flushed pallor, the colour of sunburn that hadn’t completely faded. Andrew wondered whether it was actually possible that a teacher who’d been there when he was a student was still teaching at the same school. Perhaps he was mistaken. Over the years he had seen so many faces that maybe this man just appeared similar to someone else he knew. But no; Andrew looked at him again and the way he stood, the way he gestured with his hands as he spoke, as though he was demonstrating the dimensions of a box; they were the movements of a person he’d met before.

‘I’m just talking to this girl’s mother,’ he said. An exhaustion took hold of him, the overwhelming fatigue of jet lag. He wished he’d said nothing, that he could walk away now and pretend it hadn’t happened, but he’d never permitted himself to grow accustomed to giving in. ‘My name is Andrew Spruce. I’m a photographer. I actually went to school here,’ he smiled, trying to muster his charm from somewhere inside him, a place that felt welded shut. He tried to remember the teacher’s name.

‘You shouldn’t be here. These are school premises, not public property. If you don’t leave now, I’m afraid I’ll have to call the police.’

He couldn’t help himself. His reaction against being told what to do was almost mechanical. He had to point out that he wasn’t actually on school property, that he’d simply been standing on the footpath. After he spoke something twitched behind the teacher’s face. Some deep instinct which, after a lifetime of having been in control of a classroom, responded badly to being corrected.

‘You were talking to this girl without an adult present,’ the man said. His voice was low and quavered slightly in response to some suppressed rage. ‘There are rules for contacting students. You have to go via the principal.’ At that moment, he looked towards the girl’s mother and later when he thought back on it, he realised that was the moment she’d actually decided to give him the benefit of her doubt. There was a
softness in her eyes and he understood that she felt sorry for him, for the way he was being berated for having made this simple request. The teacher left, moving through clusters of small green bodies remaining in the yard and the woman moved closer to him, her eyes brown and clear, the colour of weak black tea. ‘Do you have a card or something you could give me?’ she said, gripping the calico bag that was hung over her shoulder and seemed to be full of books. Behind them the wind rushed through the leaves of a melaleuca tree, a long quietening sound, the sound of water over stones.

‘I don’t have a card with me,’ he said. He had some business cards made for him a few years earlier, but they remained untouched sealed in a box somewhere in storage because he was too shy to ever hand them out. ‘But you can look me up online. I have a website. I’ll write it down for you. There’s an email address for me on the site and I’ll give you my mobile number,’ he said, patting his pockets for a pen. The woman found a scrap of paper for him to write on. He wrote his mobile and home numbers down. When he turned the piece of paper she had given him over, it seemed to be a receipt for some library books.

‘Thanks,’ she said. ‘I’ll look you up,’ waving the piece of paper he’d given her like something hot. She took her daughter’s hand and walked down to the pedestrian crossing and they crossed the street together. She walked slowly, looking in both directions cautiously, as though very aware of all the things that could go wrong.

He felt suddenly tired and started walking, but he felt drained of energy. It was about a block away from the school, just beside the park on Norton Street, that he heard tyres crunch up behind him and the sharp bleep of a siren. He jumped and his heart felt hard in his chest, then it started to race like a hummingbird caught in a cage.

‘We’ve had a complaint, sir, about a man meeting your description, loitering around school grounds.’ Walking past had somehow become loitering. ‘Was it you?’
He nodded and felt a tight pain across his chest. The police officers were talking to one another, but he couldn’t hear what they were saying.
‘Can you tell us your name please?’
‘Andrew Spruce,’ he said. He tried to get a hold of his thoughts. He told himself he’d done nothing wrong, that this was preposterous. He hadn’t set foot inside the school gates.
‘Do you have a licence or some other form of identification with you?’ The female officer approached him – she was wearing thick black lace up boots, a style that had been popular recently in Berlin. The gun in her holster was close, he could have reached out, unclipped it and taken it in his hands. He reached into his back pocket and took a moment to find his licence, behind all his other cards.
‘Your licence has expired,’ she said.
‘I’m living in Berlin. I’m just back for ten days.’
‘Are you staying at this address?’ He nodded. She left him for a moment.
‘Okay,’ she said when she had returned. ‘You’re not on our sex offender’s register.’ Andrew cleared his throat. Something must have changed about him. It had happened gradually since he moved past the age of thirty. People had stopped giving him the benefit of their doubt. And now he seemed to be regarded somehow, as a potential threat. This is what had happened to him as he’d aged, the light illuminated him in a different way. It became less kind.
‘Are you on your way home?’ He nodded. The female officer’s face softened with a sudden rush of sympathy. ‘Do you need a lift somewhere?’ she asked.
‘Could you take me home? To the address on my licence?’ The female officer looked at the man standing beside the car, who nodded. When the police car pulled up, his mother emerged from the house.
‘Andy,’ she said. Her voice was high and unsteady, as though she was speaking while balancing on a wire.
He thought the situation might have been funny now, being bought home by the police as an adult. That this might finally make up for his unremarkable years as a teenager when his peers were staying out all night drinking and taking drugs while he was in the dark-room alone sinking photographic paper into shallow basins of fluid, the serious expression of an adult marking his young face.

‘In future, try to avoid the school grounds,’ was what the male officer said as he leant on his mother’s shoulder and walked inside.
The next day he went to Rushcutter’s Bay, to see again the apartment where he had lived for a year with Kirsten. He tried not to think about the conversation he’d had with Dom two days’ before. Instead, he tried to focus on the fact that they’d both be back in Berlin soon and he could smooth everything over between them then. It wasn’t as though he’d really mistreated her, he thought to himself – overall, he’d been a loving and reliable partner. He just needed to do this thing by himself.

He caught the bus into the city and walked down William Street. It was a noisy, overwhelming thoroughfare to the city. It had been raining earlier that morning and the cement and bitumen were wet. As he approached the building, there was a heavy feeling in his gut, the same feeling he had towards the end of his relationship with Kirsten, when his main desire had not been to be with her, but to be alone. To sever himself, his identity, and what he wanted to be, from her, her complication and self-doubt.

The façade of the apartment block was of dark red bricks the windows were evenly spaced and faced out to New South Head Road, where the traffic tore down the hill and off to the east. Their apartment had one small bedroom and one set of windows that faced into the light well. It was a shaded light that was usually grey. It was so dark inside that they always had to turn a light on, even in summer. The carpet was worn, with strange ambiguous marks, the residue of spilt liquids, stains they had been unable to erase, the marks left by those who had lived there.
before. The bathroom was the only room in the apartment that had been renovated, as though whoever owned the apartment had started the process, but hadn’t followed through.

He stood there in the shower sometimes with the door closed, the only place he felt he had any privacy when Kirsten was also there. He stood under the hot stream of water, keeping it at a temperature that was slightly hotter than was comfortable and allowing it to spill over him, the sound of it hitting the recess around him and washing away the other noises of the apartment. From inside the shower looking into the bathroom, the life around him, his existence didn’t seem that bad.

Their furniture was mismatched and everything they owned had been lent to them or given by people who no longer needed it. On the dining table they had set up their computers, one on each end and they sat there together, sometimes, working on assignments and one of them would stand occasionally to make a fresh pot of tea. In that place with its single bedroom, its kitchen adjoining the lounge room, the only way for them to live was on top of one another. Their bed was behind a curtain, their sheets unmade and discarded clothes flung across the room. Their clothes hung on open racks, the sense that everything they owned was exposed, that neither of them could have anything to themselves. It was no way to live with another person; he knew that now, he’d learnt it.

They could not afford to rent a bigger apartment, but in that space they couldn’t live separately and in their youth and inexperience, perhaps they thought that this was what sharing a life entailed, keeping nothing for themselves. In those first six months of living together, he would have given everything he had to her, without understanding what the consequences of that would have been. Thinking of that space now, a warmth passed through him, a claustrophobia; even when he lived there he had already outgrown the space. It was a place where emotions had started off pleasant, but had eventually soured.

There was a day he remembered, that had been playing on his mind. An incident he’d kept thinking over since he’d read the email from Stewart.
He had to go right back, to a time that was so long past it now seemed to be outside himself. He had to delve so far back into his memory, he couldn’t even be sure whether the memory was real, or that he was remembering it now correctly.

He had been at college all day, working in the studio on his major work, due at the end of that semester. Sometimes he slept in the studio for a few hours, woke and kept working, staying there through the night. He wasn’t sure where he got the motivation from and sometimes what it felt like was an obsession.

That day, he had come home one afternoon around five. It was very late in the year, the air was warm, familiar and the end of the year brought with it the sense that things were ending. The apartment was still when he opened the door. The air was suddenly cold and he heard a deep-throated grumble, the beginning of a storm. There was still a bowl and a mug in the kitchen from when Kirsten must have eaten breakfast before she left for work that morning, the water in the bowl was milky. He washed them under the tap. From their apartment, they could sometimes hear the football stadium in Moore Park and there must have been a football game on, because the surge of voices drifted towards him, a chorus of exaltations.

He enjoyed those moments of stillness, of being alone and waiting for rain. Outside the traffic moved in bursts, the sound of it reaching him, the buses and trucks through his window like the groans and complaints of people he didn’t know, plaintive, full of sorrow and anger. The gruff exhale of a truck as it shifted down a gear. This was what he loved, making sense of the world. When he was alone like this, the world could mutate and change; it could become what he imagined it to be. Outside, fat voluptuous clouds scudded, low in the sky. The shadows had become thin, disappearing slowly in anticipation of rain. An old skip sat on the side of the road. Someone had moved out of an apartment in their building and deposited the refuse of their life into a metal bin. There was a plastic doll with its arm missing and its hair teased out. He could have
stood there forever at that window, looking out where he could see the world, but where it could never touch him.

He moved into the bedroom, where the room smelt bodily from their sheets. From the window, he took a fresh shirt off the hanger. He had been wearing the same clothes for two days. That was when he noticed the shape on the bed, of Kirsten laying there. He moved around to her side of the bed and watched her for a moment.

She was beautiful and still. In her silence she was perfect. He found himself thinking what a fine photograph she would make, laying in bed with their soft sheets wound around her. He thought of his camera still in his bag in the lounge room. He had already started to take it with him wherever he went. If he had to pinpoint the moment at which he started seeing the world in terms that could be framed, that was it. He stood watching her, thinking that her skin looked slightly too grey and he wondered whether she was feeling unwell again.

That was when he noticed on the table next to her bed, two empty blister packs of tablets. The pills pushed out, the foil perforated and the plastic in a neat twist, its shape distorted. He looked back at Kirsten and how unmoving she was, the expression on her face soft and contented.

He picked up the spent clothes that laid on the floor, thinking it would be a good time to put on a load of laundry, a weekday when the communal machines were not in use. As he was loading the clothes into the machine, the rain broke, big tropical beads of water scattered over the roads outside, bouncing like glass beads. The rain hit the windows in a chorus of drums.

He returned to their bedroom and saw Kirsten stir. A twitch in her foot and then the movement of her arm as she rolled to her side. He had made himself a cup of sweet, milky tea.

‘Are you awake?’ he asked. She sat up and there was an expression on her face, first of disorientation and then of panic.

‘It’s only just past five. Didn’t you go to work today?’ It was at the stage in their relationship towards the end, when all he could bring himself to
say to her were veiled accusations. He’s not proud of it, that the only thing she made him feel was limited and he could no longer bring himself to be kind to her.

She rubbed her head. ‘Migraine,’ she said.

‘Oh, okay. I stayed at the studio last night. I was working until late. Sorry I didn’t call.’

‘You didn’t call?’ she said, rubbing the side of her face with her hand.

He shook his head and looked down. She looked too tired to answer him and laid back down. When he came back into the room later, she’d fallen asleep again. The rain stopped suddenly outside. Its noise ceased at once, subsiding like the passing of a violent temper.

He went out that night, to the bar near his art college with some friends in his year, to celebrate the submission of their final work. When he came home, Kirsten was still asleep, but the empty packet of tablets had been taken off the table. In the light that had shone in from the street outside, he saw her chest move.

They separated a few weeks later.

He stood looking at the apartment block. Sweat prickled under his shirt. He’d done nothing. When the person he’d cared about most in the world needed his help, he hadn’t done a thing at all. He rubbed his arms as though something unpleasant had just settled on his skin. The knowledge of the type of person he used to be caused him discomfort. He wanted to be away from there; his limbs were loose with the sudden desire to flee.

He walked back up the hill towards Kings Cross, away from that terrible memory, over the footbridge, up the hill and down Darlinghurst Road to Oxford Street. This strip of road was so well known to him that walking down it now, after he’d just been to visit that old place, seemed hyper real to him, a sequence taken from a recurring dream. A ripple of sound from the pedestrian lights as he crossed the street. Cars turned out of South Dowling Street and hovered at the intersection, waiting for him to
cross. As he walked, he felt a separation from the world, one so definite it might have run along a perforated seam. This discomfort he felt could be cured only by taking photographs though he had nothing now, to photograph. Most of his equipment was still in Berlin and he felt a flicker of anxiety as he thought of his lights and screens, these things that were so essential to him in the darkness of winter while he stood in a world washed with light. In the window of the butcher’s shop he passed, the meat had been arranged carefully and the colours that caught his eye, glossy shades of red and pink. He stopped and stood at the window. Different sorts of meat had different colours, the pork cutlets were a weak, pink colour, the steak a blue red and trimmed with rind of fat. The chicken breasts appeared slightly grey. At the back of the display, almost hidden, he saw a silvery mass of offal, jumbled and formless shapes of red. It was impossible to tell what it might have once been. He touched the glass and the butcher frowned at him. He wore a white apron with red stains smeared across his thighs where he’d wiped his hands clean. Andrew walked inside to buy a leg of lamb to cook for his mother dinner. As he stood at the counter, he peered into the cool room and saw carcasses hanging inside from hooks, skinned and vulnerable, their heads and feet removed, legs out in front of them as though to protect them from a fall.
The next day was a Saturday and he emerged from his bedroom at ten, managing somehow to have slept for eleven hours. When he walked out into the lounge room, his mother was at the kitchen sink, washing up plates. Her gloves were pink like irritated skin. He rubbed his face in his hands.

‘Good morning,’ she said. ‘Sleep well?’

He nodded. His mother shook bubbles from the dishes and stacked them in the rack. He hadn’t told his mother about Kirsten yet. Instead he had nursed the information inside him. He had taken what he knew and treated it as his to keep and understand for himself. But now he had no-one else to talk to but his mother. It had been a long time since he’d found himself in that situation.

‘Mum, there’s something I have to tell you.’

His mother turned around slowly and looked at him and there was a moment when her gaze struck his when he wondered if she thought he was about to accuse her of something. He diverted his eyes down, where the floorboards were old and in places the varnish was gone and soft, raw wood remained. In his head, he calculated that he’d now been back in Sydney for a week. The time seemed to have passed too quickly. He’d have to leave again soon.

‘Did you remember Kirsten Rothwell? Did you keep in touch with her? I know she used to call you sometimes.’ He never wanted to know about those conversations that went on between Kirsten and his mother after
they’d separated, because he thought it must have had something to do with him, even if his name was never spoken. The only connection that existed between them was the relationship they each had to him.

‘No, I haven’t heard from Kirsten in years. Why?’

‘She disappeared. Near Lake George. She’s suspected to have drowned.’

‘Oh my god,’ his mother said and covered her mouth with both hands. He had had the time now to get used to the fact of it, but to her the news was still fresh. She closed her eyes to process it. When she opened them, she looked at him with a different set of eyes. ‘What happened?’

‘I don’t know very much about it. Stewart sent me an email to tell me when I was in Berlin.’

‘God, that’s just. It’s terrible,’ she said.

‘Yes. It is.’ He said, aware of the inadequacy of his own words.

His mother’s body changed, it slumped as though she was just realising the words as they came from her mouth. ‘So is this why you’ve come back? Is it about Kirsten?’

He didn’t want to answer her. He nodded and worried he might cry. Only his mother could reduce him like this.

She turned back around and continued with the dishes. In the reflection on the window, he could see her lips pressed firmly together, as though she wanted to say something but was struggling against it. She was silent and it was the mention of death that had done this to her. They could not speak of death in this house, without it being a reference to the one that defined them. His father’s death was the unspoken fact of their lives.

Later that afternoon, when he was laying on his bed reading, his mother stood at his door. Her face was firm and he could see that she was going to tell him something that he could already tell he would prefer not to hear.

He pushed himself up onto his elbows to prepare himself for the news. His mother entered his old room and sat on the end of his bed, the way
She used to but hadn’t done for many years. There was a depression at the end of the mattress where she sat, next to his feet.

‘What is it?’ he said, his mind raced off towards every terrible possibility.

‘I’ve been meaning to talk to you, for a long time,’ she rested her hands on her lap. She was turned side on and there was something poignant about her face in profile, as though she was sitting there quietly, waiting to be painted. ‘About your father’s death.’

They didn’t speak about his father. In this house, this was something they didn’t discuss and for a moment, he wondered if his mother had forgotten that rule. They never spoke about it between themselves. His mother was staring at the wall as she spoke, and she looked as though she was looking out of a window.

‘When you were young, I should have talked about it with you. It was something we should have spoken about, but when it happened I didn’t. Maybe it was too hard for me.’

His mother’s words seemed to be floating, light and full of air, drifting towards him like paper lanterns. She looked up at him, quickly.

‘I think we should talk about it now. I know it’s a long time ago, but maybe it would still help you,’ she said, gesturing to him with her hands, feebly. She looked tired.

His father had died twenty-five years ago and these were the first words she’d spoken of it to him. There was a heanness on his mother’s face, but he could see it was no longer grief. What he saw on her face was something that held the tangible weight of a stone. He knew what it was, without having to ask her. He had enough experience with that feeling to recognise guilt. She opened her mouth to speak again and an impulse passed through him, a lightness in his limbs, a sudden urge to stand up and flee.

‘I should have been better. More open with you. I worry now. You were such a quiet boy, after he died.’ She looked up at him. Her voice was soft, her words no more than air. ‘It was my fault, the way you were. So
lonely. I know why you felt like you never fitted in. I worry, often, that I did that to you.’

His mother’s words moved through him as a physical sensation, shunting through his bones. He was hearing these words for the first time at aged thirty-seven and it was far too late. It would have been better, now, to have never heard them at all. Dread, thick and heavy, moved through his blood. There was only one thing he had ever wanted to know about his father’s death and he took this as his opportunity to ask, finally.

How many times, as a boy, had he been on the verge of saying this, at night when they’d finished their evening meals, in the car on the home from school or on the way to his aunt’s house, driving to the mountains. He’d look away from her and resolve to ask her, but then turned back towards her and didn’t say a word. Somehow, he’d always lacked the courage, placing her need for silence above his own need to know.

‘How did he die?’

She looked up at him, her face turned smooth and white. ‘I never told you?’ she said softly, shaking her head, as though she couldn’t believe her own oversight. ‘An aneurism. In his brain.’

He looked down. ‘I always assumed it was a heart attack.’

His mother kept talking, trying to explain herself, but he could barely hear her words; they were soft, muffled, sealed behind glass. She spoke as though a silence was less harmful if it was kept out of good intentions. She was talking about how his whole life she meant to tell him, but it was hard for her to speak of it. He felt himself drifting up and away from her. When he looked down at her, his mother’s eyes like two flickering pleas.

His mother was trying to whittle what she had done down into something small, to minimise its consequences in the world. She hadn’t spoken about it and in her silence, she had spun a myth around his father’s death and he had filled it with his own imaginings and these ideas he had, this way he had of thinking about his father’s death had protected him, what he made of the information he lacked had given him strength. The story he told himself about his father’s death, he thought,
had allowed him to understand it. But now he could no longer rely, even on that.

What his mother had said moved from her, where it laid dormant for so many years and travelled to him and inside, her words settled, sharp and new like fisherman’s hooks. He could tell from the way she looked at him, that what she wanted him to do was to stay in this room and to forgive her immediately for what she had done. She wanted from him what she had always expected of him: silence and obedience, the two things he had given to her as a boy, but these were things he couldn’t offer her anymore. All these years, she’d harboured this, held onto it and told herself it was because she cared for him, but really it was to protect herself. It was in order to keep her own grief at bay to seal it off inside herself and to never have to come to terms with her own loss. He left the lounge room and walked down the hallway and out into the day.
The language of a child

Later, when he came home, he decided he would pack and return to Berlin straight away. He decided that, whatever had happened to Kirsten, it wasn’t worth risking his relationship with Dom on finding out. He lifted his suitcase, pushing his knee into it and maneuvered it onto the bed. He took his underpants from the drawer in the wardrobe, the cotton stiff and clean, and pushed them into the corner of his case. He stood in front of his wardrobe. At one end, pushed almost from sight, hung a few of his father’s old shirts on wire hangers. His mother had kept three of his father’s business shirts for him, unable in her thrift to throw them all out. Perhaps she hoped one day he would take a job in business, as his father had. Looking back, the conviction he had about photography still surprised him.

His father had worked in a bank. Before his death, he managed the branch in Leichhardt. Sometimes, Andrew found himself wondering what sort of existence his father had led, going to the same place each day and attending to the same tasks, assessing loan applications, reconciling accounts and counting money. As a boy he had sat in the bank once and watched his father work – his father’s life was one of coins and cheques and carbon paper. Andrew wondered what pleasure it had given his father, that life of repetition and doing things for other people. And what would his father make of his life now, this strange existence he lived, being alone so often, plucking ideas from the air and setting them down on paper as pictures. His imagination had become his life and everything
he did was centred around himself. But since his father had died, Andrew could never make him proud. Nor could he be a disappointment either. He was denied both things.

When he thought of his father, what he remembered most was the way he had hugged him as a boy. Spreading his heavy arms open, like the arms of a bear, squeezing him so tightly he felt his heart might be about to come out through his mouth. The graze of his father’s stubble against his soft, young cheeks, the red mark that remained there afterwards. His father had a distinct smell, of aftershave and another scent that for many years he had never been able to place. It had lingered on his father’s hands and belonged to an adult world, a world that he hadn’t understood at that age. Later he recognised it as the smell of money, of dollar bills that had passed between many hands and the residue of that scent remained on his father.

He laid one of his shirts over his arm and it had lost its stiffness, its fibres worn down with age. There was a hole above the chest pocket, a small one that might have been the nibble of a hungry moth. He moved his hand inside the shirt, the tip of his finger visible through the small opening in the fabric. The shirt was already decaying, although his memories of his father were not.

His father was a photograph, caught in a long ago moment, with his brown corduroys and his orange skivvy and his moustache obscuring his mouth. He’d never spoken about his father’s death to other people, not even to Dom. He had become used to avoiding it and the only words he could think to speak of it were short and uncomplicated. He understood his father’s death only in the language of a twelve year old boy, so rarely had he spoken of it since. He had never found an adult’s way of explaining it to other people. And so he never had.

He opened his suitcase and placed his folded shirts inside. Then his movements slowed. He thought about Kirsten and her soundless exit from the world. If he didn’t find out about it now, the same thing would happen with his memory of her; he would never know and all he would
have to remember was her departure. She was a part of his history – she’d taught him what he was by showing him what he was not.

He thought of her, walking across a flat landscape towards a silvery lake and disappearing into water. People didn’t choose to do something like that all of a sudden; something like that built in a person over a period of years. It took certainty and conviction. This had been happening for a long time, since he loved her, and probably even before that.

He had done nothing really, to find out more about it. He’d made no effort to contact her family. Maybe the truth was he didn’t want to know.

His bed gave beneath him as he laid onto it. Through the mattress, he felt a few tight springs in his back. Maybe he was afraid of knowing.

He decided he should at least contact her mother before he returned to Berlin and talk to her. If he didn’t do it now, he would have to live with not knowing and there’d already been too much of that in his life already.

He’d call Stewart and ask him if Louise had the number for Kirsten’s mother.

Later that night, as his mother asleep, he called Dom again. He tried to corral his thoughts, to concentrate on what he would say to her and to convince her that things between them were still alright. He wouldn’t tell Dom, just yet, about his father’s death. He told himself that it didn’t matter, that it was years ago, that it wouldn’t mean all that much to Dom.

Anyway, where would he start, with Dom? How could he tell her now, about his mother’s silence? That they’d never spoken about his father’s death. That he had been left to reconstruct the details for himself. It sounded like such a slight and unintentional, when he said it to himself. It seemed like too small to have had the effect he felt it had on him. Other people dealt with more serious transgressions every day and didn’t expect the world to stop for them.

He took the phone out to the back veranda. The plastic phone felt brittle in his hands; it felt too flimsy to receive such serious matters.
'Hallo?' Dom said, answering her phone against a background of clatter. He heard the sudden racket of the train. 'Wie bitte?' she said. She mustn’t have heard his voice properly.

‘It’s Andrew,’ he said, feeling he had to yell to make himself heard above the noise.

‘Andrew?’ Her voice seemed to drift, as though she was speaking across wind.

‘Yeah, it’s me. I’m still in Sydney,’ his voice was loud and earnest. Outside the night was not black but blue, illuminated from the glow of the city below.

‘I’m sorry, what was that?’ There was a surge of noise across the line.

‘Nothing. I just wanted to say hi,’ he said, loudly and slowly. The sound through the phone alternated between static and silence.

‘You’ll still be back in Berlin next week, right?’ her voice echoed as though she was speaking through a tin can. Next week, already. His return flight was that soon.

‘Yes, I’m coming back,’ he said. ‘But I still haven’t spoken to Kirsten’s parents. I’m going to see if I can contact them tomorrow.’ He heard his voice as he spoke and it sounded foreign to him. There was a note of falseness to it, the voice of a person trying to convince himself as he spoke. ‘I just need to find out more about it.’ He had the sudden feeling of speaking from outer space, floating there alone, his voice bouncing between satellites, across the sky and back down to her.

‘Sorry, what happened? I can hardly hear you. I’m on the U-Bahn. It’s snowing heavily here and I’m on my way to class. You’ll still be back the day after me though, won’t you? In Berlin?’ Her voice climbed higher. He thought of her in her jeans, with her long black boots pulled up over them, her cloche hat and long green coat. He loved that image of her, walking carefully across the snow, the crunch of it beneath her, a sound like finely ground glass.

‘Yes, I think so. I guess it depends. Also, I’m going to try to take some photos for the exhibition while I’m here. Of a young girl I found a few
days ago.’ His voice sounded unsteady. He sounded like he was making excuses for himself.
‘Can you call me back later so we can talk? I can’t even hear you properly at the moment.’
‘Okay,’ he said. ‘Okay, I’ll call back in a few hours.’ He waited for her reply, but she was gone.
Admitting violence

Even after he broke up with Kirsten, they continued to see each other regularly. It went on that way for several years. The break wasn’t clean, but ragged, along a torn edge. And even after they separated, they still slept together. Their separation was a formality, what they told other people had little bearing on what actually took place between them. There was a comfort in the sex they had together afterwards, a purity; it was sex without emotion. The longer it continued, the more it became about their simple, physical needs and in the end, it was sex that admitted its own violence. He craved it and no other encounter during that time had satisfied him sexually. The feeling he had when he was inside her was one that sat not far below anger. It was at this time that what passed between them was much darker, with a coarser, more manipulative intent. The stakes were higher after they’d separated, their feelings exposed and unprotected. What they felt could no longer be spoken of and in order to keep seeing each other, it could surface only in their brief and urgent acts of sex. They used to speak on the phone occasionally, when he was working overseas and she would say things, small suggestions that might have meant nothing, but he knew her well enough to know that her words were baited hooks. ‘I just got out of the shower,’ she would say. If he called her at night, she would speak her words breathlessly, as though she had just run for the phone. Or she would talk about a man she worked with, her words slow
and heavy and primed for seduction. Sometimes, if he left her a message, she’d call him back and say, ‘I’ve been out,’ her words elusive, hinting at something, designed to provoke jealousy in him.

He wasn’t even sure, exactly, why he said ‘no’ to her. After dinner one night she had invited him back to her terrace at Newtown, the house she shared with two housemates. He didn’t even mean never again, just not then. Not that night. He was tired and jet lagged, he’d flown back from Los Angeles a few days before. But that was not the way Kirsten took his words. Her eyes turned black and she walked away from him that night without saying goodbye.

The last time he saw her, they’d eaten dinner together in a Thai restaurant in Newtown. It must have been seven or eight years ago. He had hopped off the bus and stood at the lights, waiting for them to change and he saw Kirsten there through the glass, from the other side of the street. King Street was congested with cars, buses and bikes weaving in and out of traffic, exhaust fumes making everything appear dirty and used. Behind glass Kirsten looked still, her only movement was to lift a small porcelain teacup and hold it to her mouth as she took a sip. From that distance, her skin was white and waxy and as he watched her, he thought of a woman in an old Dutch painting, the expression on her face, the look of uncertainty about what she was doing there and the melancholy that clings to a person who does not know they are being observed. There was a ghostliness about her as she sat behind glass. Seeing her there, he felt a brief stab of regret that things between them had ended.

When he arrived, he’d stooped down and kissed her on the cheek. She leant in towards him and pressed her cold cheek against his. He sat down and poured himself a cup of tea from the warm pot on the table. The smell of jasmine rose from the steam. For a few minutes, nothing between them seemed to have changed and there was a sickly comfort to the
feeling, as though he was performing a habit he’d already outgrown. When the waitress arrived at their table, he ordered Pad See Ew, asking the waitress to bring extra chilli with his meal. It was the type of food he enjoyed, chilli, ginger and lemongrass, flavours that made his whole head tingle.

Normally when she saw him, Kirsten asked about what he was working on, about his exhibitions and what he’d seen in the places he’d travelled to since he last saw her, but that night something had changed. She sat opposite him stiffly, her smiles small and compressed. After they’d ordered he asked, ‘So, how’s work?’

Kirsten never did go back to her degree. She deferred and deferred and finally withdrew. All he knew about her job was that it was essentially administration. She typed and she answered phones. He couldn’t understand it, this impulse she had to give up before she’d really started. ‘Oh, fine. I’m fine.’

‘That’s great. Getting some drawing done?’ Kirsten had that rare and unusual thing, exceptional natural talent. Many people have some benign level of ability, something that could be worked on and developed, but what she had was a gift. All he did was point a camera and take a shot, his art was produced by an act that was essentially mechanical. His only skill was in finding the right subject, of being able to look at a person and know what they would look like framed.

Her mouth formed a hard shape. ‘No, I hardly draw these days. To be honest I don’t have time anymore, working full time.’

‘Then you should make time.’

‘Why bother? Why struggle for years and years to get nowhere? And it becomes too hard. I mean, it starts off and I’m enthusiastic about the work, but then to get it right becomes such a chore.’

‘Well, you definitely won’t with that attitude.’ He noticed, suddenly, that the restaurant around them had become too loud. The group beside them seemed to be yelling, their laughter pealed down the table like screams.
His meal arrived and the broccoli was a sharp green, the sliced red chillies on top scattered seeds over his noodles. Her eyes focused on him and there was a sharpness in them that he hadn’t noticed before.

‘So, have you found any more strange people to photograph?’ She asked and her words were small and sharp, aimed at him like darts. He bit into a chilli, coughed and tried to take a sip of water. Tears streamed down his face and he sniffed to stop his nose from dripping.

‘Strange people?’ he tried to say, but his voice was weak and his eyes were weeping.

‘You know, that’s your thing, isn’t it? That’s what you do. You find someone who has something wrong with them and you take their photograph?’ Her mouth was small and punishing.

He pressed a paper napkin to his eyes to stop them from watering. He continued eating his noodles, forcing himself to finish what was on his plate, as though not finishing might amount to some concession of defeat. She was being cruel to him and he wondered why he thought he could treat someone badly and not expect any retaliation. They ate the rest of their meal in silence and when they were out on King Street, he felt his whole face throb with heat. Kirsten waved at him, took a step back and left him alone on the footpath.

He sent Kirsten an email a couple of months later, but she never replied to him. When he looked at it again, wondering whether he might have said something to offend her, he saw that he’d used too many exclamation marks. I just got back from Japan last week! He’d written. Would love to catch up! It made the email look cheap, like copy for an advertisement.
Just after he’d woken the next morning, he heard the phone ring and he thought for a moment about leaving it, letting it ring out and transfer through to voicemail. In the mornings after he woke, it always took him some time to warm to the world. But not many people had his telephone number here and he thought hopefully of Dom. He hadn’t called her back after they’d last spoken, although he’d promised to. He hadn’t even called Stewart to ask for the number of Kirsten’s mother. He knew he would now have to postpone his flight back to Berlin for another week and he didn’t know how to explain that to Dom.

He threw off the covers and rummaged through his bag for his phone.

‘Hello?’ A woman’s voice answered, but it wasn’t Dom’s.

‘Hello?’ he echoed.

‘Hi, my name is Pippa Davis. I, um, looked you up?’ He didn’t immediately recognise the voice.

‘Pardon?’ he looked back to his bed, longingly. The sheets looked soft and inviting.

‘You wanted to photograph my daughter? We met outside her school?’

‘Oh yes. I remember now. Sorry.’ The memory of the girl with the lop-sided face returned to him. The thought of her still produced the same feeling inside, the strange shudder of recognition.

‘I looked up your website. Sorry it took me so long to call you back. Your photographs are,’ she hesitated. ‘Beautiful.’
‘Beautiful?’ he said. There was something about him, some small fault in the way he was wired that made him more comfortable with criticism than he had ever been with praise. No matter how much experience he’d had, how detached and professional he could make himself sound, his photographs always made him feel awkward. Seeing his own work was like looking at his reflection – all he saw were the faults, the things he thought could be better.

‘Maybe truthful is a better word,’ she said after a pause and he felt more comfortable with that appraisal.

‘I’m still not entirely comfortable, though. I just worry about Phoebe and the way she looks. Sometimes I think she doesn’t know how different she looks. I’m not sure photographing her is a good idea, but Phoebe wants to do it.’

‘I’ve photographed many children her age. I try to involve them as much as possible in the process. Most of my models enjoy it.’ Listening to himself speak, he sounded like a salesman.

‘What is it you had in mind?’ Pippa asked.

‘Well, I probably need her for a couple of days in the studio. I usually hire a studio space in Chippendale.’

‘I mean, what do you intend for the photos of Phoebe?’

It always sounded strange, whenever he tried to explain his work to other people and it rarely made any sense to him anyway, until it was almost finished. He thought of the girl’s face, tugged at on one side, how he’d seen her in the playground in the late afternoon light and immediately knew he wanted to take her photograph, without really understanding why. He could already tell, just from watching her in those moments that she was too self aware to be photogenic, she seemed to almost wince at the world. The way she held onto the broken hat carefully but firmly, not as though it was something damaged, but as though it was something that still needed to be taken care of. He cleared his throat.
'It would be a fairly simple photograph,' he said. 'The important part will be getting the details of the shot right, the light and so forth.'

'Oh,' she said, sounding unsure what to make of what his answer. 'Well, if you do photograph her, I mean. I would want to be there. I feel I would need to be present. A photograph like your photos, they take people and preserve them and that is something my daughter will have to live with for the rest of her life.'

Nobody had ever said anything like that to him before. Sometimes people said no, but usually the idea of being photographed for art was too alluring for most people to resist. The idea of being captured on film was seductive, what people usually thought of when they thought of a photograph was of their own beauty.

'Well, I can let you see the images before they’re exhibited and you can certainly be there while I’m taking them.' Outside was the sound of a bus, easing away from the stop, the breath of its brakes.

'What if Phoebe and I don’t like the photos you’ve taken? Will you still exhibit them if we don’t like them?'

He had never given another person control over his own work and he reacted badly to suggestions from galleries, turning his back to their comments, as he had to from all criticism. There was something stubborn inside him that always made him aware that it was his work and if it succeeded or failed, it ought to have been on the basis of choices that he himself had made. But it was also Phoebe’s image and she was still a child. 'Well, if there’s something you seriously object to, I’ll definitely consider your opinion, but usually I ask people to sign a consent form before I take the photograph.'

'No, I think I would want to have the right to say 'no', especially if Phoebe is unhappy with the photograph.'

This was starting to get more complicated than he’d planned. Perhaps he should return to Berlin and find someone else to photograph there. 'Well, okay, in this instance if Phoebe is unhappy with the image, I can agree
not to exhibit it.’ The shoot wouldn’t be too expensive, he reasoned it would be worth taking that risk.

‘Okay, that sounds reasonable. When were you thinking?’

‘Are you available in the next few days?’

‘I’m working tomorrow and the next day, it might have to be next week?’

Next week, he was supposed to be back in Berlin with Dom. To take this girl’s photograph, he would have to postpone his flight back to Berlin until the week after next.

‘Okay,’ he said, after a pause. ‘Next week should be possible.’

When he hung up, he stared at his phone. He wasn’t sure how he would explain this to Dom, without upsetting her more than he already had.

As he went out to the kitchen to make himself an espresso in his mother’s old percolator, he thought of the photograph he was recognised for most often, the photo that Pippa would have seen when she searched for his name on the internet. It seemed a sort of magic to him now, after years of trying to get his work exhibited, how quickly it had happened. While he was out to dinner with friends one night he had heard about a man his friend had been to school with who had never lost his set of baby teeth. Andrew rented a warehouse in Redfern for the day, the cheapest studio he could find, a space that had once been a mechanic’s garage, where there were still oil stains on the dusty cement floor and the smell of metal had never left it. When the man walked into his studio that day, he seemed at first, like a stern man with a hard face, his handshake brief and his palm rough. He was a large man, he had a heaviness about him and he stood with his feet apart, as though to distribute his weight evenly.

After, when the man laughed, his laugh was loud, with a resonant timbre. It boiled through his body and filled the room. It was difficult to reconcile the sudden rush of happiness contained in that laugh with the sombre man who had greeted him. He understood then that he was a man who, because of his appearance treated the world with a certain suspicion, but underneath was otherwise happy in the world.
It was a summer day and in the heat inside the warehouse, he felt himself slowly baking. The fan did nothing but stir up hot and stale air. They’d been in the studio for five hours and he was sweating, his clothes touched his body like clammy hands.
He opened a window to let the air in and when he was back in front of the camera, a gust of wind knocked over a screen behind him and he half looked away, but from the corner of his eye, he had glimpsed something, maybe it was a brief glimpse towards his own future as the man yawned and he took the photo. He pressed the camera shutter down so hard his camera took three consecutive shots. Inside the man’s mouth was pink and damp and, in the picture it took up almost the whole frame of the shot, so that he might have been looking into the mouth of a lion. At the corner of one eye was a tear, in the photo a small, perfect droplet; in the photo it almost looked white. They kept at it for another hour that day, but he knew he had the photograph he needed. When it was exhibited later, he called the photo *Teething* and with that image his life was changed.
After it he was no longer dependent for his income on taking pictures of things he didn’t want to photograph, like furniture, food and underfed women in expensive clothes. The realm of commercial photography was behind him, its smallness and falseness no longer concerned him. He could work quietly by himself from then on, pursuing only those things that interested him, working with ideas and subjects that he felt bought him some truth.
Since taking the photograph, he had often wondered if his career would forever be defined by that single moment in time. Nothing he had created since had quite lived up to it at least, not in his own mind. Sometimes, he felt he existed in the shadow of that photograph. No other picture he’d taken ever came as easily.
When he’d hung up the phone, he made himself a coffee on his mother’s old espresso machine that looked as though it hadn’t been used since he’d last been to visit. He sat outside on the back balcony to drink it. It tasted burnt and he drank it slowly, for the effect it had on him, rather than for its taste. His pulse sped up and his thoughts accelerated, rushing towards clarity. It was morning, but he could already tell the day ahead of him would be hot. The morning had a heaviness about it, the threat of overwhelming heat.

It was the first time he’d been out here since he’d spoken to his mother about his father’s death. He could no longer trust the ideas he had about it or the way he had chosen to think about it.

He looked out to his backyard. His father had often worked out here, in the garden. It was out here that his father had given him his first camera, for his tenth birthday. It wasn’t his real present. His real present had been something else, something new, something bought at a shop and that he had asked for. He couldn’t have known what it would mean to him until later.

It was a Minolta, a symmetrical black box with strange dials and notches, measurements he didn’t understand, but that looked very scientific to him at that young age. The photographs he took with that camera were taken before he understood anything at all about composition, about focal points, depth of field or aperture. When his approach to
photography was naïve and unschooled, before he understood it and was able to judge it as good or bad.

His father had taken him outside that afternoon, into the golden afternoon light. He would always remember the texture of that fading day, how the shadows swept along the grass and the diminishing light made the world tilt. He must have known the significance of the occasion, even as it happened, because his memory for it was still strong.

‘Here,’ his father said, handing him the camera.

‘What is it?’ he said, although he knew what it was.

‘It’s a camera. My old camera. I hardly use it now. I thought you might like to have it.’

It was different to the point and shoot camera they took their family photographs on. It looked more scientific with all its dials and notches. He took it in his hands. Afraid, somehow, that he might drop it. That he might ruin this one moment of interest his father had taken in him, by breaking the device. He’d taken time out of the day to show Andrew something normally, at best all he was given was a pat on the head, or a kiss before bed. Though he loved his father, even then he felt he hardly knew him.

His father released it with a click from its stiff leather case. He held it out in his palm. The camera was black and the dimpled metal was rough to touch. It was empty inside, mysterious and strange, the way it captured the world inside it, compressed it and flattened it out like the eye of a fish.

They went out onto the front step and his father showed him as he looked through the viewfinder how the needle at the side of the frame measured the light. In the last hours of the day’s sun, the needle bounced upwards. In his father’s hands, between his long fingers, he wrung the lens of the camera, twisting it between the notches and talking to him about focus, which he didn’t know then, would take him years to understand properly. It was an old camera, even for its time it wasn’t a
particularly sophisticated device, but the only thing that mattered to him then and now was that his father had given it to him.

‘I loved taking photos. When I was younger, I used to take a lot of photos. I even had one published in a magazine once,’ he said, smiling weakly, almost as though he was embarrassed to admit it. To Andrew it sounded very impressive and he had the idea that one day he would also publish a photograph in a magazine. His father rubbed Andrew’s back. He knew, then, that the lesson was over, but he didn’t want this intimate discussion with his father to end. The opportunities he’d had to be this close and quiet to his father were rare. His father was busy and often withdrawn and distracted by work.

‘What sort of photograph was it?’

‘It was a photo I took when we went to Tasmania, before you were born.’ Andrew looked at the camera and suddenly felt he was taking something from his father and he immediately wanted to give it back. ‘Why don’t you keep it then?’ Andrew said and his voice was small. He held the camera out for him to take.

His father looked down as though he had seen something new in his own son. For a moment, he seemed to be contemplating taking the gift back, but then he shook his head.

‘I don’t have time anymore, mate. As you get older, it gets harder and harder to find the time to do the things you like.’

His father stood slowly from his crouched position and a knee cracked. As the light dwindled and turned caramel in tone, he thought he understood his father for the first time, the man who had been opaque to him became knowable in those few brief moments. It was just before they went inside, he laid his hand on Andrew’s shoulder gently, and he turned his head and looked at his long fingers. His father had been at work all day and his face was gaunt, the skin followed the contours of his skull.

There was something about the way his father had looked at him. As though, just at that moment, as he looked at Andrew, he’d realised that
one day his life would end. What he saw on his father’s face that afternoon was something beautiful, a longing for his younger self unfurling across it like a great and heavy pain.

Later, Andrew had tried to capture that look on other people’s faces, in photographs he had taken and, with time, he came to understand that when his father looked at him, he had seen the things in his life that were gone and that he would never get back.
Andrew’s real estate agent called him that day. The tenants were vacating his apartment and they were letting him know that they were advertising again for new tenants. Tenants were always moving into and out of his apartment. He’d never renovated it and the low rent generally attracted students, or people wanting a short-term lease. He told the agent to wait a week or two before advertising, thinking he could stay there for a few days before he flew back to Berlin. At least that way he could get away from his mother. Every time they were together now, she seemed to want something from him – a quick and immediate forgiveness for her mistakes.

When he hung up the phone his thoughts careened towards Dom. It was after four. In the corner of his mother’s lounge room, the television flickered on mute; the afternoon movie was about to start.

He dialled Dom’s number. It seemed to take an impossibly long time to connect.

‘Dom?’

She hesitated. Or maybe it was the delay on the line. ‘Andrew?’

‘Sorry, did I wake you? I suppose it must be quite early there?’ hearing her voice produced a softness inside him. It cushioned his doubts.

‘Don’t worry. I had to wake up for an early class this morning anyway.’

He swallowed, not wanting to think about Dom living her life without him. He wanted her to keep as she was, like a butterfly under glass, until he was ready to return to her.
‘I’m sorry. I miss you. I needed to hear your voice.’ Their movements on each end of the phone echoed.

‘Really? I don’t hear anything for days and now you miss me?’ There was something about the way she spoke. He’d forgotten it. The halting words, her accent made her sound as though she was savouring everything she said; even this anger she had for him now.

‘That day you called me and I was on the train? I asked you to call me back. That was three days ago!’ her words hurtled towards him.

She was right; had been three days, which was a long time for two people who usually saw each other daily.

‘Sorry, Dom. I really am. I don’t know, I guess I just got caught up here.’

He was aware he was speaking to quickly and no good could come of this hurrying.

‘Why didn’t you call me? Or at least send a message. You make me wait and I had no idea what was going on. Fuck.’ He loved the way she said that word, placing the emphasis on the consonants.

‘I’m sorry.’

‘You can’t do that to someone you love. What am I supposed to think?’

‘I know. Sorry,’ but he stopped himself from making any more excuses. He didn’t really have any to give her. ‘The thing is, I’ve found a young girl here and I’d really want to take her photograph. For the exhibition in London next month.’

‘A girl? You’ve been scouting over there?’ she said. He heard in her voice that she trusted him slightly less now, that she was testing his words.

‘No. It sort of happened by accident one day when I walked past my old school. But I can’t photograph her until next week, so I will have to change my flight back to Berlin. The delay will only be short, I promise.’

‘So, when will you be back now?’

He couldn’t answer her. This resistance he felt, the familiar impulse he had to hold himself back. Sometimes he wondered whether he had conditioned himself to be this way, from all the years he had gone never allowing himself to rely on other people. In those years, he thought he’d
grown stronger, but he realised now it wasn’t strength at all. It was weakness dressed in a costume of strength.

He fell into happiness with Dom, it wound around him soft as cotton, without him having any real sense of it happening. Love had made him feel endless, it had lulled him into thinking it would never end.

‘Soon,’ he said. ‘The photographs won’t take long to take – I’ve lined a studio up for next week.’

‘Soon? What, Two weeks? A month? When should I expect you back? Give me something.’

‘I don’t know. Another week or two? I still have to get in contact with Kirsten’s mother.’

He knew that he was giving her no guarantees. And still, he couldn’t put any brakes on his words. They were moving out of his mouth and along a downhill track.

‘Why is this thing so important anyway? I don’t understand why you flew half way across the world at the drop of a hat?’

‘I don’t know, Dom. She’s an old girlfriend of mine, I feel like I owe something to her.’

‘She was an old girlfriend of yours?’ Those words had slipped out and he knew as he said them that he should have told her this earlier. Now it would sound like he’d been hiding it from her. ‘Jesus, why didn’t you tell me that? What, was I supposed to guess this?’

‘No, it was so long ago now. We hadn’t even spoken in years.’ He rubbed his face in his hands, realising how he had mismanaged things through not being open with her. ‘I can’t really explain it.’

‘Well, I don’t know. I don’t know what to say.’

When he hung up, maybe there was even a touch of relief in the way he felt, an immediate relief from her reproach. But it was a shallow sort of relief, a temporary feeling and beneath it was something dark and grim that he didn’t care to examine too closely. He moved to the kitchen and outside a storm bird called, the call of a bird that sings in rain.
He would stay in his apartment in Sydney until he flew back to Berlin. At least then he would be away from his mother, whose presence he had been trying to avoid. He drove to the storage unit where his belongings were packed away in cardboard boxes, to retrieve the few things he would need. He went through them one by one to find out the things he owned that he hadn’t seen since he moved to Berlin, digging them out like an archaeologist uncovering the traces of a former life. His old possessions now looked strange, inconsequential, objects that served no function in the life he now led. The warehouse in Waterloo was a cavernous space with high ceilings and the small noises of people sorting through boxes was amplified in the space around him.

The people who went to these sorts of places were single people, as he had been when he’d left Sydney, people making decisions about the things in their lives they could live without. The warehouse was divided into rows of locked spaces, cubicles partitioned by thin walls. Some spaces were small and others were almost large enough to live inside. One man in shorts and thongs unloaded a dining table from a trailer and the chairs that went with it. He remembered that feeling of packing up his life, compressing it into the small space allotted to him and of leaving that day to move to Berlin, feeling unburdened and free. He had tricked himself into believing there were things he could leave behind, parts of himself that wouldn’t travel with him. He could escape everything he’d done wrong and everything he regretted.

This was a place of transition, like a train station, a place people moved through on their way somewhere else. The people who came here shared a common trait; they were people who packed their lives away into these few cubicles in order to pursue other things. It had taken him a long time to understand that not all people were the way he was, that some people found the place they thought they belonged, the first place they came across and they settled for it. That was where they stayed, establishing themselves and tying themselves to the fixtures around them. The fact
that they knew they would never leave where they were was a source of
great contentment to these people.
He had forgotten about the photographs he’d taken of Dom two years
earlier until he pulled them out of the box that day. He still remembered
that bargain he had struck with himself when he met her, that he would
do whatever he could not to lose her. That was when the feeling of love
he had for her was still something he was constantly aware of, before it
faded into the background of his life and became something he assumed
would always be there. The pictures were taken at close range, on a long
exposure, and he remembered Dom’s question to him when he showed
her the prints.
‘Do I suffocate you?’ she said smiling, but there was a flickering in her
eyes, a side-to-side movement as she held his gaze. And she wasn’t just
speaking of these photographs, she was talking about their life together.
She understood already, that he was someone who required this, a small
pocket of space around him that he could keep to himself.
He had developed those photographs of her himself at his studio in
Berlin, at night in the dead of winter, fixing black plastic to the windows
and taping the door closed in order to block out all the light. He had used
tea as a toner and the colours were dark and caramel, almost sepia. In
them she was naked, but they were taken at such close range it was
difficult to see which of her body parts were in the shot, they were
ambiguous dark stretches of skin. There was a photo of her stomach, the
join between her hip and navel. Because of the colours and the stillness of
those photographs, she might have been a sculpture in bronze. He’d
brought them back to Sydney to show his gallery, but they didn’t think
they were ‘right’ to exhibit. He was told they didn’t fit with the rest of his
work.
It was true, they were more personal and different from his other work,
there was nothing broken or damaged about her as there was with the
subjects he usually used. They were a demonstration of feelings about
which he had no doubt.
He put the photographs back inside their plastic sleeves, because he was worried his tears would damage them. He looked up into the gaping space over this cubicle that stored all the things he owned of any material value. He felt something in his throat each time he swallowed, like a piece of broken china lodged where his Adam’s apple should have been.

When he looked up again, a young boy stood at the door of his cubicle. He was wearing yellow from his neck to his feet, a baggy outfit like a sack that was not fitted to his body. He was playing with something in his hand that was connected to cord and had a collar of fur around his neck. It took him a moment and a tilt of his head to understand that what the boy was wearing was a lion’s suit. The boy couldn’t have been much older than six or seven, but Andrew could already see on his face, the trace of the adult he would become, the man he would grow into was already waiting to devour him.

He found himself wanting to take this young boy and tell him to make sure he enjoyed this time he had as a child, to make sure that he was aware of it, because he couldn’t know at that age how quickly it would pass.

‘Are you going away too?’ the boy asked. His hair was parted to one side, brushed that way while it was still wet. Andrew could see the teeth marks where the comb had been run through his hair. His hair was the white sort of blonde that cannot stay that way. When the boy moved inside his cubicle, he smelt clean and alkaline, like soap.

He shook his head. ‘No, I just got back from somewhere.’

‘Where?’ the boy said, sceptical and reached for the photographs of Dom in their plastic sleeves. He had forgotten what it was like to be a child, that all the world belonged to you. Property and ownership were concepts that only adults understood. It took time, growing up, for those barriers to be put in place, erected over a period of years.

‘Germany,’ he said. He wasn’t sure he should be having this conversation with a child now. At that moment, he wasn’t sure he could muster the energy he needed to be kind.
'My pop’s from Germany. He was born there. He came to Australia on a boat.’ This was a child’s world, a world in which everything refers back to you. ‘We’re going to America to live. My dad’s got a new job there. That’s a whole other country, you know?’ He pulled the hood up over his head and there were two triangles on top with smaller, pink triangles inside, a lion’s small ears.
‘Really? That’s a long way. I hope you’re taking the plane?’ He turned back to the boy for a moment, to wipe the skin under his eyes that felt coarse from the salt of his tears.
‘We are. I’ve flown before, you know,’ as though the boy suspected him of assuming he had not. ‘Sometimes they give you chocolate and it’s in the shape of the tail of the plane,’ he said and turned his head, looking at something that Andrew couldn’t see from where he stood.
‘Wow. I’ve never had chocolate like that before,’ he said, retaping the box of photos closed. When he looked back up again the boy had left. He had all he needed, one saucepan, a frypan, some cutlery and a few bowls and plates. He could live this way. As it turned out when it came down to it, he hardly needed anything at all. He sat in his mother’s car, unable to turn the key in the ignition. The car smelt of synthetic strawberry from the fragrant cardboard leaf his mother had hung from the rear view mirror. He was aware that he had made a decision to leave Berlin suddenly and this decision was one he now regretted. He wondered, sitting in his mother’s car, whether this was why he’d taken those photographs of Dom. Whether he had known in advance, that one day he might sabotage his own happiness. There was some instinct in him, one that he couldn’t explain very well, a compulsion to free himself from others and maybe he’d taken these photographs in order to be able to hold onto Dom in this one, significant way.
He drove out of the warehouse, negotiating the ramp with a thump and he saw the boy in the lion’s suit standing beside the boot of a car with a man. The boy gave him a curious look as he passed and he understood his sadness was confusing to a boy of that age. For the first time in his
life, his own feelings frightened him. It was about Kirsten and now it was also about Dom. Everything he thought he knew about the world, the things he had relied on, seemed to be collapsing.

It was raining on his way back out to Leichhardt in his mother’s car; the downpour was so heavy that the water sluiced across the windscreen between the stroke of his wipers. He could see the red tail-lights of the car in front of him and every time he stopped at the traffic lights, he found his eyes had filled with tears. He wiped them away, but they collected on his lower lids and made the skin there bulge.
He had booked the studio for the next Monday. He woke early and packed his equipment into the car he had hired. The morning light was sparse. It cast no shadows. At the studio, he had already set up the screen and lighting. He’d been working in that space all week preparing for the shoot. He’d used his old lights and screens, the first equipment he’d ever owned and the pieces had a battered look about them, scarred from overuse. The walls and floor of the room he’d hired were concrete, the echoes of him shifting equipment returned to him off the walls. Until he had his equipment unpacked, until he had the lights arranged in the way he knew he could work, he felt uneasy. When the studio was finally set up, he could believe that it might happen, that the idea he had for the photograph might become something that was tangible and real.

He took the parts of his camera from the case, twisting the cool metal lens until it snapped into place. His movements were quick and reflexive, like a soldier assembling a gun. He had started taking photos in quick succession, to check the lights and the set up. It settled him, being reminded of how the camera could give attention to things, ordinary things, objects which are usually given little regard.

He set the camera up on a tripod and held the lens in his hand until he felt it turn warm. He always waited for this moment, when his camera felt like an extension of his own hands. Snip, was the noise the camera made when he pushed the button down, there was something so clean and certain about that sound and it calmed him immediately. The jolt of
the flash each time he pressed the button, striking the walls with its white, sanitised light. No matter what else was happening in his life, he could always count on what the camera would do, it would always take the world, flip it upside down and restore it again the right way up on paper.

He’d asked Pippa to arrive at ten, to give him time to set up and talk to the assistant he’d hired for the day. But fifteen minutes early, he heard a knock on the metal roller door to his studio, the clash of metal as the door shook in its frame.

‘Hi,’ Pippa said, standing with a hand on her hip, her sunglasses still covering her eyes. Pippa was not much taller than her daughter and from a distance, in a certain light, the two of them might have been sisters. Phoebe was wearing jeans, standing behind her mother and when she emerged, he noticed something new about her. An expression that hid some submerged anger that he knew must be directed at him. This was the conflict people felt when they had their photograph taken, the curiosity of wanting to see an image of themselves, coupled with the awareness that a camera isn’t always kind.

‘I’m afraid today and tomorrow could be very boring for you,’ he said to Phoebe as he walked them inside the studio. ‘Photography is a lot of fiddling. Taking the picture is actually the quickest part. And you should drink as much water as you can because the lights can be hot to stand under.’ He cracked the plastic lid from the bottle of water, unthreaded it and handed it to her. She hesitated before she took it from him.

The dress he had chosen for her to wear was a cream dress plain, with a low neckline. He wanted to expose her thin neck and her flat, pale chest. He had the idea that he would include her shoulders in the shot, he wanted to expose the tenderness of her young skin.

Phoebe and Pippa went to the bathroom together so Phoebe could get changed and a sudden wave of nerves took hold of him, aware of how easy it was for things to go wrong. The difference between success and
failure in his profession was a very fine line and he knew how easy it was to fall in the space between them.

Phoebe came out first, she moved close to him and spoke in a low voice. ‘So, you’re going to give us the chance to look at the photographs first, aren’t you? Before they’re exhibited?’ Her voice rose in pitch as she spoke.

He nodded. ‘I can give you a week or two, but then I’ll need to send them to my gallery. The exhibition is in March and it’s too late to postpone now.’

‘Okay, a week should be enough time for us to decide,’ she turned her head as Phoebe walked out of the bathroom.

Phoebe had her hands folded over her chest. ‘Is it the right size?’ Andrew asked.

‘It’s a bit baggy,’ Pippa said, straightening the dress across Phoebe’s shoulders from behind.

‘That’s okay. I can fix it with clips at the back,’ he said.

‘It looks gay,’ Phoebe said, looking at the concrete floor with a sudden hostility of a person who resents doing something they don’t understand. In her eyes were needles of doubt.

‘Phoebe!’ Pippa said. ‘Sorry, she picks up that sort of language from school.’

‘Do you mind?’ he said, moving towards her. ‘I’ll pull the tags off,’ he placed a hand on her shoulder and felt her melt beneath him, like a small animal that offers no resistance to being held. He broke the plastic tags in his hands.

‘Take a seat on the stool there if you wouldn’t mind, Phoebe?’ he said. In her dress, under the lights her limbs were pale, white, skinny and supple as green wood.

‘Okay, Phoebe. Hands on your lap for me?’ he demonstrated for her. She arranged her hands, but she still looked prim, like someone who should have been wearing a shirt buttoned all the way up to her chin.
'I’ll take a few test shots. The light will be quite bright at first.’ A blitz from the strobe and the slow whine as it recharged. He checked the shots on his laptop behind him.

‘Focus could be sharper,’ he said to his assistant, who was kneeling down in front of her laptop. He closed the aperture down and focused on her eyes.

‘Okay, looking at the floor for me,’ he said. ‘And push your shoulders back.’

She sat, slumped, the way all self-conscious children did, defending herself against the world. Phoebe looked towards her mother and then did what he’d asked. He took a few shots that way. While he was talking to his assistant again, checking the pictures on the larger screen, Pippa had moved closer to Phoebe. He stepped back behind the camera and her presence in front of the lens sent a ripple of annoyance through him. He was so used to being in control of the situation. It was the sleek anger of an autocrat at the fact she was cluttering his shot.

‘Okay, could you look over to the right for me? At the wall and then slowly turn your head and look at the camera?’

She looked at her mother. ‘It’s okay, Phoeb,’ she said. He could hear the strain in her voice to sound normal. When he was back behind the lens he saw again, why he wanted to photograph her. The left side of her face drooped, as though that half of her face had been anaesthetised, but the other side of her face remained unaffected. Her eyes were green rather than hazel, a colour without impurity like glass held up to the light. He thought then that whatever it was that made her face that way must have happened when she was young, because she didn’t appear to be self conscious about it.

The sound of the flash rung through the room, a piercing sound like a defibrillator, resonating somewhere deep in his ear. He had come to dread that sound, the sound of expectation, of the camera waiting for him to take the next photograph, for his next moment of inspiration.
Self, identity and the ethics of portraiture in photography and writing

It was difficult work that day, her reluctance made slowed her movements. He moved out from behind the camera in order to offer Phoebe some direction and then returned again. Phoebe’s expression was guarded, she looked at the camera as though she suspected it of wanting to cause her some harm.

‘Okay, could you just relax your face for me?’ he said. When the right half of her face tensed it gave her a strange, slanted appearance. ‘And look at the lens like you’re looking straight through me and pretend I’m not here at all.’ She smiled self-consciously. He stood and his lower back twinged.

He tried not to allow his frustration to show.

‘Now stand up,’ he said. ‘And just let your arms flop out. Shake your legs and relax. Pretend we aren’t even in a studio, pretend we’re at home. In your lounge room.’ She smiled and looked at Pippa who nodded.

Around twelve he stopped, clapped his hands and said, ‘Okay, who’s hungry? Should we go out and get some lunch?’ He wanted them to eat together, to share simple food and ordinary, lunch-time conversation. He would ask Phoebe about school and try to ascertain if she had any sense of the way the world saw her. He would must his charm and speak to her and try to find some way to make her trust him.

But Pippa looked at Phoebe carefully after he spoke, as though she could see something in her that he could not, some small, invisible complaint. The silent communication that takes place between a parent and a child, flowing on the currents of their moods. He thought of how his own mother knew him, but also chose not to know him, of the things she understood about him that no-one else knew and of what she wilfully overlooked. In his mother’s eyes, he could somehow never be what he had defined himself to be.

‘I think I’ll take Phoebe down to Broadway. We’ll get some sushi while we’re there. I need to buy some groceries anyway.’ He took his wallet from his pocket and tried to give her some money for their lunch, holding the note out between them, but Pippa refused to take any money from him.
He stayed at the studio and he didn’t eat lunch. He rarely ate when he was taking photographs, existing instead in a state of heightened anxiety. When they came back after lunch he continued, but by three in the afternoon, Phoebe started to yawn and slouch and he knew that he had pushed her as far as he could that day. Her posture became tight, drawing in on herself. Ordinarily this was the part of the day when his shots started to work, the models relaxed and the threat of what the camera might take from them receded to the back of their mind.

‘Okay, Phoebe,’ he said and stood. His lower back felt stiff and he continued to feel hunched while standing upright. ‘You can get changed now. We’ll start again tomorrow morning.’ She stood up quickly, tugging at the dress as she moved towards the bathroom to get changed. Her sudden relief at the day being over made her appear taller. As he watched them leave, part of him felt like what he was doing by allowing her to leave was giving up and relinquishing his idea. He wanted to keep her there and try to extract the image he needed from her, but she was a child and he couldn’t place the expectations he had of himself onto her. After they left, he stayed in the studio alone, scrolling through the photos he’d taken that day on his laptop, but he knew he had nothing he could use. There was always this sickness at the moment he thought he wouldn’t be able to make it work, when he had to entertain the possibility that he might have to abandon his idea. It was a sort of floating, the feeling of returning slowly to earth from a great height, like a cinder caught in a current of cool air.

Outside the studio a blue light had almost fallen, shadows were starting to swallow the day. He walked down the lane and out onto Broadway, where the cars surged forward with the change of lights. The people walking past were young, university students, carrying books and wearing backpacks. He remembered that age and to him it didn’t even seem like so long ago. He had sped away from that age too quickly, without really being aware of what he was moving away from. All his
life, he had been racing somewhere and it was only now he wondered what place it was he had hoped to reach so quickly.
At that age in his life the future was more oppressive than the past, the days upon days that stretched out ahead of him and he couldn’t have known what they might contain. For him at that age, the future was large, unknown and daunting, but now it was the past that billowed open behind him, thick and swollen, rising like a cloud of dust.

They arrived the next day at ten. Pippa kissed Phoebe at the studio door and called to him.
‘I’m just dropping Phoebe off. I’ll be back in a couple of hours. She’ll be alright without me, won’t she?’ Pippa asked, with a hand on Phoebe’s shoulder. Her voice was high and uncertain, the in between notes on a piano, the black keys towards the top of the scale that lingered after having been struck. She brushed a loose piece of hair from her forehead and, when she held her hands together in front of her, her fingers seemed to be shaking.
‘Of course, she’ll be fine. It will be much the same as yesterday. There’s really no need for you to stay.’ In fact, he couldn’t insist on it, but he would prefer it that way. For him, her absence would mean more control. Pippa bit her lip. ‘I’ve got a few things to do today. Are you sure that’s okay? I’ll be back around lunchtime. Maybe I should stay?’ she took a step closer towards him and he worried she was about to change her mind.
‘Yes,’ he said. Sometimes people like Pippa needed to be spoken to firmly. Still, she asked twice more before she could bring herself to leave. After she’d left, Phoebe watched him from a distance, moving out from behind a table to a chair, always keeping something between them. She moved in front of the screen and sat down on the stool, even though he hadn’t fixed the camera to the tripod yet. It was a space she knew she could occupy. She saw the dress laid over the back of the chair and moved towards it, brushing her fingers over it carefully.
'Yes, you can get changed into the dress again if you like? We’ll be working on the same shot as yesterday.’ She nodded and slipped her feet from her shoes, reaching for the button on her jeans. That was when he realised she was about to get changed there, in front of him and it provoked a sadness in him that she was so trusting, although she didn’t know him at all. He was aware of how easily she could be taken advantage of,

‘You remember where the bathroom is?’ he said and pointed towards it. When she came back he had the camera set up on its tripod. There was a sudden burst of light when he checked the strobes and a splinter of sound moved through the room. He smiled at her and she moved her mouth awkwardly to one side. Hers was a smile that could never look completely happy that would because of her face, always suggest some inner grief. He took her photograph, but she was looking below the lens rather than into it, her gaze lowered and shy.

‘Can I get you to look at the camera, Phoebe?’ He was tired. He wasn’t sure he was up to spending the whole day with her again, the thought of it exhausted him, as though ahead of him stood a day of strenuous physical activity. So often, photographing someone felt like asking them to agree to something being taken from them.

Sometimes, he thought his occupation involved a sort of stealing, that he stood in front of people and smiled the warm and charismatic smile of a thief and most of the time nobody noticed what he had taken from them. Sometimes they didn’t even understand it later, when they saw the photograph hanging publicly on a gallery wall. And he tiptoed away afterwards with his bag of money, wearing black from head to toe.

He asked her to sit sideways and look back at the camera and, in the first shot he took, her mouth was open, her lips moist. ‘Good,’ he said. ‘That’s great,’ but as soon as he said it, she looked down.

An hour later, he remembered the biscuits he’d left, still in shopping bags from when he’d bought them the day before, on the card table he’d set up
against the wall. Sometimes the easiest way to prise an image from a person was to bribe them with food.

‘Would you like a biscuit?’ he said and she looked to be uncertain about whether or not she’d heard him correctly.

‘What kind?’ she asked. She looked at him cautiously, standing and moving sideways rather than towards him, hovering at a distance from him.

He reached into the shopping bag. ‘I have fruit parcels,’ he said, holding them up. Phoebe screwed her nose up at the packet. ‘And chocolate,’ he said and her eyes turned bright. As he watched her eat the biscuits, some barrier inside her seemed to go down. She ate one and then another and he wondered if she would eat the whole packet. He took one, biting off each end and prizing it apart.

‘You eat it like that?’ Phoebe asked looking at him, still suspicious. A vacuum of feeling had ballooned open between them, created by him trying to gain her trust and her being unsure of whether to hand it over.

He tried to calmly navigate his way across that space.

He nodded, feeling the chocolate clot at the back of his throat. Phoebe reached for the third biscuit, picked it up, turned it over and replaced it.

‘I think I’ll save that one for after lunch,’ she said.

‘You know you can eat as many as you like. There’s a whole packet there that won’t get eaten,’ he said. It drew another vein of sadness from him; this restraint he saw in her that belonged to an adult. Somehow she had suppressed her child’s urge to live by impulse and tend to her own needs.

When he was back behind the camera, she was more open, somehow more pliable. He’d seen this happen before; he offered a person something sweet and it made them believe he could cause them no harm. It was a trick, a technique he had learnt, but he was never proud of himself when he found himself using it.

‘Tilt your head a bit,’ he demonstrated with a hand and she moved her head slowly, until he held his hand still to indicate where she should
stop. They worked without speaking, with gestures and him demonstrating to her.

He couldn’t be sure of what had caused it, but after twenty minutes of working that way, she looked at him with a sudden determination. In that moment, the ambivalence about him had faded and she decided she no longer wanted to withhold herself from him. She stared into the lens and a cold certainty ran through him. He didn’t take his hands off the camera. He took five photographs, the jaw of the lens opening and shutting with a crunch and he knew he had what he needed from her.

He started working on those images straight away, choosing the photos he wanted to work with first. It was hard for him to discard so many images and he kept all the photos he had ever taken, even those he’d never used, although he rarely went back to look at them again. Choosing one image over another always left him with a sense of loss. It was a process that felt to him like losing possibilities, which is why it always took him such a long time to choose what image he would use. He liked knowing that there were so many unperfected photos still in existence, standing like shadows behind the work that was eventually exhibited.

Mostly, the work he did after taking the photograph was a process of smoothing over, of removing all the imperfections and joins, his movements small and delicate, like a potter working with clay. This was his favourite part of his work, when he was at his most generous, when his view of what he had created was most expansive. He made the tones more consistent, the colours starker and the contrasts sharper, moving the mouse across his computer screen in small strokes and clicks and a sharp pain shot through his shoulder from the tension in his arm.

In photographs people were static, characterised by that single moment in time, but in real life they were difficult to pin down. He found himself often, in conversations, wanting to tell whoever he was speaking to, to stop, to be still so he could stand back from them and take the moment he needed to understand them. In photographs, people could only ever be
one thing and in the photographs he took, people became what he made them. Maybe this was why after all, he did what he did with his life, for the feeling of control he lacked in his interactions with the actual world. He often thought his best photos, were those that came out formed, that required little work and felt effortless forged in a moment, a crucible of light. It had been a long time since he’d had that, but it was how he felt about the photograph of Phoebe. There was one image in which the contrast was sharp and she was looking at the camera as though she’d lifted her eyes and the expression on her face was asymmetrical. In that shot, the texture of her skin was dewy, almost bruised with the 1800 watt lights bearing down on her. Her eyes didn’t quite focus, one turned over so slightly out, as though it were made of glass. He knew he had something, for the first time since *Teething*, he had produced a photograph over which he had no doubts.

When he had finished with the photographs he realised, looking at the calendar in his mother’s kitchen that it was already February. Since he’d been back to Sydney, time had a slippery quality to it. It seemed to pass too easily.

He sent the photographs to Pippa and Phoebe in a large white envelope with cardboard behind them to prevent them from being folded in the post. He wrote a note with it, telling them that the exhibition would open in London next month and he would tell them how it went. And he waited.

When he did not receive an immediate reply, he thought about calling Pippa to check that everything was okay, but he never found the right moment, and perhaps he didn’t want to give her the opportunity to object to the image being exhibited. Part of him knew that what he was doing was going off to London to trade off Phoebe’s image. But another part of him understood there was something about the photograph that had to be exhibited, something that no longer belonged to Phoebe or
Self, identity and the ethics of portraiture in photography and writing

Pippa, something that needed expressing to an audience. He hoped Pippa would see that too.
Consistency

When he was back in his apartment, he found it difficult to believe that he actually used to live in that space, with the kitchen he’d always meant to renovate and the taps that never stopped dripping. The furnishings were so old and worn it felt like it could never now be clean. He looked up and saw that in places, the paint was peeling from the ceiling. Out of the window the view skipped over the rooves of the Paddington terraces, an aspect that taunted him with what he knew he could never afford to have. It was a lonely life and he shared his poverty with no-one. He spent those years he’d lived there in his late twenties and early thirties, eating tuna and noodles and cans of beans. Subsisting in preference to living in order to pursue photography. Maybe part of him even thought this was the life he deserved for leaving Kirsten the way he had.

He invited Stewart over two days after he’d moved in. He sometimes wondered whether Stewart ever got tired of being so consistent, of always doing what was expected of him. He wondered if he had ever had the urge to do something radical, to quit his job or walk away from his marriage. To act quickly and impulsively, to risk doing something he might live to regret. But whatever urge it was that was present in him, the need to always move forward, was absent from Stewart. Stewart was a man who knew how to hold onto things, to maintain the status quo. It was something he’d once regarded with disdain, this steadiness and inability to change, but as Stewart walked through the door of his
apartment that night, leaving behind his working day to flash a genuine smile at him, the feeling that crept over him was one of admiration.

Stewart said nothing about the state his apartment, about the bare rooms or the fact that everything in it looked so broken. He tried to smile and welcome him in, but the awareness that he wanted something from Stewart sat in his chest. He’d invited him here not for this company, but to ask about Kirsten. His motives were selfish and ulterior.

‘How are you?’ he asked as he clicked the lid from two bottles of beer. They drank together; that was how they shared their time. He couldn’t remember a time when they were together and not drinking something. He wasn’t sure why two men always needed something to hold onto whenever they were alone together.

‘Good, mate. You know, we’re busy at work right now. There’s a big building going up in the city and we’re behind on it. I keep finding myself in board-rooms trying to explain the delays,’ he said and took a sip of his beer. ‘We can build it quickly, but not if they want it to still be standing five years from now,’ he smiled. ‘How are you? I thought you would have gone back to Berlin by now?’ Stewart was standing near the window. If you stood at the very corner of the room you could catch a glimpse of Rushcutter’s Bay, a small triangle bordered by trees, a cluster of anchored white yachts that bobbed on their moorings like toys.

‘No, I need to do a few more things, before I go back,’ he said. ‘I’m taking some photos for an exhibition, actually,’ as if that explained his visit. ‘How are you?’ he asked Stewart and took another swig of his beer.

‘We’re good.’ All his friends did that now, they spoke about themselves in plural form and it hurt him to hear it, with Dom so far away.

‘We’re having a baby.’

‘Wow, that’s great news, when is it due?’

‘March, quite soon. I’m starting to get a bit nervous. Sorry I didn’t tell you any earlier, mate. It was a bit awkward last time I saw you, with what happened to Kirsten.’ He thought about this, that as Stewart and
Lydia would be having a baby, he would be in London showing his new work. This was the choice he had made with his life.

He asked Stewart the proper things, all the things he knew that he was supposed to ask, about sex and whether they had chosen names. He said that Stewart’s parents must be excited about it. Since about the age of thirty, he had learnt to ask these sorts of questions. He had learnt to feign happiness for others, but it was hard now, being apart from Dom. He felt as he spoke, that he was pushing the words out between his teeth.

He opened his cupboard doors one at a time to try to find something he could serve for them to eat, something that would make it look as though he had planned this, that he wanted Stewart there. But the only shopping he had done was for the things he needed; he hadn’t stocked his cupboards, because he wanted to be able to leave for Berlin as soon as he could.

He found some cashews and they slipped from the packet in a cloud of salt and looked meagre and broken in the bowl. He sat down on the opposite side of the table to Stewart and were both quiet.

He was aware he’d invited Stewart there, but it had been such a long time since Stewart and he had been this close and quiet that what he felt was discomfort. He tried to think of something to say, something that would seal off this awkwardness that had arisen between them, but the more he searched for something the farther away it seemed to be; striking a conversation between them was now a matter of luck. He couldn’t even be sad about what was lost between them now, because it had been missing for years.

He asked about a mutual friend from their university days, Toby, but he didn’t really care about Toby and as he said the words, they both knew he was filling in space.

‘Toby’s fine. He’s still with Sandra, though it’s been on and off for years. Mostly it seems to be on now.’

He nodded.

‘Oh yeah, did you hear about the coronial inquiry?’
For a moment, he thought he’d misheard Stewart. He felt a pain in his stomach, as though he’d swallowed a nail.

‘Sorry?’

‘About Kirsten. They’re holding a coronial inquiry into her disappearance. It starts on Monday. Louise heard about it at the funeral from her mother.’ Stewart said and his voice was hard and he understood it was difficult for Stewart to speak of these things. He was a man who, if it were possible, would arrange his life in order to wholly avoid tragedy.

‘A coronial inquiry? I didn’t realise it was that...God,’ he said. He couldn’t find the right words to talk about this woman who was gone, but whom he’d kept alive in his thoughts.

‘Yeah, I mean. I think there was a lot about what happened that has been left unexplained.’

When Stewart left, he realised that if he wanted to go to the coronial, he would have to delay his flight again. He needed to get back to Dom, but he also needed to know why Kirsten had died.

Out over the trees through the windows, bats rose in black shapes that tumbled in the air like black rags caught in the wind.
A signal he never understood

The morning of the coronial inquiry, he woke early. All he had in his apartment to sleep under was a duvet and he woke the next morning too warm and wet with sweat. He rubbed one foot over the other in a nervous gesture and pressed his face into the pillow, willing himself back to sleep, but consciousness had already slipped open inside him. The things he would hear that day about Kirsten would be difficult; these were the things he had always shied away from in his life, the details of death. He felt already too accustomed to it, that his life had been defined by it and he had now earned his right to live without hearing any more about it. There was more to life, he’d spent his life trying to convince himself, than the way it had ended.

He ate his breakfast too quickly, biting through his toast and swallowing his coffee without feeling that the food was making him full. In the taxi on the way, he beat his fist to his chest, feeling the food congested there, fighting its way down. That morning he had written the address of the court on a slip of paper, but he had left it on the kitchen bench, forgetting to take it with him when he left the apartment. The taxi driver drove down Glebe Point Road and Bridge Road, but couldn’t find the court and he felt impatience rise in him, thinking he might be missing something essential about Kirsten as he sat there in the back of the car, with motion sickness passing through him in fits.

Eventually they found the building on Parramatta Road, but it was a strange place for a court, with the buzz of traffic outside, passing this
solemn place indifferently, surges of cars between the change of lights. He shuffled across the back seat of the cab, paid the driver and stood on his wobbly legs. Inside the foyer was busy but silent, like a place of worship; people hurried, gathered and waited without speaking. He moved towards a seat outside the courtroom and it was a seat with a very straight back like a church pew.

In his jeans and blue Adidas sneakers he’d bought in Berlin he felt underdressed. He only had one mode of dressing now, casually, in clothes designed for comfort and ease of movement. But sitting where he was, he wished he’d dressed more formally and he tuck his feet under his chair, hoping no-one would notice how colourful his shoes were. Shortly before ten, the people in the court-room stood and shuffled inside, moving as though responding to a silent bell. He followed them in and found a seat, squeezing along a full row, knees shifting sideways to let him pass. The room stood when the magistrate entered, but he found himself still seated, looking at the people around him, mystified by these orchestrated movements. Later he learnt the etiquette, to stand each time the magistrate entered and left the room and he enjoyed the performance of it; it seemed somehow comical to him, all this standing and sitting and standing again, though no-one else seemed to see the humour in what was taking place. In between rows the carpet was worn, in some places down as far as the weaving that held it together and, behind him in his right ear, the sound that registered each time a person left the room was the creak of a loose floorboard. After a few hours of sitting still, the air in the room was muggy, recycled air that had come from other people’s mouths.

The man who gave evidence that first morning was the doctor who had prepared a medical report. He was talking about benzodiazepines, referring to the empty bottle of pills found in Kirsten’s car.
‘Assuming the deceased took the whole bottle of tablets, would it have been a lethal dose?’ counsel assisting asked. He was a tall man who favoured one leg, with a hand held to his lower back, as though seeking out the source of some pain. During the course of the hearing, the man’s back became a familiar sight, the gowns hung from his body in vertical pleats, the way he shifted his weight from one side to the other from time to time, like a horse.

‘In my opinion, it’s unlikely to have been lethal for someone who took drugs regularly and there’s evidence the deceased did so.’

‘Could it have made a contribution to her death?’

‘It may have done, yes. It’s difficult to say, without having the body to examine.’

He looked down for a moment, feeling the floor move beneath him and he thought about standing up and leaving. To most people this sort of information was fascinating, but to him it was disturbing and grotesque, the way everybody in the room was speaking so plainly about death. He looked around the room for someone to make eye contact with, to share his disbelief, but nobody met his gaze.

Everything that happened in the court-room seemed to follow a script. There was a strange, rehearsed quality to people’s words and expressions, as though what he was watching here was a re-enactment of something that had happened before. He felt angry that they were speaking about this woman he had known and loved and in such blunt terms. He forced himself to stay there and listen, though there were moments when the witness spoke of possibilities that were macabre and he sat through these details with his eyes closed, the fluorescent lights leaving white streaks on the inside of his lids.

That afternoon, a tall man with arms that moved like oars took a seat in the witness stand and gave his occupation as a cattle farmer. He had been eating lunch that day with his family at the picnic area beside Lake George.
'The lake had been empty for years, but with all the rain recently it was full for the first time since the kids were born. We’d seen it on the news, they weren’t sure how long it would stay that way and we, my wife and I,’ he said and glanced towards someone in the court room and the people sitting around him turned to look that way, ‘thought we’d take the kids to see it on the way to Canberra. You never know, with that lake, when it will be full again,’ the man said and something stirred in him at the effort this man was going to in order to make himself understood. ‘We packed a picnic, though it wasn’t really the right weather for it,’ he said and his face was awkward, lop-sided and he knew from the man’s expression that he wasn’t used to speaking in public. ‘The car was parked there, right down by the water. It was the only one parked so close to the lake’s edge. I didn’t even know whether there was anyone in it. I looked at it, I remember, and wondered if it had been abandoned. I even wondered whether it had been stolen. I mean, it looked brand new,’ he said, speaking towards his hands. ‘We were sitting on one of the picnic tables they have there. It was a cold day,’ he looked up. ‘My daughter was wearing gloves.’ ‘Did you see the deceased step out of her car?’ The man shook his head. His head was large and the movement of it looked sorrowful. ‘No, I didn’t. I saw a person duck beneath the fence, but I didn’t. I mean, I thought she must be going down there to the water’s edge, but when I looked up again, I couldn’t see her. I assumed she’d come back to the car without me seeing.’ ‘But you didn’t see her again?’ ‘No, as we left I checked the car and she wasn’t there. I looked out over the lake and I couldn’t see anyone. I mean, part of me thought she’d walked too far out by that stage, so that I couldn’t see her. The air was misty.’ ‘And what happened next?’
‘I said to my wife I thought I should take a look, you know, just in case. So I hurried down to the water’s edge and stepped through the fence.’ As the man sat in the witness box, he tried to imagine what this man would look like in a hurry. He was so large that he didn’t think he would be capable of moving very quickly, with the body of a broad chested football player whose strength was not in his speed, but in his weight and forward momentum. He was a man who other people would have to move out of the way for and he’d probably been that way his whole life large, clumsy and all heft. ‘It was very muddy ground there and I wasn’t wearing the right shoes, but when I got to the water’s edge, I still couldn’t see her. That’s when I knew something wasn’t right. I mean, she’d just disappeared.’ At the back of the court room and to his left, a fluorescent light flickered as he tried to concentrate on what this man was saying. The words he spoke seemed somehow crucial.

By the morning of the second day, he understood that the big boned woman sitting three rows ahead of him was Kirsten’s mother. She assumed the same position each day. Her shape from behind was solemn, a broad back, her head hung. There was a grace to her stillness and the way she sat with her shoulders pulled back and her head tucked into her chest reminded him of a water bird. She hadn’t flinched at all when the doctor spoke of how she might have died. She hadn’t acted the way he assumed a grieving parent would; she didn’t leave the room or divert her gaze. She didn’t hide her face in her hands or shed any tears.

When they were together, Kirsten used to see her mother often, though she rarely went home. They met for coffee or lunch and Kirsten would come home and tell him about it.

‘I met mum today,’ her eyes flashing something at him, some signal he never understood. He had the impression that she shared things with her mother, things that she wasn’t prepared to tell anyone else, even him. Her mother also gave her money, sometimes large amounts of it and for a few days they would feel rich and spend their money on wine and
French cheese. He used to see Kirsten counting it, placing the notes in piles and squaring off the corners. There was always a look of concentration on her face as she performed the task, about the way she counted the money and looked at it as though it bore some significance to her other than its monetary value.

Although they were together for over two years, the only time he’d met Kirsten’s mother and father together was for a dinner the day of her twenty-first birthday. They went out to an Italian restaurant, crossing the bridge to Mosman, a small celebration of Kirsten, her mother, her stepfather and him. Beside him at the table, Kirsten kept shifting in her seat, a small movement that made the chair creak beneath her. Their dinner was strangely quiet, the conversation intermittent, as if the four of them weren’t sitting in an intimate setting at all, but at a large table that was formally set. There was a politeness to their words, as though they were spoken across a great distance, they seemed unclear about the details of each others’ lives. There was a moment when Kirsten’s stepfather had to be reminded of what she was studying at university. The silences spread open between them, pockets of air with no sound that seemed to hold an unspoken sadness. After one of those silences, as he’d spun the last piece of spaghetti around his fork, her step-father said suddenly,

‘Did Peter call today?’ There was something in his eyes, something cold and definite like glass that made Andrew think that her step-father already knew what the answer to his question would be. That might have been the first time he understood that parents have this power over their children, one which it must be tempting to misuse.

In response to those words Kirsten had pulled her arms into her body, like a person caught in an act of theft. She shook her head in a small, almost imperceptible movement.

When the waiter had brought out her birthday cake that night, nobody sang happy birthday. Kirsten stared out from behind the glow of the orange flames and Andrew kept having to clear his throat.
Later, on their way back over the bridge to their apartment, she told him as she looked out of the window of the train that Peter was the name of her father and that she hadn’t seen him for over five years. She rested her head on his shoulder.

In court the next morning Kirsten’s mother gave evidence, sitting in the witness stand with her knees pressed together. Her voice was soft and difficult to hear, diffuse with air.

‘Could you state your name and occupation for the record?’

‘Renee Rothwell. I’m a chartered accountant. Retired.’

‘And what was your relationship to the deceased?’

‘I am. Was. Her mother.’ Her gaze drifted towards him, but her eyes never quite settled on his. Had she recognised him? He must have changed a great deal in the years that had elapsed. He was aware that he no longer looked like a young man, with silver flecks through his hair, lines around his eyes, the way time had marked him in ways that were not kind.

‘What was your daughter’s occupation Mrs Rothwell?’

‘As far as I know she was unemployed at the time of...the accident. She went back to university. She had been employed by my husband briefly, but it didn’t work out. Before that, she worked for a barrister as his personal assistant. She had that job for ten years.’ Ten years. He hadn’t seen her that whole time. It was hard to believe ten years could pass so quickly.

‘What did she do, for your husband?’

‘She worked in the office, answering phones. Administration. Some accounts as well, I think.’ She looked beyond the people in the court room to the back wall.

‘And she was studying?’

‘She went back to finish her degree in fine arts. She’d started it straight out of school, but never finished.’ Renee looked down.

‘What exactly was she studying?’
‘She was.’ Kirsten’s mother looked down and drew breath. ‘Kirsten could draw,’ she said and there was a flash of pride on her face a brief flicker, like the shine off a coin. Her eyes met his again for another brief moment and then glanced off somewhere behind him.

Spoken in this room full of strangers, amongst people who would not know what those words meant, the words sounded thin, they didn’t capture what Kirsten was actually capable of doing with her hands. Oh, how she could draw. She sat down at the desk in their spare room and the world was lost to her. While she was drawing, he might as well not have existed. She would copy something, usually a painting from a book and when he saw her sitting there, inside her fortress of concentration, he envied how easily it was for her to withdraw herself from the world.

While they lived together, she had copied all of the paintings from a book on Vermeer she picked up second hand at the Glebe markets. She captured that same watery light of his paintings, just with the shading of her pencil. Her drawings were precise, somehow more exact than the originals.

He could ask her something when she was drawing and it wouldn’t be until much later, an hour or more sometimes, before she answered him. By the time she answered he had usually forgotten the question or have figured out the answer for himself.

‘She was at the National Art School last year. I helped her, so she could go back and study, but I was told she dropped out. I hadn’t known that.’

This was how Kirsten’s life was accounted for in the end, with these few things that she had attempted, but at which she had never quite succeeded. If his own life were summarised, at the end and if he took away photography and Dom, there would be very little left of it.

The faces each day in the court room became familiar and there was a camaraderie between him and the journalists filing into court together and shuffling out again in the afternoon, exchanging comments about the proceedings, the sense that they were all there to reach some sort of
understanding about what had occurred that day. They were all waiting for that moment, for the critical piece of information, the one fact that would unravel the mystery of Kirsten’s death, as though there were a single explanation, one way to understand what she had done that day.

On the third day of the hearing, a female journalists was standing, leaning her back against the wall during the morning adjournment, her fingers moving quick and agile on the keys of her phone.

‘So, what do you think?’ she asked, speaking towards her phone and then looking up, training her attention on him. She had long brown hair that fell over the lapel of her jacket. He stood still, confronted by her question, delivered with a journalist’s bluntness, a distaste for anything but truth via the most direct route. ‘Was it deliberate?’ Perhaps she thought he was also a journalist, that what he sought by being here were small, hard and ingestible facts.

‘It’s difficult to say,’ he said, quietly. Then with more conviction. ‘I mean no-one saw what happened that day.’ He said, feeling as he spoke that he was trying to convince himself as much as her. ‘What do you think?’ ‘Basically, I don’t think anyone walks alone into water unless they want to die.’ They were a journalists words, spoken with an absolute conviction. She shifted her weight off the wall and held her phone to her ear. He stood there, staring at the wall she had left bare, plunging the words he had heard below the line of his thoughts.

Outside the court-room, Kirsten’s mother spoke to no-one and perhaps it was the sort of conversation he had just had with the journalist that she was trying to avoid. At lunch-time, she sat on the wooden bench outside the court room and ate a sandwich, taking very small bites. A journalist approached her during a lunch adjournment and Andrew watched as she held her small palm up to him before he drew too close. He watched her from the foyer of the court, standing with his back to a wall, waiting for the right opportunity to speak to her, but the truth was he was frightened of what her reaction to him might be.
Would she blame him? Would she point her small, stubby finger and press it to his chest? There were moments in a person’s life, things that happened and once they had happened, a person could not always recover from them. He felt that way about his own father’s death, he was not the same person after it as what he’d been before it. Perhaps Renee Rothwell would accuse him of being that to Kirsten, of somehow breaking her. He worried she would stand before him and say that all of this, Kirsten’s decline had somehow started, with him.

He watched her intently. During the proceedings, Kirsten’s mother spoke to no-one except occasionally to counsel assisting the inquiry, when he swivelled his chair around to ask a question during the course of the hearing and then her answers were restricted to one or two words, her mouth pressed firmly together, her lips the eye of a fine needle.

Andrew spent more time watching her back than what was happening in the hearing. He watched her for movement, for any sign that might give away what she was thinking. His thoughts so focused and intent he hoped they might penetrate hers. How still she sat, she didn’t even shift in her chair and sat with such square shoulders she might have been a sculpture of bronze. There was something about the way she sat unmoving, that suggested a reluctance and made him think she was there against her will.

The police officer who’d been responsible for investigating the death gave evidence on the fourth day of the hearing. It was late in the morning and he sounded very weary, the words he spoke dredged up from a dark and difficult place. Kirsten drove to Canberra from Sydney that morning in a van she had borrowed from her step-father. The van was a Toyota Hi-Ace that had been purchased by her step-father’s company three months before the accident. Kirsten had stopped at Goulburn.

‘Was there any reason that you’re aware of for her making that stop?’

The police officer shifted in his chair and his eyes flicked briefly towards her mother.
'She bought fifteen dollars worth of petrol and a loaf of bread.'
'Sorry, did you say a loaf of bread?'
'Yes. She went back for it after she’d paid for the petrol I reviewed the CCTV footage.'

_Bread_, Andrew thought, clutching at this detail, holding it to his chest, trying to locate the significance it held within it. A person who buys bread surely intends to live. He wanted to stand up and say, _there, see, she wanted to eat! She wanted to live!_ Maybe this wasn’t what everyone thought it was and all these people could stand up and leave this room and hear no more of this.

He imagined her on the grainy black and white footage, walking in and out of the shop alone. There must have been footage of him like that everywhere, doing absent-minded things, that when you looked back on them, appeared strange and inexplicable to other people. But when you died the way Kirsten did, this was what people did, they raked through the refuse of your life and tried to make some sense of it.

In Canberra, Kirsten went to Ainslie, where she’d driven up and down the same street a number of times. The police officer said he wasn’t sure if there was any significance to that street and it was the only time Kirsten’s mother moved. She stood from her chair, rising above the seated bodies towards counsel assisting. She bent her knees and spoke into his ear and the barrister orientated that side of his head towards her. It looked intimate, even solicitous. If they weren’t in a room full of people, in some other setting, what had passed between them might have been a moment of intimacy, but there could be none of that in this public place, this room designed for exposure.

It was the only piece of evidence she’d taken any interest in. When the police officer left the stand, counsel assisting stood and said,

‘Your honour. I’m instructed by the deceased’s mother that that particular street in Ainslie is where her sister resides.’
Kirsten had spoken of her sister to him, although he’d never met her. The sound in Kirsten’s voice whenever she’d said Lydia’s name was bright and warm, like someone standing in darkness and speaking of light.

Counsel assisting then asked about the search for her body.

‘We spent two days there conducting a full-scale search. We flew in divers from the search and rescue squad in Sydney,’ the police officer said, his voice higher, tighter, as though anticipating criticism. He looked to the magistrate and back to the barrister. ‘We didn’t have the manpower to search the whole lake,’ he conceded. ‘It was fuller than its been in years. It’s twenty five kilometres long and ten wide. It holds hundreds of millions of litres of water.’

That afternoon at three, counsel assisting stood and declared there was no more evidence to hear. The hearing had been set down for five days but somehow, just like that, in a single sentence and a sweeping gesture of the barrister’s hand it was over.

The magistrate stood abruptly and left the room and everybody else stood and lingered, waiting somehow, for a more emphatic conclusion. Not Kirsten’s mother though. She stood and moved straight to the door with her head down, like a criminal absolved of a crime. He hurried out behind her, pushing the weight of the heavy courtroom door away from him with both his hands.

‘Mrs Rothwell?’ he called out, but she didn’t seem to hear him. ‘Excuse me?’ he walked out after her and she was almost at the front door when he turned back around to face him. Outside, the traffic on Parramatta Road sped past, the sound reaching him through the door in snippets, like a radio station not quite tuned to a signal. He felt a nerve next to his eye twinge.

‘I’m not sure if you remember me?’ he said, wishing as he spoke the words that he could explain it to her more delicately, that he wasn’t always racing towards a conclusion. ‘I used to. I mean. Kirsten used to by my girlfriend. A long time ago now.’ He ran his fingers through his hair.
Kirsten’s mother tilted her head, as though with this movement, she was trying to recall a younger version of him. She was wearing a small gold cross on her necklace that hung over the sunken space at the base of her neck where her collarbones met. She had a strong jaw-line and the wrinkles around her mouth were ambiguous, he couldn’t be sure whether they had been formed from laughing or pursing. As he kept talking, he had the sensation of swimming in dark water, with the awareness that he couldn’t see the bottom and there might be something lurking, not far beneath him.

‘I’m sorry. Someone else. A mutual friend told me about the coronial inquiry and I wanted to know why. I suppose this must be quite strange for you?’ He knew as he said it that the word strange wasn’t enough, that it did not carry the weight it needed, because what they were discussing was the death of this woman’s daughter. But maybe there are no words for death or grief and maybe those are things cannot be described and can only ever be felt.

When she spoke, her eyes were fixed on his chest. ‘I see. Well. I do remember you. I’m glad you introduced yourself,’ she said. But glad was not how she looked. Her face was heavy and hard, set like a theatre mask. She took a step backwards and reached for the door behind her. ‘It’s nice to know you still care about Kirsten,’ she said this with an air of finality, turning back towards him as she said it. People do this with the things they have no wish to confront, they tidied them up as best they could, brushed them into a small dark place and hoped to keep them cornered there; he had learnt this from his mother.

He didn’t want her to leave. His instinct was to reach for the door and press it closed, to prevent her from leaving. ‘I wondered whether you’d be willing to talk to me about her. You see, we lost touch and,’ he saw her frown. He licked his lips and continued. ‘I wondered if you could tell me a little more about her life, what she’d been doing for the past few years.’ Mrs Rothwell straightened and took a firmer grip of her handbag. He noticed the way she moved her hands, how she reached for the front
door and held her hand now, to her bag, touching things so lightly she looked reluctant to make contact with anything at all. Her hands might have been covered in gloves.

‘Well, I’m sorry. Perhaps you can understand. The last few weeks have been quite difficult. I need some time. What if I call you?’ She looked past him. She was speaking in a breathy voice that sounded as though it should have been coming from someone else’s mouth, someone smaller and less sure of themselves.

‘I could give you my number, then? You can call me, when you feel ready?’

He didn’t actually want to leave it up to her. He wanted to be able to follow it up, to remind her and pester her if he had to. But she had that look about her, the steadiness of stone, of someone who does things in their own time or otherwise not at all.

He handed her a piece of paper with his phone number on it and watched the door swing shut. Behind him the foyer had emptied.
He waited a week and then sent the images to the gallery in London by email in a low-resolution format. It was always difficult for him that moment of relinquishing control, of admitting there was no more he could do. He was never sure whether they were ready or not, or if he had simply reached the point where he didn’t know if he could do any more to them without causing some damage. But as soon as he had emailed the thumbnails to the gallery he let go of the images, their existence ceased their dependence on him, they forged their own way in the world and spoke for themselves.

The gallery called the next week, late at night, when he was already asleep.

‘It’s Marten Smythe here,’ a clipped voice said when he answered the phone.

‘Sorry?’ he sat up in bed, his thoughts rushing back towards consciousness.

‘Marten Smythe, London Six,’ he said.

‘Oh yes, sorry. It’s late here. Could you give me a few moments?’

‘Of course.’

He walked to the kitchen with the phone and filled the upturned glass on the sink with water. Through the kitchen window he saw the moon glowing through a thin layer of cloud as though behind silk, its light bleeding out around it. He picked up the phone again.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said, still feeling foggy from sleep.
‘That’s quite alright. I was just calling to talk about your prints.’
‘Oh yes,’ he said and worried suddenly that he was about to tell Andrew they weren’t what he wanted.
‘We’re really excited about this work,’ he said. ‘We’d like to have the prints ready as soon as we can. Could you send the full resolution images over on a USB stick by courier? In the next few days would be best.’ It took him a moment to readjust himself to this development and there was a sudden jerk of feeling, a leap from one place to another.
‘Oh right, wow. Yes, of course.’
‘Splendid. Also, the girl with the face.’ The girl with the face. He wanted to tell this man that her name was Phoebe and that she was a sophisticated young woman. Marten continued, ‘it’s almost excruciating to look at, the detail, but I have a feeling about it. It’s unique. I think it will sell well.’ He didn’t like to be reminded of this fact that art was a business and that like any other business, in the end it turned on money.
He hung up. These conversations with gallery owners and curators stripped him of his innocent belief that art was about art. And now, he was acutely aware of how he was exposing Phoebe. He thought of the images of Phoebe and started to worry that somehow they were too honest. They took advantage of her openness and maybe they were too exposing to be shown. Maybe if he exhibited those images, what he would be doing would be putting on display a personal transaction that had taken place between him and Phoebe; an interaction that was essentially private and should not be shown to the world.
In the morning, he put the images of Phoebe on a disc, but he did not post them. He put them in a drawer in his apartment. He would take a few more days to think it over.

The next day he went back to his mother’s house to collect some clothes he’d left there. It was just after one in the afternoon and he had chosen a time when he hoped his mother would be at work and he could slip in and out and avoid her. He didn’t want to risk her trying to talk to him
again about his father. He had gone too long without speaking about it and now his natural and only reaction to it was silence.

But his mother walked in from a shift at the hospital in her black slacks and white blouse, just as he was about to leave. Since she’d brought up the matter of his father’s death, they hadn’t spoken properly. When he had seen her, the words that passed between them were reduced to those that were necessary, they were quick and brief and spoken with no feeling. When she entered the room, she flung her eyes towards him. There was a rawness in her gaze that she wanted him to tend to. But he wasn’t sure he could do that now, or ever again.

She made herself a cup of tea and sat down at the kitchen table. She wanted this proximity between them, he knew. She thought if they were physically close, there would be the possibility for them to talk. He hadn’t talked to his mother about the coronial inquiry and now he had a sudden urge to tell her, maybe because it was something he could say to her that was hurtful. He sat down on the kitchen table opposite her.

‘There was a coronial inquiry into Kirsten’s death. It finished last week.’

His mother looked up, eager for whatever words he was prepared to share with her. She might have accepted anything from him just then, even an insult.

‘She took some pills before she drowned,’ he heard the hardness in his voice and the callousness in those words as he spoke them was aimed at her.

‘Oh my god,’ his mother said and covered her mouth with both hands. She knew what this meant, what it implicated. He thought of the words of the journalists he’d spoken to at court, no-one walks out into a lake of water unless they want to die.

He’d had time now to get used to it, but to his mother the news was still fresh. She closed her eyes to process it.

‘What happened?’

‘I still don’t know, exactly. The coroner hasn’t handed down his findings.’
‘God, that’s just. It’s terrible,’ she said. She went quiet, moving to the kitchen without saying anything more. She took the box of teabags from the cupboard and unwound the string from the bag carefully. He watched her closely in order to observe the effect his words had had on her.

Darkness passed across her face. ‘She was always so,’ his mother hesitated. ‘She always seemed so damaged.’ She blew on her tea and continued before he could answer her. ‘I could always see that about her, that she was too,’ she said, hesitating over her own thoughts. ‘Fragile for the world. Everything always seemed to affect her very deeply.’ His mother’s words were faint and wisping as she spoke. For a moment, he wondered whether she wasn’t really speaking about Kirsten at all, or whether her words were really referring to him. She looked out into the yard without saying anymore, but he could tell that Kirsten was still lodged in her thoughts. There was something about Kirsten that always seemed to linger, a mystery and he understood by looking at his mother now, that it wasn’t just with him.

That night when he had just stepped out of the shower, his telephone rang.

‘Hello?’

‘Oh, hello,’ he didn’t immediately recognise the voice.

‘It’s Renee Rothwell.’

‘Yes,’ he said, but his memory slammed against a wall.

‘We spoke after the coronial inquiry, the week before last? Sorry, it’s taken me this long to get back to you,’ she said.

‘Oh yes, no problem,’ he said, his thoughts catching pace with his words and realising Kirsten’s mother had called him. ‘We’d like to invite you. My husband and I would like to have you around for morning tea with us. This Saturday if that would suit you?’ Morning tea sounded very formal.
'Oh yes, sure. That suits me.' He spoke the words too quickly and tried to settle his own feeling of urgency. 'Why don’t we say eleven, then?' 'Great.' She gave him her address and directions from the train station at Gordon. When he replaced the phone on the receiver, he had the feeling of having been summoned and, for the next few days, he waited and paced and slept and ate like someone waiting to receive bad news.
Drowning on air

On the way to Renee’s house, catching the train to Central Station and transferring to the Berowra line, the train stopped at Wynard and he thought that he should have brought something with him. Something to offer them, something sweet for them to eat. People speak more freely when they have to open their mouths to eat anyway. If he had thought about it earlier, he could have bought something with him from the sourdough bakery near his apartment where he bought his coffee in the mornings. He thought of the macaroons in the glass cabinet there pastel circles, their colours bright and playful.

The metal struts slid across the window beside him as he passed over the harbour bridge. The harbour was a broken blue, the uninviting darkness of very deep water. Pushing his ticket into the machine, passing out through the turnstile that snapped shut behind him, he saw a small bakery and it was warm and smelt of yeast and sultanas. The bread was stacked on the shelves, loaves and loaves of it, the dimensions exact, pushed from the same mould, white and fluffy, lacking in nourishment. He missed the German bread he’d grown used to in Berlin, heavy and substantial. He bought a fruit loaf that felt soft when he picked it up and light as he carried it from the shop. Further down the street, he slowed down. He was going to speak to these people about their dead daughter and what he had to offer them was a flimsy loaf of bread. On the footpath on the way he stopped and packed it into his bag so it would be hidden.
The noise from the main street receded behind him, behind the lines of houses and he found himself on a quiet street. The wind jostled the trees around him, hostile. A crow flew past, its cry desolate and forlorn, three long pleas with no variation in tone.

In any other location, on the other side of the harbour, or in a town somewhere, these houses around him might seem ordinary. They would be the sorts of red brick dwellings that people lived in everywhere but here, in this location they were different. In these suburbs, they were grand and well cared for. They weren’t like the houses in Leichhardt that had been added to and built on and threatened to burst from their lawns. They were houses that remained confined to the seams that contained them.

In these driveways were new cars of moderate tones, the types of cars that slipped through the world and attracted no dirt. In their gardens were hedges and topiary plants and in their windows, the curtains were drawn. The houses as he passed were utterly still, they were houses from which all the children had already left home.

When he reached their house, there was a Poincianna tree in the front lawn that had shed its leaves and its trunk was scaly and smooth as a reptile’s. The branches were bare and, against the red brick behind it, its frame looked ghostly. It stood in the yard obstructing the front lawn and it took him a moment to notice the path around it.

‘Good morning,’ Renee said when she opened the door. The first thing he noticed was that she was wearing a knee length navy skirt and stockings and he wondered what sort of person dressed so formally on a Saturday in their own home. He walked in behind her and down the hall lined with photographs that hung along the picture rail. It was as though these photographs constituted proof of what these people had accomplished with their lives, documentary evidence of a useful and productive existence. They were photos that asked no questions.

There was a photograph of a girl with dark hair, a toddler, sitting in the haphazard way of a child who hasn’t yet learnt to walk and is yet to find
her centre of gravity. She was sitting on the edge of a round-about with her feet dragging in the gravel. The girl’s nose scrunched up tightly her hair was thin and wispy, barely enough to be pulled together in a pony-tail. She was wearing pink and the smile on her face was one that had never known sadness.

The young girl might have been Kirsten, it looked like her, but it might also have been her sister who he had never met. He lingered there, but ahead of him Renee had disappeared into a room to the left and he followed her, but he didn’t ask about the picture, because it felt somehow impolite to ask about a dead woman in a photograph.

The furnishings in the house were all new. He had assumed that people like this, older people whose children had left home and whose careers would soon be ending would hold onto the things they had collected over the years, that their furniture would accumulate in their house with them as they aged. But it was new and there was too much of it. It was place too closely together and everywhere it looked to be in the way.

For a moment, he was distracted by the clutter and didn’t see Kirsten’s step father standing there. He was behind the couch so that Andrew could only see him from above the waist, like a puppet on stage.

‘Saul,’ he said, holding out his hand.

His beard had turned completely white since they’d last met, but if he had any recollection of Andrew he didn’t show it as he leant forward over the lounge and shook his hand. His hands were large and forceful like the hands of a boxer. Maybe Renee hadn’t explained to her husband exactly who he was.

On the coffee table fine Italian biscuits were arranged on a white plate, the china so fine the light passed through it. They were delicate biscuits arranged like ornaments on the plate. Some of them were shaped like a horse-shoe, covered with flaked almonds, others were pistachio green. He thought of the fruit loaf in his bag that he put at his feet when he sat down, glad that it now remained hidden and that he wouldn’t have to embarrass himself by offering it to her now.
'Can I offer you some tea or coffee?' she asked.
'I'd love a tea,' he said.
She nodded and left for the kitchen and her husband stayed standing in the room. His features looked oversized, his nose and ears too large for his face, ageing had made his skin retreat from his features. His eyes were glassy, like the stuffed head of an animal on a wall. Those creatures had the same look about them as Kirsten’s step-father, of not quite believing where they had found themselves.
'What is it you do with yourself?'
'I’m a photographer.'
'Oh yeah? I suppose you work for a newspaper or a magazine?'
'Well, no.' He still found it hard to explain his occupation to other people.
'My photographs are more like portraits.'
'I see. I’m a sales person myself. I own an office supply business,' he said, coughing on the back of his hand.
Was it possible to completely erase a person from your memory, the way Kirsten’s father appeared to have done to him? But he found that there were people who were like this, who had no wish to examine the past and were able to live free of it. Renee walked in with tea in a delicate white teapot with a long spout a fine piece of porcelain china, the colour of crushed bones. She had the teapot on a tray and put it down on the table in front of her, making the movement awkwardly, without bending her knees.
'Are you working at the moment?' she asked and sat on the lounge opposite him, crossing one leg over the other and lengthening her skirt over her knees with her fingers.
'No. I, well. I’m preparing for an exhibition that’s opening next month.' A crease of anxiety unfolded inside him as he thought of the photographs of Phoebe that he still hadn’t sent to the gallery. What he was doing would threaten the professional reputation he’d taken years to build.
Renee sat in the corner of the lounge, holding one hand inside the other as though she’d been taught somewhere the proper way of sitting and had practised the pose with books on her head until it became routine. ‘Oh, I see,’ she said softly, fiddling with the cross on her neck.

Mr Rothwell stayed standing with the cup in his hand. He couldn’t keep his hand still and as he spoke, the teacup rattled on its saucer. ‘You know, we saw Kirsten quite regularly,’ he spoke loudly, over the clatter of his teacup. Renee pushed the sleeves of her cardigan up. ‘She came here to visit. She still had her own room here,’ he looked out the window as he spoke.

Andrew reached for a biscuit, but realised that neither Renee or her husband had eaten one. And his hand hovered there as he wondered whether they were only there for display. Renee nodded her head in a very slight movement that made it look as though she didn’t want to be seen. He took a horse-shoe shaped biscuit and held it in his hand, waiting for someone else to take one too. The biscuit grew sticky in his palm as he waited.

‘She asked to borrow the car for the day, you know?’ Renee’s husband started again, speaking more quickly. ‘She came into the office the week before to ask me. She told me she wanted to go down to see an exhibition. What was it again, Renee?’ He was a man who always spoke with a frown, a man for whom the world seemed to be a very confusing place. ‘She was going to the National Gallery of Australia,’ Renee said, looking down.

‘And when I found out what she’d done, I just,’ he stopped and looked into his tea. He spoke as though her death had offended rather than upset him.

‘How could I have known what she intended?’ His cheeks were sharply sunken, two divots in his skin.

Mr Rothwell cleared his throat and looked at Renee and understood that by coming here as a person from Kirsten’s past, he had somehow invited this. Somehow Mr Rothwell thought if he could explain himself to
Andrew that whatever he had done, or not done in relation to Kirsten, in whichever way he thought he might have contributed to her fate, he would be forgiven, as though he thought that being someone who had once loved her, Andrew had that power.

He was expecting the biscuit when he bit into it to snap in his mouth, but it was soft and crumbly and broke apart. He cupped his hand to his mouth to stop the pieces from falling to the floor.

‘Did she,’ he started to say. ‘I mean, had she. Was she alright, before?’ he asked, but all he could do was make a start on what he wanted to say. He couldn’t say the word accident, the word everyone else kept using to describe what had happened to Kirsten, even though whatever it was it hardly seemed to have been accidental. It seemed to be thought out, planned and deliberate, if nothing else, that much was clear.

‘She seemed happy enough, didn’t she, Renee? Last time we saw her, anyway.’

‘Yes,’ Renee said, looking up, but there was a heaviiness to her features the way a person looks when they are speaking of one thing, but thinking of another.

‘Well, Andrew,’ Mr Rothwell said, taking the last sip of his tea. He thought he was being dismissed, so he stood as well. ‘I’m going out to work in the garden. Saturdays are the only chance I get. I’ll leave you two here to talk.’ He sat down again and felt relief as Mr Rothwell left. Renee was still fiddling with the cross on her neck, as though some memory were attached to it. He was quiet and she was quiet and then they both spoke at the same time.

‘You go,’ he said.

‘I’m glad you came. I mean, when I saw you that day at court, it was very sudden.’

He supposed to her it seemed sudden, although to him it wasn’t that way, he’d been thinking about what to say to her for days.

‘Do you know if there was someone else in Kirsten’s life?’ the words skittered from his mouth and her lips twisted in response to his words.
‘It’s so hard to say with Kirsten. She was a bit, I don’t know. In the end, she didn’t always tell me everything.’ Then her tone changed it turned warmer. ‘She worked for many years for a barrister as his personal assistant,’ she articulated those last two words carefully, delineating between them as if they each meant different things. ‘I think she enjoyed that.’ She re-arranged her hands on her lap.

He licked his lips, lubricating them for words. ‘Did you see her? Before it happened?’

She stiffened and pressed her knees together.

‘I hadn’t seen her properly for a few weeks. She picked up the car from Saul at work. She seemed. Busy. I thought that was a good thing.’ Renee looked up and her eyes narrowed. ‘We really tried I mean, my husband gave her a job after she’d stopped working for the barrister. Even though she’d said some things about Saul that were hurtful.’ She looked into her lap and he waited for more of an explanation. Like Kirsten herself, everything he found out about her was tentative, capable of being understood in more than one way.

Renee was angry at Kirsten, for dying this way. Somehow she took Kirsten’s death as an insult, a personal accusation against her. He looked at the biscuits on the coffee table, wondering if it would be rude of him to take another one. He wasn’t sure why he felt so suddenly hungry; he felt an ache in his teeth for something sweet.

A dark looked passed over her face. ‘The barrister she worked for was married,’ she said, filling her words with air, as though she was blowing them towards him. There was an edge in her gaze almost, of menace. He shifted and underneath him the leather couch protested.

‘Had you seen Kirsten recently?’ she asked, looking across at him, her gaze steely like a thief’s. She had the look about her of someone who already knows. He thought for a moment that answering that question might be like handing her something he would never get back again.

He conceded that he had not and he knew what she was doing. With her words, she was questioning his right to be there at all. He felt a sudden
urge to make a confession. He thought that must be what she wanted from him.

‘I know that I didn’t handle things with Kirsten the way I should have, in the end,’ he found himself saying. He felt distant from his words, speaking about something that had taken place so many years before. ‘But we were both young.’ From the look on her face he could tell this was not what she had wanted to hear.

On the way from the house when they finished talking, he passed a window and saw Renee’s husband on his knees, working on the garden. He wore a white terri-towelling hat. He was tilling the soil with a small gardening fork, snail bait sprinkled over the garden bed, the pellets and unnatural green against the soil. A gloved hand waved at Andrew, the fingers of his leather gloves were stained with dirt.

‘Good-bye,’ Andrew said to Renee on his way out of the door and as he left he turned back towards her.

‘Thank you for coming,’ she said. ‘God bless.’

Looking back towards her from the way she stood in the doorway of her own home, so contained with her arms folded in on herself, he had the impression of someone being slowly smothered. Drowning on air.
He had been invited to a gallery opening by his friend Stephen, who had two prints in the show. When the email came, his first reaction was reluctance at the thought of confronting a room full of strangers, but he knew he should go, he so rarely had the chance to see his Sydney friends. Walking into the gallery that night with its floors of polished cement, the voices echoed from the hard surfaces, sounding as though they were being transmitted through speakers. He felt himself harden as he entered, bracing and marshalling his confidence. People stood with their glasses held to their throats, looking out from their drinks and cautiously around the room, huddled together in groups like people sharing secrets. His friend stood in front of one of the prints and next to a slim woman with long brown hair who he thought looked familiar. He moved towards them, wondering whether he had studied with her. Or maybe he didn’t know her at all; people seemed to contain traces of other people he’d met before. ‘Hi,’ Stephen said. ‘Thanks for coming,’ and shook his hand warmly. ‘This is Meredith,’ he said, gesturing to his girlfriend. ‘Nice to meet you. I’m glad I could make it,’ he said, thinking of all the openings he’d asked his friends to attend over the years, all the times he’d asked people to stand around and be happy for him. Stephen went to get another glass of wine and he was left alone with Meredith. She looked at him quickly and then looked away.
'Do I know you from somewhere?' he asked and tried to smile, but his mouth felt heavy.

'I don’t think so,' she said and looked over her shoulder, back towards Stephen. Since he had returned to Australia a few weeks ago, he moved through the world with an acute sense of dislocation, unable to find the right words to say to other people, too attentive to other people’s expressions and trying to read their reaction to him. He’d become very aware of his own presence in the world. He felt somehow, larger than other people, as though he lived in a miniature world and in every direction he moved, he threatened to dislodge something from its place.

Stephen was a print maker and worked mainly on lithographs, but he had never achieved any sort of commercial success and worked at a film archive, producing his art in the time he had spare. Sometimes Andrew thought that the only thing that distinguished him from other artists he knew was that he had been willing to make sacrifices, to persevere long after other, more reasonable people had given up in order to resume a normal life. Thinking that way was easier than the other thought he sometimes had, that maybe it came down to something as indiscriminate as luck.

'What are you working on?' Stephen was wearing glasses with black frames that shrank behind the lenses, so that they looked father away that the rest of his face.

'Oh, at the moment I’m just retouching some prints I have for an exhibition in London next month.'

'What are you doing back in Australia anyway, I thought you pretty much lived in Berlin now?'

'I had to come back,' he said. ‘Something came up,’ he half smiled and looked away, aware that in the way he spoke about himself, in his inability to be open with other people, he was spinning an enigma around himself that was as dense and opaque as a chrysalis. He used to believe it was something from which he would one day emerge.
'Right. Are you staying or heading back overseas? I thought you were married now?'

When he heard Stephen say those words, something inside him felt suddenly extinguished. He wasn’t married. In fact, he’d hurt the woman he loved. For a moment, he wondered whether he would spend his life from now on, coming back to this point, revisiting his decision to leave Berlin so quickly. When he allowed his thoughts to stray to Dom, the thoughts were of feeling her naked body pressed into his back.

‘No, I’m definitely headed back.’ He took a sip of his wine too quickly. It went down the wrong way and he coughed. For a moment he couldn’t breathe.

When he had decided to leave Sydney all those years ago it was because living in Sydney, every familiar building, every landmark and street, the jacarandas in spring and the bark that hung from the Morton Bay Figs like loose skin served only to remind him of all the ways in which he had failed, of all those years of failure, both as an artist and a human being. That was why he so studiously avoided coming back to it.

Stephen’s lithographs were beautiful and modest prints. They were close and observant studies of twigs and branches, the level of detail was striking. As he looked at them, they seemed to give off a quiet, hushed sound, of standing amid trees.

Across the room, he saw a tall woman in a blue shift dress looking towards him, her blonde hair spilling over her shoulders. She was familiar and he looked at her and looked away, unable to place where it was he recognised her from. She walked towards him with her arms stretched out beside her, in a manner that reminded him of a flamenco dancer. They kissed each other’s cheeks.

‘Hi, Andrew,’ she said. He realised she worked at the gallery in Sydney that had represented him since the start of his career. He hadn’t seen her in person in more than two years. ‘How long have you been back?’ she spoke in the seductive tone people who work in galleries used with
artists. You could get caught up in this, he knew. You could actually start to believe it.

‘I’ve been back a few weeks.’ Already the weeks were mounting.

‘How come you haven’t come to see us?’ she said, feigning offence. Then her voice dropped, it became soft and cool, the tone normally adopted to speak of a secret.

‘I saw your photos for London,’ she said. He thought of the photos of Phoebe the work he felt most proud of, but now a feeling of doubt ran through him. He had already exposed her to this world, the world of praise or failure and he was too aware of how closely those two extremes sat together.

‘Oh yeah?’ From her tone, he thought for a moment that what she was about to tell him was that they had no real interest in them, those words he had heard from other galleries for so many long years. That it wasn’t for them.

‘They’re really unsettling,’ she said. He felt the skin around his mouth harden. ‘What’s the expression?’ she continued, smiling. ‘Using the camera like a hand grenade?’ She took hold of his arm as she said it, a strangely intimate gesture. When she saw the reaction on his face, she said. ‘I mean that in a good way. Just be prepared for the reaction to it is all.’

He felt himself turn transparent, as though the people in the room around him must have been able to look at him and see the guilt he felt for the way he was about to expose Phoebe to the world.

‘So London, huh? Maybe us afterwards, if there are any prints left,’ she said, sighing and gathering herself up, looking around the room for the next person she would speak to.
The next afternoon he walked through Darlinghurst on his way to Oxford Street, in search of something to eat for dinner. The only clouds in the sky were long white strands that were thin and unthreatening. Though it was late in the day, the heat ebbed, it moved across the bitumen in swirls. On his way past the Sydney Tech Art School, he remembered the detail from the coronial inquiry about Kirsten having studied there. As he walked past the front gate, he decided on an impulse he would go inside. From outside, the sandstone walls were fat and tall, the large wooden gates were painted green and held together by cast iron. The buildings inside were oddly shaped sandstone blocks. One fat, round building in the middle of the grounds looked like a structure designed to keep watch. The buildings he passed obscured the path behind him and he turned back, feeling disorientated, as though navigating his way through a labyrinth. Students stood in small huddles, immersed in conversation. One young man wore a waistcoat and the woman he was talking to wore a long, pleated skirt that almost brushed the ground. They stood together with their arms folded looking poised, like people waiting to have their photographs taken. He remembered this from art school, the feeling that from the way these people looked at him, they didn’t particularly like him. And now what the years had taught him was that mostly what other people felt about him wasn’t even as strong as dislike, but something closer to neutral.
He walked into the building with an open door and it was bigger inside than he expected it to be, the ceilings arched, the wooden beams exposed. He might have walked inside the hull of an upturned boat. There were easels set up in the room for a class, but nobody was painting at them. The room smelt of linseed oil and turpentine a hard metallic smell, the smell of industry and suffocation. In the centre of the room were stuffed animals on metal spikes. He walked a wide circle around them a rabbit, a cat and a marsupial he didn’t recognise, all with thinning hair. Their eyes glassy and glistening, dead animals that had nothing left to do anymore, but wait to be painted. Through a glass door at the back of the building, he could see someone moving about in the small room.

‘Hello?’ he pushed the door slightly ajar.

‘Hi,’ the man said, looking up. ‘Are you lost?’ His eyes were a thin blue, the colour of a husky’s. His chin was prominent and he wore his jeans low around his waist. He stood in the doorway, while the man continued to work.

‘Nah, just here for a bit of a sticky beak. Screen printing?’ he asked, looking at what he was working on. The bench was cluttered, a wide brush with coarse black hairs, a pot of black paint and a spray can of fixative. He always admired people able to work amid mess. He had always required such strict and absolute order.

‘Wood block prints,’ he said. The man cut into a block with a small chisel and a fine shaving curled up, which he brushed away before he continued to work. He moved around to the opposite side of the table, in order to see the prints the right way up. The shapes were strong and bold a print of a woman, her face elongated and limbs thick, like a stone sculpture from the Easter Islands.

‘Great shapes,’ he said.

‘Thanks.’

‘Do you work here?’

The man nodded. ‘It’s handy for my own work,’ he said, smiling. He was a man who smiled easily.
'Did you ever come across a student named Kirsten Rothwell?' he asked and the man looked at him for a long moment.

'Yeah, I did.'

'What did you think?'

'Not a journalist are you mate?' he said, dipping a block of wood into a basin of fluid.

'Nah, a photographer actually. Andrew Spruce.' He cleared his throat. He could feel something loose inside it, like the movement in a rattle.

'She only studied here for one semester.' He cleared his throat. 'She was a bit unusual.'

'Unusual, how?'

The man looked up at him and he was older than he had initially though as he got closer, he saw the lines in his face were deep, like grooves in wood. 'You a friend of hers?'

He nodded.

'She just didn’t really fit in,' he said.

The man shrugged. 'I don’t know. Maybe because she was older than the other students, I guess. That and art schools can be difficult places to fit in at the best of times.' The man looked up at him with eyes that betrayed none of his thoughts. 'Don’t get me wrong. I thought she had talent. I had her in one of my classes. I mean, you know, there is a lot of talent in a place like this. The thing was, she was only ever copied other people’s work.'

'Other student’s?'

'No, it was more, she’d see something in a book and draw it exactly as it was, without any interpretation of her own. The drawings were technically good, but that’s not enough when you’re studying art. I tried to encourage her but she found criticism difficult.'

He wanted to know about Kirsten and yet, he was apprehensive about discovering for fear that what he found out would lead back to him. Everything he heard about her he scanned for implication, for the direction in which it cast out its lines, for which way it pointed.
'Did you hear what happened to her?' he said, licking his lips, aware that the way he was speaking of Kirsten made it sound as though she was a stranger to him, that through this man, he was allowing himself some distance from her.
The man wiped his hands on a grey rag and looked up. ‘Yeah, people talked about it here, after it happened,’ the man said.
‘What did you think?’
‘Well, I don’t know. It wasn’t exactly clear what happened, but I can’t say it entirely surprised me either, something like that happening to her.’ He tipped the basin of fluid into the sink and moved towards the door. The smell of chemicals lingered in the air. ‘Sorry, mate. I have to lock this place up now.’ He closed the door and looked at him. ‘Actually, I think I still have a few of her drawings in my office. I called the number she gave for her parents, but I could never get hold of anyone. I left a message on the machine. I could show them to you if you’re interested?’
‘I’d love to see them. It’s been a long time since I saw any of her work. I mean, I always thought she’d do something with it,’ he said. He remembered seeing her drawings and how they always produced a feeling with sharp edges, an envy at the fact that Kirsten had produced work like that just with her hands.
At the door to his office, the man pushed the key into the lock and manoeuvred his weight against the door. He switched on the fluorescent lights that fluttered and then buzzed with a static charge like neon signs. ‘Actually, she’s an old girlfriend of mine,’ Andrew said, tying himself to her and aware that this information might cast him in a different light. ‘A long time ago, now.’
‘Here they are,’ the man lifted out a large cardboard folder from behind his desk and saw Kirsten’s name written across the front. He could still identify her handwriting, an artist’s script in which attention is paid to the shape and symmetry of the letters.
He took the first page out. He recognized it as an exact drawing of Goya’s *Saturn Devouring his Son*. It looked to have been drawn in charcoal and
the shading was detailed, the strokes soft and feature, the attention to light and dark, exquisite.

Many years ago, he’d seen the original in Madrid, stood in front of it and inside him something had wilted. The whites of the old man’s eyes, the fear and madness that being usurped by his own child had produced in him, between his hands an adult’s body, the size of the baby’s, the old man clutching its waist with both hands like a lover. He couldn’t help but think that what Saturn was doing in consuming his son was trying to silence him and maybe all parents had this instinct in relation to their own children. Maybe all parents feared what their children have to say to them.

It was hard to look at this image now with the knowledge of what had come after and there was a period a brief moment, when he felt that image, when it rushed off the page and out towards him. It can’t have been very long that he stood there staring at it, but it was long enough for him to have the feeling of returning to the room after having been absent from it, of remembering where he was, looking up and around and taking in air.

The man was checking his emails on his computer. He turned back towards Andrew.

‘It’s is spooky, isn’t it? Hard to look at, now.’ He was shutting his computer down. ‘Sorry mate, I really have to go.’

‘Okay, sure,’ Andrew said. ‘What will happen to this drawing, now?’

The man pulled his office door closed. ‘I’ll try the number I have once more, but otherwise, I think I’ll have to destroy them.’

Andrew thought of Renee and wondered whether she didn’t want to see Kirsten’s work, if she wanted to remain ignorant of what it was that had preoccupied her daughter’s thoughts as she drew.

He walked out of the building and in the courtyard, a group of students were lingering after a class, bags over their shoulders, adjusting their bodies to the weight and hugging their books to their chests. A young woman held his gaze indifferently. As he walked out onto Forbes Street,
he realised he’d been gritting his teeth. A pain grew in his temples, a hot, tight feeling like a cramp.

He walked out on to Oxford Street and kept walking down to Victoria Street, towards Surry Hills. He decided he would do something he had not done in years. He would go into a bar alone and find someone to talk to. When he first moved to Berlin and he knew no-one he’d done that sometimes, he made some of his closest friends that way.

He sat on a stool and watched women loosely, without any specific interest, in order to remind himself what women who came to bars looked like. He tried not to think of what Dom would think if she saw him here in a place like this.

It was a Friday night and the women in the bar wore dresses and high heels, standing in lop-sided, precarious postures. The women looked pinched, their personalities folded up into a neat place inside them, the words they spoke and the clothes they wore might have been traced along dotted lines.

He asked the barman for a drink with vodka, because he wanted the clean and odourless oblivion that came from vodka. The thought of making conversation occurred to him in a distant and unresolved sort of way. He had never enjoyed the conversations that took place in bars, the false note of what people spoke of in bars, of two strangers assessing each other and discussing their surface concerns.

A woman with straight blonde hair who he’d been looking at without any real awareness of where his gaze had fallen walked towards him. She lifted one leg over the stool beside him. This woman had the look about her of someone who is easy in the world, who could laugh and enjoy herself. He had always held a fascination for people like her, people who were free in all the ways he felt constrained.

‘You’re here alone?’ she asked. Her voice had a sultry, broken quality striking between two notes.

‘Yes. I’m staying close by,’ he said, gesturing in the direction of his apartment with his hand. Somehow in the space of a few weeks he’d
slipped towards this fate. He had become a man who sat in a bar alone and drank vodka. It hadn’t even involved any sort of conscious decision by him. He’d drifted to this place without even making a choice.

‘I’m Deb,’ she said and he could smell the alcohol on her breath.

‘Andrew.’

‘And what do you do?’ she swayed slightly on her chair.

‘I’m a photographer.’ He looked down at the vodka which looked suddenly unappealing. She inched her hand towards him until their fingers touched. The feeling this gesture provoked in him was of a reptile slipping from a warm rock into a dark pool.

‘A photographer?’ she said and signalled to the man behind the bar. ‘I’m a recruitment consultant. I’ll have a martini,’ she said to the barman.

‘And for you?’ He shook his head and held his hand over his drink.

‘Come on,’ Deb said. ‘My shout. Whatever that is,’ she said to the barman and pointed at his empty glass. He sat on his stool and thought how sad it was to have come to this bar for company, that at thirty-seven, this is what had become of him. Once he had considered himself capable of great things.

‘What sort of photos do you take?’

‘Mostly portraits,’ he said. He looked up. Every surface around him was reflective. He kept his head down so he wouldn’t have to watch himself talking to this woman.

‘So, head shots and that sort of thing?’

‘It depends.’

‘On what?’

‘On what the subject looks like and how I want the image to look.’ He had the feeling when he spoke to her that he was bearing his teeth.

‘You know you’re not a very easy person to have a conversation with?’

‘You’re actually not the first person to tell me that.’ There were people who lived inside themselves and those who lived their lives externally and he had already accepted which sort of person he was.
'I’m an artistic photographer,’ he said, looking into his drink. No matter how many years he’d done it, it didn’t get any easier for him to admit this fact to strangers. There was always a tentative feeling about what he did with his life. He remained aware that what he did was something that could easily be taken from him.

‘I suppose the people I photograph,’ he said, thinking of the photographs of Phoebe, of her awkwardness and the way in which she was aware of herself in a way that other children her age were not, ‘are unusual in some way.’

Deb tilted her head at him. ‘Unusual?’

‘Yes, I suppose that’s it.’ He took a deep breath. He was a person who had to remind himself to be kind. Being hard on other people and himself was something that came to him too easily. Sometimes he felt he moved through the world with edges as sharp as knives.

She readjusted herself on her stool. The music in the bar sounded suddenly louder.

‘It must be wonderful to be able to do that with your life,’ she said. Her words were encouraging, but her smile was uncertain. This was the response he drew from people; he knew it too well. His self-consciousness confused them. These were the moments he wished he was someone who could slide through his life and pretend he felt no doubt.

‘Yes. Although I’ve done it for a long time.’ His sigh was heavy.

‘Then why do you keep doing it?’ It was a question he had often verged on, but never dared ask of himself. He couldn’t afford to. He had invested so much of himself in his work, sometimes he wondered if there would be anything left of him without it.

‘There are moments,’ he said, unsure how to finish his sentence. Maybe all there were in life were moments, brief occasions when you could look around you and found that the good things in your life had converged. Maybe everyone lived for those moments and in between was just a sort of waiting for things to turn better or to change. Maybe the question of living was how to survive those in between times.
She looked at him for a long moment. ‘You look sad about something,’ she said, but he knew that if you looked at anything for long enough you could end up seeing its sadness.

‘Maybe I am,’ he said, defiantly. Sometimes in the world he lived in, he felt sadness was a thing that had to be defended. Part of what he did in his work, he thought, was to fight for its rightful place.

‘It doesn’t sound like you have that much to be sad about?’ How could he explain it to her, that the things that happened to him in his life seemed to cling to him. The same things other people brushed from themselves like lint.

‘I don’t know. Maybe I’ve done bad things in my life. Hurt other people.’ He looked at her fiercely as he said it, perhaps attempting to flash her some sort of warning. She looked at him carefully. This was too much. He wasn’t a man who discussed his problems with strangers at a bar. He was a man who rarely discussed them with anyone. He also had no desire to stay sitting there and allow himself to become one. He stood and took his wallet from the back pocket of his jeans, removing a twenty dollar note and pressing it to the bar.

‘Oh, don’t go. Come on. Stay. We can talk about something else,’ Deb said.

‘Sorry,’ he said. ‘I’m just in a bad frame of mind. Honestly, it would be much better if I just left.’ She took hold of his wrist. ‘I don’t want to go home alone tonight,’ she said. He found himself looking at her lips. Her lipstick was a rim around the edges of her mouth. He looked away and tried to muster something, that instinct that had once been so familiar to him, the desire to be inside someone, the urge to move beyond himself.

‘It’s just. I love someone,’ he said and she released her grip on his wrist and her gaze on him became softer.

He left the bar. Outside it was windy and he put his hands into the pockets of his jackets and started walking, turning down Riley Street towards Darlinghurst. Just past Foveaux Street, he stopped on the corner
outside a series of connected terraces, painted dark green, the colour of camouflage, as though attempting to hide itself in direct gaze. The windows were tinted, reflecting the streetlights and there was a glow of a red lamp next to the door. Why was it that he never saw people entering these types of places? He stood there, looking at the brass number on the door and the doorbell light from behind in a small box of light.

Everything about the building suggested discretion, it said you could walk in there and out again without there being any trace of your visit. The traffic lights changed twice as he stood there looking at the door and the traffic swelled past him. Someone yelled as a car past. Down Crown Street and up Oxford Street, the signs were bright and the traffic was loud and the people on the street had a look of hunger about them as though they had come there to be fed.

When he got home, he opened the door and fell against the wall, moving with the sensation of having been thrown. It had been so long since he drank seriously, he had the feeling of slipping. His thoughts skidded towards blackness. In the lounge room, he lunged for his phone and dialled Dom’s number. He couldn’t get a hold of his thoughts they plunged forward, slipping as though tossed from a cliff. When she answered the phone, he could hear soft, lulling music in the background. A trumpet. Jazz.

‘Dom, it’s Andrew,’ he said. His head spun and he sat down and held his head between his knees.

‘Oh, hi,’ she said, her voice soft, spoken so it would not be heard by others.

‘Where are you?’

‘At home,’ she said, the music softened into the background and he heard a door close. She was moving through the apartment they shared together and she was there with people he didn’t know.

‘Do you have people over?’ his voice sounded shallow.
‘Yes,’ she said. A sudden ripple of laughter across the line, a chorus of it. Were they laughing at him? Had he become the joke in Dom’s life? Maybe that was what he had made himself into.

‘I just, geez. I found out more about Kirsten. I saw some of her drawings today. I just, I don’t know what happened to her. No-one does. I mean, she just vanished that day,’ he said, aware that his thoughts were leaping from place to place. He stood up, but felt he was standing on sloping ground.

‘Are you drunk?’ she said. ‘You hardly ever drink. What’s happening to you?’ He didn’t answer her. He couldn’t really explain it. He wished he’d never come back to Sydney. He’d made a mistake in leaving Berlin.

‘You know you’ve been away almost three weeks?’

‘Three weeks?’ he hadn’t been counting and time had passed so easily. He had left with the intention of returning straight away and somehow now that he was here, he couldn’t bring himself to leave.

‘Sorry, I didn’t intend to take this long. I just. I took the photographs of that girl I was telling you about. Also, there was a coronial inquiry into Kirsten’s death here and not even her mother really knows what happens to her.’

‘I’ve been back in Berlin for a week now,’ she said and there was a stiffness to her words.

‘She was just such a talented artist,’ he heard himself saying. ‘She was just much better than me, you know.’ Even as he spoke, he knew this, all of it, wasn’t really about Kirsten, that somehow it was to do with him.

‘She was much better than me, you know. She could draw. Just with her hands,’ he said this as though the ink she had used had been bled from her fingers. He felt tears on his skin, hot tears that dripped all the way down his cheeks and from his chin.

Something changed then, about Dom’s voice. All the patience was expelled from it and it became thin and hard like steel. ‘What’s happened to you? Have you fallen in love with a dead woman?’ He heard a click
the sound of her putting down her glass of wine. It was definite sound, a certain one, now she was fed up.

‘No, that’s not it.’

‘Andrew, I’m thirty nine and I love you and you are a difficult man to love.’

He didn’t know how to answer her. Sometimes he thought he’d become so used to keeping quiet, he had forgotten how to really talk.
Self, identity and the ethics of portraiture in photography and writing

Unintended consequences

Two days later, with a cool breeze blowing in over Sydney from the ocean and salt in the air, Andrew went to his mother’s house to borrow her library card. She kept it under the small bowl on the kitchen bench and he went into her house while she wasn’t there and took it without asking. He went to the library at Leichhardt with the intention of borrowing a book about Diane Arbus. He crossed Norton Street and walked through the arcade to the Italian forum, through the walls and floor of terracotta, descending the stairs to the library. He remembered having bought a catalogue from a Diane Arbus exhibition the first time he’d seen her work exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, when he was still a young man, but he hadn’t found it amongst his boxes in storage and must have left it somewhere, with someone, in one of the cities he’d lived in over the years since he’d left Australia.

There was something about her photographs, about the way Diane Arbus saw people that he wanted to revisit. His need was particular and immediate. Sometimes he thought every photograph he had ever produced was in homage to her work, the strange people, the freaks, the oddness and the ordinary in such close proximity. The first time he’d seen one of her photographs there was something about it that reached in and stroked his bones. It was the first time he realised that everybody felt this way, this dislocation. Some people were just better at pretending they didn’t.
The glass doors parted with a sudden jerk and he was hit by the quietness inside the library the absence of sound had a pull to it, a seduction. It drew him towards it. He tip-toed towards the closest shelf, but it was full of children’s picture books, some of the names he recognized from his childhood, *The Very Hungry Caterpillar, Where the Wild Things Are* and *Possum Magic*. He would lose himself in the pictures and forget about the words. The library smelt of ageing paper. The ceilings were low and the light was fluorescent and sharp. As he walked deeper into the room it felt like a bunker, a place protected from the outside world. He had forgotten this about libraries that, like galleries, they were places in which quietness is encouraged.

He found the non-fiction shelves and stood in front of the books. It had been such a long time since he’d had to sort through books, to check a catalogue and to sift through information. He had grown accustomed to having the things he needed close to hand, of typing words into his computer and having what he needed returned to him a second later.

When he couldn’t find a shelf of photography or art books, he walked to the counter where a woman stood with her head down and her brown hair fell across one shoulder. She looked up.

‘I was wondering if you could tell me where I might find your books on photography?’ he met her gaze and focused on her face, which was familiar, although he was unable to say from where he recognised her. A strange disorientation crept over him, the feeling of having been spun in a blindfold and now attempting to stand still.

‘Hi,’ she said, her voice throaty and warm.

‘Hi,’ he replied. ‘I know you, don’t I?’ He looked at her nametag. *Pippa*. A feeling stirred in him, like the memory of something from his youth.

‘You took the photographs of my daughter?’

‘Yes, Phoebe, of course,’ he said quietly. He thought of Phoebe’s photographs, the high resolution images in his drawer that were still waiting to be sent off to the gallery in London. He still hadn’t decided on what to do about the pictures. Instead, he’d pushed them to the bottom of
his thoughts. ‘I’m sorry. I’ve been a bit distracted,’ he said. Above him a fluorescent light stuttered.
‘You certainly made a big impression on my daughter. She has it in her head now that she wants to be a photographer.’
‘Really?’ he said, feeling giddy as his thoughts struck Phoebe again. Soon he would be leaving for London, where they were expecting the photographs he’d taken of Phoebe to be hung on crisp, white walls and people would stand and frown at them and appraise his work. But he couldn’t see how the photos could be shown, without causing some damage to her. Perhaps he could just keep them for himself and gaze at them from time to time when he wanted to be reminded of Phoebe and her honesty and openness in the world. He would find some other way to make money; he’d take commercial photographs again if he had to.
‘Actually, it’s her birthday soon. She’ll be thirteen next week. She asked for a camera.’ She held her mouth in a strange shape after she spoke, as though attempting to anticipate his reaction to what she’d said. ‘But I’m just not sure which one to get for her.’ She shook her head, remembering where she was and moved closer to the computer. ‘Was there a particular book you were looking for?’
‘I’m after a book about the photographer Diane Arbus. I had a book of hers, but…I can’t find it. I can’t remember the name of it.’ He noticed this in himself lately, half finishing his sentences and trailing off, perpetually distracted from what he was trying to say. The words he needed for ordinary conversation somehow lost to him.
Pippa typed something into the keyboard. ‘It looks like we have a biography and a book of photographs. They should both be on the shelf.’
She moved out from behind the counter and he noticed again, how short she was. He stood over her, feeling too tall in her presence and stooping slightly, like a giant as they stood by the shelf together. She deposited two books in his hands.
‘I’ll leave you to decide,’ she said and padded back towards the front counter.
'Thanks,' he called after her.
He flicked through *Diane Arbus: Revelations* and as he looked at the photographs, the rest of the world became a soundless, watery pool. There was something about looking at a photograph that made him hold his breath, drawn suddenly into the moment of the picture. Sometimes he even thought that if he were to die while looking at art, it might make his death bearable, that it would lull him into a quiet state where his breath slowed down and the air around him turned thick and he might not even notice his own passing.
He flicked through the book and stopped at *The Backwards Man*. The photograph of a man standing fully dressed in a bedroom who looked perfectly ordinary until you saw his feet were facing in the opposite direction to his body. At first it appeared to be a sleight of hand, a photographer’s trick, but the longer he spent looking at the photo the more the image appeared normal. A photograph could do this, it could make strangeness seem normal and transform it into a thing of beauty. He had been thinking, more and more that maybe this was what a photograph was for.
When he walked back to the counter to loan the book, Pippa was serving another customer and he waited behind the rope. Above him, the air conditioning hissed softly.
‘Find what you were after?’ Pippa asked.
He nodded. ‘Yes, I did. Thanks,’ he took his mother’s library card from his wallet and slid it, together with the book, across the counter. She picked up the card and looked at it for a moment, hesitating. He thought she was probably type of person who struggled with breaking rules. ‘It’s my mother’s card,’ he said.
‘Oh, okay,’ she said and smiled tightly and it beeped as she scanned the barcode. She held onto it for another moment, weighing it in her hand.
‘I don’t suppose you’d be willing to help me decide what sort of camera to buy for Phoebe? I find the technical details in the catalogue confusing.’
'Sure,’ he said, surprised by her question, that she would trust him with this. She struck him as a person for whom it was difficult to ask for help. She handed the Diane Arbus book back to him. ‘I have a catalogue in my bag,’ she said, nodding over her shoulder towards the mirrored glass behind her, where he saw a dark shape moving. ‘I finish work in about fifteen minutes?’ she said, hopefully.

‘Well,’ he said, looking at his watch. ‘I could get a coffee and wait for you?’ he said. ‘Sure, there’s a café just up the stairs?’

It was a Tuesday afternoon and the café was empty, apart from two old men in the corner of the room speaking Italian loudly. The walls and furniture were an off white, discolouring unevenly like old teeth. He sat in the café that smelt of garlic and red wine and realised how hungry he was. Lately, there was a space in the pit of his belly and a constant sense of loss.

Pippa walked past the front window with a library bag over her shoulder weighed down with books. She wore a scarf tied loosely around her neck. On her way in, she gave the door a heave, but it offered very little resistance and swung inwards quickly. Her movements were flinty and determined. There was a seriousness about her, she was ready to attend to business, not wanting to waste any time. She dragged a chair from the next table to his and already had the catalogue out of her bag when she took a seat opposite his.

‘Would you like a coffee?’ he asked. He’d already started sipping at his, a warm, syrupy liquid.

‘Oh yes,’ she said, looking up, around her and realising where she was. She looked towards the counter and she pushed the catalogue across the table towards him, while she went to order a coffee for herself. He flicked through the glossy brochure, but found the number of cameras inside overwhelming. It had been a long time for him since he’d had to make a decision about a new camera. He’d used the same Hassleblad for over ten
years and only recently bought an updated model, when he had received an influx of money from his last exhibition. He liked this certainty, that it was settled and he no longer had to make a decision about this one, important aspect of his life.
Pippa walked back to the table, looking at her cup as she walked. He had the brochure closed when she sat down.
‘Where’s Phoebe today?’ he asked.
Pippa lifted her head, but didn’t quite meet his gaze. ‘She’s staying with her father tonight.’ He saw that the mention of Phoebe’s father caused her some discomfort. She took a sip of his coffee. The lines around her eyes were set like scores in pastry.
‘You must have been young when you had Phoebe?’ She looked up at him quickly. ‘I fell pregnant when I was twenty-three. Her father and I had separated before she was born,’ she said and smiled with the self-consciousness of a person unused to talking about themselves. He made the calculation. She was younger than he was by a year or two and yet he had assumed the opposite. She sat on the edge of her chair, looking at the wall behind him more than she was looking at him. He could see from the way she sat that she was someone who didn’t allow other people into her life very easily and he was threatening to open a door that was more comfortably left closed.
‘It hasn’t been easy for Phoebe. Sometimes I think it’s hard for children of single parents,’ she stole a quick glance at him and looked to be worried that she’d given too much of herself away.
‘But you two have a great relationship?’ he said. The expression on her face as she listened to him appeared almost stern.
‘Sometimes I think we’re too close. I guess I was really too young to know how to bring up a child alone,’ she said. Her sudden honesty made him look away. They didn’t speak for a minute or two, the intensity of her words required a period of silence to pass between them.
He was the first to speak. ‘While I was looking through the catalogue, I remembered that I actually have an old camera I could give to Phoebe.'
It’s a very good camera, just an old model. She’s welcome to it, though it’s probably more sophisticated than what she needs.’
‘Oh, no,’ she said, holding up her hand. Like him, she had made a point of doing things on her own and he wondered at this commonality between them, why they were both people who found it difficult to rely on others.
‘No, honestly. It’s just sitting at my mother’s house. I haven’t used it in years.’ Where had this sudden generosity come from? He wasn’t usually a person who gave his things away. The few possessions he had acquired and accumulated, he normally kept for himself, even if he never used them.
‘Well, I can pay you for it. Just let me know how much?’ she said.
A man and a boy wearing his school uniform walked in and stood in front of the gelato freezer. The boy was wearing brown sandals and Andrew suddenly felt for him, thinking how those shoes would get him teased as school.
‘No,’ he said. ‘Don’t worry. Honestly, I won’t use it again.’
She dipped her teaspoon into her coffee, stirred and pulled it out and tapped it twice on the rim of her cup. ‘When’s the exhibition?’
‘Next month,’ he said. For such a long time it felt a long way away and now it was upon him, he felt the sensation of hurtling towards a wall.
He hesitated over his next words, unsure if they were even worth raising with her now. But curiosity took the better of him. ‘I take it you didn’t object to her photograph?’
Pippa sighed and looked away from him. ‘To be honest, I wasn’t sure. Phoebe liked it though – she was fascinated by the image of herself. I don’t know, I couldn’t bring myself to say no. And part of me thought it might be good for her self esteem. She never seems aware of it, but one day I think she will be.’
It hurt him to hear what she said. He knew already that a photograph could never really help a person with their self esteem. Even if you liked your photo, it was something you would always move away from.
'What do you think people will say about it, at the exhibition?' She sat forward in her chair, the position of someone who is anxious. He knew it too well.

'I don’t know. I’m never a very good judge of that sort of thing.' He didn’t tell her that he might not exhibit show them. He didn’t want to think he might have put them through this for no reason at all.

Pippa fiddled with her silver bangle, turning and turning it around on her wrist. 'I’m glad it’s happening so far away. I’m not sure how it would affect Phoebe, if she were criticised,' she said, looking into her cup as she took a sip.

'Well,' he said slowly, not sure he wanted to be having this conversation with her when he hadn’t even made up his mind about whether he would show the photos at all.

'Any criticism would be directed at me, rather than at Phoebe.'

'I know. I can’t protect her from everything,' she said, looking away and he understood that somehow she wished she could.

Maybe it was the fact that Phoebe wasn’t there that gave him the courage to ask the question finally, about her. The detail he most wanted to know about her when he’d taken her photograph, the truth of what lay behind how she looked.

'How did it happen?'

'You mean her face?' Pippa’s mouth was hard. Her features were small and cluttered.

He nodded.

'I was so young when I had Phoebe. I wasn’t even. Her father and I. We drank too much tequila one night at college. We weren’t in love. Back then, I was someone who used to be able to have fun. I suppose a lot has changed about me since then. I was studying law at the time, you know?'

Her face was slack, as though it still caused her some pain to speak of this. 'I wanted to be a criminal prosecutor. I dropped out when I found out I was pregnant. I only managed to finish my arts degree. I guess I always thought I’d go back one day, but now that seems fairly unlikely.'
It’s never too late.’ He hoped his words didn’t sound feeble.

‘No,’ Pippa said, vaguely. ‘Well her father, I mean. I don’t know how to put this any other way. He wasn’t the man I would have chosen to start a family with. It was one night and I got pregnant and I decided to keep the baby, even though we were both so young. I told him he didn’t have to get involved with her. My father was a doctor,’ she said, looking up.

‘He told me that he knew people who could help.’ The skin around her jaw was heavy and thick like wet clay.

‘After I had her, when Phoebe was a baby, I didn’t want her to see her father. But when she started to get older and go to school, I knew she’d start to wonder who he was. That I couldn’t keep him from her, that it wasn’t have been fair.’ The way she said the last word, the way her other words seemed to halt around it made him aware that fairness was something that was important to her.

‘He was just irresponsible, but he did try. He really did try to be a good father to her. And it didn’t go as badly as I thought it might, so I let Phoebe start staying with him overnight. Then over weekends.’ It struck him that what she was saying was something she hadn’t told anyone else, but had thought over many years before. Her words had an evenness, a pacing that suggested she had thought them over and put them in order.

‘I’ll never forget that day. It changed everything, even more than having Phoebe. That day set the course for the rest of my life. My friend and I drank a bottle of wine together in the sun, on Bronte beach. It was one of the first warm days of the year. It had been so long since I’d been able to do anything like that and I felt, I don’t know, reckless. The way I used to feel before I had Phoebe, when I only had to worry about myself. Him taking Phoebe, it was the first time since having her that I had more time to myself.’

‘That sounds natural to me,’ he said. He wondered then, about his own mother, whether there were times she wanted to be free of him.

‘When I walked in my front door, the phone was ringing,’ she said. ‘And I knew. Or maybe I was just always worried when she was with him. It
was the doctor from the hospital. I was her legal guardian and they needed my permission to operate.’

‘What happened?’ he asked. He felt he was tilting in a direction he hadn’t expected to go.

‘He had taken her on a motorbike, driving through a paddock on his parents’ farm without a helmet. She came off the bike and hit a fence post. She was knocked unconscious. The post hit a nerve on her face and they operated on her, but they couldn’t restore it.’ Pippa looked at him with a firm face, set to expect criticism.

‘Oh, that’s awful,’ he said. ‘But it wasn’t your fault.’ He said his words firmly, as though they were capable of changing something as large and painful as what she had told him. Even as he spoke he knew that what had happened was something that couldn’t only ever be mended inside her and it was something that might not ever mend at all.

‘I don’t know. People do things. Things they don’t intend to do. It can cause just as much damage to a person. Maybe in some ways the things people do unintentionally are harder to understand,’ she said and he heard her words clearly, resonating long after she’d spoken them, like the striking of a bell.
The next morning on his way back upstairs with his ritual, morning coffee he bought a newspaper. It was an old habit of his, of needing to know what was happening in the world. He flicked through its pages and stopped to read the occasional article that was of interest to him. Normally he skimmed across the world’s events and felt better for knowing them, even if his knowledge was only summary.

On the table beside him his phone rang.

‘Hi, Andrew. It’s Renee Rothwell speaking again.’

‘Oh, hi,’ he said. He felt himself clench. He hadn’t expected to hear from Kirsten’s mother again. When he had left her house that day, he had the impression that he’d been filed away in her life, like an unpleasant task she had completed once and would never have to repeat.

‘How are you?’ She asked, but her words sounded perfunctory, a necessary segue to something else.

‘I’m fine, thanks.’

‘I wasn’t sure if you’d still be here. I thought you said you were going back to Berlin,’ she said, pausing. He wasn’t about to explain to her the problems he was having with Dom or his exhibition. He knew from what little contact he’d had with her that she was a woman with whom he shouldn’t share secrets. ‘You see, they just called me. From the coroner’s court. I thought you might like to know. The coroner handed down her findings. You can read them on the website.’
'Thanks for letting me know,' he said. She said nothing, but he could hear her breathing. She was lingering, as though there was something else she wanted to say to him.

'I haven’t read them myself yet,' she said and gave a small, nervous laugh, a girl’s laugh.

'Well, I’ll go online straight away,' he said, anxious to hang up the phone and read the findings for himself.

'Yes, okay,' she said. 'Goodbye.'

He hung up the phone and turned on his laptop. He went to the coroner’s website and found the decision straight away. What he wanted were definite answers. He wanted a fixed point that he could look at and distance himself from. What he wanted most of all, was to be told what had happened was somehow inevitable, that Kirsten had always been this way and he couldn’t have done anything, all those years before, to have prevented it. But the word that was used was inconclusive, an uncertain word that hovered between two places.

The coroner said that Kirsten had most likely died by asphyxiation caused by drowning, although the body was never found. She appeared to have taken several Xanax, which may have contributed to her death. The coroner couldn’t rule out misadventure. Misadventure, it sounded like such an ordinary and harmless word.

Andrew scanned the document again. What he read, was expressed in words that were conditional, they brushed across the surface of what had happened that day and closed over no holes. The coroner didn’t delve into why a person might have died so silently, that question was left for the people who knew her and remained.

He moved to his window and below him the street looked closer than he expected it to, a small leap to the ground.

On his way out of the building later that day in the lift, he looked at his reflection. He saw the awareness of this new information about Kirsten in his gaze. That was when he remembered the detail, the evidence given by
the police officer at the coronial inquiry about Kirsten’s sister living in Canberra. It came back to him like the recollection of a dream, moving through him first as a feeling before the memory took shape. Kirsten had driven down her sister’s street that day back and forth, pacing like a person trying to gather the right words to say. He wanted to visit Kirsten’s sister and his need to speak to her was immediate. There was more to know about Kirsten than what he’d just read and maybe her sister would be the person who could disclose it. He hired a car to drive to Canberra that day and, as he made the preparations, packing his backpack with the things he would need, and he felt a small excitement flicker within him, attracted to the idea of movement, of going somewhere new.

Andrew had forgotten that drive out of Sydney, how the suburbs continued on and became at first older and then newer and finally more spread out the further he drove from the centre of Sydney. The houses might have been spun in a centrifuge and dispersed that way. When he was cruising out along the Federal Highway, he remembered why he liked driving, aware of the movement, of seeing the world slide silently by, the feeling of being sealed from it and all that mattered was his destination.

The further south he drove, the land seemed to change from green into a paler colour, the landscape yellow and parched. Closer to Canberra, in a creek that ran beside the highway, willow trees now grew from the water, deposited there by banks that had collapsed. In the water their leaves billowed out around them.

As he drove he started to see on the sides of the road, dead creatures bundled up like sacks. At first he didn’t understand what they were until he saw a creature that must have died that day, the long pink smear of it along the surface of the road. He swerved to avoid it and the car beside him honked loudly. There seemed to be too many of them, little brown bundles on the shoulder of the road where the bitumen was soft.
When he reached Canberra, he had an immediate sense of the city’s spaciousness. The streets were built long and wide, with gentle corners, as though built to accommodate a procession. There was nobody out on the streets though and it felt like a town that had been built but abandoned. Everything that happened in Canberra seemed to take place behind closed doors, in meeting rooms or malls.

Occasionally, he saw someone emerge from the building and scuttle off to a car. It was a silent city, occupied by public servants. He could almost imagine the scale model from which it had come. On his way to the motel, he looked down one street that was straight all the way to the memorial. It was a city in which the streets had been planned before the buildings and houses, a giant thoroughfare designed for ease of movement from one place to the next. A place where nobody actually stopped.

On his way to Ainslie, he stopped beside Lake Burleigh Griffin. The water was dull and unmoving as a flat piece of rusted tin. It had been such a long time since he had been there and he wanted to get a sense of the city, this small, quiet place from which his country was governed. The place he had seen most often as a thin and static background on the news. He parked beside a tree with leaves that were red. In the lake, the water was a milky brown colour, thick and silty like water in a dam. The fountain dispersed a stream of water that was pushed sideways in the wind. Around the edges of the water, a dirty foam had gathered as though around a sick mouth.

Across the lake was Parliament, with its windows darkly tinted like the windows of a limousine. The Australian flag snapped on its mast in the wind. The bells of the national carillon started to tome, on a random scale. On the opposite side of the lake was the National Gallery, where Kirsten had told her mother she was going that day she came there and he understood why she might have decided not to go in. He had found
himself that it was hard to look at other people’s work when he was producing none of his own.

He drove to Ainslie along a straight road towards the War Memorial at the end, a monolithic arch of concrete built to honour the dead. He turned left towards Mount Ainslie where the houses seemed to press up against it, making the suburb feel enclosed.

He drove down Campbell Street, the street that Kirsten had driven up and down that day. A sudden shiver moved through his body as he thought to himself he was driving the same route she had, following the path of a woman who was now dead, the trail left behind by a ghost. The thought he had as he followed her movements was that what she was doing, driving around Canberra that day was looking for a reason to live and she hadn’t found it there. She hadn’t found it anywhere.

He squeezed his foot against the brake and the car behind him, large in the rear view mirror sounded its horn. The sudden noise unsettled him.

On the letterbox beside the car, he saw the number he had parked beside was forty-eight and the house he was looking for was number fifty-two. The handbrake was stiff, resisting as he pulled it into place and he waited in the car, knowing that as soon as he stepped outside, he would have to make an investment in what he had come there to do. He extracted the keys from the ignition, stepped out of the car and breathed in air that was cool. Gum trees lined both sides of the street and they had outgrown it, set to a different scale than the houses in the suburb.

The house was a one-storey brick house, of cream colour bricks, compact like the model of a home. Unimposing. There was a clean white car parked outside the double brick garage. It was the sort of house that gave nothing away about the people who lived inside it and offered him no sense of what to expect.

On the way across the lawn, dried gum leaves crunched under his shoes like snail shells. He stood in front of the door, about to knock when he noticed the doorbell beside the door, a black plastic box around a white
button. The sound was a simple, two-note chime, an innocuous sound that might have been easy to ignore. He couldn’t hear any movement from inside the house and had a sudden need to leave. What could this woman really tell him about Kirsten that he didn’t already know or had guessed? But the door opened before he could leave. The woman standing in front of him wore a white shirt, unbuttoned to her chest with a tasteful, silver pendant. She had her mother’s awkwardness and her lips were held tight, pursed, as though still recoiling at the memory of an insult delivered many years before. Her arms were lean and toned – she was someone who went to a great effort to make herself look thin. She frowned at his appearance there, at her door.

‘Yes?’

‘Hello, my name is Andrew Spruce. Are you Lydia Thomas?’ The woman folded her arms, nodded and scepticism moved across her face, a quiver of movement like someone suddenly aware of the cold. He wondered if she thought he was there to try to sell her something. And perhaps in a way, he was seeking something from her, some reassurance that her sister’s death was not his fault. That what had happened to Kirsten was not in any way, attributable to him. He wanted someone, someone with authority, who knew Kirsten better than he had to touch him on the arm and tell him that he was not responsible for what had happened to her. Whenever he thought of Kirsten’s death, the first feeling to surface in him was a sick sense of guilt.

‘I know this might sound strange to you, but I met your mother a few weeks ago,’ he said, thinking the woman would soften at the mention of her mother, because that was the response mothers drew from their children. But he saw something else in her then, a stung look. The look of someone unexpectedly hit with bad news, but she recovered herself quickly and he had the impression that this was something she had grown used to.

‘Did my mother tell you to come here and see me?’ she asked and he got another glimpse of Renee in her daughter, the way her face was so
carefully held, her lips poised. It looked as though she had tried, but never been able to leave her mother behind. Every day she would see Renee staring out from her own reflection.

‘No,’ he said. ‘Nothing like that. I just wanted to talk to you about your sister.’ She didn’t respond immediately and for a moment, he wondered again whether he had mixed her up with someone and she wasn’t Kirsten’s sister after all. Thomas was not such an uncommon surname.

‘Yes, Kirsten. My half sister,’ she said.

‘Yes,’ he said and worried for a moment that she might be about to shut the door on him, to turn him away. ‘I used to know her. My name is Andrew. I was Kirsten’s boyfriend, a long time ago now. We never met, but Kristen and I lived together for a while, when we were at university,’ he felt he was pushing his words up a very steep hill.

Lydia looked to her left, aware of someone else in the house, although it seemed silent to him clean and undisturbed, like a house people spent their holidays in.

‘You had better come in,’ the woman said. The understanding of who he was and how he was connected to Kirsten seemed to tug at her. Her shoulders slumped, a sudden new awareness of gravity seemed to weigh at her. She stepped back and let him in. He followed her into the lounge room. The lounges were a soft, beige leather that gave way underneath him too easily. He fell backwards into it.

Lydia disappeared into the other room and he heard the murmur of voices. After she re-emerged, he saw a car drive out from the garage and down the driveway. She sat on the chair opposite him. ‘My husband,’ she said and waved her hand in the direction of the door he’d just walked through.

‘I don’t think I saw you at the coronial inquiry?’ he said. Part of him still wondered whether he had the right woman, whether there hadn’t been some sort of mix up, because her reaction to him, given who he was and what he should have represented to her seemed very mild.
'No, I didn’t go to Sydney for it,’ she said. She held her hands out on either side of her body, touching the lounge with the tips of her fingers, as though to assist her with balance.

‘Your mother didn’t mention me to you? I went over to her house.’

‘My mother and I don’t talk regularly anymore,’ she said and there was a directness to her words, a finality that made the subject sound closed to her. He wondered what it would be like, to willingly shut a parent out of your life. He imagined that it was a door that wouldn’t shut easily.

‘Did you have much contact with Kirsten?’ he asked.

‘Less over recent years. She lived with us for six months last year. She was looking for work down here. After she. When she stopped working for the barrister. The barrister. There was something about the way she said those words, holding them up between them like soiled clothes. She looked at him, regarding his clothes and shoes, making him feel he was being appraised. ‘But we hadn’t spoken in months.’ Her eyes were sharp and her mouth was narrow, giving him the impression that it was taking a great deal of effort to keep her feelings at bay.

‘Well, I can’t imagine what it must have been like. I don’t have any siblings myself.’ His words made him sound like a coward. He looked down after he spoke and the carpet under him was the colour of crushed eggshells. ‘Well,’ Andrew said. ‘I know we never met, but Kirsten often spoke about you. I know you were important to her.’ His skin went tight and he realised how cold it was inside her house. It must have been the air conditioning. It felt colder indoors than it had been outside. ‘I. We fell out of touch in the last few years,’ he said, when she didn’t reply to him. He worried that his words sounded too thin and superficial, that they had been said too often before by other people. It was hard for him to swallow, his throat felt dry.

‘Yes, well. I mean. Of course. It’s nice to know that Kirsten had friends,’ she said. He felt a tear in his eye, large and hot and threatening to fall. Emotions were welling in his chest and billowing open as though inflated
with warm air. He didn’t want to move or to speak, for fear they might engulf him.

‘Could you tell me about what she was like in the last few years?’ he managed to ask, barely recognising his own voice as he spoke. It quavered and leapt between words.

Her sigh before she spoke was long and draughty. ‘When she was well, she was fun to be with. Maybe I remember that most because I knew how dramatically it could change. You can give so much of yourself to another person, I didn’t know that.’ She looked up at the roof as she spoke and he thought she’d forgotten him when she continued. ‘Sometimes, especially in those months she was living with us, do you know what I started to worry about? That if I kept giving she would take everything I had. To be honest, the day I came home from work and found she was gone, I actually felt relieved. Having her here nearly claimed my marriage.’ As she sat opposite him, she looked guarded and composed and not very much like a generous person at all.

‘I never really knew she was unwell.’

‘For as long as I can remember, Kirsten had problems with anxiety. That was even before that term became as popular as it is now. Even as a teenager, she just used to worry so much. Most of the time she was fine, but when it came it was debilitating,’ she said and touched her fingers to her lips.

He wondered how it was possible for him to have lived with Kirsten and not to have known this about her. But maybe he hadn’t wanted to know. Maybe at the time in his life, he’d been too preoccupied with understanding himself to have ever really known anyone else. Maybe it had taken him this long in order to be able to look out from himself.

‘And it was something she was very good at hiding. Mum always used to tell her she didn’t have a problem, that everyone felt the way she did sometimes.’

‘Did you know Kirsten came here? On the day it happened, she drove past?’
She stiffened. ‘My mother told me at the service. Kirsten was always welcome here,’ she said, looking past him. There was a pause and the house was quiet, it might have been located amid empty fields.
‘Do you know what it was like in the end?’ The way she held her mouth, the flatness with which she spoke her words made him think she was saying something she’d been waiting a long time to say.
‘Talking to her? Talking to Kirsten was like waiting for glass to break. You know that moment when you drop something and you wait to see whether or not it shatters?’ She looked at him, waiting to see if he had comprehended what she had said. ‘That’s what it was like with Kirsten. You never knew if she would be upset by even the smallest thing. It was the same way with mum, too. When we were growing up. Walking around the house on tenterhooks.’ There were suppressed tears in the corners of her eyes, tears that were more of anger than they were of sadness. ‘For a long time, I used to forgive her for being that way because I thought she didn’t know the effect she had on other people.’ She stood up and moved to the window. It was overcast outside.
On the coffee table was a Vogue Good Living and the house on the cover was open and airy, through the window a frangipani tree, the sky and the sea were the same effortless blue. The white curtains billowed open.
‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘To have upset you.’ He felt he had come here into her house, only to re-open old wounds, injuries she thought had been healed. She smiled at him, a smile that looked sore. She unfolded her arms.
‘No, I’m sorry...I wish I could tell you only nice things about her.’

When he was on the other side of the fly screen door, she was standing in the doorway lop-sided with her leg buckled. ‘She had a difficult relationship, you know,’ she cleared her throat. ‘With my father.’ He looked at her through the gauze of the fly screen, wanting to know more, but she bore the expression of someone who knows something, but
doesn’t know where to place that information and isn’t sure what to do with it.

He walked back across the lawn where the grass was cut all the way down to its stubs. Inside the hire car smelt new and of plastic. He fitted the key into the ignition, but found himself unable to start the car. He wondered why Kirsten had come here that day, but not gone in. Her sister might have been difficult, but all she had for Kirsten was love. He wondered whether there was something in Kirsten’s life that she had come down here to share, but couldn’t bring herself to speak of, whether she had stayed in the car alone in order to maintain some silence.

He drove back to Canberra with a hard feeling in his chest, a knot of emotion that sat under his sternum about different things drawn together. Was it possible for anyone to live without letting this hardness into their heart? Or was it something that set in with age, inevitable somehow. He drove out of Canberra, the streets wide and gentle, guiding him from the city and towards the north.

Half an hour out of Canberra, past flat, open paddocks where bales of hay were rolled into balls like oversized skeins of wool, he stopped at Lake George. The water had receded, exposing the dry grass, a dirty yellow that had formed the bottom of the lake when it was full. In the distance, the brackish silver water seemed still. A body of water that did not lap at its shores.

The water in the air sharpened the definition of the hills and the trees in the distance, but left a haze over the land. Behind the lake, wind turbines twirled in large, slow circles. The movement of it mesmerising, swishing through the air like pinwheels under a constant breath. The air glistened with water, evaporating and condensing, forming clouds, biding its time and waiting to rain. There was an uncertainty about this place – you could never be sure that what you were seeing was something that was real, or something you had imagined.
Beneath the lake was a reservoir of water that the lake drained into, water settled onto the grass and eventually vanished below. He thought of it under the landscape, surging, moving through channels of old rock, a dark underground sea roaring away beneath him.

‘It’s a bit eerie, isn’t it?’ A voice behind him said and he turned, startled from his solitude. A man sat with the door open, leaning from his car, eating an orange. He hadn’t noticed him there. The man had a white head of hair and a beard that covered only his chin.

‘God, you gave me a fright,’ he said. ‘It’s been a while since I last came here. I don’t think I’ve been here since I was a kid.’

‘You should have seen it a year ago. Completely empty, it was just a field. There was cattle grazing out where the water is now,’ he nodded his head forward and bit into the orange that dripped into the gravel at his feet. Half the orange was peeled and the man bit straight into its flesh, as though devouring a heart. Andrew moved closer to the wooden post where some of the flowers were taped. The petals had hardened and turned brittle and brown, like the flowers used to make potpourri. A curled red ribbon held it in place and was the only colour that remained, a bright plastic that would never fade. It rasped in the breeze that moved in off the water.

The man in the car beside him closed the door, but the sound was lost in the open space. Andrew turned and watched the car reverse and drive away. It would have been a day like this the day Kirsten had been there, a day when there were very few other people around. How long had she sat in her car? What had she thought about, but been unable to say?

He looked out into the haze of refracted water. What sort of numbness would it have taken to have walked out there? There was an utter silence about this lake, as though the water had rendered every sound blunt. He stayed there for a long time, until the moon rose up over the hill on the other side of the lake. It was an early moon that was almost full and as it climbed, the lake amplified the moon’s light like an upturned spoon. This was a place in which there could be no certainty, the evaporating stretch
of water, the lake that was always changing its shape. It only added to the mystery of Kirsten’s death.
He remembered the letter about the exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in which two of his photographs would be exhibited. The exhibition had opened last week, but he had assumed he would already be in Berlin by now. He took out the letter and re-read it. He had missed the opening, but thought of taking Phoebe to see it. He called Pippa to arrange it with her and he was surprised when she didn’t hesitate to agree.

On Saturday, he went to their house an hour early to give her his old camera and to show her how to use it. When he arrived she showed him her bedroom. Her room was painted green, the colour of a Granny Smith apple and the light fittings were shaped like ladies hats. Her bed was under a window, small and narrow and the bedspread was covered in flowers. It still looked like the room of a young girl, though Phoebe would soon be a young woman and all this would come to embarrass her.

On her desk was a photograph of her father, with the sheep in the backyard on a farm, the field behind them was a parched and distant green. They were both smiling large smiles, the smiles that came at the end of a laugh and her father was crouched on one knee with an arm draped over her shoulder. There was something about the way her father held her there. It was an affectionate gesture, but one of ownership, as though with this photograph he was telling the world, this child belongs to me.
Outside in their backyard, the magnolia tree had bloomed, but it was late in the season and the flowers were loose, the petals losing their grip on the bud. The tree was large, its branches sprawling out over the fence and into the neighbour’s yard, unwilling to observe the boundaries intended to contain it. He tried to tell Phoebe what he knew about taking photographs. If he could take everything he knew and give it to her, that’s what he would do. She might be the only person he had to tell about this. She might be the only opportunity he had to share what he had learnt. He thought of the similar lesson he’d been given by his father in his own backyard when he was ten. He wondered whether people were doomed to repeat these things that had happened to them earlier in their lives, to replay the things that had formed them again and again, to turn them over like stones.

He stood in their backyard where a magpie had landed and stared at him with its head cocked, as though doubtful of his motives. Phoebe looked up at him with an open face, concentrating on what he was saying. It was hard for him to explain it to Phoebe, that usually he thought about his photographs for so long that by the time it came to actually taking the picture, the act of opening and closing the shutter seemed almost incidental. How could he tell her why he loved taking photographs so much? The reason seemed so sad. The oneness of capturing something that would never happen again. And how as you grew older, stillness and silence eroded from your life and that photographs preserved those two essential things. It honoured them.

He drove into the city in his mother’s car and parked under the Opera House, spiralling down the ramp until he found a vacant park. It was the first time he had been in a public place with Phoebe and he noticed, as they walked around Circular Quay towards the museum that people stared at her, but usually only until they noticed something wasn’t right with her face and then they looked away. Phoebe seemed either not to notice, or to be used to this way people stared at her.
She didn’t seem to feel compelled to be always speaking and he liked that about her. She was happy to allow a quietness to pass between them. For most people, the only thing that silence brought them was discomfort. He found it hard to understand the endless need most people had to fill their lives with noise.

Tourists swarmed around the quay, distracted by the sights, unable to walk in straight lines, snapping at the view with their cameras and pushing the world away. The day was cool and the air around them smelt of salt and diesel from the ferries, pulling in and out of the quay. They stood for a moment and watched a man play an instrument that looked like a concave drum, but sounded like a xylophone. As they watched, Phoebe leant in towards him and he could feel her body close to his. She thought nothing of closing the space between them and he realised how he’d shut this from his life, this easy intimacy with other people. It had taken a child to remind him of it.

Beside them, the ferries floated imprecisely towards the wharves and lurched against the wooden docks. On the opposite shore, houses crept up a hill, staggered one behind the other like tiered seating. They walked towards the MCA – it had been so many years since he’d been there. He loved the building, the warm evenness of the sandstone, walking inside it always felt welcoming to him. On his first visit there, he had not been impressed by the art, so much as the names beside the works. He saw the dates and places the artists had born and died. It was a revelation to him, that these were real people. People actually did this with their lives – they made art. It was the first time he understood that if he dared to want it, there was a life in which self-expression might be possible. As they walked into the shadowy recesses of the building, there was a long cry of a boat from the harbour, singular in tone and sorrowful, like the call of a wounded whale.

Inside the building was cool and in line for their tickets, Phoebe pulled out a plastic purse and a twenty-dollar note unfurled from inside it. She
held it out to him, but she shook his head. This was why he liked her, she
was awkward and honest and beautiful.
‘No, it’s okay,’ he said. ‘I’ll pay.’
‘But mum gave me money for the ticket,’ she said, looking at the note in
her hand and the right side of her face made a small, slipping movement.
‘Maybe you’ll see something you like at the shop when we come out?’ he
said, handing her the ticket, which she stood still for a moment to study.

As they walked through the exhibition, he found himself checking on her,
now and then, making sure she was within sight, convinced that nothing
could happen to her as long as he could lay his eyes on her. On the
ground floor was a series of Tracey Moffat photographs. They passed the
self-portrait of her looking coyly out from the image, the saturation of
red, yellow and blue and the background behind her that might have
been painted. He had never felt he could work with such dramatic
colours. To him, bright colours felt artificial.
On the next level were three Bill Henson photographs and he worried as
they moved past them that Phoebe was too young to be looking at them,
the nakedness of them and the suggestion of sex they had about them. He
had a sudden urge to cover her eyes with his hands, but maybe they
suggested carnality to him and to her they suggested something
completely different.
He stood for a moment and watched the people around him. This was
what he loved most about galleries, the way people slowed down in
order to look at art.
In the next room, there were two photographs by Loretta Lux, dream-like
pictures of children who looked like incorrectly proportioned dolls. He
didn’t say anything when they passed his photographs, the two
photographs of his that, if people knew his work, they usually knew
those images. The first was Teething and the next photo was a photo he’d
taken of a woman with a cochlear implant which he’d called Silence. In
that photo, the woman was parting her hair with her hands to show
where the implant had been inserted and it looked like a computer port into her head. He had wanted somehow, to capture what she experienced, the total absence of sound that she lived with. After he’d met her, he almost envied her for it, the ability she had to withdraw herself from the world so completely. He was proud of that image, the detail of it, but mostly of its stillness. The final photograph he had produced, somehow, didn’t look like her at all. It didn’t even look like anything that resembled life. Instead she looked like something carved from stone.

‘That’s you,’ Phoebe said, pointing to his name beside the photographs. His first reaction was one he knew well, but the feeling sank quickly. He wondered if this was why he had bought Phoebe there, to prove that his photographs were not the work of an amateur. That he was a professional artist.

He looked at the little white sign beside the work. Andrew Spruce. Born 1969, Sydney. It always surprised him how few words he could be reduced to and that his art said more about him than any description ever could. This was what he had to show for his thirty-seven years of life, these few words. What must be lacking in a person to make them seek out this sort of life?

He moved into the next room and started looking at a series of Nan Goldin photographs on the wall behind him. A couple in bed, the woman naked, facing away from the man who sat on the edge of it with his chin caught in his hand. A man submerged in a bath, his nipples a ripe purple through the water and the bruised body of a man who looked to be recovering from surgery. Images of suffering and cruelty, of what it was like to live in a world populated by people who lived so separately.

When he stepped back from the photograph, his eyes swept the room. Phoebe wasn’t there. His thoughts accelerated from I lost her towards someone has taken her. And then he was thinking about what he would say to Pippa when he came home without Phoebe. His mind was expert at
this, trained at rushing towards catastrophe. For him it was the closest destination.

He moved into the next room and stopped. Someone was saying his name. Andrew, he heard. Andrew, Andrew.

For a moment, through the bodies, he thought caught a glimpse of Kristen standing in the corner of the room, between two white walls, her hair the blackest thing in the room. Not even looking at art, just observing the people around her with small, ungenerous eyes, looking for what might cause her harm, seeking it out. He stepped to the side to gain a better glimpse of the woman, but he lost sight of her. In that moment he thought he’d seen Kristen, the look on her face was a wounded look, her stance was crooked, her body askew. He had never found out what it was that had made her that way, how she could look at the world and all she saw of it were the threats.

He heard his name again and orientated himself towards the sound. Through the crowd he saw Phoebe standing there looking at him. Her little purse over one shoulder, strapped across her body and the small pocket of plastic resting above her waist. She was smiling at him and saying his name, her voice bright like something ripened in sunlight. She was waving him towards her. When he reached her he was pointing towards a photograph, her finger almost touching the glass. He felt himself draw breath.

‘I like this one,’ she said. It was a photograph of a dead bird, a native parrot on a white porcelain plate, sitting on a table next to a bowl of fruit. He smiled at her, unsure what to say, troubled that she liked something that had such a blackness to it, a connection with death, concerned that somehow he had encouraged this in her. He didn’t want to tamper with her view of the world until all she saw was its darkness.

‘How about we go and get something to eat?’ He found himself rubbing her back, a warm gesture and he wasn’t sure where it had come from inside him. Phoebe nodded.
Before they left the museum, he took a last look behind him to see if he could see someone, anyone that he might have mistaken for Kristen. There was a young woman with dark hair, wearing a dark blue dress, but she was shorter than Kirsten and he saw her only from behind before she disappeared into the next room.

They walked out of the MCA towards a French patisserie he knew a few streets away in The Rocks. Outside, the light had turned thin and silken, falling over the buildings in folds.

They sat out in the back courtyard and he brushed the scattered sugar crystals from the table with the back of his hand.

‘What would you like?’

Phoebe looked at the menu. The waitress waited to take her order, poised, pen over her pad. He ordered a coffee for himself. Phoebe looked at the menu and bit the inside of her cheek, unable to make up her mind.

‘I’ll come back,’ the waitress said, looking towards another table.

‘Would you like something to eat?’ he asked Phoebe, feeling impatience rise in him. He was so used to being productive. To getting things done he had forgotten that a child’s sense of time is endless. He envied her for that. He couldn’t live his life anymore, without the awareness that the time he had was limited, of fitting what he had to do into the shortest possible period of time. He had lived his life being conscious of death.

‘How about a milkshake?’ he asked.

Phoebe nodded and licked her top lip. After he’d ordered, he noticed that the other people in the café were looking at them and he could see them wondering what the relationship between he and Phoebe was. For the first time he realised that people might assume she was his daughter. He orientated himself around that thought, understanding that he was easily old enough for that role. If his life had turned out differently, he might have already been responsible for another human being, but he had given himself, instead, to other things.

From above, a flower from the frangipani tree fell to their table, its white petals bruised. ‘How often do you see your dad?’ he asked, thinking of
the photograph he’d seen of them together in her bedroom. He thought of what he had seen in that picture, the sort of possessiveness in the way her father looked at her.

‘It depends. It’s supposed to be every second weekend and one week in the school holidays.’ She spoke these words very formally, as though reciting the orders of a court. ‘But sometimes he gets busy.’ She didn’t sound disappointed by this. It was something she had accepted long ago.

‘What does he do?’ Their drinks arrived and Phoebe started playing with her straw, stirring it in her milkshake as though trying to decide whether it was okay to drink.

‘He’s an engineer,’ she said, lifting her head and fitting her mouth over the straw. ‘He has a girlfriend,’ and there was a glint of something in her eye when she said those words, an invitation for him to agree this was a bad thing.

‘Do they live together?’ Phoebe nodded. He watched her milkshake lower in the glass as she drank it.

‘My dad moved into her apartment last year, but I don’t have a bedroom there, so I sleep on a fold-out couch when I stay there.’ It didn’t sound like this was something she resented.

‘Does your mother have a boyfriend?’ he said and felt himself turn red, worried she might think he had some interest in her mother.

She shook her head resolutely, as though she thought this was the proper order of things.

‘Did you enjoy the exhibition?’

‘I liked it, but I still don’t know what makes one photograph better than another?’ Her mouth hovered over her straw as she spoke.

‘That’s a good question. Even I don’t always know. Sometimes it’s the composition, or the idea behind it. Almost always it has something to do with light.’

She lifted her straw from the glass and licked it clean.

‘I want to be a photographer,’ she said loudly, hopefully and then looked back into her lap, recoiling from the strength of her own words.
'Really? You don’t want to be something else? Like a doctor or a vet?’ he said, hearing his voice high and jangling, jostling for a sense of control over his feelings. He wanted to take her firmly, hold both her arms and say don’t. Don’t do what I did with my life. Don’t make your career so bound up with who you are at the expense of everything else.

‘I think so,’ she said less decisively, looking at him for some sort of encouragement, but he couldn’t bring himself to give that to her, knowing what it had done to him.

On the way home, they drove down Parramatta Road in his mother’s car and the sun was in his eyes. He folded down the sunshade, feeling exhausted. Being with Phoebe was draining. She absorbed so much of his attention, more than he was used to giving over to another person. The traffic started and stopped and he tried not to tap his fingers against the steering wheel or show his impatience to get her home in order to be alone.

They walked to the front door and Pippa must have seen them arrive, because she opened the door as they took the steps to the house. The way she looked at that moment reminded him of a bird, with bright, darting eyes, sitting on a nest, aware of everything, of the way in which things could go wrong, the threats to her eggs. Phoebe disappeared behind her mother’s legs and inside the house.

‘How did you go?’ Pippa asked and her face looked awkward, her features were bunched, a drawstring tightened behind her face.

‘Fine. I think she liked it,’ he said. She turned her head and looked down the hall towards where Phoebe had disappeared.

‘Thank you. For doing this,’ she said, her words halting, hesitating between each one. He understood then, that she was someone who hadn’t allowed herself to accept other people’s kindness very often.

‘Well, I was glad I could take her.’ Phoebe appeared at her mother’s shoulder. He could tell already that she was going to be taller than her mother when she grew up.
‘Bye,’ he waved to Phoebe and as he saw them there so close together he felt a stab of envy that he did not expect. Pippa had given her life to being a mother and, in return, she had produced this shy and glorious girl. It made the thing he had done with his life, these photographs he’d taken, seem very static and small.

‘Bye,’ he said to Pippa, turning suddenly, feeling he was on the brink of tears.

‘Thank you,’ he heard from Phoebe as he walked out to his mother’s car. As he left, he thought of Kirsten and how she had been his only real chance at a life like this, at children and a family, if he could have managed to stay with her somehow. It was what she had always wanted, to tie herself to the world through him. And then he thought of how quickly and unflinching he had been at giving that all away, as though freeing himself from her was his first and only instinct.

In the front garden, along the fence was a plant with light green leaves and timid yellow flowers. They were the type of flowers that closed for the night and opened for the day in order to absorb the sunshine.
The phone rang on his way back into the apartment. It was almost seven and he felt a tenseness move through his body like the tightening of screws. He needed a period of silence in order to think about the process he’d been through, the time he’d spent with Phoebe and the photographs he’d seen. He didn’t want to be distracted by speaking to someone else straight away.

‘Hello?’ he said sharply, hoping to make it clear to the person on the other end of the phone that he had no time to talk.

‘Hello. It’s Renee Rothwell speaking.’

‘Hi,’ he said, wondering what she had to say to him now, after the coroner’s findings had been handed down, when there was nothing more that could be done. He wondered if she knew that he’d seen her other daughter, if the two had discussed him since his last visit. If she was calling to ask him to explain himself. Perhaps he was walking unknowingly into some sort of bitter domestic dispute. Outside his apartment, night had fallen.

‘Well, I hope I haven’t disturbed you?’ she said in the same breathy voice he had heard her speak in before. She paused. Everything about her was poised and timed for effect. She was a woman unable to live by impulse; she interacted with the world in a very calculated way.

‘I wondered if you would have time for a coffee with me?’ she said and her voice had a haltingness to it. She knew she was asking for a favour. ‘I could come. To you. You needn’t come back. All the way back over here
again, I mean.’ The overwhelming feeling he had was one of curiosity.
What was it she thought he could offer her, now?
‘Sure. What about tomorrow? Bar Coluzzi at eleven?’

He chose Bar Coluzzi because it was central and he thought it would be
easy for her to find. But seeing her there before him, squatting on the
small stool so close to the footpath, he regretted his choice. She looked
awkward in her largeness with her legs bent up. He looked down the
street and wondered if he should suggest they relocate.
‘Hello,’ she said when she looked up and saw him standing there.
She was the sort of woman who was used to being in an environment
that was familiar to her and he could tell that finding herself there in an
unknown place caused her some unease. He sat opposite her. She wore
pearls and pinched the strands between her fingers, pulling each one out
and shaking it, as though they were making her hot. Her handbag was on
the ground beside her and she wore tan stockings that seemed somehow,
out of place and too demure for Darlinghurst.
‘You can put that on the table if you’d like. There’s plenty of room,’ he
said, pointing to her handbag and moving the sugar to one side of the
small table between them. At the table behind them, a small white dog
was straining at its leash.
‘No,’ she shook her head. The skin under her eyes was dark, bluish like
the bruise left behind by a thumb. Their coffees arrived in small brown
cups and she didn’t speak straight away. She took small sips, holding her
cup carefully, observing him over the rim.
‘Did you take very long to get here?’ he asked. His feeling of
responsibility for bringing her there clawed at him.
‘No. Not very long. I had to come into the city anyway,’ her voice
sounded as she spoke, as though she was thinking of a far away place. He
wondered whether he should say something about the coroner’s
findings, if that was what she had come to discuss with him. He cleared
his throat.
Renee made a small movement, reaching her hand into her handbag surreptitiously. She left her hand in her bag as she continued to speak. ‘I was on our computer last week. At home. It’s my husband’s computer, for work and I don’t use it very often. I found some photographs,’ she paused, looking up and he had the feeling that she wanted him to anticipate what she was about to say so that there would be no need for her to say it herself. He tipped forward on his stool.

Then he wondered if she had come there with an ulterior motive. If what she really wanted was to reproach him now, for the way he had treated Kirsten all those years before. That he would finally hear the things he’d been dreading from her, that she would shout and cause a scene. He opened his mouth to speak, not knowing what words to say, but she continued.

‘I printed them out.’ She pulled an envelope from her handbag that was big and yellow and large enough for building plans. She laid it on the table.

‘What are they of?’ he asked. Their conversation seemed to be hovering on the border of strangeness.

‘Kirsten,’ she said, holding her coffee over its saucer. ‘They’re of Kirsten.’ She spoke her words with her face down, her voice lowered, like some kind of admission.

‘Do you know who took them?’ He picked up his cup and sipped, but the coffee had already lost its heat.

‘I think she took them of herself.’

‘Herself?’ He still didn’t understand why she thought he should see the photographs. It seemed there was some crucial piece of what was taking place before him that he didn’t fully comprehend.

‘Yes,’ she said and nodded to them. ‘I. They’re for you,’ she said and started sipping at her coffee more quickly. Hurrying. ‘I’d like you to have them.’ She patted the envelope and withdrew her hand, as though from something hot.
He wanted to rip the paper from the envelope immediately and see what was inside, convinced those photographs were the crucial thing that would help him to understand what had happened to Kirsten that day, why her life had taken such a wrong turn and whether it had anything to do with him. But the way they were sitting there, so carefully positioned on the small table between them made him think he did not want to look at them in front of her. They sat together on their small stools, saying nothing and sighing, like two weary travellers crouched over a fire. Around them, Darlinghurst unfolded loudly, it was a place of excess, a suburb where people felt no need to hold themselves back.

The silence grew between them and he wondered whether she was there because she wanted someone to talk to. He thought of his mother in the years after his father had died, when he scuttled around the house quietly as a child, not daring to cry himself for fear of upsetting her. He thought of Renee’s husband and how he had not looked like a man who was prepared to discuss things that were difficult. Maybe all Renee wanted was a witness to her grief. Someone, in other words, to cry to.

Before he could speak again she stood suddenly, leaving him alone on his stool. The movement was quick and awkward, she slipped her weight forward and stood with her feet apart with her feet splayed like a weight lifter’s.

‘Thank you for meeting me,’ she said, looking down at him and something about the way her voice changed made him think that she preferred this position, that she would rather he didn’t look on her so directly.

‘Thank you for the photos.’

She nodded and he watched her walk to the car. She paced herself like someone walking with an egg balanced on the end of a spoon. Her car pulled away, dark and new. She was a woman who would always be driving cars that were new. She had arranged her life in order to make it that way.
In his apartment, he opened the envelope. The photographs had been taken at close range. Some of them didn’t catch all of Kirsten’s face and must have been set up on a self-timer. They hadn’t been printed on paper and the colours were too strong, cartoonish, the ink bleeding out from the edges of her face. It was difficult to look at someone who was now dead depicted in such striking tones.

He laid them out on his kitchen table, standing over them as though he was examining a contact sheet, taking in the images one at a time, attempting to understand each photograph. He always started with her eyes, that was where he forced himself to look first although it was difficult and then he moved to her mouth, the way she held it, looking for the words it was holding back. The differences between the photos were sometimes so pronounced he might have been looking at photographs of different people, except there was one thing that was consistent about each of the photos. Kirsten looked at the camera as though she wanted something from it. She wanted it to find the beauty in her, of which she seemed to think there was none. But the camera wasn’t always kind and it didn’t necessarily show a person what they wanted to see of themselves.

He put the photographs back in the envelope Renee had given him. She had given him these, but somehow he felt that in giving these to her she was somehow reaching out to him.
Over the next few days he wondered whether, in these photographs he’d been given and the conversations he’d had with Kirsten’s mother and sister, he now had an answer to his questions. If he now knew enough about her that would let him put this mystery of her death down in order to return to Berlin. But he wasn’t really sure he really knew anything and he hesitated. He visited the galleries he used to go to in Darlinghurst and Surry Hills and going to museums, but he’d seen most of the work in museums in Sydney and he found nothing he could stand in front of and lose himself inside. At other times in his life, when he found himself alone, he occupied his time by looking at art. What he would give now to see a Rembrandt. On his last visit to the Reijksmuseum, when he travelled to Amsterdam from Berlin for a group show, he had finally decided what it was he loved about Rembrandt’s paintings. It was the sparing use of light. He spent those days he had there standing in front of paintings in perfect stillness, allowing them to seep into him. The darkness of his paintings, thick, coating the canvas like molasses, the placement of emphasis on people, their expressions on the way that they looked at one another and out of the frame. A painter he’d met once said the reason Rembrandt’s paintings had that darkness to them was because he primed his canvasses with black paint. He wondered sometimes, what Rembrandt would have made of a camera. Rembrandt had the sensibility of a photographer, the same feeling for light.
On Tuesday afternoon, he went swimming at a chlorine pool near St Mary’s Cathedral. He walked down William Street against the tide of traffic, when the city workers were still sitting behind their desks in sheaths of glass, shuffling their papers and tapping their keyboards. He had never known that sort of life, of having to be in one place each day and being accountable to other people. In the way he had chosen to lead his life he was answerable only to himself.

Inside the pool the air was warm and moist, touching his skin like a sultry fog. He sat on the benches and watched the swimmers splash through the water in straight lines. The lane closest to him was unoccupied and the water there was an unbroken blue. He sat there in the warm, chlorine air, the tang in his nostrils, a sting in his eyes, the thick chemical air rubbing up against him. Bodies lumbered up and down lanes, arms overhead; an old man with a very short stroke, moving like a wound up device.

Why were they always painted this same colour, these pools? The permanent blue of a shallow, tropical sea, the blue of holidays, of hot sand and palm trees. A blue that was unreal, that spoke of something fictional, the glimpse of the cover of a travel magazine then lost in the tumble of every day life. He never swam in a chlorine pool without being conscious of this, the idea that stood behind it, the thing that most people had never actually seen, but spent their lives wanting. People lived with this longing. The desire to reach a point in their lives where everything was calm and made sense and never having to leave it.

He dove into the water, the cool pool stripping his body of its warmth. He dug his hands into the pool, forcing himself forwards. Encased in water, breathing was an effort, but about ten laps in something in him changed. His movement slowed and he was more aware of each stroke as he lifted his arms over his head and silver bubbles parted around his hands, in his ears water gurgled each time he turned his head. The light through the moving water concentrated into curling strands on the blue tiles. He wanted to take those threads of light and stretch them between
his hands. The water around him felt warm and familiar, like amniotic fluid.

When he had swum thirty laps, he emerged from the pool and showered, but the smell of chlorine remained with him, soaked into his skin. When he walked outside he was aware of the chlorine haze around him, moving with him like a personal cloud.

Afterwards, with the water from the pool still lodged in his ear, he was in the supermarket downstairs, underneath the Kings Cross Coke sign, standing in front of the olives and wondering which jar to choose. His thoughts were thick in his head, coiled together like rope. Dom would know which olives to buy. She was a person who lived her life that way, someone who took the time to enjoy what was good in life, to have noticed which types of olives were the right type for a particular recipe. She’d never quite succeeded as a professional dancer, instead what she had excelled in was knowing how to live. These were the details in his life he had skimmed over on his way from one thing to the next. This is what he’d never allowed himself to have time for. She had once bought home some green olives from a delicatessen in Prenzlauerberg with almonds stuffed inside. They ate most of them before they’d started cooking from a small cocktail bowl, an assault of flavour that crept across his tongue. But he couldn’t see any of those types of olives at the supermarket in Kings Cross. The stuffed green olives in jars had something bright and orange folded up inside them.

His phone rang and he fumbled for it in his bag, lodged beneath his swimmers and wet towel. There was a delay after he’d answered the phone.

‘Hello, is this Andrew Spruce? It’s Marten Smythe speaking,’ the man said.

Andrew stood still. With the sound of that man’s voice, he had been summoned to a place he’d been avoiding. He had allowed himself the
liberty of not thinking about the exhibition in London. It was taking place at such a distance away, he let it shift to the peripheries of his thoughts.

‘Hi,’ he said. ‘How are you?’

‘Well, everything’s fine here, we’re setting up for your exhibition. There’s just one thing. We’re missing the high resolution files of the girl with the face. Did you send over the disc, they don’t seem to have arrived?’

‘Oh, really?’ he said ‘that’s funny, I thought I sent them right after we spoke.’ He wondered if his words sounded as thin and gilded to Marten as they did to him.

‘No and the thing is, we really need them soon to prepare for the exhibition. Maybe they got lost in the post, I should confirm our address with you,’ Marten Smythe cleared his throat. ‘We’re hoping to start printing the catalogue soon and obviously we’ll need to hang the work in advance of the opening. We’ve already put most of the images on our website.’

The disc with Phoebe’s image on it was still laying in a drawer. He hadn’t sent them over. He’d left them there and said nothing to Marten about them.

‘Yes, I understand, sorry. I don’t know what happened.’ He wondered if he should tell Marten now that he was having second thoughts about exhibiting the image of Phoebe. That he would send over something else instead, he’d find some photograph he’d taken but hadn’t exhibited. He was sure he could find a substitute amongst the pictures he’d taken in the last few years, even if it wasn’t quite as good.

Instead, he found himself saying, ‘Yes, I’ll send them over today or tomorrow.’

‘Good, thanks. We don’t have much time left. We’ve sent out the invitations too,’ he said, the way English people have of speaking and making what they say sound emphatic. He paused expecting Andrew to say something, but all the rules for conversation, the cadences of speech had become something unfamiliar to him, like the steps to an old dance routine he’d learnt at school and now had to recall again. ‘I sent out a few
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thumbnails of your photos last week. I hope you don’t mind? I must say, the response we received back was very encouraging.’ He looked at the back of the jar of Kalamata olives and saw they were marinated in balsamic vinegar. So they had already shown the photographs of Phoebe to collectors. ‘The reaction I got was very strong, especially to the image of the girl,’ Marten Smythe said to his silence. ‘A very important collector asked to see the catalogue as soon as it is ready.’

‘Great,’ he said, feeling his face burn. He looked behind him, wondering whether there was anywhere in the supermarket he could take a seat. He felt dizzy.

‘So you see, we need those files as soon as we can,’ he said.

‘Oh yes. Don’t worry. I’ll take care of it,’ Andrew said. He’d let things go too far, he could see that now. He should have told Marten Smythe about his reservations as soon as he’d had them. Maybe this would be the final and spectacular end to his career. He could annoy an important London art dealer and never exhibit his work again. The thought of it contained an uneasy attraction.

Marten cleared his throat. ‘And I take it you’ll be here then? For the opening, I mean.’

‘I think so,’ he said carefully. He wasn’t sure he would go. Mostly, he wasn’t sure he could stand that sort of proximity to Dom without seeing her. What he wanted to do now was to fly straight back to Berlin. He didn’t want to bother with London at all.

‘What’s the date today?’ he asked.

‘The twenty first of February,’ Marten said. The exhibition opening was just over a week away.

‘Oh right, well I had better get organised then, hadn’t I?’ he said. This was not like him, he thought, this indifference and disorganisation. The things that had once meant something to him now felt so far away he could have been waving at them from a distant shore.

‘Yes, if you could come to the gallery a day or two before the opening to check the proofs that would help us a great deal,’ he said.
'Yes, I can do that,' he said, but what he felt was an urgent need to hang up the phone and concentrate on buying olives. ‘Great, we can sort out any last minute issue then,’ Marten said. When he hung up and turned around, he found himself in front of the aisle of refrigerated meat. Cuts of meat lay in their plastic cradles, red and tender and protected by a film of taut plastic. On his way out of the supermarket, he stopped in front of the poster with black and white photographs printed along it in rows. There were names underneath the photographs like Claire, Matthew and Rachel. ‘Missing Persons’ was written along the top of the paper in large, black letters. There was something odd about these photographs of lost people and it took him a few moments to realise that the strangeness came from the fact that in those photos these lost people were smiling. It would have seemed more natural to him if they looked sad somehow, in those photographs, but they were taken at a time before these people became lost. The photographs were low resolution and monochrome, formed from small black dots of ink and the closer he moved to the images, the less clearly he saw them. As he walked up the escalators, he thought about how these people were missing to those who knew and loved them, but to everyone else they were no more than strangers.

Later in his apartment, cooking an omelette over the sear of raw egg on the frypan he had, he heard his phone ring. ‘Hi, Andy,’ his mother said. ‘How are you?’ They hadn’t spoken recently. The rift that had opened up between them about his father’s death had not been bridged and maybe they would be this way from now on. This is what had become of their relationship, two people talking as though across the space of a ravine. ‘Fine. I’m cooking, actually.’ ‘What are you making?’ ‘Spanish omelette. It’s Dom’s recipe.’
Dom had taught him these useful details about living, small things about the right way to live and enjoy life. The trick to making a Spanish omelette, she’d always said, was in the seasoning. He reached behind him for the salt and pepper grinders.

‘Have you spoken to her recently?’

‘Yes. We’ve spoken,’ he said. He didn’t want his mother to ask him anything else. He didn’t want to admit how angry she had been the last time they’d spoken and he worried what she’d say to him when he called her again, so he kept putting it off. Instead, he said, ‘Why don’t you come over here. For dinner?’

It was the first gesture he’d made since she’d tried to talk to him about his father’s death. His first effort to be kind to her, although the thought of her there, in the space he had reserved for himself made him apprehensive. It would bring in front of him one of the things he’d been trying to avoid.

She hesitated. ‘Are you sure there’s enough food for both of us?’

‘Yeah, there’s plenty. Too much for me by myself.’ Then he remembered how bare his cupboards were. ‘The only thing is, you might have to bring a plate with you.’ He said, sheepishly, feeling like a student again.

‘A plate?’

‘Yes. And some cutlery. I only unpacked a few things from storage.’

His mother arrived in his apartment with the plate and cutlery and a bottle of wine and she offered them out to him as she walked in.

‘We’d better eat soon,’ he said. ‘The omelette’s in the pan,’ he gestured in that direction with his head. He was anxious for their dinner to start – the hurry he was in was for it to conclude.

‘Do you need help with anything?’ his mother said, stepping towards the kitchen, a small, tentative step, as though the ground below her might give way.

‘No, you sit down,’ he said, batting her away with a hand.
He served up the omelette and dressed the salad, thinking to himself that it looked quite respectable, the eggs tanned the way they looked when Dom had made it herself. They started in silence, a silence that was still and gaping and one that he felt he needed to fill.

‘The gallery in London called this afternoon. The opening is next week already. It crept up on me,’ he said. He rarely spoke to her about this aspect of his life with his mother and she looked surprised to hear him mention it. She nodded and manoeuvred a piece of lettuce on a fork carefully into her mouth.

His mother had only ever been to one of his exhibition openings, his first solo show in Sydney and she had worn a black dress, stiff and crisp and bought new. She stood in the corner of the gallery, gripping her skirt with one hand and holding a glass of wine in the other. She favoured her right leg when she stood, tipping that way, uncertain about her own presence in the room. It was difficult for her, the people and being in an environment in which she didn’t know the rules.

‘When will you leave?’

‘I haven’t booked my flight yet, but I’ll have to leave soon,’ he said, realising he would have to leave in a few days to make it to the opening. He looked at his mother, quiet and alone in her sadness, the place to which she often retreated. But instead of feeling sorry for her, for the first time what he felt towards her was anger. This was what his mother excelled at, making him feel responsible for her moods.

‘Why didn’t you ever talk about it? How dad died?’ She looked at him and there was a clotted look in her eye, the look of someone encountering criticism for the first time.

‘I. I didn’t want to upset you, I guess. After it happened, I was only just coping myself.’ She held her fingers to her lips.

‘Upset me?’ he said. He had never been upset about his father’s death. She had never allowed him to be. They hadn’t left it behind them. In treating it with silence, the only thing she had guaranteed was that it would stay with both of them.
'I’m sorry,’ she said. ‘I should have thought about you too,’ she said, quietly, crossing her cutlery over her plate, a gesture that suggested she wanted what was happening between them to end there. It was an apology. The first apology he could ever remember receiving from her.

After dinner, he showed her out and she stood in the hall for a moment, lit from above by the halogen lights, small, pursed circles. Her arms folded as they’d often been when she was a boy, fending off grief with her elbows. She stood there, wanting to say something else, perhaps some reproach. She had damaged him. The knowledge of it came bobbing to the surface of his mind like a buoy released from its anchor. But following close behind it was the awareness that she had also done the best she could. The two thoughts came so close together, one cancelled the other out. He shut the door and thought it would be much easier for him to deal with this awareness of what she had done to him if he could just be angry with her about it.

He sat on the couch and stared out of the window. Outside it was dark and on the road below him he could see a line of headlights moving up the hill from Edgecliff towards Kings Cross bright, like a row of nocturnal animals in the darkness, marching through the night. He thought of the silence he’d kept for his mother. He thought about Kirsten and her silences, how they weren’t empty, that there was some meaning contained in them and how there was something in them that had always cried out. And kept crying out, even now.
When his mother was on night shift the following night, he borrowed her car without telling her, sneaking into her house and retrieving the keys from the bowl on the kitchen bench. Perhaps he thought she owed this to him. Perhaps he thought she would always owe him some debt she could never repay, because of the way the life she had given him felt like a weight that had to be carried, rather than something he could enjoy.

He drove across the harbour bridge and up toward Gordon, negotiating the tangle of roads that distributed traffic to the north on the other side of the bridge. It wasn’t as though he really gave much thought to what he would do when he got there, he wasn’t sure what he would say or do, but he felt he was driving toward a sort of clarity. That when he reached his destination he would understand finally, about Kirsten, what she had done, her lingering silences and what was hidden beneath them. It was time for him to find out what he had come back to Sydney to learn.

He parked opposite Kirsten’s old house. The lights from inside, through the sheer curtain in the window was a pearled light that illuminated but did not expose. He could see the two of them through the window, sitting at opposite ends of the table, like two children on the ends of a see-saw. They must have been eating dinner, their bodies tipping forwards slightly to take food to their mouths. What did they speak of over their evening meals? Something made him think it wasn’t their absent daughter, that the things spoken of at their dinner table were
surface details, of what could be spoken of by a person when their thoughts were much more difficult.

He wanted to be back inside that house again. Amongst walls that were a shade short of white and the photos that suggested a pleasant family life. He wanted to know what it was that made him uneasy to stand between those walls. The clothes he had worn that night were black, and perhaps he thought of himself sneaking into their home like a burglar.

There was an image he had of Kirsten in his mind that he couldn’t chase clear of his head, of her sitting in her car at Lake George that afternoon, having no-one she felt she could talk to, but something important to say. It was hard for him to believe that a person’s life could end that way and he somehow felt the answer to the question of why was held between the four walls of that house.

Renee’s shape rose from the dining table first. Her movements were fluid, her limbs moved along lines that were curved and smooth as a figure skater’s. She appeared from the window and re-appeared near her husband and stooped to collect his plate. For the next fifteen minutes, Mr Rothwell sat in that room with the lights out and he could see the lights from the television wending their way over the ceiling.

Andrew was sitting with his hands on the steering wheel. Holding it in both hands and there was a tenseness in his body as though the car was still moving and he was bracing for an accident. He kept his eyes on the house worried that if he looked away, he might miss something crucial, some vital clue. Everything seemed to hold some significance, the switching off of a light, the orientation of their bodies away from the windows, the front door closed and left in shadow.

When he saw a light poke out from beneath the garage as it opened, the clock on his dashboard read 8.25pm. The door lifted and the light yawned out, shining onto the street, a corridor of light. The car moved slowly, easing from the driveway and turning smoothly onto the road. It was the expensive car he’d seen when Renee came home to visit him in
Darlinghurst, a European car, the sort of car that seemed to float across the road like a boat, negotiating intersections like bends in a river. As soon as the tail-lights had disappeared out of the street, he unclipped his seatbelt and stepped from the car. The night was cool and still. The street was so straight the rows of houses stretched along it and from where he stood they never seemed to end.

There was a knocker on the door that was closed and round like a fist and he struck it twice against the door. It made a hard noise of metal against metal. There was no sound from inside the house. Perhaps they had left together in the car.

Kirsten’s step-father opened the door and readjusted his glasses on his face. He looked at Andrew in a way that suggested he was trying to remember his name.

‘Sorry to disturb you. We met a couple of weeks ago. My name is Andrew Spruce?’ he said, trying to smile and sound as though it was natural that he was there, that he ought to have been expected.

‘Oh yes, I remember. You’re the old boyfriend,’ he said, smiling, still behind the door, but he looked relieved that the mystery of Andrew’s sudden appearance had been solved. He relaxed back into himself.

‘Renee’s gone out for a little while. To do some grocery shopping, I think,’ he said. It seemed strange that this man might not know where his wife had driven to at eight thirty on a Thursday night. That two people who lived their lives at such close proximity might not for any length of time, know the other’s approximate location. They stood staring at each other and it occurred to him that this man wasn’t used to having visitors, that he didn’t know that the appropriate way to proceed from this point was to invite him inside.

‘I wondered if I could ask you a few more questions, about Kirsten? I’m sorry to take up more of your time.’ He looked down. Mr Rothwell was wearing slippers and under his feet, the doormat was crooked.

‘Oh yes. Yes, you can talk to me about Kirsten,’ he said and he pushed his glasses up his nose and stayed standing there, as though he was
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expecting Andrew to ask him where they both stood. He moved his
glasses again, as though this might assist him to think.
‘Should I come in?’ he asked.
Mr Rothwell turned to the hall behind him. ‘Okay. I wasn’t really
expecting anyone tonight,’ he said, taking a step backwards. ‘My wife’s
out.’
He couldn’t decide whether the confusion this man had about him being
there was real or contrived. He followed Mr Rothwell to the lounge
room, noticing a patch of pink at the back of his head where the hair was
thin. They sat down on the couch. The television was turned off and he
wondered what this man had been doing since Renee had left. He looked
around him as though surprised to find himself sitting on his own
lounge.
‘I went to see Kirsten’s sister,’ he said and Mr Rothwell looked at him,
confused.
‘Lydia?’ Mr Rothwell said.
‘Oh yes, Lydia. I don’t get to see her very often. She works in Canberra,
you see.’
He wondered if Renee’s husband had been listening at all to anything
he’d said. ‘It sounded like Lydia and Kirsten were quite close?’
He nodded, thoughtfully. ‘Yes, as teenagers they were very close,
although they were a few years apart in age.’
‘Your daughter mentioned there might be some,’ he stopped and looked
at the bookshelf, where the spines of the books were aligned so neatly
they looked never to have been read.
‘Differences between you and Kirsten.’ He knew that the only way to
speak to this man, a man who sort to hide behind confusion was directly.
‘Differences?’ his face was crushed, his cheeks sunken, nestling into the
space under his cheekbones as he’d aged.
‘We had. Kirsten was.’ Andrew wondered for a moment whether
Kirsten’s stepfather was trying to work out how much he already knew.
All he could think of was the night they had all had dinner together, the
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way Kirsten had jumped when this man had said her father’s name, as though in response to a threat. He felt somehow, that and her death, the two things must be connected in a way he could not see yet. Some invisible line drew them together. Mr Rothwell finally finished his sentence. ‘She was seven when we married.’

‘Seven?’ It took him a moment to understand that what he was speaking of was her age. Somehow to him Kirsten would always be twenty one, she would remain the age he’d loved her, preserved that way, the sort of love he had for her made it difficult to accommodate change.

‘Yes. She was very upset, you know. About the divorce. Her father had been gone for a year before we met. Kirsten couldn’t move on,’ he said. He thought of the words moving on and how they sounded more like words that would be spoken about an adult than a seven year old girl. ‘Her father lived in Townsville, didn’t he?’

‘For a time, yes. More recently he moved to W.A. and was working in the mines over there. But we don’t hear very much from him. He couldn’t make it to Kirsten’s funeral service,’ Mr Rothwell said, nodding sagely. If he had any feelings about this, he disclosed none of them. Mr Rothwell stopped talking and looked at him, as though trying to determine whether he had said enough to satisfy his curiosity.

He sighed. ‘She always hoped, I think. She hoped Renee would get back together with her father. Even after Renee and I married. I mean, it didn’t matter how often we told her he wasn’t coming back,’ he said and sat up straighter, possessed of a new idea.

‘Would you like to see her room? Some of her things are there. She kept them there for when she stayed here.’

‘Sure,’ he said and felt tired. All he wanted was to have his question answered and to leave again, but this man was speaking in circles.

They walked down the hall and he felt his resolve had broken, that he was seeking to discover something that could never really be understood. When he opened the door there was nothing about the room from which
he could have identified the woman he one loved. It might have been a spare room, in which a bed for visitors had been set up. ‘Oh,’ Mr Rothwell said, softly. ‘I keep forgetting that Renee took Kirsten’s stuff off to the charity bin last week. Sometimes I sit here on the bed.’ Mr Rothwell moved to the bed and sat down on it, slumped. It looked like a position he had often assumed.

He imagined Renee moving through the room in a fury, picking up Kirsten’s belongings, tearing things from the walls, disposing of everything that once belonged to her daughter, losing control for a moment and then straightening up, regaining composure and walking back out into the hall.

‘Did something happen to Kirsten? When she was young?’ he asked. It was strange hearing those words, aloud, what he had wondered so often lately. They lingered between them after they were spoken.

‘There was nothing. Kirsten and I. We didn’t see eye to eye. It happens, sometimes. I wasn’t her father,’ he said. As he sat there on the bed, he thought Mr Rothwell didn’t even look like a man. He looked like a boy. Mr Rothwell shifted on the bed. Something in him was stirring. ‘I just. I used to say to her sometimes, after Renee and I married. I told Kirsten not to talk about him anymore.’ He pressed his knuckles against each other and the grooves didn’t quite align. ‘I thought it would be easier for her mother if Kirsten didn’t speak about her father.’ Those silences Kirsten had, so long and deep she often seemed lost in them. ‘Don’t tell Renee, will you? She doesn’t know,’ he said looking up fearfully, as though telling the truth might be something that brought this clean and quiet life around him to an end. The truth to him, had become the loose thread in a bow.

Andrew showed himself out and walked across their lawn thinking about silence. How it made a person skirt around it like the rim of a deep pit. The way it made a person limited.
He wondered if this is what he had really seen in Kirsten that day they first met, this common trait between them. That in their own ways they were both struggling against this instinct they had not to allow themselves to be heard.Outside, he didn’t notice Renee’s car parked on the street as he walked past. He had taken the keys from his pocket when he heard his name called out from behind him. He spun around and his heart gave a few, hard knocks. Renee was standing at the edge of a beam of streetlight like a person trying to avoid exposure.

‘I saw you sitting in your car when I drove out earlier,’ she said and he wondered how long she had been sitting there, waiting for him.

‘Yes, I,’ he said, but he didn’t want to lie and he didn’t want to hurt her with the truth.

‘Did you speak to my husband?’ Andrew nodded. Renee folded her arms around her waist. She was standing on the high edge of the gutter and her car was in between them.

‘Thank you for the photos of Kirsten,’ he said.

‘Did you come about those?’

He shook his head. What he thought was maybe it is easier to understand someone else’s life than it is to understand your own and maybe that was why he had come all the way back to Australia, his need to understand his own past had been transposed onto Kirsten. He looked at Renee and wondered whether she had ever felt this, if she was someone who had ever really tried to understand herself. Or whether she was as she appeared to be, a person who lived her life skating across the surface of the world as though it were a lake of ice.

‘I still can’t understand it,’ she said and her voice assumed a new tone, one that was natural, honest and that he hadn’t heard her speak in before. He wondered how often she got to use this voice in the life she led here. ‘I know Kirsten always had her problems, but I always thought these sorts of things didn’t happen to people like us. She never wanted for anything,’ she said and gestured to the house behind her, as though the only thing a
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person needed in life were these physical comforts. ‘Not since I remarried, anyway.’

And then she did something he was not expecting. She sat down there on the grass as though the weight of her words had dragged her there. He moved around her car and sat down beside her. Through his jeans, the lawn was damp and wetness seeped through to his skin. She sat with her legs stretched out in front of her, her hands behind her, her feet loose, the way a defiant teenager might sit.

‘My first marriage was hard,’ she said. ‘I really loved Kirsten’s father. I mean Saul,’ she waved her hand behind her. ‘It was different with Saul. Our marriage was more,’ she paused and sighed heavily. ‘I made a good marriage.’ He knew what she meant. She meant in a material rather than an emotional way, Saul had provided for her and was she wrong to have wanted that?

They were silent for a moment and he knew the less he said the better, that the natural inclination of most people was to try to explain themselves. They both knew this might be the only opportunity for her to divulge what she knew.

‘The separation from my first husband affected me as much as it affected Kirsten. I was devastated by it, actually. I had to completely cut off contact with him in order to recover. Kirsten suffered from that, and I found I was better than Kirsten was, at living behind a veneer.’ A car drove past slowly and its headlights came on.

‘Do you have another girlfriend now?’ she asked. He was surprised to hear her ask about him. She had never cared to know anything about him when they had spoken before. He looked at her, but couldn’t see her face. The streetlight was too far away from them and he almost preferred it that way, the two of them sitting there, unable to look upon each other, like two people sitting inside a confession booth.

‘I love someone,’ he said. ‘But I treated her badly.’

She sighed. ‘Sometimes I think it’s easier if you don’t love the person you marry. Sometimes I think the more detached you are the better,’ she said
and there was a hardness to her voice. She pushed the words out of her mouth and he could tell from the way she spoke that she was speaking of herself.

‘The day they told me they’d called off the search for her body, I knew my life was over.’ She looked at him and her voice turned low and knowing. It was the voice of a person whose mind is made up and seeks no input from anyone else. ‘When there’s no more love in your life, it might as well be over.’ She looked up. ‘My other daughter and I. We don’t speak vey often anymore. She’s much more savvy than Kirsten was, better at fending for herself. Saul may as well not speak to me. Kirsten was really all I had. She suffered a lot. In the past few years she’d become angry at me and I hardly saw her in the end, but she did let me love her.’

He looked across at her and saw her eyes glistening on her face like two dark pools. ‘Her father drank, you know. He worried a lot. I see now that Kirsten had the same thing too. I guess I thought she had to learn not to be so sensitive. And I thought I was the one who had to teach her that lesson. I was too hard on her. On both my daughters, actually. Sometimes you don’t realise what you’re doing until after it’s done.’

‘What do you think happened that day, to Kirsten?’ he asked.

‘I don’t know. And now I’ll never know. Somehow, I feel this would all be much easier to understand if they’d just recovered her body. Part of me still wonders whether she’ll walk back through the door, even though I know she’s gone.’

‘Was deliberate, do you think?’

She shook her head, but not strongly enough to indicate a denial. Renee breathed out and it was a long, draughty exhale. She said nothing and he felt the sadness of the large limbed woman sitting beside him. To most people’s sadness there is a sort of desperation. Most people’s sadness is a thing they try to fight, they think if they struggle with it enough they will eventually overcome it. But Renee’s sadness was something different. It was a state that was permanent, that had set in like rot. She pressed her
face into her hands. The street was quiet and all he could hear were the sounds of Renee beside him as she sucked back her tears.

‘You know, I used to believe in God,’ she said, looking upwards to where the moon was peeking out through a crescent gap in a sheet of blue. ‘And in heaven and hell, but now what I think is that when I die, I would forgo a death and an afterlife, if I could go back to the start of this life, armed with what I know now. I would re-live it and I would execute it perfectly, like a diver off a spring-board. I’d be aware of every second. I would tumble and enter the water without a splash. A perfect dive into a turquoise pool and then I wouldn’t need an afterlife. I think I could just about get it right the second time around.’

When she’d finished speaking, she stood up in stages, first onto her feet, pressing herself off the grass with her hands. There was something desperate about the way she heaved herself from the lawn, lifting herself away from her strange, discordant and impossible words.

He drove back over the bridge, driving in the left lane and the harbour expanded out in both directions below him with a blackness that didn’t seem to move. He knew now, about Kirsten. Kirsten had died after an affair she’d had with the man she worked for that had ended badly. That had been the last thing in her life to go wrong. He knew now, that the things that really damaged people could be very small.

He knew something else too. He knew that all families were fortresses and some were so solidly built they allowed a person to venture outside their walls. But some were so big and overbearing they trapped a person and their terrible secrets inside them.
Blessings

The evening of his opening in London, Andrew opened his hotel wardrobe and took out his plastic suit bag, unzipping it down the front like a bag that contained a corpse. From inside, he took out his check business shirt, one of the only two formal shirts he owned and kept for occasions like this. The collar was very stiff. He unfolded the ironing board that creaked as its stand parted and pushed the cord of the iron into the wall socket. He moved to the kitchenette and filled a glass of water from the bathroom tap, dipping his finger into it and sprinkling the droplets over his shirt. He pushed the warm iron across the fabric and the smell of warm cotton rose to him. There was something clean and reassuring about that smell. He smoothed out the creases of his shirt and prepared himself physically for what was about to come. He manoeuvred his arms into the sleeves, one at a time, the fabric was warm and dry and against his cool skin, it made him shiver. He moved out the door of his room and taking the elevator to the lobby where he waited for the cab. He sat on an old leather couch firm as a muscle and watched. How much of his life had he spent this way? Sitting still and observing other people.

In the corner of the lobby at a table were an old couple, sitting quietly. There was a calmness around them and a stillness. Over the table they held each other’s hands. They didn’t need to speak to each other. They were content, aware that the time they had left with each other was limited, that they had no more left to be wasted.
The night before he flew to London, he’d called Dom.

‘Hallo?’

‘Dom, it’s Andrew,’ he said. He felt, calling her then after everything that had happened, that he had to state his name. He had to declare himself.

‘Hi,’ she said. And he knew he had to be grateful, even for that small greeting.

‘I wanted to tell you I’m coming back. I’m flying to London tomorrow and after the exhibition opens I’ll be back in Berlin a few days later.’

She sighed. ‘So, you’re coming back now, are you?’ Her words were short and hot, delivered like blows.

‘Yes, I’ll fly over, probably on Saturday,’ he said, speaking his words too quickly, making the most of this new certainty he felt possessed with.

‘Actually, I was thinking you could come to London for the opening with me? We could spend a few days there. We’ve never been to London together,’ his words spiralled from his mouth.

‘Come to London?’

‘Yes, for the opening. You usually come to my openings with me?’ It was always comforting having her there; it was a reminder of who he really was.

She was silent.

‘I found out about Kirsten, what happened to her. And I took those photos I was telling you about, of the young girl. They’ll be in this exhibition. I’m coming back to Berlin. I’m ready, now.’

‘You’re ready? God, Andrew, I don’t even know what to say. What do you think this relationship is, something you can turn on and off like a tap?’

‘No, Dom, it’s not. It was just. I’m sorry.’

‘Sorry? Sorry isn’t enough.’

‘I found out about my father. How he died. It was a brain aneurism, my mother finally told me. Do you know I always thought it was a heart
attack?’ He using this information now, he knew, because he did not want to lose her.
‘You father? Andrew, you’ve never spoken about your father’s death to me. Not once.’
‘I didn’t tell you about my father?’
‘You told me you didn’t have a father anymore. That was second night we were together.’ She was silent, but she didn’t hang up. ‘I tell you what it feels like to me. It feels like you spend a lot of time hiding.’
‘I’m not hiding anything from you, I promise.’
‘Not from me, as much as yourself.’
‘Don’t say that. I love you. I’m coming back. I’ve only been gone a month, nothing’s really changed, has it?’
‘Andrew, come. Don’t come. If you want me to be a part of your life, you have to start involving me in it.’ There was a gentle click and then nothing. The silence of a dead line. Had he ruined it? He had always assumed he would never lose love through acquiescence alone.

The bellboy waved to him when the cab arrived and out on the street the cold air grazed his lungs. He shuffled along the back seat.
‘Hoxton, please,’ he said.
The cab driver nodded and drove. Was it jet lag? Making everything around him look small, the buildings and the houses like scale models of something much larger. Above him a sky of ceaseless grey. The raised gold lettering along the awnings of the pubs he passed. London had always been a place of transit to him, somewhere he spent a few days on his way somewhere else. He’d never stayed long enough for it to ever feel familiar.
Closer to the gallery, what he felt wasn’t so much a sense of happiness, but a sense of dread. His body stiff with the awareness of what could go wrong, bad thoughts clung to him like tar.
He wasn’t entirely sure why he did this to himself. Did he think people would only like him if he was bright and shiny and lit by success?
From his pocket, his phone gave off two quick pings. Who could be messaging him now? His thoughts rushed towards Dom, but instead it was his mother. Good luck; Love mum. She kept loving him, even as he pushed her away.

The day before, Andrew had arrived at the London gallery, where he’d met Marten Smythe for the first time. He was a man whose body didn’t match the authority of his voice, a short dumpy man with a cropped, grey beard. He had a small, lipless mouth like an animal that only eats meat. Andrew knew immediately what sort of person Martin Smythe was. He was the type of person who crowds around success and who wants to be around only the things that glowed.

He had the USB with Phoebe’s photos on it in the pocket of the jacket he was wearing. He had never made up his mind about whether to send it over. But it didn’t matter now, he had decided that he definitely didn’t want to exhibit the photos of Phoebe. He was sure of it and as he shook Marten Smythe’s hand the day he met him that he had made the right decision.

‘How was your flight?’ Marten Smythe had said.
‘The flight was fine. The hardest part is the jet lag.’
‘I’m sure it is. How far behind is Sydney?’
‘It’s ahead, by eight hours.’

Marten Smythe cleared his throat. ‘Well, I’m not sure if there’s been some problem, but we still haven’t received the high-resolution images of the girl with the face? We’ll need those now, or we won’t be able to go ahead with the show,’ he said and smiled. His words sounded moderate, considering the threat they held.

‘Yes,’ he replied. He would be strong. He wouldn’t be pressured into doing something he didn’t want to do. He would protect Phoebe’s image. He would do what was right and he would not bend to this man’s will.

‘Have you brought them with you? We really need them today, tomorrow will be too late. We need to have them printed.’
'Yes,' he said. ‘Yes’ seemed to be the only word he could say. ‘I’m sorry I got a bit busy,’ he said. He fiddled with the USB stick in his pocket. Marten looked over to the office at the back of the gallery where a woman he had met earlier, was sitting behind glass. They exchanged a look that said the two of them had discussed this. Andrew definitely wasn’t going to hand the photographs over. ‘If you give them to me now, we can arrange the printing for this afternoon? We have someone on standby at the printers.’ ‘Yes.’ He stood still for a few more moments. Marten Smythe’s eyebrows twitched. Andrew reached into the pocket of his jacket. In his head, he was telling himself that he had done enough. He had given them eight photographs that were already hanging in the gallery. They didn’t need the photographs of Phoebe as well. The rest was greed. ‘I assume you have the files with you?’ Marten Smythe had his hand held out. ‘Yes,’ he said. Andrew couldn’t help it. The way he had lived his life, his art had always come first. He had pursued it at the expense of everything else. He dropped the USB stick into Marten Smythe’s plump hand.

The opening was already underway when he arrived that night at the gallery. He walked in and the gallery was full. More people than he had expected were there and he stood on the threshold for a moment, wondering whether there was any way for him to avoid entering the room. The space was split across two levels and the walls were impossibly white. He stepped forward and forgot how loudly people spoke at openings, loud enough for their conversations to be overheard and walking into the room he passed through several layers of sound. Moving to the table of drinks he drank a glass of water, the sudden coldness of it made his throat seize. With his head tilted back drinking, he allowed his eyes to move around the room. The feeling he got when he saw the photos of Phoebe was lofty, of the floor moving away from
underneath him. It wasn’t very often that he permitted himself to feel proud of his own work.

Marten Smythe walked towards him with a man wearing a dark grey suit. He couldn’t stop staring at the man’s tie, a very tight knot at the base of his throat. He had crumbs down the front of his shirt, the remnant of dismantled hors d’oeuvres. He wiped his hand on a paper napkin before he shook Andrew’s hand.

It was always this way at openings, the lights shone too brightly in order to illuminate the work, but they made the people around them look too visible, their features grotesque.

‘Congratulations,’ the man said, regarding him distantly, with a curl on his lip that suggested Andrew wasn’t the man he thought he would be. ‘Thanks,’ he said and smiled, but his smile felt painted onto his face.

‘Where did you find the girl?’

_The girl_, he thought. He had done this to Phoebe, he had made her an object. Some people, would look at the photo he had taken of her and all they would see was what was wrong with her face. In this photo he had taken of her she would be forever reduced.

The woman who worked at the gallery walked towards him with a glass of champagne. She was wearing a grey, woollen dress, a soft sort of wool that made him want to rub his face against it. She squeezed his arm, as though she knew him and left him to talk to the man in the tight suit alone.

‘I actually found her at a school in Sydney near where I grew up,’ he said. ‘Well, the photos of her are very moving,’ the man said, stepping backwards, drifting from him into the crowd.

The room seemed to have filled with even more people, which made him nervous. He had the sudden urge to leave, to step out into the cool air, hail a cab and allow it to whisk him away. His name was everywhere in the room, beside every photograph and all around him everyone was talking about his work, but still he didn’t feel he was anywhere he belonged.
The woman who worked at the gallery moved from a conversation she was having behind him and stood by his side.

‘You must be very happy with the result?’ she said looking up at him, stretching her neck and tilting her head upwards, like someone peering out from under an awning. With this sudden vulnerability about her, she reminded him of Phoebe.

He looked into his drink and nodded.

‘I guess it might also be quite confronting,’ she said.

‘Yes, I’m sorry. I’m not very good at this,’ he said. Sometimes he felt he spent his life apologising.

‘The photos of that girl, they really are something, though I guess you must have known that already?’

He looked at Phoebe’s face on the bare, white wall. ‘I knew I had something,’ he said. What was it he knew he had? It wasn’t to do with her strangeness, which was what everyone else saw when they looked at that image. In Phoebe he had seen something of himself and by taking her photograph, he had preserved it. And it wasn’t only Phoebe. That was the only reason he ever took a photograph. To keep hold of that part of himself, to seal it in a frame so that he could look on it when he needed to. He only ever looked at the world this way in order to understand himself.

‘I like her a lot. The girl. Her name is Phoebe. She’s interested in photography now, since I took her photo,’ he said and the woman nodded.

More people were introduced to him and he spoke to them. They said kind things and he tried to respond graciously. The more people he met, the less he remembered of them. At a certain point, he had realised that it wasn’t meanness, this limit he placed on the number of people he gave himself over to; it was the way he wanted to live his life.

After eight, the crowd had started to disperse. He reassured himself that all the people around him would soon be gone and he could excuse himself for the night. But then, where would he go? Retreat to his hotel...
room where the air was cool and all the sounds were mute? It was an empty room. A room he would depart from without leaving any trace of himself.

Around him, red dots were lined up beside his photographs, small red stepping-stones creeping up the walls and he knew he’d sold more prints than he’d ever sold before at an opening. But the thought jerked around silently inside him, like a small metal pinball.

He had talked himself hoarse and now there was no-one left to talk to. The room was almost empty. He didn’t want to be there, but he didn’t want to be alone. What was this feeling? He could only ever count this night as a success, but why did he feel he was standing on the water’s edge with the tide pulling away from him?

Only the gallery staff were left and they had started packing away the tables and chairs around him. They moved quietly and swiftly, in a hurry for the night to be over. Marten Smythe was seeing the last guests down the stairs. It was a night that did not belong to them. Why was it he put himself through this? For these fleeting moments of glory after which everyone went back to their own lives and he was left to himself. He couldn’t say. He’d never found a way to explain it to himself.

He walked to a wall and looked up at one of his photographs. It had taken him years and years of work, gradually learning how to take a photograph like that, with hours and hours of practise to perfect his technique and passing through every disappointment, every rejection, in order to come through to the other side.

The woman from the gallery walked towards him. ‘Should I call you a taxi?’

He nodded. He couldn’t avoid it any longer. There was no other reason for him to stay. She helped him down the stairs, her arm under his and out to the cab, like a very old man being assisted to his last chair.

The taxi stopped outside his hotel, but he didn’t go in. He walked instead towards the Thames, navigating by some instinct his body had to find its
way to water. The air outside was frigid and dry. When he reached the Thames, he walked along beside it, the water a dark and listless void. It was still light in the sky, although the sun had set, the city lights illuminated the night sky. A jogger wearing white paced towards him and offered a nod as he past. He looked at his watch. It was after nine. He wondered what such a life was like, working hours so long you had to squeeze these ordinary activities into the corners of your life. That was one way to live and he had chosen another and he couldn’t even say that one was preferable to the other, but at least it was a choice he had made.

On the opposite side of the river, Westminster Palace was rimmed with light, its stony walls seamed and ornate. Ahead of him, London eye loomed, small capsules on a round wheel, shimmering and still. On the water a boat glided by, silent and sparkling with light. Pictures from postcards. He could look at them, but he couldn’t feel moved. What was it that gave him this distance from life? It was his blessing; it was his curse.

That night, he slept better than he had expected to, a sleep that was thick and dark as though unfolding behind a theatre curtain. When he woke, he realised it was almost eleven the next morning. He stood and opened the curtains on his windows. It had blocked out the light from outside and with the windows open the light flooded in. Cool, creamy European light. The light he loved to take photographs in. It was the reason he’d gone to Berlin, though Dom was the reason he had stayed.

After he showered and had been downstairs for breakfast, he walked back into his hotel room and the telephone in his room was ringing.

‘Hello?’

‘Andrew?’ It was Marten Smythe. ‘We were worried you might have left the country already,’ he said and he couldn’t tell whether or not he was joking. ‘You weren’t answering your phone?’

He picked his phone off the beside table and the screen was back. ‘Sorry,’ he said. ‘My phone must have run out of batteries.’
'Never mind,’ Marten said. ‘Have you seen the paper today?’

‘No,’ he said, wondering whether there had been some sudden catastrophe he hadn’t heard about, a cyclone or tsunami on the other side of the world. Perhaps Marten wanted to warn him of it in case he was travelling.

‘There’s a review in The Guardian today,’ he said.

‘Oh, great,’ he looked at his unmade bed as he spoke and felt a sudden urgency to straighten it. He tugged a sheet up over the pillow with both hands. Marten read from the review. He listened, but he couldn’t make sense of the words.

‘I don’t want to talk it up, but sales are strong, especially the one of the girl. I think we’re going to sell every edition,’ Marten Smythe said, before he hung up the phone.

Andrew went downstairs and asked for a paper.

‘Which one, sir?’ the young man with red hair said. Even his eyelashes were orange.

‘The Guardian if you have it?’

‘Certainly,’ he said and disappeared and then reappeared with the folded paper. He read the review on the way up to his hotel room. The photograph of Phoebe had been printed above the review and seeing it there shocked him; to see it on a gallery wall was one thing, but to see it in a newspaper meant it was there for all the world to see. He felt he had to show this to Pippa and Phoebe, to confess the way he had publicly exposed her. He took a photo of the article on his phone, opened his laptop and sent it to Pippa in an email.

Once it was done, he decided he’d go to the airport and see if he could take an earlier flight, not really thinking about what he was doing, beyond the thought that he wasn’t prepared to wait any longer. First he went to gallery to finalise things and afterwards he packed up so quickly that, as he took the train to Heathrow, he was worried he might have left something behind. The stations as they slipped past were words that sounded familiar: Piccadilly Circus, Leicester Square, Knightsbridge,
names that sounded miniature and playful, like words that had been
taken from a children’s verse. It was after four and around him, the other
passengers were silent. They were commuters, dumbstruck from their
day at work.
At the airport, he wheeled his bag to the sales desk, where he asked
whether there were any flights to Berlin that day. There was one seat
available on the next flight and he pushed his credit card across the
counter. A pocket of air caught underneath it and it continued to slide
after he’d removed his hand. It wasn’t as though he actually thought
about what he would do when he got there, but by the time he held the
boarding pass in his hand, he was thinking exclusively of Dom.
He stood at the gate until his flight was called, watching aeroplanes take off and land. There was a long moment before the plane separated from the runway, the extended tussle with gravity which gravity seemed almost certain to win. There was always the sense when the plane peeled off the runway of the possible conquering the impossible.

He waited three hours for his flight. The food he ate in the airport lounge was soft and luke warm. He used to love airports for the sense of progress, that he was on his way somewhere, to accomplish something.

He stood at the gate and watched people move around him rushing, focused on reaching their destination.

Outside, aeroplanes took flight and landed, tearing through the infinite blue, passing from one point to another along mathematical lines. Even from the inside, he could hear the sudden noise of every departure, a giant breath of air, like a lion’s roar.

And then he was on the plane. He sat in his seat and looked from the window, over the wing, watching the bags being loaded below, impatient to take off. Flicking through the magazine from the seat pocket, the pages slippery and containing only advertisements for expensive goods. People felt their richest when they travelled. He looked at the photos inside, images designed to make these things look seductive. He was glad he had freed himself from having to take pictures like this, of telling small but inviting lies about the world. As the plane lifted from the ground, he
felt a sudden lightness as though he was now, after weeks of procrastinating, on his way to solving all his problems. Optimism flooded through him like warm mead.

The plane circled over Berlin and what he had noticed were the cranes, yellow and orange struts, perched next to buildings. It was a city permanently under construction, building and rebuilding itself always conscious of the ruins from which it had come. From above, the Spree, silver in the sunlight, sliced through Berlin like a corrugated blade.

He took the TXL to Alexanderplatz and the trip was familiar to him and there was something comforting about moving through the streets he knew and the familiar voices on the train. *Einsteigen Bitte*, the woman said pleasantly before the train doors closed. He carried his suitcase down the stairs of the station and it was unexpectedly cool outside. He hadn’t worn a proper coat and he pulled the jacket he had on in around him.

Instead of going straight to their apartment, he got off at Alexanderplatz and walked through Mitte, seeking out the familiarity of the streets there. He wanted to visit his studio first, the place where he’d spent most of his time in Berlin. He wanted to regain that sense of belonging he’d had before he left. How fleeting the feeling was, it came and the moment he got used to it, it had left again. Around him, Berlin was a patchwork of ugliness and of beauty, a city that had survived a terrible history and had become something different and good.

When he could go no further, he had reached the Spree and looked down at the water, which was dark and still. The metal rail along the edge felt frozen cold. There had been times in his life when he wanted that darkness, to forget himself, to plunge himself into blackness, the way Kirsten had submerged herself in that lake. He sometimes thought that would be easier, than this constant struggle for meaning.

He started walking towards his studio and on his way a group of young Australian girls with long hair passed him and their easy accent broke his
concentration. He walked through the front doors and up one flight of stairs to his studio. The rooms in that building were big, cavernous and cool inside. It was as empty as he’d left it. When he worked there, he liked being able to hear the movement of other people in the rooms above and beside his studio. He often thought when he was there of bees in a hive, working separately but together, towards a common purpose.

The hall was dark and shadowy. There were old glazed tiles lining the walls, a pattern of creams and a crimson so dark it might have been drawn from blood. He moved out towards the notice board, where there were little signs pinned up in German and English. Offers to sell cameras, for studio models, lighting and notices for upcoming exhibitions.

He unlocked his studio and the room was as empty as he'd left it. It was cold in his studio and the air was still. This was where he worked, though as he looked around he saw it contained no trace of him. He came here each day, he laboured, agonised over photographs or ideas he had for them. He failed constantly and he hated himself for it. And then, each night, he returned home to Dom.

He stood next to a window. It was late afternoon and the light through the mottled glass looked watery. The windowsill was dusty, a fine grey layer on the wood, fine as ash. He pushed aside the curtain to gain a better view and on the windowsill he saw a beetle resting there, unmoving. Dead. Its shell divided into two halves by its wings and perfectly round in shape, as a scarab painted on a pharaoh’s tomb. It was the sort of bug, a black bug in a hard case that enjoyed only a brief life in the summer there. He had a boy’s urge to pick it up and feel it, but in his hand, he felt it was light. It wasn’t a bug anymore, just a shell. It must have died and been eaten by ants in the summer. They had picked pieces from it, labouring with as much of it as they could, carried it away to their burrow and worked and worked at it until they had transformed it into something new.

His phone rang. His Australian sim card was still inside.

‘Hello?’
‘Andrew? It’s Pippa.’ He felt suddenly nervous, worried that she’d be angry at him for allowing Phoebe’s image to be published in the newspaper. ‘I got your email.’

‘The review?’

‘Yes, I haven’t showed it to Phoebe yet. It sounds like the exhibition was a success then?’

‘Yes, I suppose it was.’ He shut the door of his studio and walked out into the shadowy hall.

‘Aren’t you happy?’

‘Happy? I don’t know if that’s the right word. Maybe more like relieved.’ There were old glazed tiles lining the walls around him, a pattern of creams and a crimson so dark it might have been drawn from blood.

‘Yes, I think I know what I mean.’

‘You weren’t upset then?’

‘About what?’

‘That they put Phoebe’s photo in the paper?’

‘No. I suppose I knew something like that might happen.’

‘I didn’t tell you, but I was thinking about not exhibiting her photograph. In the end, though, I felt I had to go through with it.’

‘I think you had to as well. The photo is very striking.’

‘I guess. I don’t know.’ He said his next words without really formulating them, they just came to him like a though. ‘I used to think photographs for a long time were my way of speaking.’ He wasn’t sure why he was telling this to Pippa, for some reason he thought she’d understand.

‘Your photographs are a beautiful language.’

‘Yes, at one time I thought they could be everything I needed. But they are no substitute for conversation. Or laughing. Or touch.’

‘I suppose not.’ There was a pause. Neither of them spoke, but there was no discomfort. Pippa said thank you and that she was glad Phoebe had been involved. She asked him to send through anymore reviews. He might never meet her or Phoebe again and so he said goodbye.
He took the U-Bahn to Kotbusser Tor and walked the familiar path to their apartment, with his suitcase bumping along the grooves in the cement as he pulled it along behind him. *Thud, thud, thud,* it sounded at regular intervals, like a measuring wheel. He’d walked this street so often he had the feeling that he was doing nothing unusual, returning home and Dom would be happy as she had always been to see him.

He crossed the street, walking on a diagonal. Since he’d been there last, the earth had tilted on its axis, moving back towards the sun. He hesitated before he buzzed the apartment. A feeling rose in him, a good feeling, a warm one. Such happiness in these moments before he had suffered disappointment, such bliss when all he had at his disposal was hope.

Not far away, the train thudded over its elevated track, the racket of metal and bolts that held it together. Along the side of the apartment building, graffiti, large swollen letters in green and silver, painted there in the black of the night and now catching the last light of the day. What would Dom say to him now, if she were there? Would she allow him to resume their love? He had hurt her. He had also hurt Kirsten. His own mother had hurt him. He found it hard to understand why these things kept happening with the people he loved.

He buzzed the apartment instead of using his key. The noise was sudden and crude. Through the intercom he heard a voice, but one so far away it sounded like the trace of a voice, carried off by the wind.

‘Dom?’

He thought he heard his name. The door clicked open and he pushed it. He stood at the bottom of the stairs, unsure he could make it all the way to the top with his heavy suitcase. He negotiated the first flight of stairs and rested on the landing.

It was peaceful in the stairwell. He always enjoyed standing there, in this hall of doors. The only sounds were the ambient noises from inside the apartments. He always smiled at his neighbours when they passed each other on the stairs, although he didn’t know their names. Still, he felt
these people were familiar. He’d heard their voices carried out here from inside their homes. He stood out here sometimes, eavesdropping on their lives.

The winter light through the glass was watery. It filled the stairwell with ambient light. The branches on the trees outside cast spidery shadows against a wall. He felt suddenly alert. The struts of the window frames made thick lines on the painted walls.

He was assessing the room for light, he realised. It was his automatic reaction to the world, to decide whether it would make a good photograph. He looked up to his front door, one flight up; he could see light seeping out beneath it. It was a faint light, but warm. He took his suitcase in his hand and moved towards it.
Introduction: Self, identity and the ethics of portraiture in photography and writing

My critical thesis explores the self, identity and the ethics of portraiture in photography and writing. By reference to Marguerite Duras’s *The Lover*¹, Hervé Guibert’s *Ghost Image*² and Susan Sontag’s approach to the photography of Diane Arbus in *On Photography*³, this thesis argues that the self is an inescapable presence to both photography and writing and that the representation of others often involves a fraught ethical dimension.

My research theme is very much practice led, in that the ideas surrounding photography, representation and identity that emerged in the writing of the novel have shaped my line of critical inquiry. The purpose of the thesis is to illuminate some of the major themes in the novel, to explore the same territory covered in the creative work, by applying the lens of critical theory to the same subject area. Equally, the research for the exegesis informed and fed back into the creative project, in the type of ‘iterative cycle’ referred to by Hazel Smith and Roger Dean.⁴ The result of the dual creative and critical inquiries is that it led to connections between the three texts that would not have otherwise been available to me.

The methodology I have used in the exegesis is to undertake a textual analysis of three texts, which illuminate the self, identity and the

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⁴ Smith H and Dean R (2010). *Practice-led Research, Research led Practice in the Creative Arts*, Edinburgh University Press
ethics of portraiture. Each of the three texts have photography either as their direct subject or central idea; the first and third chapters offer examples of writing the portrait, the second chapter examines a critique of portrait photographs.

There are two main threads within photographic theory that have interested me and were my theoretical starting point. First is the idea of the photograph as a documentary object and the apparently incompatible relationship between photography and writing. The second is the idea of looking at others which links to portraiture; why as humans we have this need to look, to identify ourselves in relation to others.

The static photograph

The photograph has been said to be an indexical sign and it has been suggested that, because of this, it is causally linked to its referent. In other words, a key and crucial idea behind the conceptualisation of a photograph is that its referent must exist in order for the photograph to be produced. Roland Barthes argues that a photograph is unable to deny the existence of the thing that has been photographed and its documentary effect derives from this fact. In other words, a photograph is ‘indifferent to all intermediaries: it does not invent; it is authentication itself’. Or as Rosalind Krauss writes,

‘Photography is an imprint or transfer of the real: it is a photochemically processed trace causally connected to that thing in the world to which it refers in a way parallel to that of fingerprints or footprints or the rings of water that cold glasses leave on tables.’

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7 Ibid, p. 87
My interest is in the uneasy and complex relationship between photography and writing, in view of the fact that a photograph is considered to be documentary proof of the thing it represents while, in contrast, writing is seen as more subjective and filtered through the self. Another way of expressing this might be to say that photography is external to the self, whereas writing is often seen as a more interior undertaking.

This difference might be linked to the dual notions of ‘self’ and ‘identity’. In this thesis, the idea of self will refer to the interior experience of self – the type of subjectivity that might readily be said to occur in the process of writing the self. Identity is to do with the public aspect of self and therefore more readily associated with photography. The meeting of the internal experience of self and the external projections of identity occurs at the site of portraiture. The apparent incompatibility between the internal understanding of self and the public experience of identity can lead to ethical problems for those seeking to represent others in portraiture.

Susan Sontag argues that only that which narrates can make us understand. Sontag describes photographs as ‘inexhaustible invitations to deduction’, given they are only able to represent a slice of that something much larger. Along the same lines, John Berger argues that photography is different from memory because memory is a continuous experience, whereas a photograph operates at a single moment. He argues that since there is no unfolding in a photograph, there can be no meaning. But perhaps a better way of explaining the difference between narration and the static image is that they lead us to different meanings.

This is one dilemma that arises in photographic portraiture. The portrait photograph is static and limited, since there is no unfolding in the photograph there is arguably no wider meaning of a portrait.

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10 Sontag S, p. 23
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photograph except in relation to the moment it represents. Nevertheless, the written portrait can also be seen as problematic, precisely because it unfolds – on one view it seeks to represent the internal experience of another – something that arguably defies representation.

The tension between photographic and written portraiture is demonstrated in The Lover, in which the narrator imagines a photograph of herself that was never actually taken, in order to attempt to achieve a convergence between her internal experience of self and how it is outwardly represented. In Susan Sontag’s approach to Diane Arbus, she suggests that Arbus’s photographs are ethically problematic because they do not draw on her own suffering, but use other people’s apparent suffering to validate her own pain. Here, the fact that the camera records what actually exists in the world is precisely what Sontag identifies as problematic. Hervé Guibert consciously blends autobiography with photography and shows us that photography can be as subjective an undertaking as writing the self.

The concept of portraiture

I am interested in what the exercise of looking at or reading others in portraiture tells us about ourselves. This need to look is powerfully and undeniably human, and reveals an intense need to know and understand ourselves in relation to others.

In Ways of Seeing, Berger writes ‘The reciprocal nature of vision is more fundamental than that of spoken dialogue.’ 12 Looking at photographs is a dialogical exercise, and this process is even more fundamental to photographic portraiture. Looking at others is a process of orientating ourselves in relation to the other. The face and therefore the portrait are the site at which the internal experience of self and the external representations of self meet.

John Tagg sees the photographic portrait as ‘a sign whose purpose is both the description of an individual and the inscription of social

identity.’ It is the face that represents us in the world; our faces are the point at which we interact with others. This is the idea that is strongly at play in my novel and the subject of my theoretical inquiries in this exegesis.

Sontag takes the view that looking at photographs is an overwhelmingly voyeuristic exercise, and yet there is something other than voyeurism at play in Sontag’s own response to Arbus’s work. In fact, one might infer from Sontag’s critique of Arbus’s work that our need to look at photographic portraiture fulfils an overwhelmingly emotional need. Sontag is concerned with the apparent violation of the subjects of Arbus’s portrait photographs, because those subjects are used to Arbus’s own artistic ends. This ethical dilemma would seem to be less of a concern to her if Arbus produced written portraits of her subjects.

At one level, The Lover could be read as suggesting that the written word is uniquely able to represent the self because of its ability to tell. And yet, Duras draws on the photograph as a concept to demonstrate to us that narration can also mislead us and misrepresent the self. The lingering and irresolvable tension within the novel is whether the narrator is concerned with writing her internal experience of self, or with representing herself to the world (that is, with her identity). In my reading of The Lover, the self and identity in the portrait are a continuum – one is experienced, the other is seen – at some points they converge, at others they digress.

Finally, Ghost Image is a useful text to examine because Guibert takes the view that photography, though it is external in that it represents what lies outside the self, is ultimately subjective to the photographer insofar as the photographer selects her subject from the limitless alternative possibilities. Guibert acknowledges the idea that portraiture in photography can violate a subject’s own sense of self, but at the same time he shows us that the representation of identity is fleeting and in this

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sense though photography does have ethical shortcomings, they are not of enduring consequence. By using his writing in the same way a camera might be used to ‘record’ that which is outside the self, Guibert shows us that the assumed dichotomy between the written self and the represented identity of photography is a false one.
Chapter one: Photographic metaphors and writing the self in Marguerite Duras’s *The Lover*

*The Lover* is undeniably a novel about writing, about the act of writing, about becoming a writer and what it means to write the self. Equally, it is a book in which photographs and ideas linked to photography figure prominently. These two themes run simultaneously throughout the book, though no explicit connection is made between them. This essay will argue that photographs operate metaphorically in *The Lover*; insofar as Duras references photographs, they can be conceptually linked to writing. Moreover, the photographic portrait is a metaphor for the limitations of writing the self. I will conclude by arguing that one of the key preoccupations in *The Lover* is how, in producing the written artefact of a life, the internal experience of self becomes secondary to what is written about it.

Though *The Lover* is in many ways a canonical text, it is worth revisiting here because of its peculiar resonances with the creative text in this thesis and its preoccupations with a growing awareness of self for its protagonist and photography. Moreover, I am of the view that the concept of photography as a metaphor in *The Lover*, outlined in Caroline Sheaffer-Jones’s 2011 article ‘The Art of the Portrait: Frames deconstructed in Marguerite Duras’s *L’Amant’* can be further extended. More specifically, my argument will be that metaphors of photography in

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*The Lover* highlight the parallels to be drawn between the representation of self that takes place in writing and photography. The Duras text links these two types of representation in an exemplary way.

**Photography and writing in *The Lover***

Photography is a strong motif in *The Lover* and the first and most significant photograph to be described in the text is of the narrator crossing the Mekong River as a young girl. It is the lingering image that pervades the text, as the narrator returns to, revisits and revises the photograph. The narrator describes the photograph in these terms,

So I’m fifteen and a half.
It’s on a ferry crossing the Mekong River.
The image lasts all the way across.
I’m fifteen and a half, there are no seasons in that part of the world, we have just the one season, hot, monotonous, we’re in the long hot girdle of the earth, with no spring, no renewal. (p. 5)

She elaborates on this photograph a few pages later,

I’m wearing a dress of real silk, but it’s threadbare, almost transparent. It used to belong to my mother. One day she decided the colour was too light for her and she gave it to me. It’s a sleeveless dress with a very low neck. It’s the sepia color real silk takes on with wear. It’s a dress I remember. I think it suits me. I’m wearing a leather belt with it, perhaps a belt belonging to one of my brothers. I can’t remember the shoes I used to wear in those days, only certain dresses. Most of the time I wore canvas sandals, no stockings. I’m speaking of the time before the high school in Saigon. Since then, of course, I’ve always worn shoes. This particular day I must be wearing the famous pair of gold lamé high heels. I can’t see any others I could have been wearing, so I’m wearing them... (p. 11-12).

The most significant fact about this photograph is that it was never actually taken, despite the detailed description offered. The photograph is imaginary, although the narrator tells us ‘It might have existed’ (p. 10). The suggestion here is that the significance of the image could not have

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been known until much later, perhaps not even until the narrator wrote it down in this novel.

The narrator tells us ‘It’s the only image of myself I like, the only one in which I recognise myself, in which I delight’ (p. 4). It is a curious statement to say that this particular image, a non-existent photograph, is the only one in which the narrator recognises herself. It is this image that the narrator seeks to present to the world and it is also the central memory she draws on in order to understand herself.

She tells us that ‘it’s to this, this failure to have been created, that the image owes its virtue; the virtue of representing, of being the creator, an absolute.’ (p. 10). There are two ideas intertwined here. The first is that the virtue of the image is its non-existence, suggesting that its significance to the narrator is the fact that it is the product of an imaginative act. Secondly, the reference to it being ‘an absolute’, suggests that it is incontrovertible, in the sense that we have no independent means of verifying the narrator’s description.

The dress the young narrator wears has the ‘sepia color real silk takes on with wear’ (p. 11). The dress’s ‘sepia’ colour is suggestive of the scene’s photographic quality, even before it was written that way, although paradoxically, the photograph did not exist until the narrator wrote it into existence. In inserting the details into the photograph, particularly the details about clothing, it reads as though the narrator is attempting to convince us of the photograph’s authenticity, while at the same time acknowledging its imaginative foundation.

The whole ensemble of the narrator’s outfit is absurd and haphazard – the belt that ‘might have belonged’ to a brother and the ‘gold lamé high heels’ (p. 11). Certain aspects of her clothing, such as the high heels and the fedora are fetishised in their elaborate descriptions. Furthermore, the way this passage is assembled suggests that the narrator is composing the image as she writes; she is calling forth the visual image of herself, hinting at veracity, at the transcription of memory.
It is almost as though in composing the photograph Duras is constructing her identity out of thin air.

Of course, if this were a real photograph, these aspects of the narrator’s outfit would not be open to speculation and in the way Duras plucks elements of the image from her apparent memories, an analogy with writing might be drawn. In writing it is possible to construct the self and present it to the world as truth. Later, uncertainty becomes certainty when the narrator achieves clarity about where the shoes and hat came from. In fact, she tells her mother, ‘it was in rue Catinat, marked-down’ (p. 26). The narrator is showing us the difference between the self (internally experienced through the recollection of memories) and identity (the narrator’s projected self shown in the photograph).

The fedora the young narrator wears distinguishes her from other people, she tells us, ‘No woman, no girl wore a men’s fedora in that colony then’ (p. 12) and goes on to surmise how it ‘must have’ have been bought for her. It is the hat that allows the narrator to see herself from the outside ‘as another would be seen, outside myself, available to all eyes, in circulation for cities, journeys, desire’ (p. 13). The fedora is fetishised, described with such potency that it makes the young narrator visible to others in a way that being a writer later made her visible in the sense of being a public figure.

This photograph, importantly, is the only physical description of the narrator we are offered in the novel. The idea of being seen from the outside is something that portrait photography has in common with memoir – the writer constructs the self and what is constructed is taken by those who read it to be a representation of the self in the same way that a portrait photograph offers a visual representation of the face.

The narrative of The Lover moves away from the imaginary photograph and back towards it, returning again and again to this one critical image. Later though, the narrator redefines the boundaries of the imaginary photograph, telling us the image actually ‘starts when he got out of the black car when he began to approach her, and when she knew,
knew he was afraid’ (p. 35). Writing confers that power on the narrator; she can invent a photograph of herself and then she can revisit it and reinvent it at a later point. Later, Duras does precisely this in her own writing, re-writing the same story recounted in *The Lover* in *The North China Lover*.

To the narrator, it is as if the river crossing is always occurring; the passage is written as though the moment is ongoing. We get the sense that it is a memory that will always be available to the narrator. It exists in both the narrator’s past and her present, as she recalls and narrates the experience. The river crossing serves to highlight the act of narration itself; it can be called upon and deployed by the narrator whenever it is needed.

It is this imagined photograph that becomes the defining portrait of the narrator. It is this image, I will suggest, that links writing to photography and by comparing photographs to autobiographical writing, the narrator shows us her awareness of the limitations of the autobiographical form. The complexity of *The Lover* as a text, derives from what Duras tells us about the writing the self through the concept of the portrait photograph.

In terms of narrative function, there is no reason why a written description of the narrator’s memory would not have served equally as well as a description of a photograph, which suggests that the import has to do with its conceptual significance rather than what is depicted. The relationship between photography and memory is, at best, shaky. Photographs, Geoffrey Batchen writes, don’t really prompt us to remember things as they were.\(^\text{16}\) The memories we retain from actually experiencing an event are more specific and involve our senses to a greater degree, than the memory induced by a photograph. A photograph is far more limited and less vivid than a memory. Batchen writes,

\[\text{\textsuperscript{16}}\text{Batchen G (2004). }\textit{Forget me not},\text{ Princeton Architectural Press, p. 94}\]
To induce the full, sensorial experience of involuntary memory, a photograph must be transformed. Something must be done to pull it (and us) out of the past and into the present.\textsuperscript{17}

This is one of the central contradictions of the photograph of the narrator crossing the Mekong: to recreate it she draws on her memories and those are, apparently, not fixed in the way a literal photograph would be.

One of the initial difficulties in interpreting \textit{The Lover} is a threshold problem of classification. Whilst the novel is apparently autobiographical, in that many of the protagonist’s experiences coincide with those of the author’s, it is nonetheless described as a novel. The book is not even said to fall into the less precise territory of ‘memoir’, which has been distinguished from autobiography ‘as being more flexible and outward-looking’.\textsuperscript{18} The overlap of the biographical details of the protagonist to Duras herself is striking. Duras also lived in Indochina as a girl, had two brothers and confirmed having had an adolescent affair with a Chinese lover.\textsuperscript{19} The confusion about the text’s status is also compounded by the fact that Duras inserts a writer into the narrative; the ageing writer reflects on her life from a point in the future. Yet given the classification of the book, it is impossible to be certain which aspects of the novel are truth and which are fiction.

Similarly, \textit{The Lover} makes reference to a number of other events, such as the mother’s purchase of infertile farmland and the death of a brother, which might be independently corroborated. But within the novel itself, the references to dates and life markers hint at authenticity, although we have no way of verifying that information except by going outside the text. Leslie Hill writes that despite these hints about the author, the narrator ‘refuses to supply the reader with a reliable life story, and the narrative structure in the book is more often in the form of

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid
\textsuperscript{18} Anderson (2001). \textit{Autobiography}, Routledge, New York, p. 113
digression than progression’. At the very least, she wants us to associate the author with the narrator of the book, but it is unclear how closely their two identities can be reconciled.

*The Lover* sets the agenda of writing as its central preoccupation at the beginning, by placing the narrator ‘in the entrance of a public place’ (p. 3) when she is accosted by a stranger. It is no accident that the narrator happens to be in this location. Leah Hewitt suggests that Duras flaunts the ‘pleasures of self-representation from the very first page’. There is certainly a playful, almost toying tone to the narration, the sense that Duras is enjoying the control she has over her material. However, I would argue that in negotiating this text, it is best read as a book about writing and to that extent there is little to be gained from an attempt to sift fact from fiction.

Indeed, the very lack of a clear distinction between fact and fiction brings into focus the act of writing. It asks us to consider the identity of the writer, the writer’s oeuvre and because the writer of *The Lover* is inserted into the text, we are also asked to consider the role of the author and the act of writing. Along these lines Karen Kaivola has argued that Duras’s novels ‘… are about the simultaneous success and failure of language and writing to represent female subjectivity and experience as they exist in the world.’ I would agree that *The Lover* constantly raises the idea of the failure of language to adequately represent the self. However, my reading of the text is that it is not so much concerned with the failure of language per se, as in suggesting that all acts of self-representation are flawed. Duras suggests that self-representation is

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reductive; even autobiography cannot capture the self any more than a photographic portrait is able to.

One of the key preoccupations of The Lover is the unique ability of a writer to construct a self. This suggests both authenticity in providing a location in which the book was written and a duration of time. The presence of the writer in the novel and the fact that the writing mimics the flow of memory, with its backwards and forwards movement in time, its elusiveness and elliptical style, give the impression that it is being written as it occurs to the writer, that all the writer is doing is recording the movement of her thoughts and that it is therefore ‘natural’.

Though The Lover is told through the lens of the backwards looking narrator, it is not elegiac in its tone, as might be expected from an ageing writer recalling the past, aware of events lost to her. In fact, whilst there is certainly a good deal of misery depicted in the novel, it reads as if the narrator relishes writing about the abject. References to her mother, for example, are almost exclusively negative, ‘she should be locked up, beaten, killed’ (p. 23). In fact, most of her childhood memories are unhappy ones, for example, the error her mother made with the incubation of chicken eggs that resulted in the chicks’ deformity (p. 30).

Yet, the tone itself is rarely sad; the narrator is not grieving or regretting. There is the sense that she is observing her younger self with a degree of detachment. Deborah Glassman has observed that this is a common feature of many of Duras’s characters in that they seek ‘sanctuary’ in their memories ‘in order to preserve the intensity of their experience from the erosion of time’. In the case of the narrator in The Lover, the past remains vividly accessible. It is almost as though being able to access the past and her memories, even if terrible, is preferable to the narrator to remembering nothing at all.

The forward and backwards movements in time between the narrator’s past and present are also referenced symbolically by the river

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crossing; it corresponds to the shunting back and forth from the older narrator to the younger one. Susan Cohen agrees that the river crossing is essentially symbolic, noting that it ‘signals no definitive departure from one place to another’. In a way, the only departure that takes place in this image is the departure of the young narrator from her mother’s custody, which places the narrator’s own identity very much in focus.

Everything in The Lover is viewed through the narrator’s eyes; we are privy only to her way of seeing. The fact of the narrator as novelist is sitting down to write her own life, also makes us acutely aware of the narrator’s hand. The disruptions to the flow of the text are frequent. It is constructed out of discrete passages which, when placed against each other, resonate and create meaning. Most of Duras’s paragraphs are brief, some are only a few lines long and Cohen has written about the significance of blank spaces in the novel, which draw attention to ‘the silence of blanks’. These silences pervade the work; there is as much silence as there is narration.

Hewitt, on the other hand, suggests that these blank spaces ‘speak the promise of something more substantial, more poetic and true than ordinary language or thought.’ I would suggest that these gaps in the narrative attune us to what is absent from the text. Indeed, the very idea that there might be absences in the context of an autobiographical text is significant. What is clear is that what we are ‘seeing’ in this narrative has been the subject of very careful selection and there is no way of knowing what has been omitted. What is significant is that the narrator makes us aware of the shortcomings of the form, even as she indulges in them.

One might argue that we are aware of the presence of the writer in The Lover in the same way we are aware of the presence of a person behind the lens of a camera, though they cannot be seen in the

25 Ibid, p. 150
26 p. 95
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photograph. The task of the writer of *The Lover* and the photographer might also be compared. A photographer merely mediates what is seen though the lens, making choices about what to include or exclude from the frame of the photograph. Similarly, *The Lover* gives the impression that the narrator is the curator of her own memories, making choices about inclusion or exclusion, about the edges of the work and its sequencing.

The episodic narrative is also suggestive of photography in the way that a photograph is disconnected from experience. One of Susan Sontag’s chief criticisms of photography is that a photograph has no capacity to explain. ‘Strictly speaking, one never understands anything from a photograph’, Sontag writes. Whilst a photograph depicts a ‘rendering of reality’, how a thing looks cannot explain how it functions. Accordingly, she writes, ‘Only that which narrates can make us understand.’ In fact, the prevalence of silences in *The Lover* and the way the text is constructed through episodic fragments, similar to photographs, is an attempt to deliberately defy narration. At the same time, the narrator is acutely aware that narration may mislead, thus equal weight is given to the silence as to what is written.

The narrator claims that the undertaking of this book is different to her previous work, which is all fictional, though many plainly have autobiographical components. She declares,

Before, I spoke of clear periods, those on which the light fell. Now I’m talking about the hidden stretches of that same youth, of certain facts, feelings, events that I buried. (p. 3)

The words ‘hidden stretches’ suggest that if we keep reading, we will discover some secret, some new truth the narrator has neglected to reveal in her earlier work. Furthermore the reference to periods ‘on which the light fell’ could be read as an implicit reference to photography.

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28 Ibid, p. 23
29 see Hill 1993, p. 2
The idea of a single truth of the self is regarded with derision by the narrator, who declares that writing is ‘nothing’; it isn’t even ‘a quest for vanity’ (p.8). She tells us what writing must be in order to succeed, which is ‘all things confounded into one through some inexpressible essence’ and if it is not that it is ‘nothing but advertisement’ (p. 8). In making this comparison, the narrator is highlighting the uneasy relationship between autobiographical writing and the commercial imperatives of publishing.

The tension between understanding the self and representing the self is constantly at play. Hewitt draws the link between writing the self and prostitution, making explicit something that Duras herself hints at, …writing- like prostitution – entails an act of seduction that submits the writer to the open ended, indiscriminate circulation among readers, just as the girl’s body and attire are openly offered to the gaze of others.\textsuperscript{30}

Hewitt also writes that autobiography is ‘a form of mediated self-love’.\textsuperscript{31} The narrator is asking us to consider this idea, that there are multiple agendas at work in autobiography and the reader should beware any claim to transparency or truth.

To the young narrator, writing seems to be something dangerous and powerful, which is also its apparent allure and it connects in this way to her affair with the Chinese lover. She tells us she doesn’t know how she proceeded with the lover, ‘So calmly, with such determination’ and she marvels at her own ability to follow through on her desire to be a writer (p. 39). The preoccupation here is with how she sees herself through others – in other words her identity exists only insofar as it is consummated by the gaze of others.

\textsuperscript{30} p. 117
\textsuperscript{31} p. 109
Identity and selfhood in The Lover

Identity and the construction of the self are strong themes in The Lover. So much is apparent from the significance placed in the text on the narrator’s relationship with her mother. The narrator is writing about that point in her life in which she separated from her mother in order to define herself. This is the undercurrent to the affair with the Chinese lover, in that it is against her mother’s wishes, as is the narrator’s desire to become a writer.

Certainly, the mother-daughter attachment has been identified as a key preoccupation of the text. Laurie Vickroy agrees that it is through the young girl’s ‘transgressions’ that she achieves a separation from her mother and that she ‘distinguishes herself from her mother in describing her own self-dissolution in positive terms such as potentiality, mutability and abandonment to another in love’. The differences between the narrator’s life and her mother’s is one issue that the narrator continually returns to, almost as though in writing these differences, she is reinforcing them.

Conversely, Julia Kristeva writes that ‘…in erasing the mother’s image she simultaneously takes her place’. Certainly, the mother’s death is enabling in the sense that it frees the narrator to write the text. Whatever the precise role of the mother, it is certainly bound up with the young narrator’s assertion of her own identity at this crucial phase in her life. The narrator tells us after she loses her virginity to the lover ‘I wonder how I had the strength to go against my mother’s prohibition’ (p. 39). In this way, she is contrasted with her school friend Hélène Lagonelle, who will ‘do what her mother wants’ (p. 73). The young narrator is determined to know pleasure in a way her mother was unable to. The mother is frequently described in terms of her self-control, for example,

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33 Ibid, p. 125
in the way she plans ‘her own and her children’s future’ (p. 5). One could see the affair with the Chinese lover and the choice to become a writer as a choice for the self, standing in stark contrast to her mother’s denial of pleasure, which translates to something like a denial of the self.

Crossing the river on the ferry represents the moment that the narrator obtains a certain distance from her mother and yet she is wearing her mother’s ‘dress of real silk’. It is the dress that her mother one day decided was ‘too light’ for her. Apparently, the mother considered there was no risk in the daughter wearing such a threadbare dress; to her mother she was a girl who hadn’t yet matured. What is key here is the disparity between how she is seen by her own mother and how she represents herself in the world; the self as observed and the self as experienced are distinct.

The French women who live in the colony also construct a version of themselves and an analogy could be drawn here to the construction of self that takes place in autobiography. The narrator observes that they return to France to talk about their ‘peculiar colonial existence’ (p. 19).

They wait, these women...they dream of romance, they already have huge wardrobes full of more dresses than they know what to do with, added to one by one like time, like the long days of waiting (p. 19).

It isn’t just writers who represent themselves in the world in this carefully constructed manner, this trait is also seen in these French expatriates who live in the colony.

The family’s poverty is referenced early in the book, although it is a relative poverty when compared to that of the indigenous population’s. The family’s poverty becomes relevant to the narrator’s relationship with the Chinese lover. In fact, the subtext of the relationship with the Chinese lover is that it is also a relationship of prostitution. The narrator writes,

The link with poverty is there too, for money has to be brought in...that’s why the mother lets the girl go out dressed like a child prostitute’ (p. 24).
Later in the novel, the mother’s complicity in her daughter’s affair becomes open – she asks the head of the boarding school not to check the time her daughter comes in at night and to excuse her from Sunday excursions so she may rendezvous with the Chinese lover (p. 70). The narrator describes her motivations as mercenary, even as a young girl, telling us,

She listened, watching out for anything to do with his wealth, for indications as to how many millions he had (p. 34).

What the narrator seems to be saying is that despite this poverty, despite the interracial affair with the older Chinese man, her story is not one of tragedy, although it might easily have become such. She seems aware of this the first time she gets into the lover’s limousine, the desperation of her situation is acute, ‘It’s already enough to make you weep, here in the black limousine’ (p. 35). Yet, the narrator’s life story does not become tragedy, because in time she became a writer and this period in her life became the inspiration for a crucial thread in her œuvre. Instead of selling her body, as a writer, she sold the story of her life.

*The Lover* acknowledges the contradiction that ‘autobiography splits the self it presents: between the writing self and the self written.’\(^35\)

This duality is captured in *The Lover* through the two versions of the narrator, the younger and older, and also in the descriptions of the non-existent photograph and the shifts between first and third person. We are very much aware of the older narrator observing the younger one, with the fascination and novelty of observing the actions of a stranger.

**Photographs as metaphor**

Portrait photography is used as a metaphor for writing the self, while simultaneously the frequent references to ageing and the structural arrangement of the book, narrated by an ageing writer, bring to bear photography as a concept and its connection to death, as identified by

Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida*, just a few years before *The Lover* was published. Given the photographic preoccupations of *The Lover*, it is difficult to imagine that Duras would not have been aware of Barthes’s work as she wrote.

The narrative then moves to a photograph of her mother. The narrator tells us she recognises her mother in that photograph more readily than in more recent pictures.

I recognize the awkward way she holds herself, the way she doesn’t smile, the way she waits for the photo to be over and done with. (p. 4)

But the narrator also knows what lies outside the photograph, that her mother’s expression denotes a mood. The narrator confides ‘Every day my mother experienced this deep despondency about living’ (p. 14). She then interprets the photograph in light of what she knows about her mother, about her father’s illness and death and her mother’s anxiety at the time about buying a new house. Here the narrator is saying something about the way we interpret photographs, that they are encoded with the information we already know about the subject.

Describing her sadness after consummating her relationship with the lover, the narrator hints at this, telling us that she ‘can see the same sadness in the photos of myself when I was small’ (p. 45). Interpreting photographs this way, according to what is known outside the frame of the image says something about the limits of photographs, about their tendency to de-contextualise moments from lived experience.

The narrator makes a comparison between her mother’s scrutiny and the discerning gaze of the photographic lens. Her mother takes her children to be photographed every so often and the photographs become the way the mother measures their development. The narrator writes,

My mother has us photographed so that she can see if we’re growing normally. She studies us at length, as mothers do other children. She compares the photos, discusses how each one of us has grown. (p. 94).
Her mother trusts her own eyes less readily than she would trust a photograph. When the mother takes the photographs home to the family in France, the photos seem to be operating as a sort of proof of the children’s normalcy (p. 95).

Even the children have a certain fascination with these images themselves. The narrator says they ‘Look back at ourselves when we were very young in the old photos, then look at ourselves again in recent ones.’ (p. 94). One of the defining characteristics of a photograph is its ability to take a moment out of the continuous experience that defines life, to remove what went before and what came after. In the same way, The Lover only what the narrator selects from their life and memory to write about.

The mother also has her own photograph taken, ‘in her best dark-red dress and her two bits of jewelry, the locket and the gold and jade brooch’ (p. 96). We gather from the description that is given that this is not the way the mother usually dresses, that the occasion of the photograph is special. We’re told ‘In the photo her hair is done nicely, her clothes just so, butter wouldn’t melt in her mouth’ (p. 96). The mother does not want the photograph to show her as she is, but the way she wishes to be seen. Earlier Duras has told us about herself, ‘What I want to seem, I do seem…’ (p. 18) and the mother is acting out this very phrase in her own photograph. Writing suffers from a similar limitation, of the writer, whether consciously or unconsciously, writing themselves according to their own interpretation of self.

The final photographic description in The Lover occurs when the narrator refers to the ‘better-off natives’ who have their photographs taken. These photographs ‘gave practically identical results, the resemblance was stunning’ (p. 96). Throughout The Lover, the narrator suggests that there are certain hierarchies of race at play - the white child having an affair with her Chinese lover, who is useful to the family for his money, and the sense of superiority that the French colonials feel over the indigenous population.
The narrator tells us that the photographs of the ‘natives’ were ‘touched up’ to tell a particular narrative.

All the faces were prepared in the same way to confront eternity, all toned down, all uniformly rejuvenated. This was what people wanted. This general resemblance, this tact, would characterize the memory of their passage through the family, bear witness at once to the singularity and the reality of that transit. (p. 96).

This effect is similar to the way the writer, particularly the writer who strays into autobiographical territory, is seen and assessed according to what they have written, rather than how they have lived. Pamela Genova notes that the comparison between these particular images and autobiography is acute,

The retouched photos of elderly subjects prepared to etch a perfected image of themselves throughout time represents an apt metaphor for many writers of autobiography, anxious to offer a final, beautified, public version of that which they hope ultimately to become in the annals of family, history and art.36

The narrator compares the expressions on the faces of these photographs to the photograph of her mother, telling us it was the same expression. ‘Noble, some would say. Others would call it withdrawn.’ (p. 97). These photographs record this difficulty in any representation of the self; though a portrait may appear to be self revelation, it is more often an attempt at representing the self. Moreover, the intention in this undertaking is to represent the self in a favourable or beautified way.

Sheaffer-Jones has written about the metaphorical link between photography and writing that underpins The Lover. For Sheaffer-Jones, the significance of the photographic descriptions is the way in which they highlight ‘the fragility of frames’, how ‘the subject of the work, exceeds the finite boundaries’ and ‘what is unspoken and at the edge of the frame’.37 Duras calls on these aspects of the photograph to demonstrate

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37 Sheaffer-Jones C (2011). p. 166
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‘the impossibility of telling the story’. In fact, one of the chief preoccupations in *The Lover* is with ‘a radical absence at the heart of the text’.

In her work, it is as if she were recreated, “captured” through artistic techniques as if in a frame, like the people photographed facing eternity. Her work would be the reinvention of herself as the portrait of eternal faces, artistically produced in the photographs, in short, a depiction of everyone and no one.

My argument in this chapter is that the metaphor of photography in *The Lover* creates an ongoing awareness of the act of representation in writing. The narrator is able to write in the autobiographical form, while simultaneously acknowledging its limitations.

The figurative use of photography is also compounded by the constant references to ageing and death. The man the narrator meets on the first page of the novel prefers her face ‘as it is now. Ravaged.’ (p. 3). The narrator tells us that already at the age of eighteen it was ‘too late’ and that she ‘grew old at eighteen’ (p. 4). Obviously, the narrator isn’t asking us to believe that she was literally old at eighteen, instead we are invited to give ageing its figurative meaning and thus connect it with photography. Her ageing, the narrator tells us, was ‘very sudden’,

I saw it spread over my features one by one, changing the relationship between them, making the eyes larger, the expression sadder, the mouth more final, leaving great creases in the forehead. (p. 4)

The way this description is given, the listing of features, the narrator might be writing this while studying her own photograph. The theme of ageing is also underpinned in a structural sense, by the positioning of the narrator, reflecting on what takes place in the book from a much later

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38 Ibid
39 Ibid, p. 167
40 Ibid, p. 169
The reference to ageing can be conceptually connected Roland Barthes’s views as enunciated in *Camera Lucida*. Although Barthes’s writing on photography might be described as dated, *Camera Lucida* is critical to my argument about photography as metaphor in *The Lover*. Furthermore, *The Lover’s* contemporaneity with *Camera Lucida*, the former published barely four years after the latter, means it is appropriate to consider these two texts alongside each other.

Barthes informs us that the link between photographs and death is inescapable. ‘Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe.’ Barthes tells us that ‘…however “lifelike” we strive to make it…Photography is a kind of primitive theatre, a kind of *Tableau Vivant*, a figuration of the motionless and made-up face beneath which we see the dead.’ Though the narrator doesn’t mention her own death, through the positioning of herself as an old woman reflecting on her younger self, there is this constant awareness of her age and, I would argue, her movement towards death. In fact, the act of writing in *The Lover* reads at times like a grandiose attempt at achieving immortality.

Carol Murphy also makes the link between Duras’s use of photography and death, writing,

> Photography serves as the emblem which evokes, either literally (through mention of actual photos) or figuratively (in images and narrative passages that are photo-like) the inevitable. The equation of death and photography in *L’Amant* is not a coincidental one…By evoking this awareness in the image of an absent photo, Duras thus transcends death (here, the fixing of the ephemeral in a static image) in a perpetual rewriting of desire.  

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42 p. 32  
Murphy is hinting at the relationship between the older narrator and the younger one, suggesting that the relationship is an ongoing one, that the older narrator might continue to revisit aspects of her past. In the way the narrator conceives and re-conceives her younger self, the relationship between them is almost outside time; it is perpetual and ongoing.

The narrator tells us she observed the process of her ageing ‘with the same sort of interest I might have taken in the reading of a book’ (p. 4). There is a tone of curiosity to her expression, as though she is suggesting that she is equally mystified by what she has written about herself as a reader of her work might be. The narrator refers to her ‘face laid waste’ (p. 5) and it is revealing that the focus here is on the face. She is not concerned here with the remainder of her body, which one assumes aged at the same pace, but with the part of her that is most recognisable to others. The theme of photography resonates here: just as the portrait photograph represents us to the world externally, autobiographical writing is taken to stand in for the writer’s internal understanding of the self.

Death is ever present in *The Lover*, not just because the ageing narrator would seem to be moving towards her own. Margaret Sankey writes that ‘The relationship between desire, death and writing lies at the heart of this work.’ The death of her younger brother is also one of the narrator’s acute preoccupations, she circles around the truth of it, only facing it towards the end of the book. The young narrator came to terms with her own mortality at the time of her brother’s death, when she became aware that her own eventual death was as certain as her brother’s. She loved her brother so much she wanted to ‘die of his death’ (p. 106). What is suggested here is that the narrator was unable to separate herself from her suffering over her brother’s death. She writes,

...the simple knowledge that my younger brother’s body was mine as well, I had died. And I am dead. My younger brother gathered me to him, drew me to him and I am dead. (p. 105).

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The present tense is striking ‘I am dead’, apparently a deliberate reference to both the older and younger narrator, one of the rare points at which their identities coalesce.

**Cinematic representations of the self**

It is difficult to read *The Lover* without bearing in mind that Duras was a screenwriter and director; there is something very cinematic about the way the book is written. Though the key distinction between the photograph and film is that the film is able to move across time whereas the photograph captures a single moment, both art forms are representational.

I would suggest the cinematic way in which the novel is written draws attention to the narrator’s visibility. To be a writer is, we are told, to be seen.

*When you’re being looked at you can’t look. To look is to feel curious, to be interested, to lower yourself. No one you look at is worth it. Looking is always demeaning.* (p. 54).

That the narrator characterises ‘looking’ as ‘demeaning’ suggests the narrator prefers being seen to looking at others. What she seems to be telling us is that it was a choice between one or the other; to be seen or to look. The implication is that both are not simultaneously possible. As a child, she does seem to have been a ‘witness’ of sorts, to her mother’s despair (p. 55), or later she describes herself as a ‘spectator’ to her mother’s unhappiness (p. 58). Later still, the choice to become a writer seems to have been the choice to be seen and recognised.

*What is implied here is that the narrator chose to ‘be seen’ rather than to look, to be a spectacle, rather than a spectator. Writing her life made the narrator visible to others and it perpetuated the ‘image’ of the young version of herself crossing the river. In a way, by being seen, she remained the young version of herself.*
There is a remarkable detachment to the way the narrator describes certain scenes, particularly the scenes featuring the Chinese lover. Whilst we are privy to the narrator’s thoughts, they are given in very rhetorical language and do not suggest the type of deep interiority that one might expect from an autobiographical text. The narrator seems to be very much aware that the writer’s interior becomes the exterior representation of the writer’s self when the book is released and published.

The narrator even hints at this cinematic quality to her descriptions of the affair, referring to the noise of the city being ‘like the sound track of a film turned up too high’ (p. 40). Again, the metaphor is given greater depth here – not only are we offered photographs embedded in the text, we are watching what happens in the novel unfold as though through a lens.

The narrator writes as though she is observing herself in her mind’s eye, calling forth the memories and telling us what she sees. Even the teenager already displays this ability to remove herself from experience – the detachment in the way she describes what happens without describing how it makes her feel. It is almost as though, to the older narrator, her feelings are irrelevant. During their first moments of intimacy, we are told, she already knows ‘she’ll never love’ (p. 37) the Chinese lover, which seems surprisingly callous, particularly in view of her age and that this is the first moment of intimacy, though there is no way of telling whether this was what the younger narrator felt at the time, or what the older narrator is now inferring while remembering this event.

In fact, much of the writing comes across as staged; she listens to her lover ‘with a sort of theatricality at once contrived and sincere’ (p. 49). The writing has something close to a performative feeling. The sex between the young narrator and the Chinese lover, for example, is carefully directed and positioned in the writing. This passage, for example, reads as overtly dramatic,
He’s torn off the dress, he throws it down. He’s torn off her little white cotton panties and carries her over like that, naked, to the bed. And there he turns away and weeps. (p. 38).

The scene that is depicted here is deeply troubling. There is an undertone of violence to the way clothes are torn from her body and there is also the shame depicted in the lover’s weeping. The actions are described in definite, direct sentences, and read as almost stage directions. There is an exaggerated quality to what is taking place, almost a heightened sense of reality – this is a scene that we have seen before, that verges on cliché. What ought to change the dynamic of this situation, what ought to make us uneasy, is the narrator’s youth and vulnerability, but the way it is written diverts our attention from those concerns.

This too, ties into the way in which, whilst the novel describes much misery and sadness, the tone is not necessarily consistent with the emotions described. There is a dissonance between what is taking place and the feeling the text evokes. The narrator is taking pleasure in recounting these details that might otherwise be difficult for us to read. The older narrator is attempting to reassure us: this is not the story of violation or of innocence lost. Or at least, that is not what it becomes.

About this aspect of the text, Hewitt has written, Duras has created ‘an effect of strangeness by positioning the reader outside the characters’ inner lives’.45 In fact, it is difficult to know what is taking place inside the younger narrator and what is imposed by the narrator looking back. One interpretation of this might be that The Lover attempts to show the way the interiority recorded in the novel comes to represent the author in the world, that is, once written, a novel becomes an external representation of the novelist’s interior state.

There is also a cinematic quality to the way the narrator flashes forwards. The narrator speaks of what ‘will’ happen, rather than what ‘has’ happened, as though it is in the future for the younger narrator, but already pre-determined, waiting on a reel ready to unspool. ‘Soon I’ll

45 p. 104
have a diamond on my engagement finger’ (p. 71), gives rise to the feeling of inevitability, as if the narrator is watching what is happening along with us. Though the facts are known to her, what apparently motivates the narrator is provoking our reaction for the first time to the events she knows so well.

There is something very cinematic too, about one of the last scenes in the book.

They are silent all evening long. In the black car that takes her back to the boarding school she leans her head on his shoulder. He puts his arm around her. He says it’s a good thing the boat from France is coming soon to take her away and separate them. They are silent during the drive. (p. 101).

The cues here are mostly visual – these too might be directions in a screenplay. The young narrator leans on the lover, she puts her head on his shoulder. The silence is overwhelming, much like the excruciating silence in the scene before the two lovers finally part in Hiroshima mon Amour; both couples linger in the knowledge of the ending. The separation is as important as the affair itself.

The narrator tells us that people look at her a lot, though she knows it is not for her beauty. She is ‘seen’ for her writing and as a writer. The narrator’s toying words are,

What I want to seem I do seem…I can become anything anyone wants me to be. And believe it. (p. 18).

One of the distinct stylistic traits in The Lover, often remarked on by scholars, is the way the narrator frequently confuses the first person with the third in The Lover. On the first occasion this occurs, she tells us,

My mother is a teacher and wants her girl to have a secondary education…What was enough for her is not enough for her daughter. (p. 5)

The narrator has slipped into her mother’s perspective. Her mother sees her, still as ‘her girl’, as having no separate identity apart from as ‘her daughter.’ She does this again when communicating her
desire to be a writer to her mother, saying her mother knows ‘she’ll escape’ (p. 22). The narrator is demonstrating the licence given to her as a writer to slip between perspectives.

The transitions between first person and third person are sudden and don’t follow strict rules. After describing what she is wearing in the imaginary photograph, the narrator slips suddenly into third person, referring to herself as ‘the girl’. The passages during which the narrator describes herself on the ferry denote the moments when lapses into third person are imminent. She describes herself, ‘The girl in the felt hat is in the muddy light of the river, alone on the deck of the ferry’ (p. 21), in referring to ‘the sublime elegance of the child who crossed the river’ (p. 94). In a way, the third person seems appropriate since this is, after all, an image, rather than a memory.

The meetings with the Chinese lover are also cues to third person – when she gets into his limousine after the ferry crossing (p. 34), the first time she visits his house (p. 36), when their relationship becomes sexual (p. 38), the clothes she wears that give her relationship away (p. 88), the reference to ‘the little slut’ who ‘goes to have her body caressed by a filthy Chinese millionaire’ (p. 89). The passages in which the young narrator is with the Chinese lover are where we are very much aware of the older narrator watching the younger version of herself and of watching us watch her.

Whatever else might be said about the third person transitions, they heighten the feeling of watching the young narrator, more than the first person passages. Sharon Willis writes that because of the transitions between third and first person ‘we cannot maintain a rigid and secure separation of the same and other, interior and exterior’ nor can we find a ‘fixed vantage point’ from which to observe the protagonist. What is written about the narrator becomes the narrator’s life; there is the clear sense that the two exist along a continuum.

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Later, there occur transitions into second person, which have been the focus of significantly less academic attention than the slippages into third. The first of these is the passage in which the narrator writes of her mother, saying that ‘she ought to be locked up, beaten, killed’ (p. 23). The text then refers to the mother’s statement, ‘She looks at me and says, Perhaps you’ll escape.’ The ‘you’ in that sentence would appear to be the mother addressing the child, but in the following sentence, the ‘you’ is the narrator addressing herself, ‘It’s not that you have to achieve anything, it’s that you have to get away from where you are.’

There is something intimate about this use of second person. It occurs again later when she tell us that her mother has become easy to write about since her death, her mother has become ‘something you write about without difficulty’ (p. 29). These are some of the few moments when there seems to be a meeting between the old narrator and the younger one. The division that exists for much of the book between the two versions of herself has subsided for this brief moment. The lapses into second person are the only occasions when the text becomes more interior than the rest of the novel, where the idea of being watched subsides.

**Conclusion**

In writing *The Lover*, Duras conveys her awareness that all acts of representing the self are flawed. In fact, this acknowledgment in some ways saves the book from what might otherwise be seen as a somewhat narcissistic enterprise. At the same time Duras is writing her life, she is undermining what is written, because she is making us aware of the difficulties with that process. In a way, it is as if a process of erasure is taking place – the self that is written is being substituted for the self that lived.

Duras is aware of the violence any autobiography does to a life and to memory. It excludes, it exaggerates; it reduces. On one side of the river, the narrator is a child, on the other side she is a woman and in
representing herself to the world, she has been transformed. Indeed, towards the end of the novel, there is no overwhelming feeling of resolution, rather there is the sense that the writer might continue to revisit this part of her life and, by revisiting it, revise it.

The photographic metaphor demonstrates the narrator’s awareness of the limitations of writing the self, whilst at the same time pursuing that very undertaking. In that respect, the story told in the book is undermined by this central contradiction – the narrator unstitches the fabric of her story as she writes it. The portrait photograph allows the narrator to write about the limitations of autobiographical writing which, whilst capable of description in literal language, would disrupt the continuity and poetics of the novel.

The text offers this central duplicity: Duras tells us that there is no single interpretation of the self, no more than a portrait photograph can really represent the self. Here lies the tension between the self and identity. What takes place in *The Lover* is therefore a sort of conscious failure. *The Lover* does not derive its meaning or significance from the autobiographical story produced, but rather from its ability to show its own limitations.
Chapter two: Ethics, emotion and aesthetics: Susan Sontag’s approach to Diane Arbus

In this chapter, I will consider Susan Sontag’s approach to Diane Arbus in her famous essay, ‘America, Seen Through Photographs, Darkly’ the second chapter in *On Photography*47. I will argue that Sontag’s approach evaluates the ethical aspects of Arbus’s portraits to the exclusion of their aesthetic value and without examining her own overwhelmingly emotional response to the work. In fact, in the context of her treatment of other photography mentioned in *On Photography*, her response to Arbus’s photographs is uneven. What is clear from Sontag’s response is the centrality of their affect. I will suggest that, since the affective power of Arbus’s work passes unacknowledged in Sontag’s essay, it diminishes the claim of her ethical pronouncements.

Although a great deal of academic discourse exists in relation to Sontag’s response to Arbus’s work, the majority of it was written before the so-called ‘affective turn’. Moreover, since Arbus’s work continues to influence contemporary photographers working today and equally Sontag’s writing on photography continues to be a touchstone for critics, it is important that the critique of Arbus’s work be reconsidered.

In ‘America, Seen Through Photographs, Darkly’, Sontag is deeply critical of Arbus’s work. Arbus was a renowned American photographer and Guggenheim Fellow working in the 1950s and 60s, who took her own

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life in 1972. Although her oeuvre included some landscapes, portraiture comprised the majority of her work. She was the first American photographer to have work exhibited at the Venice Biennale.\footnote{Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, Fellow Diane Arbus, Retrieved on 4 February 2015, \url{http://www.gf.org/fellows/406-diane-arbus}}

Sontag’s approach to Arbus is difficult to understand when seen in the context of her earlier, now famous essay ‘Against Interpretation’, in which Sontag very much sided with the artist over the critic. In that earlier essay, she essentially wrote that all interpretation of art is reductive, that ‘It is the revenge of the intellect upon the world.’\footnote{Sontag S (1961). \textit{Against interpretation and other essays}, Penguin, p. 22} In her approach to Arbus, Sontag is very much the critic, interpreting and thus by her own standard, reducing Arbus’s work.

I will argue that there are a number of assumptions Sontag makes in relation to photography that underpin her analysis of Arbus’s work. I will suggest that some of Sontag’s assumptions require a more nuanced treatment than they are given. Finally, I will suggest that Sontag’s own reaction to Arbus’s work is curiously exaggerated, suggesting the photographs operate at an emotional level that Sontag does not acknowledge.

The ugliness and suffering of Arbus’s subjects

Sontag commences ‘America, Seen Through Photographs, Darkly’, with reference to Walt Whitman’s project of universalising the human condition and by contrasting Arbus’s work against this ideal. Her critique of Arbus’s work is in reference to the 1972 retrospective held at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, which exhibited 112 of Arbus’s photographs (that is, the majority of her work). Sontag writes,

\ldots the Arbus show lined up assorted monsters and borderline cases – most of them ugly, wearing grotesque or unflattering clothing; in dismal or barren surroundings – who have paused to pose and, often, to gaze frankly, confidently at the viewer. (p. 32).
To a certain extent, this misrepresents the nature of Arbus’s oeuvre, which more frequently included people without any apparent disability or defect.\textsuperscript{50} Sontag does go on to observe, ‘Anybody Arbus photographed was a freak’ (p. 35). Sontag’s concern extends to those without any apparent disability or abnormality because of the approach Arbus took to her photographs and her insistence on photographing her subjects in an unflattering light. Sontag’s language is deliberately divisive, categorising Arbus’s subjects as either ‘freaks’ or ‘normals’ and reliant on her own value judgments about normalcy.

Arbus’s work, Sontag writes, does not invite identification from the viewer, but disassociation. Arbus’s message is ‘anti-humanist’ (p. 32), without a ‘compassionate purpose’ (p. 33) and suggests ‘a naivete which is both coy and sinister’ (p. 34). The use of the word ‘sinister’ suggests an element of malice in Arbus’s intent. Such evocative language does not assist us, I would argue, in making an informed appraisal of the photographs. Indeed, it often reads as though Sontag is attempting to match the visual force of Arbus’s work with her own prose.

One of Sontag’s key arguments seems to be that the subjects of the photographs are not aware of their own ugliness or suffering and that this results in a certain level of dishonesty on Arbus’s part. Sontag suggests she lulls her subjects into believing they are beautiful enough to be photographed, but betrays them by showing their flaws. Of course, the assumption inherent in this criticism is that her subjects are ugly or grotesque. ‘Ugliness’ seems a rather subjective appraisal – and is not something that can be measured by fixed criteria, or at least Sontag does not offer us any indication of the criteria she relies on to make this assessment. Many of her subjects couldn’t even be described this way – the Identical twins, Roselle, N.J. 1967 or A flower girl at a wedding, Conn, 1964,

\textsuperscript{50} See Arbus D (1972). \textit{Diane Arbus}, Aperture, New York, a monograph that was published contemporaneously with this exhibition.
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for example.\(^{51}\) The young, dark haired girl clad in white in the latter picture is, in fact, arrestingly beautiful.

Sontag’s criticism of Arbus and the ‘ugliness’ of her subjects is perplexing when viewed in the context of her comments about photography generally, that photographs also beautify, even the ugly. In fact, in *On Photography*, she wrote that beauty has come to be measured by photographs (p. 85) and of ‘the camera’s ability to transform reality into something beautiful’ (p. 112). On the one hand, this comment seems at odds with her opinion that Arbus’s photographs invariably render her subjects ugly. In any event, this is also precisely the point of Arbus’s photographs, the reason that the photos are so jarring is that her subjects don’t meet our visual expectations.

At one level Sontag, acknowledges this. She writes,

The authority of Arbus’s photographs derives from the contrast between their lacerating subject matter and their calm, matter of fact attentiveness. This quality of attention – the attention paid by the photographer, the attention paid by the subject to the act of being photographed – creates the moral theatre of Arbus’s straight-on, contemplative portraits. (p. 35).

The suggestion Sontag is making is that there is a disconnect between style and subject matter – that the level of attention Arbus paid to her subjects is at odds with their appearance. However, Sontag is coy about why Arbus’s subjects do not deserve the level of attention she affords them.

What can be observed about Arbus’s subjects is that they are very different to the beauty norm that pervaded the fashion photographs she was involved with early on in her career. She worked with her husband for many years in fashion photography\(^{52}\) and, in a certain way, her work can be seen as a reaction against that. In her artistic photographs, Rachel

Adams suggests ‘…she repudiated the aesthetic and social values of the fashion industry.’

In most of Arbus’s photographs there is a tension between her technique and subject matter – the close-up, expressionless and full frontal portraiture is what we might expect to see in a fashion magazine, yet Arbus’s subjects consistently defy that visual paradigm.

In a way, I’m not sure Arbus would even disagree with Sontag in her suggestion that photographs have become our metric for assessing beauty. This is part of what Arbus is exploring: the nature of photographic seeing. Her consistency of approach comes from applying many of the standard techniques of commercial and fashion photography to subjects who we would not have expected to have been given that sort of treatment. The tension that is often experienced when viewing Arbus’s work is to do with the level of attention to detail her subjects are afforded; it is the type of attention we expect only to be afforded to subjects who are traditionally considered ‘beautiful’.

Sontag writes that Arbus photographs people who are ‘…in various degrees unconscious or unaware in relation to their pain, their ugliness’ and she contrasts this to photographs of those whose suffering and the cause of that suffering is apparent, such as victims of wars, accidents or famines (who were very much the subject of her later book, Regarding the Pain of Others). The photographs show no ‘emotional distress’ and she observes that in fact, ‘Pain is more legible in the portraits of normals’. Sontag goes on,

In the world colonized by Arbus, subjects are always revealing themselves. There is no decisive moment. Arbus’s views that self revelation is a continuous, evenly distributed process is another way of maintaining the Whitmanesque imperative: treat all moments as of equal consequence...Instead of trying to coax her subjects into a natural or typical position, they are encouraged to be awkward – that is, to pose. (p. 37).

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Of the photograph *Woman with a veil on Fifth Avenue, N.Y.C 1968*, Sontag writes, ‘what makes the woman in Arbus’s photograph strange is the bold unselfconsciousness of her pose’ and apparently what she has to feel self-conscious about is her ‘characteristic ugliness’.

It seems a difficult argument to mount that the photographs would somehow be more ethically valid if the suffering of her subjects were more apparent. However, Mieke Bal writes that though suffering is invisible, ‘it is readable.’

Vicarious suffering, obviously, is an extremely lightened form, and if this lightening comes from the annulling of difference, in the end suffering all but disappears from sight, eaten up by the commiserating viewer.

Though we cannot see or feel a person’s pain for them, we can detect that they must be suffering. This seems to be the crux of Sontag’s concern. That we look at Arbus’s photographs and infer that her subjects must be suffering, but we cannot read this from their photographs and consequently we are not invited to empathise. Accordingly, our looking becomes voyeuristic, even predatory.

Nevertheless, it is condescending to assume that the people Arbus photographed were, because of their appearance, necessarily suffering. Or even if they were suffering that they would seek out our sympathy to console that suffering. Or, to take it one step further, that we could ever understand the nature of her subject’s suffering even if they were to explain it to us. In a way, this is part of the point of Arbus’s photographs: to challenge what might be thought of as our immediate response to her subjects.

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55 Ibid, p. 110
Phillip Charrier has argued that Sontag’s main concern was with Arbus’s agenda itself, which she considered to be cold and voyeuristic. He further argues that Sontag was ‘unresponsive to the unique living reality of Arbus’s photographs as art…’ Indeed, there is a certain irony in Sontag’s approach to Arbus’s work, which is that in assessing her subjects as ‘ugly’ and ‘grotesque’, Sontag evinces a certain coldness to those people herself. The logical extension of Sontag’s argument is that these people ought not to be photographed. Or, even more problematical, they should be photographed in a way that demonstrates that they are aware of their own ‘suffering’, though the nature of that suffering is not precisely articulated.

The issue of consent in Arbus’s photographs

Part of Sontag’s concern with Arbus’s photographs is with the violation of subjects that Sontag saw implicit in her work. By Arbus’s own admission, she befriended many of the individuals she photographed and Sontag is critical of this. She writes the portraits suggest that her subjects consented to being photographed (p. 36). About the frontal pose characteristic of Arbus’s photographs, Sontag writes, her subjects were ‘facing the camera which ‘signifies solemnity, frankness, the disclosure of the subject’s essence.’ (p. 37-38). This frankness is also suggestive of consent.

The implication seems to be that Arbus’s subjects, whilst consenting to the photograph being taken, could not have consented to the way they were photographed, nor to the full use to which the photographs were put. However, this criticism seems to be one that is better levelled at the enterprise of photography than at Arbus’s photographs specifically. In certain respects, this is an exchange that all photographers must negotiate, because as a representational art form

57 Ibid, p. 423
photographs depend upon the existence of their subjects. And photographs of people use that person’s image; more specifically, photographic portraiture uses a person’s identity. It is not possible to know exactly what took place between Arbus and her subjects, nor is it really possible to determine from the photographs themselves whether the relationships between Arbus and her subjects were exploitative. In a way, this issue sits outside what is represented in the photograph and how it is represented. Can any subject of a photograph, whether artistic or journalistic, ever knowingly consent to or even know, the full extent of the use to which it might be put?

Part of the impossible dilemma that Sontag sets up for a photographer like Arbus is that, even if the subject consents to having their photograph taken, they cannot consent to how they are ultimately represented in that image, because that could not have been known until the photograph was developed (at least at the time Arbus was working). Photography for Sontag is a realm of violation. However, she clearly did not think this was an issue in relation to the work of other portrait photographers, such as Walker Evans or Dorothea Lange, who are treated more favourably, though much of their portraiture is stylistically similar to Arbus’s.

Her approach to the photographs of Dorothea Lange, for example, is much more sympathetic. She praises Lange’s photos of Nisei on the West Coast being transported to internment camps in 1942, which she says helped the public in the 1960s to reach the understanding that ‘a crime had been committed by the government against a large group of American citizens’ (p. 17) and implies that Lange’s photographs are moral. She describes what she calls Lange’s ‘sensitive use of the camera’ (p. 121); the word ‘sensitive’ is particularly at odds with how she describes Arbus’s work.

Stylistically, the similarities between Arbus’s photographs and Lange’s are, in many ways, stark. Many of Lange’s photographs are full frontal photographs, of people who appear to be suffering, though the
source of their suffering is not depicted. In *Rural Rehabilitation Client, Tulare County, California*, November 1938, a woman is shot in an unflattering pose, in an apparently deliberate choice by Lange, with her hands folded over her chest and her head tucked into her neck.\(^{59}\) Or Lange’s famous photograph *Migrant Mother, Nipomo, California*, March 1936 in which a mother is seen with her two young children, hand to her face, squinting, her clothes stained.\(^{60}\)

It is unclear the exact basis on which Sontag distinguishes the frontal pose of Arbus’s photographs from those of the ‘The immensely gifted members of the Farm Security Administration photographic project of the late 1930s’ (p. 6), amongst whom Lange was included. Perhaps the distinction, insofar as Sontag is concerned, is that Lange’s photographs exist in a context that Arbus’s lack. Lange’s pictures were, in other words, concerned much more acutely with social realism.

Later in the book, Sontag contrasts August Sander’s work with the photographs of Diane Arbus.

People face Sander’s camera, as they do in Model’s and Arbus’s photographs, but their gaze is not intimate, revealing. Sander was not looking for secrets; he was observing the typical. (p. 59).\(^{61}\)

Sontag does not articulate what it is precisely about Sander’s subjects gaze that is not ‘intimate’ and ‘revealing’, or even exactly why such a gaze is problematic. She goes on to write ‘Sander aimed to shed light on the social order by atomizing it, into an indefinite number of social types’ (p. 60). It seems plain that Sontag did not consider Arbus to be performing the same function and yet Sontag does not draw a strong distinction between the photographs taken by the two photographers.

Geoff Dyer observes that Arbus’s strategy of befriending her subjects is arguably ‘less exploitative’ than the more surreptitious strategies employed by other photographers such as Paul Strand and

\(^{59}\) Davis K (1995). *Dorothea Lange*, Hallmark Cards Inc, p. 59
\(^{60}\) Ibid, p. 45
\(^{61}\) Lisette Model was Arbus’s photographic mentor
Walker Evans. Indeed, there is a hint of condescension in the suggestion that Arbus’s subjects did not consent, and moreover, could not consent – it implies that Sontag considered them incapable of understanding what it was they were involved in.

There are some photographs in which the issue of the consent of Arbus’s subjects is truly problematic, but Sontag’s critique does not specifically mention these. Those are the photographs Arbus took of the young women with Down’s Syndrome. In Untitled 1 1970-71 two women with Down’s Syndrome stand in the centre of the photograph. They are wearing elaborate hats, tied up under their chins. They both wear cardigans and knee length stockings and flat, black shoes. One holds a handbag under her arm and wears glasses. Their arms are clasped. What is striking about this photograph, in the context of most of Arbus’s photographs in which expressions are so often ambiguous, is that these two women are smiling so contentedly. One is missing her two front teeth. Of all of Arbus’s photographs, these are one of the few in which the subjects are unequivocally happy.

This is where Sontag’s arguments about consent are, I think, most cogent. Unlike her other ‘freaks’, Arbus’s Down’s Syndrome subjects are unlikely to have been able to have given informed consent to these photographs being taken, let alone understanding the broader implications of how they might subsequently have been used. Though Arbus may have obtained consent from their legal guardians, the idea that they may never have understood what Arbus was doing, is troubling. On the other hand, this reasoning, taken to its logical conclusion would mean that no photograph of a person with Down’s Syndrome could ever be taken, particularly since it’s difficult to know what ‘context’ these subjects might have been given to make the images more ethically valid. The removal of their images entirely from public consciousness seems to me to be equally problematic.

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63 Arbus D (1972)
Janet Malcolm made this observation in relation to these photographs,

In photographing the retarded she waits for the moment of fullest expression of disability: she shows people who are slacked jawed, vacant drooling, uncoordinated, uncontrolled, demented looking. She does not flinch from the truth that difference is different, and therefore frightening, threatening, disgusting. She does not put herself above us- she implicates herself in the accusation.64

What makes these particular images so disturbing is, I think, that we’re are asked to look carefully at people who we are trained to look away from. We’re being asked to stare, when our socially conditioned impulse tells us not to.

David Davies writes that the issue of consent more broadly is less about the artistic value of Arbus’s work than it is ‘as one of professional ethics.’65 Davies suggests that if a photographer does have a professional responsibility to his or her subjects, it is no different to the writer of fiction who bases their characters on real people. In certain cases, a person might be plainly identifiable from what has been written about them. Given Sontag later uses the writer as her artistic paradigm against which photography is unfavourably compared, this observation seems particularly apt.66 If Sontag’s concern really is about the violation of Arbus’s subjects, surely the same argument could be made in relation to writers of autobiographical fiction or memoir.

However Judith Goldman argues that there is a problem, not so much with the issues of consent of Arbus’s subjects, but with the ‘air of complicity and misplaced trust’67 that her photographs imply. Goldman

66 Sontag (1977), p. 39
suggests that the difficulty with Arbus’s work is that her photographs do not acknowledge the power imbalance between photographer and subject and that there is therefore a dishonesty to her images. But does this mean that the sorts of subjects Arbus chose could never be photographed? One of the problems with this type of argument is that it means certain categories of people could never be represented in photographs, because it is not immediately clear what contextual indications might be used to acknowledge the existing power imbalance.

Although Sontag does not raise this specifically, in view of her statements about photographs generally, she presumably considers the harm that would flow to Arbus’s subjects is in fact that they would be recognised and judged as ‘grotesque’. In other words, it is the reputation of the individuals that she represents that is at stake. But a photograph often captures a person’s ephemeral state – the way they appeared at particular moments, which may be very different to the way they appear in real life. As Davies suggests, identity as captured in a photograph is ‘momentary’ and ‘we can hardly hold the photographer responsible for making us aware of what was already there to be seen.’ However, if it is accepted that the representation of identity is only ephemeral, it is difficult to see what enduring harm could result from consistently choosing unflattering photographs, even accepting that this was a conscious choice made by Arbus. The ephemeral nature of identity is also something that Hervé Guibert is preoccupied with in *Ghost Image*, which will be addressed in the following chapter.

**Photography as an artistic enterprise**

Part of Sontag’s objection to photography suggests a deep suspicion about photography as an art form. Sontag contrasts Arbus’s work and the task of the photographer in general to that of the writer’s.

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68 Davies D, p. 25
There is a difference, she maintains, between the activity of the photographer and that of the writer. The writer, she says, is giving voice to their own pain, while the photographer is recording the pain of other people. Pain she writes is ‘one’s own property’, while one must actively seek out the pain of other people (p. 40).

Sontag’s query with Arbus’s work seems to be that photographs merely represent their subjects as they are, without mediation by the photographer. The argument that Arbus’s photographs present only their subject seems at odds with Sontag’s contention that Arbus photographed her subjects in a manner that was deliberately ‘ugly’. If, on the one hand, Arbus’s talent is merely selecting her ‘strange’ subjects, it is difficult, on the other hand, to assert they were photographed in a way that deliberately made them appear ugly. Clearly, in the way Arbus’s subjects are shot, in the stylistic similarity between them, she is doing more than selecting strange subjects to photograph. The photographs are almost always frontal, the expressions are often blank, which casts the viewer curiously adrift, because there is nothing in the subjects’ expressions to denote to the viewer what the appropriate reaction to the image should be. The subjects are very often shot from below, suggesting that Arbus was crouching down to take the photograph and therefore implying her presence in the photographic scene. Such consistency alone suggests Arbus’s technique is deliberate.

Symmetry is also a prominent feature of Arbus’s work. Retired man and his wife at home in a nudist camp one morning, N.J 1963; A family on their lawn one Sunday in Westchester, N.Y. 1968; and especially her famous Identical twins, Roselle, N.J. 1967, all display a visual symmetry in the placement of her subjects, inviting us to assess similarities and differences between the individuals they contain. In relation to the photograph of the identical twins, the photograph discloses that the twins are not in fact

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69 Particularly since Sontag contends that in photographs ‘style’ is secondary to ‘subject’ (p. 71).
identical and here Arbus is not asking us to find equivalences between the two girls, but drawing our attention to their differences.

Sontag is derisive of Arbus’s art form insofar as she claims she is merely representing what already exists in the world. To a certain extent she devalues the task of selecting subjects. One thing that is generally on about Arbus’s photographs is that their style is unique, suggesting that her ability to select subjects from the infinite number of alternative possibilities, was a rare one.

Part of this, again, is bound up in Sontag’s attitude towards photography as a medium. Christopher Bedford writes that in artistic criticism, premium is often placed on ‘conceptual sophistication’ over the ‘observe and record model of photography’ because the latter is ‘too connoisseurial, too ineffable, and too intuitive to qualify as an intelligent and intelligible conceptual strategy.’ Additionally, it can’t easily be described. This is part of the difficulty with the sort of photographs Arbus took: they are difficult to critique, because the work undertaken by the artist is, in some ways, invisible.

Sontag goes on to observe that photography is troubling because it trades in other people’s pain. She writes.

Thus, what is finally most troubling in Arbus’s photographs is not their subject at all but the cumulative impression of the photographer’s consciousness: the sense that what is presented is precisely a private vision, something voluntary. Arbus was not a poet delving into her entrails to relate her own pain but a photographer venturing out into the world to collect images that are painful. (p. 40).

Sontag’s concern is that Arbus appropriated the suffering of others in order somehow to communicate her own. Sontag sets up an impossible dilemma for a photographer – as a representational art form, photographs depict what exists in the world; portrait photography depicts people. If the photographs cannot be used to make a private statement, but only in a strict documentary sense, an artistic undertaking

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70 Bedford C in Klein A (2009). Words without pictures, Aperture, p. 10
like Arbus’s will be flawed before it begins. If this is taken to its conclusion it suggests that a photographer cannot ‘lay bare’ their own pain or make a personal statement by photographing other people.

One of Sontag’s claims is that Arbus was validating her own feelings by photographing others. In one way, it’s not clear that there is a relevant distinction to be made here – many visual artists, in one way or another, represent things that exist in the world, because those things or situations have meaning and resonance for them. This is something I will examine in the next chapter with reference to Hervé Guibert’s *Ghost Image*. In any event, it is not even clear that Arbus’s intention was laying bare other people’s pain. I would argue her work has to do with asking the viewer to examine their own responses to the photographs.

Davies has written about the assumption that the relationship between the subject of a photographic image and that of a painting or drawing is different because ‘while the intentionality of the artist plays a particular kind of determining role in the latter, it plays no analogous role in the former.’

When we look at a canvas, we undertake a process of viewing that is different to looking at a photograph, because we are more conscious of how the subject of the painting has been rendered by the painter. Gerry Badger suggests that Sontag assumed that a photographer ‘can do little to mitigate’ the ‘fundamental limitation’ of their own subject. Both Badger and Davies agree that there are problems in confusing what is represented, with how it is represented, as Sontag does, particularly in her treatment of Arbus’s work.

One of the difficulties with Sontag’s approach is that she frequently conflates the photographs with their subject matter. In a way Arbus’s artistic subject is perception itself: to interrogate our ways of seeing and dismantle our assumptions about her subjects – or at least to

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71 Davies D, p. 211
72 Davies D, p. 213
73 Badger G (2010). *The pleasures of good photographs*, Aperture, p. 11
show us that we hold those assumptions. Lisa Baird writes of Sontag’s appraisal that,

By photographing subjects outside mainstream society, Sontag argues, Arbus’s work violated both the aesthetic aims of photography to either beautify or objectively record the world. In fact, Arbus offered up images as documents for scrutiny, thus inviting viewers to look as voyeurs. Ethically, Sontag thus concludes, Arbus’s work amounted to a kind of predation.74

I would argue that Arbus’s work, while perhaps documentary in style, is plainly not documentary in overall effect. In my view, it is incorrect to assume that viewers would have been confused about the nature of Arbus’s work because of the form in which it is presented and in my view, this critique underestimates our ability to differentiate a subject from the way it is represented. Sontag also underestimates the fact that Arbus’s photographs were exhibited in galleries, which made their artistic intention clear.

One of the key problems with Sontag’s arguments is their level of abstraction: to criticise Arbus’s photographs at the level of ethics makes it very difficult to contradict Sontag’s arguments without taking an ‘unethical’ position ourselves. There is almost no attempt by Sontag to engage with Arbus’s technique, apart from her selection and befriending of her subjects, her use of the ‘frontal pose’, neutral backgrounds and the unflattering nature of the images. Sontag doesn’t even examine one single photograph in any detail. This makes it difficult to contradict her claims, because they cannot be tethered to anything concrete.

Sontag’s criticism exceeds a critique of the photographs and becomes a criticism of Arbus herself. She writes, ‘The fact of her suicide seems to guarantee that her work is sincere, not voyeuristic, that it is compassionate, not cold.’ (p. 39). Sontag even goes outside Arbus’s work, looking at her background and childhood. Arbus, who lived a relatively

protected childhood, used her photographs, writes Sontag, as a way of ‘procuring experience and thereby acquiring a sense of reality’ (p. 43). Again, Sontag suggests that Arbus used her photographic subjects as a way of attaining some sort of validation for her own feelings.

Going beyond Arbus’s photograph gives Sontag an unfair advantage, because Arbus was not alive to contradict her assertions. Davies suggests that valid artistic criticism must separate the artwork from artist, and writes,

In fact, Sontag’s most influential criticism of Arbus involve speculations about the psychology of both the artist and those drawn to her work, and the ascription of moral failings to Arbus in virtue of her psychological state, vis-à-vis her subjects.75

In other words, the suggestion made by Sontag is that, not only are there problems with Arbus’s photography, but there is even the suggestion that those drawn to her work are also somehow corrupt as well.

The distancing effect

Sontag suggests that Arbus’s photographs are popular because they demonstrate that ‘life’s horror can be faced without squeamishness.’ But the suppression of queasiness through exposure to images such as Arbus’s photographs results in a sort of desensitisation.

The photographs make a compassionate response feel irrelevant. The point is not to be upset, but to be able to confront the horrible with equanimity. (p. 41).

Sontag suggests that this is a tendency of modern art, which ‘is devoted to lowering the threshold of what is terrible.’ (p. 40).

The effect of a photograph of a person is that ‘you are not intervening in their lives, only visiting them.’ (p. 42). Accordingly, Arbus was,

75 Davies D, p. 218
Photographing an appalling underworld (and a desolate, plastic overworld), she had no intention of entering into the horror experienced by the denizens of those worlds. They are to remain exotic, hence “terrific”. Her view is always from the outside. (p. 42).

The language used by Sontag here is itself interesting, she refers to the ‘horror experienced’ by Arbus’s subjects – the language is strong. The ‘horror’ inferred by Sontag seems to be derived from the way these people looked. Furthermore, the suggestion that her view ‘is always from the outside’, seems to be an easy criticism to make of any photographer. The ‘exotic’ nature of Arbus’s subjects, I would suggest, stems from the fact that they are not the types of people who were ordinarily the subjects of photographic representation in her time.

Furthermore, the use of the word ‘terrific’, though unattributed, is a clear reference to the introduction attributed to Diane Arbus in the Aperture Monograph, in which Arbus is quoted as using the word ‘terrific’ with some frequency. For example, Arbus writes,

I hear myself saying, “How terrific,” and there’s this woman making a face. I really mean it’s terrific. I don’t mean I wish I looked like that…

In addition to this cruelty of mimicking Arbus’s own words in such a condescending fashion, Janet Malcolm has pointed out that these quotes derived from tape recordings made of Arbus’s classes, as well as from interviews and letters and were stitched together to form this introduction. Malcolm notes that the introduction ‘hovers over the pictures’ and informs their interpretation. Yet, these words that Sontag takes and uses against her have no real context and were assembled from a variety of sources. In my view, they therefore need to be approached with some caution.

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76 Arbus D, pp. 1-15
77 Ibid, p. 1
79 Ibid, p. 169
Arbus’s work is contrasted with what Sontag termed ‘ethical journalism’, which represented people in moments of actual suffering; that sort of photography she argues had a purpose (which implies that Arbus’s work lacks one).

Arbus’s work is reactive – reactive against gentility, against what is approved. It was her way of saying fuck Vogue, fuck fashion, fuck what’s pretty. (p. 44).

Here, Sontag is putting words into Arbus’s mouth and the language is unfairly emotive, given it is no more than speculation.

Arbus’s disclaiming of the formal elements of photography, Sontag writes, was disingenuous.

However eager she was to disavow standard elements of photographic sophistication such as composition, Arbus was not unsophisticated. And there is nothing journalistic about her motives for taking pictures. What may seem journalistic, even sensational in Arbus’s photographs places them, rather, in the main tradition of Surrealist art – their taste for the grotesque, their professed innocence with respect to their subjects, their claims that all subjects are merely *objets trouvés*. (p. 46)

There is something of a backhanded compliment in this passage – Sontag here is acknowledging Arbus’s skill, by deploying the double negative ‘not unsophisticated’. She concedes Arbus’s technical ability while avoiding a complimentary statement about her work. A photographer’s ‘skill’ might be described as their ability to draw the image from their subject and thus is linked to the dynamic *act* of taking a photograph.\(^\text{80}\)

The act undoubtedly contributes to the resulting style of the photograph itself, although Sontag’s later asserts that the formal qualities of style are of secondary importance in photography because ‘the subject of a photograph always dominates our perception of it’ (p. 71).

Interestingly, the connection between surrealism and photography is later made in relation to W. Eugene Smith’s photographs of the Japanese fishing village of Minamata in the late 1960s ‘most of whose

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\(^{80}\) I have outlined some of these ‘skills’ on p. 273.
inhabitants are crippled and slowly dying of mercury poisoning’ (p. 105). She describes in the photographs, ‘a suffering which arouses our indignation – and distance us because they are superb photographs of Agony, conforming to surrealist standards of beauty.’ (p. 105). Notwithstanding her belief that photographs distance us from what they represent, her experience of these images was patently affecting.

The defining characteristic and central flaw of Arbus’s photographs is, Sontag writes, the way it flattens out the difference between people; it treats everybody as the same.

She does not, like the most ambitious photographers, play the field of subject matter – even a little. On the contrary, all her subjects are equivalent. And making equivalences between freaks, mad people, suburban couples, and nudists is a very powerful judgment, one in complicity with a recognisable political mood shared by many educated, left liberal Americans. The subjects of Arbus’s photographs are all members of the same family, inhabitants of a single village. Only, as it happens, the idiot village is America. Instead of showing identity between things which are different (Whitman’s democratic vista), everybody is shown to look the same. (p. 47)

This is Sontag’s final lament about Arbus’s work, that her subjects are given a universal treatment.

However, it seems to me to be one thing to say the photographs are stylistically similar and quite another to say her subjects were treated ‘universally’. There are certainly methods and composition techniques that are repeated across the breadth of Arbus’s work. But, on the other hand, there is an attention to the individual in each of Arbus’s photographs that is apparent from the level of detail in the photographs. The gaze of the majority of her subjects is intimate. If it were not, the photographs would hardly be as compelling as they are.

Goldman argues, along similar lines to Sontag, that this treatment of Arbus’s subjects is problematic because, instead of focusing on the presentation of individual subjects, her attention is on her overall narrative statement. The individual images are flawed, according to
Goldman, because they are compromised for the larger message Arbus was trying to convey. She writes,

Arbus’s pictures read as one. Their intention is never clear. That is the irony of Arbus’s hunt and unquestionable talent. Masquerading as documentation, the same fantastic quality of an emotional netherland pervades each image and contradicts any reality. That is their flaw.81

Goldman is arguing, along similar lines to Sontag, that the images do not make proper use of the photograph’s status as a documentary artefact. In other words, Arbus was not really documenting anything, but creating her own world by manipulating the way she represented those people she photographed. However, I take the view that Arbus’s oeuvre is artistic rather than documentary: the photographs are not naturalistic, they are plainly staged (even if staged to appear natural); even the consistency between the way they are shot suggests an artistic rather than a documentary intent, because it exhibits a level of attention to technique.

The role of the viewer in Arbus’s work

There is something about the uneasy attraction of Arbus’s photographs that plainly affected Sontag and drew a passionate response from her. Goldman gives some acknowledgement to this aspect of Arbus’s photographs, noting,

The mesmerising power of Arbus’s photographs is also their problem. That power derives from her choice and, more importantly, from her handling of the subject. Each picture acts like a visual boomerang; freaks and lonely people scare us into looking first at them and then back at ourselves.82

The ‘mesmerising’ power Goldman refers to is connected with their affect. Goldman also suggests that Arbus’s handling of the subject is ‘strangely unresolved and incomplete’ and ‘something about it is

81 Goldman J, p. 74
82 Ibid, p. 30
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dishonest.’ Goldman is referring to the discomfort we feel when we view Arbus’s photographs and, perhaps Arbus intended us to feel some level of unease. In fact, arguably our discomfort is part of the point; Arbus’s photographs leave the viewer without a clear idea of what the appropriate reaction to them should be. Are we supposed to be shocked, sympathetic or appalled? But this failure to prescribe a response to her work is, I think, different to dishonesty. Arbus is not holding her subjects out to be something they are not – at best she elicited a frankness from them that is at odds with what we expect to see.

Arbus’s agenda, Charrier suggests, was a ‘curiosity about the boundaries of cultural groupings, classes, ethnicities and genders.’ In other words, Arbus was not so much interested in seeking out ‘freaks’ or ugliness for its own sake, but for what it said about the prevailing attitudes of the time.

Sontag suggests early on in On Photography, that photographs have created ‘a new visual code’ (p. 3) and create certain expectations for the types of subjects we might see represented in them. Neil Evernden echoes this point by suggesting that when photographs are severed from the experience of the viewer, they are ‘almost pure code’ and notes that the ‘publicly used photograph...belongs to the memory of a total stranger.’

Arbus’s photographs have their particular effect on us because of how they are placed within the scheme of images we are ordinarily exposed to and we know virtually nothing about her subjects. Arbus’s photographs seem to require a context that they lack – the unusual nature of her subjects makes us want to know more about these people, but the photographs are disconnected moments. As a result, Arbus’s photographs are, I would suggest, about photography itself.

83 Ibid
84 Charrier P, p. 437
The question of whether there was an ‘appropriate’ response to Arbus’s work is a complex one. Karen Hanson has written that Arbus’s subjects do not ‘...in any straightforward way, suggest injustice in need of our active intervention.’\textsuperscript{86} In fact, had we been present in the room when Arbus took her photographs, there is no obvious action that morality would have required us to take and thus, it is difficult to suggest that Arbus’s photographs are problematic on that basis. Hanson writes,

...if, with Arbus’s work, we are made to stare frankly at those who, in life, we would ignore or spy upon with furtive glances, then it is not clear that our real-life responses have much positive moral weight. And we do not, after all, come close to killing or even wounding the dignity of Arbus’s subjects. We do not, in looking at their photographs, override their wishes to participate in an evident abridgment of their sense of privacy.\textsuperscript{87}

That is not to say that we may not be more aware of the sorts of things that Arbus drew our attention to in her photographs – the awkwardness of the every day, the strangeness of life, deformity and disability – when we turn away from her photographs and re-enter the world.

One of Sontag’s central concerns is that a photograph displaces our ability to respond to the pain or suffering and injustice that we see represented. Photographs are also unfavourably compared to other works of art that move across time and narrate and therefore, in Sontag’s view, assist us to understand.\textsuperscript{88} It is not even clear that we would ‘intervene’ in response to a narrative piece that drew our attention to a person’s plight, even in relation to a work of non-fiction. When we finish reading about another’s suffering, it is not necessarily apparent that we would be any more inspired to take action than we might be after

\textsuperscript{86} Hanson K (1998). ‘How bad can good art be?’ in Levinson J Aesthetics and ethics: essays at the intersection, Cambridge University Press, p. 206
\textsuperscript{87} Hanson K, p. 206
\textsuperscript{88} A claim repeated by Sontag in her later work on photography. Sontag S (2003). Regarding the pain of others, Hamish Hamilton, p. 122
viewing a photograph, though we might at the conclusion have considerably more information about that person’s suffering.

In this regard, Sharon Sliwinski writes,

The photograph is crucial because of the fact it reveals – devastatingly – the utter inability to prevent suffering. In the painful encounter with the image lies the responsibility to recognise that individuals are represented in photographs, to recognise their suffering, but also a second responsibility: to recognize the impossibility of that recognition.89

In other words, what makes photographs of suffering uncomfortable is that they ‘illuminate the limit of [our] ability to respond’.90 One argument is therefore that it is not the moral failure of a photograph that we cannot respond to it, but the fact that much suffering is of such an acute form and on such a large scale that there is very little we can do in the face of it, apart from be aware of it and make appropriate responses in the way that we live our lives at a micropolitical level.

Sontag, emotion and photography

In On Photography, Sontag describes photographs as ‘elegiac’, ‘moving’ (p. 15), ‘melancholy’ (p. 69) and tells us that they ‘shock’ (p. 70 and 169). Clearly photographs have an impact on her; they work at some emotional level. It is worth observing that Sontag earlier observed in her ‘Against Interpretation’ essay that the act of interpretation ‘takes the sensory experience of the work of art for granted, and proceeds from there’.91 In my view, it is possible to fault Sontag for the same oversight in relation to Arbus’s work. Sontag’s response to Arbus’s work is acute and sensory and yet, she attributes almost no weight to this aspect of her response. She certainly doesn’t acknowledge any anomaly in her reaction to Arbus’s work.

90 Sliwinski S, p. 155
91 Sontag S (1964), p. 23
By contrast, in relation to photographs of the Korean War taken by Felix Greene and Marx Riboud, Sontag writes that the photographs sit within the context of the public’s awareness of these matters. She writes,

What determines the possibility of being affected morally by photographs is the existence of a relevant political consciousness. Without a politics, photographs of the slaughter-bench of history will most likely be experienced as, simply, unreal or as a demoralising emotional blow. (p. 19).

Here, she concedes photographs are capable of delivering an ‘emotional blow’ – a forceful description of their ability to affect their viewer. And she goes on to note that ‘Photographs shock insofar as they show something novel.’ (p. 19). It is the photograph’s power to ‘shock’ that Sontag overlooks in Arbus’s case.

In one of the most poignant passages in On Photography, Sontag speaks about her personal experience of the photographs of Bergen-Belsen and Dachau, which she came across as a twelve year old and didn’t understand at the time she saw them. She tells us that this experience came to have a life long effect on her. She writes,

Nothing I have seen – in photographs or in real life – ever cut me as sharply, deeply, instantaneously. Indeed, it seems plausible to me to divide my life into two parts, before I saw those photographs (I was twelve) and after, though it was several years before I understood fully what they were about. (p. 20).

She writes about her experience of seeing those photographs but being unable to understand them. Here she is talking about the power of photographs to shock us insofar as the depict the unrepresentable. She writes,

Some limit had been reached, and not only that of horror; I felt irrevocably grieved, wounded, but a part of my feelings started to tighten; something went dead; something is still crying. (p. 20).

She describes a similar experience of shock when viewing the photographs of Roman Vishniac of the ghettos of Poland taken in 1938 (p. 70), but mainly because looking at those photographs, Sontag has an
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awareness of their fate that the people photographed do not have. Sontag often picks up on these memento mori aspects of photography as a way in which photographs have their particular effect.

There is something curious in these acknowledgements in the context of On Photography as a whole. Clearly the ‘shocking’ effect of these photographs was to move her in some way, working at an emotional rather than an intellectual level. Later still, Sontag writes that reality has come to be understood as what we see through photographs. She writes,

It is common now for people to insist about their experience of a violent event in which they were caught up – a plane crash, a shoot out, a terrorist bombing – that “it seemed like a movie.” (p. 161).

Although Sontag is referring to moving rather than still images, she is alluding to the distancing effect that is common between the two. What Sontag doesn’t examine is whether this phenomenon is a result of the proliferation of photographic images, or whether photography merely captures this distancing of experience in relation to events that are difficult for the human mind to process.

In a similar vein, Sontag writes about having observed surgery in person and feeling no queasiness, but having watched a violent film and having to divert her eyes. She writes,

One is vulnerable to disturbing events in the form of photographic images in a way that one is not to the real thing. That vulnerability is part of the distinctive passivity of someone who is a spectator twice over, spectator of events already shaped, first by the participants and second by the image maker. (p. 169).

This idea of the double impact of a photograph (or in this case a film) is key to Sontag’s critique. And yet in the contemporary media environment this argument is far less cogent. The proliferation of photographs has meant that this idea that the fact of the photograph having been taken, along with what the photograph depicts shocks us twice, is far less compelling. We have come to expect there will be
photographs accompanying reportable news; we have also come to expect the existence of video footage.

Sarah Parsons notes that whilst much has been written in scholarly discourse about Sontag’s approach to photographs, a detailed analysis is yet to be made of the way Sontag linked ‘photography, emotion and ethics’. Parsons suggests that many of Sontag’s emotional responses to photography reflect, ‘The underlying point is that there is an inextricable link between knowledge and emotion demonstrated by our reactions to photographs.’ Furthermore, Parsons suggests that the examination of her own responses to photographs was part of Sontag’s deliberate intention.

I would suggest that, in her approach to photographs, Sontag treats any image that deeply moves her as suspect. Parsons points out that Sontag’s reaction to the photographs referred to in On Photography is what leads to many of the contradictions in her work. Part of the significance of Sontag’s approach to photography, Parsons argues, is the way in which it treats photography as an affective medium. In fact, Parsons argues that our emotional response to photographs is often imperfect and complex and the contradictions evident in On Photography are reflective of this.

Sontag’s critique of Arbus’s work was written prior to the affective turn in critical discourse that occurred from the mid 1990s and it is thus understandable that affect passes unacknowledged by Sontag. She focuses on the ‘analgesic’ nature of photography and the photographs’ failure to produce any ‘action’ by viewers in response to Arbus’s subject (or to the set of circumstances afflicting those subjects). What Sontag is referring to is an intervention that is a consciously planned response.

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93 Ibid, p. 291
94 Ibid, p. 290
95 Ibid, p. 291
Affect, on the other hand while referring to the ‘bodily capacity to act’, those responses are ‘often automatic responses, in excess of consciousness.’

My own reading of On Photography is that, particularly in relation to Arbus’s work, Sontag doesn’t even seem conscious of the intensity of her own response. Furthermore, she does not fully reconcile her emotional response to the photographs she sees with her ethical concerns. Whilst photographs of suffering need to be approached with a level of caution, there is something to be learnt from very affecting power of photographs that causes Sontag to distrust them. Apart from anything else, photographs of this nature are increasingly part of our contemporary media environment and continue to preoccupy prominent artistic photographers working today.

Anthony McCosker has argued in his 2013 book, Intensive Media: Aversive Affects and Visual Culture, that human experiences of suffering and in particular, images of suffering, tend to vitalise the contemporary media ecology, as much as they can also be problematic. In relation to photography in particular, McCosker suggests that,

Pity, compassion, empathy and action in relation to the suffering of others are all made possible through ever developing technologies of immediacy, but also dissipated in the corresponding hypermediacy.

This effect is evident in Sontag’s approach to photography, in which Sontag is plainly affected by images of suffering, but at the same time laments the oversaturation of our visual culture with these images.

Images of pain and suffering are now an undeniable part of our visual landscape and whether or not Sontag’s concerns about the

98 Ibid, p. 4
‘analgesic’\textsuperscript{99} nature of photographs are correct, in the current media context, her views come across as somewhat dated. As McCosker suggests, images of suffering are now a reality of our media environment.

The sensibility of a pain image, whether still or in the duration of video and cinema, in the flow of television, or the networked spaces of the internet is tied to vulnerability; and vulnerability facilitates the circulation of sensation as aesthetic force, requires ethical conduct and offers a catalyst for thought, action and sociality.\textsuperscript{100}

Accordingly, McCosker does not see the ‘pain image’ as necessarily distancing in its effect, but suggests that it can operate as a catalyst for action, even if not in the form conscious response to which Sontag referred.

McCosker also suggests that the art of human suffering is potentially problematic because it is not clear ‘what action or reaction might be conceived as the outcome of this kind of encounter.’\textsuperscript{101} However, McCosker argues for the acceptance of ‘pain as subject matter, experience, event beyond its negative characterisation as trauma’ and suggests that pain should be conceived more broadly ‘in its complex, dynamic and productive dimensions as aversive affect’, which is the ‘normal state of affairs’.\textsuperscript{102}

Certainly, if one looks at Arbus’s work in the context of the current visual landscape, her photographs no longer shock in the way Sontag responded to them. In fact, when compared to the work of other contemporary photographers working today, such as Nan Goldin’s photographs of post coital couples or Bill Henson’s images of pre-pubescent children that caused great controversy in 2007 at Sydney’s Roslyn Oxley Gallery\textsuperscript{103}, Arbus’s photographs seem comparatively tame.

\textsuperscript{99} Sontag S (1977), p. 110
\textsuperscript{100} p. 5
\textsuperscript{101} Ibid, p. 6
\textsuperscript{102} Ibid, p. 7
\textsuperscript{103} See Marr D (2008). \textit{The Henson case}, Text publishing, Melbourne
This is partly why Sontag’s acute response is so difficult to understand – Arbus’s photographs seem benign in today’s visual landscape.

It is difficult to look at the work of Goldin, Mary Ellen Mark or Larry Clark, for example, without seeing Arbus’s direct influence. Mark’s black and white photographs of identical twins taken at the Twins Days Festival in Twinsburg, Ohio[^104], for example, or her photographs of the women of Ward 81[^105], the mental ward at Oregon State Hospital seem to be directly influenced by Arbus’s work. Similarly, Goldin’s documentary style photographs of drug use, gay and post-punk subcultures seem to plainly owe an artistic debt to Arbus’s work, though she shoots on colour film. Her photographs of drag queens, such as *Jimmy Paulette and Taboo! In the bathroom, New York City, USA, 1991*, are strikingly similar to Arbus’s work – the frontal pose, the plain backgrounds and the subjects[^106]. Goldin’s infamous self portrait *Nan one month after being battered, New York City, USA 1984* of herself with a black and bloodshot eye is shocking and personal, but the way Goldin looks into the lens, the self revelation that seems to be taking place, makes the image distinctly reminiscent of Arbus’s photographs (though Arbus herself didn’t take self portraits)[^107].

Our attraction to affecting photographs can be seen in the ever increasing popularity of the work of Sebastiao Salgado whose exhibition *Genesis* toured photography museums across the world from 2013-2015, (including the International Centre for Photography in New York, the Natural History Museum in London, the Maison Européenne de la Photographie in Paris and the Fotografiska Museum in Stockholm where I viewed the exhibition in September 2014), is also testament to the prevalence of photographs of the strange and the suffering. The general theme of the exhibition is one of conservation; Salgado plainly wanted to capture landscapes, wildlife and people whose existence is threatened. Most memorably, the exhibition included photographs of the Mursi and

[^105]: Ibid, p. 40-41
[^107]: Ibid, p. 47
Self, identity and the ethics of portraiture in photography and writing

Surma women of Omo valley, south Ethiopia, who are some of the last people in the world to wear lip plates and photographs of the Yali and Korowai people who live in West Papua, Indonesia, who wear nothing but skirts or penis guards. These people are plainly photographed for their strangeness and for the impact the photographs will have on us as viewers. Salgado himself writes,

I wanted to capture a vanishing world, a part of humanity that is on the verge of disappearing, yet in many ways still lives in harmony with nature.

And yet, these photographs have the greatest visual impact of any of the photographs in the exhibition. I looked at the women with the lip plates and was conscious of the pain they must have been through and of their suffering in enduring these large lip plates embedded into their skin, though I knew nothing about them. Salgado even suggests that the plates are worn with pride. Certainly, as McCosker would argue, Salgado’s images are inserted into the exhibition precisely for their ‘aversive affects’. The disturbing attraction we have to these images is what makes them so powerful.

Regarding the Pain of Others

Sontag revised her views of photography somewhat in her 2003 book devoted to photography, Regarding the Pain of Others. In that book, Sontag is specifically preoccupied with the role of the war photographers and the ethics of photographic representations of suffering in that context. In many ways, her revisiting the subject so many years after On Photography, acknowledges the reality of the proliferation of many of the sorts of photographs she criticised in the years that followed.

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109 Ibid, p. 137-167
110 Ibid, p. 8
111 Sontag S (2003). *Regarding the pain of others*, Hamish Hamilton
Sontag writes that originally it was hoped that the act of photographing horror and violence would act as a deterrent, that people ‘would finally take in the outrageousness, the insanity of war.’ (p. 14). Speaking of photographs of suffering and famine in Africa, she writes that the ubiquity of these images served instead to confirm the inevitability of these tragedies in that part of the world.

She observes that the role of art is to transform and yet photography that shows suffering is criticised on ethical grounds if it is aestheticised.

Photographs that depict suffering shouldn’t be beautiful... in this view, a beautiful photograph drains attention from the sobering subject and turns it toward the medium itself, thereby compromising the picture’s status as a document. (p. 76-77).

The ubiquity of images makes us callous and, instead of becoming sensitive to suffering, we become desensitised. Sontag asserts, ‘In the end, such images just make us a little less able to feel, to have our conscience pricked.’ (p. 105)

Although Regarding the Pain of Others was more concerned with the journalistic use of photographs than with artistic ones, what we can see at play are the thematic concerns similar to those which caused her to criticise Arbus’s work. Just as photographing images of war and suffering does not induce empathy in the viewer, Arbus’s photographs do not cause us to empathise with her subjects. Fundamentally, Sontag’s preoccupations are ethical, rather than aesthetic. It is not the image Sontag deplores, but the fact that in viewing them we are visiting rather than intervening.

And yet, towards the end of Regarding the Pain of Others, comes an acknowledgment that artistic photographs are capable of provoking deep thought and reflection about disaster and suffering. This acknowledgment comes in the form of praise for Jeff Wall’s photograph ‘Dead Troops Talk (A Vision After an Ambush of a Red Army Patrol Near Moqor, Afghanistan, Winter 1986)’, which she writes is ‘exemplary
in its thoughtfulness and power’ (p. 123). The image depicts Russian soldiers dressed in uniform, injured and surrounded with the debris of war. Sontag observes that none of the soldiers is looking out of the image and that most are talking, or ‘horsing around’ together (p. 124-125) and here the direct contrast to the motif of the outward looking subjects in Arbus’s work is apparent.

The inference to be drawn from this image, suggests Sontag, is that we are incapable of imagining what the war was like for these men. ‘We can’t imagine how dreadful, how terrifying war is; and how normal it becomes’ (p. 125) and this is what any journalist, soldier or aid worker feels when they return from conflict. And in that view Sontag concedes they are correct. Significantly, Sontag concludes Regarding the Pain of Others with an acceptance that there is a role for photography and, in particular artistic photography like Wall’s, in informing about suffering and affecting us. In an ironic twist, Sontag observes that the photograph best able to communicate suffering is one in which the subjects are not apparently suffering themselves. And, significantly, she places her trust in the photograph’s ability to make us think rather than feel.

**Conclusion**

I have argued for a broader critique of Arbus’s photographs that takes into account their aesthetic and affective value. There are a number of weaknesses, I have suggested, in Sontag’s ethical approach to Arbus’s work. Furthermore, Sontag’s extreme reaction to Arbus’s photographs suggests that her response is made at an emotional level, although she is not altogether conscious of that response. Whilst seeing photographs as a site of moral failure, Sontag also examined their curious affective power in unconsciously exploring her own reactions to the work. In this way, On Photography amounts to an acknowledgement that the photographs impact us in a way that no other media can match, even if we ought to approach their power with some caution.
Chapter Three: Identity and ethics of representation in Hervé Guibert’s *Ghost Image*

In this essay, I will examine Hervé Guibert’s book *Ghost Image*, a collection of personal essays themed around, and inspired by photography. My interest lies in Guibert’s examination of issues of identity and representation and the overlap of those concerns in both photography and writing. Guibert offers a deeply intimate exploration of photographic representation, using personal experience to reflect on photography as a form of self-expression and an artefact of daily life. In fact, much of Guibert’s preoccupation is with representations of the self and the other, and I will argue that by excluding photographic images from the text, Guibert links photographic and written representations. Subjectivism is a key component of Guibert’s work including in his photography, and Guibert explores the ethical ramifications of the portrait in view of this.

Consideration of *Ghost Image* is warranted as part of this thesis because there is relatively little by way of academic response in English to that work. In particular, there is scope for a treatment of this text, which considers the symbiotic link between photography and writing as means of representation.

Writing photographs in *Ghost Image*

As a collection of sixty-four fragments of writing, *Ghost Image* is a book about photographs in written form. The snippets are brief, like snapshots. Some are no longer than a paragraph; others seem incomplete. I will argue that in making us conscious of this method of writing, in
‘recording’ by words what might have been recorded in a photographic image, Guibert is drawing our attention to the similarities between the two forms.

The essays are mostly of a personal nature, themed around photography, written, at least at the outset, in conscious response to Roland Barthes’s *Camera Lucida*.112 The key difference to Barthes’s work though, is that unlike in both *Camera Lucida* and *Roland Barthes*, in which photographs are reprinted in the book and inspire and inform the written words, in *Ghost Image*, the printed photograph is conspicuous in its absence. This absence is particularly striking in view of the fact that reproductions of photographs have featured in other publications of Guibert’s writing.113

‘Photography is also an act of love.’114 These are the words with which Guibert commences *Ghost Image*. Curious here, is the word ‘also’; in addition to what, we are obliged to ask. Plainly, photography for Guibert is deeply connected to desire, in certain respects, it is about the possession of those we love.

Whilst Guibert explores the limitations of photography as a method of representing others as well as its ethical problems in *Ghost Image*, at the same time he also shows us that many facets of photography are essentially benign. In fact, Guibert rejects the idea of photography as the site of absolute ethical contention that many other critics have considered it to be.115 In a way, *Ghost Image* makes the case for the defence of photography as an artistic form, particularly in so far as it allows for an expression of the self. In fact, Guibert suggests it is the

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112 A consideration of *Camera Lucida* is plainly warranted in relation to a text that implicitly references that work.
complicated power dynamics involved in every photographic act that makes it such an engaging and seductive form.

While Guibert doesn’t explicitly tackle the theoretical criticisms of photography, he offers an intensely personal take on photography as a form of self expression. Guibert calls photography an act of ‘love’, even though it is plain as we read *Ghost Image* that Guibert is aware that photographs are not always flattering of their subjects, nor are they unambiguously moral documents. In fact, Guibert makes plain that in understanding a photograph as much depends on the photographer and viewer as depends on the photograph itself.

Guibert is aware that love itself is a slippery emotion, and we see as we continue reading, that there are different types of love: familial love; erotic love; love between friends; the love of an artist for his art form. In the world evoked by Guibert, love can be obsessive, painful, overbearing and ephemeral. Essentially, Guibert is alerting us to his belief that photography is an ambiguous act. Subjects that draw the attention of the camera, do so for reasons that are almost always complicated, and often because of the subjects’ particular resonance with the photographer. Guibert does not deny that photographs can appropriate from reality, nor that they can misrepresent what they depict, but he is also concerned to show that photographs are bound up with the way we live our lives. The need to look and to hold on to experience reflects a condition that is particularly human.

Nevertheless, the subject of *Ghost Image* is not restricted to looking at photographs. Rather, *Ghost Image* explores all facets of photography – the act of observing photographs, being photographed and the taking of the photographic image. In all of this, Guibert is the main protagonist; the insight he provides is through personal experience – rather than grappling with theory, he is asking fundamental questions about issues of representation, based on his own experience of photography and writing.
The first essay ‘Ghost Image’, describes a photograph Guibert took of his mother when he was eighteen. Guibert’s age here is not incidental – he is on the cusp of adulthood. Though Guibert tells us that he had photographed his mother on previous occasions, he had done so without giving the task much thought. This instance was different in that Guibert consciously applies himself to how his mother ought to be represented. He also tells us that his mother mostly refused to be photographed and ‘that the situation immediately put her on edge.’ (p. 10). His mother, though still beautiful, was forty-five and ‘I felt that she was at the threshold of old age, of sadness.’ (p. 10).

Guibert explains that he had generally refused to photograph her because he disliked her haircut, which was styled like the actress Michele Morgan. He writes,

My father forbade my mother to wear makeup or dye her hair, and when he photographed her he ordered her to smile, or he took the picture against her will while pretending to adjust the camera, so that she had no control over her image. (p. 11).

The idea of photographic representation and how it relates to identity thus comes into focus – the way Guibert’s mother wished to be seen, the way Guibert saw her and the way her father wanted her to be seen. Who controls his mother’s image? His mother attempts to assert control over the way she looks by adopting a particular hairstyle; his father forbids her from wearing makeup; Guibert himself has his own idea about the way she ought to be represented.

Guibert leads her to the living room and removes all of the distracting objects from the view. He removes his father from the room, so that she was ‘temporarily free’ of ‘his need to keep up appearances’. He washes his mother’s hair, removing the hairstyle and he combs her hair so that she wears it long and straight. He writes, ‘There she sat, majestic, like a queen before execution.’ (p. 12). This is an interesting observation – his mother’s passivity and the suggestion that the camera is capable of taking her life.
He took her picture, he writes, at her most beautiful, and that it was ‘the image of a woman who has always been criticized by her husband, enjoying what she could never have, a forbidden image’ (p. 13). It is as though, by photographing her, Guibert considers himself to be liberating her image.

There is something undeniably Oedipal about this incident\(^{116}\) – an obvious suggestion here, that Guibert is liberating his mother from his father’s control. The implication, made not particularly subtly, is that in taking the photograph, he is usurping his father’s role. In a way, in this scene, Guibert is asserting himself; he is asserting his right to selfhood in relation to his father. But he is doing so by demonstrating his dominance over his mother.

In a way this refers back to the book’s first sentence, that photography is an act of love. There is a psycho-sexual drama being played out here, as Guibert toys with these sexual taboos, certainly he would be aware of the psychoanalytic implications of what he is writing. The inference to be drawn from this is that Guibert was placing selfhood and desire at the core of this book.

The suggestion, I think, is that through the son’s treatment of the mother, we learn about the son. Akane Kawakami points out that in this photograph,

Guibert is attempting to surround her with his own emotional associations, to photograph her from his, the son’s, point of view. The resulting aura is what makes her uniquely beautiful to her son through the lens.\(^{117}\)

What Kawakami is suggesting here is that more than anything, this is the son’s image of the mother. This is the case, even though all Guibert purports to be doing is revealing his mother through the lens of the camera. There is even an element of condescension in what Guibert writes, as though he alone has the power to represent her through image,

that in photographing her he can liberate her from his father’s control. There is an erotic dimension to what Guibert is suggesting – the steps he takes in setting up the photograph are ritualistic, almost pre-coital in their intimacy. Ironically, in describing how he photographed his mother, he reveals a great deal about his own attitudes.

When Guibert attempts to develop this film, however, he finds that the image did not exist, that ‘the entire roll of film was unexposed, blank from one end to another.’ (p. 14). Guibert tells us he hadn’t completely attached the film to the camera, ‘it had slipped off the small black teeth that held it in place and advanced it, and I had photographed nothing.’ (p. 15). This non-existent image becomes the ‘ghost image’ of the book’s title. Guibert explains that this image, or absent image, is the reason that the book will have no illustrations. He writes,

For this text is the despair of the image, and worse than a blurred or fogged image – a ghost image… (p. 16)

Guibert does not elaborate on what he means in his statement that the ‘text is the despair of the image’, but it appears that Guibert considers that the image and text cannot co-exist; the writing is a consolation for the absent image. Rather than being a mere substitute for the image, it is a lament for what is missing.

Ralph Sarkonak observes that the great irony here is that ‘had the photograph turned out, there would have been no text, no book, so that the work we are reading is the product of [this absence]’118. In other words had the photograph been taken there would be nothing for Guibert to write about. The text is thus a substitute for that image.

We could observe, however, that the absence of the image means that there is nothing to confirm that this ghost image was ever taken, or not taken as it were. It is, in a way a device, the type that might be deployed by a writer of fiction rather than non-fiction. It is the uncertainty about the nature of Ghost Image as a text that I will suggests

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aids the association between photographic and written representations that Guibert seems to be making here.

Guibert commences quite consciously with this image of his mother, in an obvious reference Barthes’s *Camera Lucida*. Barthes’s book was also centred on the image of his mother, though this is an image that Barthes does not include in the book because, he tells us, its significance would be lost on us and that it only exists for him. It is difficult to determine whether, by commencing *Ghost Image* in this way, Guibert is referencing Barthes out of admiration, or whether the gesture is mocking. It is certainly playful in its tone, in that great lengths are taken in describing the process of taking the photograph, for us to learn it never existed in the first place.

Plainly throughout *Ghost Image*, Guibert treats Barthes’s ideas about photography with a certain measure of respect. The *memento mori* aspect of photography, for example, is one that Guibert frequently refers to. Nonetheless, Barthes and Guibert had a complicated relationship, as Roger Luckhurst notes,

> In 1986 he published a private letter from Roland Barthes, who had asked to sleep with the angelic Guibert in return for writing a preface. Guibert spurned the offer…

Sarkonak has suggested that *Ghost Image* is in fact allegorical and that the true absent parental figure in the book is Barthes himself. In my reading the presence of Barthes in *Ghost Image* can certainly be detected, but it is not overbearing or suffocating of Guibert’s own views.

In any case, this untaken photograph of Guibert’s mother is the book’s overarching motif, just as Barthes’s Wintergarden photograph resonates throughout *Camera Lucida*. Whereas in *Camera Lucida* Barthes’s key preoccupation is with death, in *Ghost Image*, I would suggest that the preoccupations are more bound up with identity, the self and in

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120 Sarkonak R, p. 49
representing oneself and others to the world. Moreover, Guibert’s interest in photography is as artist rather than theorist.

Guibert provides a nuanced view of photography from the perspective of photographer, photographic subject, viewer and writer. The link to Barthes, though, is strong. Kawakami writes that in Ghost Image,

...the tale of how Guibert takes a photograph of his mother is very much a continuation – as well as an attempt to outdo – Barthes’s mourning of his mother in La Chambre Claire.\textsuperscript{121}

I would also argue that, in commencing the book with this ‘definitive’, though non-existent ‘image’ of his mother, Guibert is placing identity at the heart of the text. What is at stake here is both his mother’s identity and his own understanding of himself through her.

From this first essay, we see that Ghost Image is constructed through a written description of a photograph, moreover of an absent photograph. Jean-Pierre Boule writes that photography in this book is ‘composed in reverse, through the mediation of writing.’\textsuperscript{122} And yet, we trust the written image far less than we trust the photographic one – in writing, the intervention of the author is far more obvious and, the assumption is, open to manipulation than the photograph. Writing and photography are two subjects that Guibert was uniquely placed to write about as both author, photographer and photographic critic for Le Monde.

In some instances, what occurs in Ghost Image are exercises in ekphrasis, that is ‘the verbal representation of visual images.’\textsuperscript{123} And yet, the more intriguing aspect of Ghost Image, is not the way in which Guibert engages in ekphrasis, but the way that photographs or untaken photographs inspire the text. For the most part, Guibert is writing around

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{121} Kawakami A (2013), p. 48
\item \textsuperscript{122} Boule JP (1999). \textit{Hervé Guibert: Voices of the self}, Liverpool University Press, p. 60
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
images, circling the processes involved in taking and viewing photographs. To the extent that Guibert does engage in the occasional ekphrastic description of photographs, it is interesting to note that W.J.T Mitchell has observed,

The ekphrastic image acts, in other words, like a sort of unapproachable and unrepresentable “black hole” in the verbal structure, entirely absent from it, but shaping and affecting it in fundamental ways.¹²⁴

This observation takes on special significance, in view of the ghost image itself, which is the absence that shapes Ghost Image as a text and informs its interpretation. There is no way for the reader to engage with it visually, whilst we are told about the process of the photograph being taken, we know very little about its composition. The importance is apparently the photographic process and the uneven power dynamics between photographer, subject and viewer, or intended viewer (being the father).

Photobiography in Ghost Image

In Ghost Image, Guibert explores his ideas about photography, from a deeply personal angle. Overall, the book reads as an exercise in Guibert scripting his own biography through photographs, but there is an uncertainty about the status of Ghost Image. One of the ironies in reading Ghost Image is that the photograph, traditionally the form used to represent the other, becomes overwhelmingly a document that reflects on the self.

Kawakami writes that the term ‘photobiography’ refers to ‘a form of self-writing intricately interwoven with photography’¹²⁵ and that it involves writing the self ‘with a strong awareness of the possibilities offered by both media.’¹²⁶ Kawakami also notes the strange tension that derives from the fact that the referent in autobiography is also the author

¹²⁴ Mitchell, p. 158
¹²⁵ Kawakami (2013), p. 1
¹²⁶ Ibid, p. 2
of the text, while in photography the referent is usually not the photographer. This, along with the fact that photographs are considered documents of truth, whereas the self is difficult, if not impossible to capture in words (as I suggested in chapter 1 by reference to Marguerite Duras’s *The Lover*), gives rise to a curious tension between the two forms. In my view this is heightened in *Ghost Image*, because Guibert deliberately deploys fictional techniques.

There are occasions when the passages read as contrived and even fictive in their tone. By the time *Ghost Image* was written, Guibert had already published three novels and the book is quite consciously composed, in that attention is paid to the style in which it is written. The prose is mostly lucid and crisp – appropriate for a book which has photography as its subject. Nonetheless, there are some aspects of the work which are, I would suggest, deliberately deployed to cause doubt about the book’s veracity.

More broadly, Guibert uses the text’s instability to raise certain questions about the nature of photography and its role in human relations. Part of the way that Guibert brings into focus these issues is by his ‘persistent challenging of boundaries between truth and fiction.’

To complicate this, as Elizabeth Jones writes,

\[\text{[H]is syntactical and linguistic style is predominantly rational and conventional, seeming to retain the illusion that the author might be in full control of the text.}\]

On the one hand, Guibert gives the impression that in writing *Ghost Image*, he is merely documenting what he observes, but there are clearly aspects of what he writes that are fictional either in substance or in style. In a way, this deliberate dance between documentation, fiction and autobiography is what Guibert uses to bring into focus the act of photographic

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128 Ibid, p. 260
representation. To a certain extent, the idea of whether the photographs are real or imagined is something of a distraction.

In ‘Identity photograph’, Guibert spots a man sitting near him on a train, attaching photographs to the train’s window. The photos are still wet, which allows them to be attached to the glass and Guibert recognises a photograph of himself. Guibert says the man ‘followed me day and night, photographing’ Guibert and introduced ‘my image in places where I had never been, only to present it to me afterwards, grinning like some Chinese demon’ (p. 57). This anonymous man seems to possess a power over Guibert simply by virtue of his ability to photograph him without his consent. There are elements to this particular fragment that make it read like a work of fiction; it is as though we are not being told the whole story. Why is this man pursuing him? What exchange have they had? Even if this event actually occurred, without more details to give us a better ability to orientate ourselves within the scene, it reads closer to a work of fiction than it does to a work of non-fiction.

It would seem, from this fragment, that the ‘still damp photographs’ that are taken of Guibert are Polaroids, because they are apparently instantly developed. There is a deeper anxiety underpinning this passage though, in that the fear inspired in Guibert is about having his identity stolen, or about not being in control of the way he appears to others.

Jones argues that Guibert’s work ‘is marked by a will to blur and twist some of the basic categories that structure literature and its relationship with the external world.’Certainly, this particular essay, whilst purporting to be non-fiction, seems to incorporate fictional aspects – we can’t really believe that Guibert was followed ‘day and night’ or even that this man took Guibert’s photograph as frequently as is suggested. The essay thus has an unstable feel; we’re not entirely sure where to place it in the context of the remainder of the essays in terms of its veracity. Nonetheless, the significance is in the way Guibert situates

\[129\] Ibid, p. 263
himself as photographic subject and describes the experience of being photographed by another.

We take the narrator of *Ghost Image* to be Guibert himself – there is nothing in the text that causes us to doubt his identity as both author and narrator. Clara Orban suggests that all Guibert’s writing ‘bears heavy traces of an autobiographical “I”’\(^{130}\), which implies the primacy of the self to Guibert’s preoccupations. On the other hand, Donna Wilkerson suggests that, ‘...the narrator as subject is effaced in a text that supposedly drawn from real life.’\(^{131}\)

I would suggest that these essays are meditations on photographs and they remain as cogent whether or not the events that they refer to a real or inventions that are used to assist Guibert in making his arguments. The significance insofar as *Ghost Image* is concerned is not so much about the veracity of what is described, but their meaning for Guibert.

The style adopted in *Ghost Image* is reflective of Guibert’s ouevre as a whole – there is a clear overlap always between Guibert’s life and his fictions. Boule observes that intertextuality is key to interpreting Guibert’s work and that it exists ‘not only at one level of the published words, but also of all the art-forms he uses: film, photography, drawing and, of course, literature.’\(^{132}\) Edmund White agrees, noting that his photographs include portraits of friends, who also show up in his books.\(^{133}\) In view of this interchange between truth and fiction and given photographs are said to be documents of truth, I would suggest that what Guibert is concerned with are not objective truths, but issues of selfhood.

The nature of Guibert’s inquiry is artistic, his interest less to do with photographs as objective documents, than with the personal experience of their creation and effect on the people they represent.

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\(^{132}\) Boule J P, p. 6

Self, identity and the ethics of portraiture in photography and writing

Nancy Pedri has observed that in creative writing, a photograph rarely operates as ‘indisputable documentary evidence that corroborates, validates or even establishes claims of empirical truth’. In other words, photographs aren’t deployed in creative writing to prove the thing that is represented actually exists or exists as it is represented. I would suggest that in Guibert’s case, photographs or the photographic process are described only insofar as they assist in examining his uniquely personal insight into the photographic form, by choosing examples in which subjectivity, identity and desire are at stake.

And yet, if the examples Guibert uses are not objectively true, what sort of autobiographical exercise could *Ghost Image* be said to be? Guibert is using the photographic scenarios to tell us something about himself, but this is different to saying that the truths he is exploring are objective or verifiable. Sarkonak agrees, observing,

> Throughout Guibert’s books, autobiography and fiction are woven together in what appears to be a seamless fabric so that one is never sure of just how referential his writing is.

He goes on to suggest that the images in *Ghost Image* are both ‘real and imaginary ones, actual photos and memories of photos that might have been, photographic fantasies...’ However, as I have indicated above, the ideas Guibert is examining depend little on whether the photographs or scenarios he is writing about actually exist. It might very well be that Guibert invented some of the ‘photographs’ that inspire *Ghost Image*, merely because they assisted in making the argument he was attempting to convey.

Of course, in a book about photographs, the notion of objective ‘truth’ holds particular resonance. Jones cautions against accepting Guibert’s writing as ‘truth’, stating it would be,

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135 Sarkonak R, p. 7
136 Ibid, p. 12
...unwise to assume that Guibert’s writing can be characterised as motivated by a desire to articulate referential, externally verifiable material in clear, transparent language. Looking beneath the façade of sincerity it is clear that Guibert’s relationship with truth telling is highly complex. Even those works that I have identified above as clearly drawing upon ‘real’ elements of Guibert’s life also contain overtly fantastical elements.\textsuperscript{137}

Along these lines, Kawakami also points out that there are many factual details that are incorrect in Guibert’s writing, and ‘his self-fabulations display that slightly uneasy mixture of seemingly verifiable facts and a linguistic coherence and smoothness which seems to belong to the world of fiction.’\textsuperscript{138} In this way, what Guibert is demonstrating is the writer’s ability to slip between fact and fiction, the level of control a writer exercises over her subject and how it is represented is virtually absolute. A writer, one might argue, has even more control of his subject than a photographer, whose choices are limited to a selection of the subject and how that subject is represented. In other words, though a photographer’s work must be tethered to what already exists in the world, a writer’s work is not necessarily so delimited.

**The word/image dichotomy**

It is clear from a reading of *Ghost Image*, that Guibert considers there to be a strong link between photography and writing. So much is plain, I would argue, from the absence of photographs in the book, which purports to be all about photography. Guibert’s meditations on photography become, because of the absence of photographs, directly relevant to issues of representation in writing.

Guibert establishes a dichotomy between photographic images and written words in *Ghost Image*. Again and again, Guibert suggests that for him the choice is between taking a photograph, or writing. Even the overarching ghost image of his mother has this notion at its core, in that

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{137} Jones E, p. 116
  \item \textsuperscript{138} Kawakami A (2013), p. 62
\end{itemize}
had the photograph actually been taken his description of the taking of the photograph would not have been necessary.

A similar scenario arises in ‘The Perfect Image’, in which Guibert is angered because he is unable to record an image of a storm at sea whilst on holidays. He did not have ‘the necessary equipment’ and thus the image ‘crumbled into pieces before suddenly transforming itself into a regret’ (p. 20). He asks himself why he wants to photograph the image, referring to the intensity of the storm and the sirocco, but also four boys in ‘dorsal nudity’, their equidistant alignment being perfect (p. 21). The beautiful composition of the image then disintegrates and Guibert speculates that he will never recapture that moment, even if he were to ask the four boys to return and pose in the same positions the next day. Instead, he retains that perfect image only in his memory, ‘to be developed and fixed by writing.’ Guibert is demonstrating for us how the internal state of the photographer is crucial to the photographic image that results.

Guibert continues,

It seems to me now that this process of writing has surpassed and enriched the immediate act of photographic transcription, and that if tomorrow I tried to rediscover the real image in order to photograph it, it would appear dull. (p. 22).

Apparently, the significance is not so much the image itself, but the feelings he had that inspired him to want to take the photograph. It is as though the loss that Guibert laments is the loss of the feeling, the impulse he had to take the photograph.

The word ‘transcription’ here is also telling, a word usually associated with a transfer to words, but here it is used in relation to a photograph, making the connection between the two forms more obvious. This suggests something about the nature of photography and writing – for Guibert, it seems to be one or the other – they are not equivalent, but somehow for him they seem to perform a similar expressive function. More specifically, he writes that the taking of the photograph would have
‘obliterated’ his memory, ‘photography envelopes things and causes forgetfulness, whereas writing, which can only hinder, is a melancholy act’ (p. 22). It seems that while photographs ‘obliterate’ memory, writing merely obstructs it. The suggestion is that photographs take the place of memory and, instead of remembering the event, what we remember is the photograph. Barthes also suggested that photographs have this effect of supplanting memory. The same cannot be said about writing – as far as Guibert is concerned - we may still remember something as it happened, even after we have written about it.

Nonetheless, the type of writing that Guibert is attempting in this book is akin to photography, in the sense that it at least gives the impression that Guibert is merely ‘recording’ as a photograph might. Kawakami observes,

\[\text{We therefore have here the description of a photographic act taking place without recourse to a camera, and thence a more specialized version of photographic vision...}^{139}\]

Kawakami is suggesting that the sort of observational writing undertaken by Guibert in *Ghost Image* is analogous to a photograph because, like a camera, Guibert acts as a conduit for what he observes. This equivalence he identifies between writing and photography has to do with the process of their creation and certainly Guibert’s clear and lucid prose style might be said to suggest a certain objectivity.

The most interesting aspects of *Ghost Image* are the way that Guibert writes around photographs. Often his essays relate to the power dynamics between photographer and subject that wouldn’t necessarily be visible in the photograph. A photograph has none of the subjectivity that Guibert is able to write about in the book – words necessarily contain a different reality to photographs. A text can make us understand the feelings attached to a photograph and the motivations behind the taking of a photograph. Guibert demonstrates through the very confessional biography provided in the book, that words are able to cover territory

\[139\] Kawakami A (2013), p. 49
that a photograph cannot. Many of the feelings described in the book would not be possible to decode from a photograph.

Kawakami uses Guibert’s writing to demonstrate the link between photography and autobiography, which she suggests are connected by virtue of their relationship with the real. Certainly, at a structural level, *Ghost Image* is itself suggestive of a photographic process in that Guibert gives the impression that what he is doing is merely ‘recording’ what he sees and experiences with words. And yet at the same time, Guibert acknowledges that writing always requires the writer’s intervention.

Kawakami has written about the relationship between autobiographical writing and photography.

The age old argument for the referential quality of photography and autobiography goes as follows: if photography is the indisputable reflection of an object on a photosensitive surface, autobiography is the true record of life by a person who should know best. Although theorists of both photography and autobiography have shown that these are simplistic views, the fictionality of autobiography and the artistry of photography now being commonplaces in the relevant critical discourses, it is also generally accepted, even in the context of a more sophisticated understanding of the theories and practices underpinning both media, that photographs and autobiographies are linked by similar issues about referentiality.¹⁴⁰

Whilst the link Kawakami makes is undeniable, Guibert’s main preoccupation in this book is less with autobiography than with photography and the ethics of portraiture. The significance of the self to *Ghost Image* is as a way to understand photography, as Guibert examines his role as photographer, photographic subject and viewer. Much of what *Ghost Image* refers to is to do with the representation of other people, about what it means to represent or to be represented by others – the self is relevant to that insofar as it reflects on the photographer.

In ‘Photographic Writing’, Guibert draws an explicit connection between writing and the photographic process. He writes, ‘We might think of a journal as a form of contact sheet, an orderly arrangement of

images waiting to be developed, but it is not quite that.’ (p. 72).

Interestingly, his conception of his journal entries are apparently visual in nature, he sees that as he would see a photograph. Later, he observes,

The journal landscape is a kind of quick, staccato sketch – a postcard. The landscape in the novel has the advantage of a longer exposure – it is almost a painting compared to the photographic landscape of the diary. (p. 73)

Interestingly, Guibert does not in this analogy, suggest that the difference between journal and novel is one of reality versus fiction (though perhaps in the reference to a painting this suggestion is implied). This divide is of less significance to Guibert than process. His focus is on the method of production and the length of the gestation in producing the respective texts. David Levi Strauss writes,

People believe what they see in photographs. The imagination is thought to be yoked to the material world, to ‘reality’ in a quite different way than with painting.141

Guibert, on the other hand, suggests that the difference is not in the relationship a painting has to reality that distinguishes it so much as the process of its creation and period of its gestation.

On this aspect of his writing, Kawakami has written that the process Guibert is describing compares writing to photography, in the sense that in writing of the nature that Guibert is referring to, it is memory that operates as the ‘photosensitive’ surface. She writes,

The retina, of course, really is a photosensitive surface, so this image likens the human eye to the camera, in a science-fictional mode allowing technology to be embedded into human beings. It is as if the impression short circuits in the mind, moving directly from the eye to the diarist’s page. Photography is therefore much more than a metaphor at this point: it is a procedure and a mode of perception incorporated, literally, into the human body.142

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142 Kawakami A (2013), p. 50
And yet, as I have suggested above, the distinguishing feature of Guibert’s writing is that it is filtered through human subjectivity. We are privy to the emotional impact photographs produce in Guibert, which would not be available to us if the book were a collection of photographs. Guibert can tell us how he feels, whereas a photograph’s impact is often non-verbal (as demonstrated by Susan Sontag’s response to Diane Arbus in chapter two).

The book is, in a way, a demonstration of photographic affect. In many ways, *Ghost Image* reads as a topography of Guibert’s feelings about photography; photographs are worth writing about to the extent they produce affect. It has been observed that, ‘Affect is in many ways synonymous with force or forces of encounter.’143 This is what is unique about *Ghost Image*, Guibert is able to capture the emotional impact photographs have on him. For example, Guibert describes the ability of a photograph of himself to ‘shock and ‘stun’ (pp. 57 and 58). Furthermore, when describing his reaction to Diane Arbus’s photographs of children with Down’s Syndrome, the thing Guibert picks up on is their ‘disturbance’. He writes, ‘Was I supposed to enjoy this image, and was my enjoyment legitimate?’ (p. 112). Above all, it does seem to be the peculiar power of photographs to affect that interests Guibert.

**Identity and the ethics of representation in *Ghost Image***

Identity, the body, the self, as well as control and ownership of those things are issues that are all strongly at play in *Ghost Image*. In many ways, Guibert is exploring the ethical issues that arise in using other people’s identity towards the artist’s own ends. As Guibert rarely actually describes photographs in *Ghost Image*, his concern is less with the actual images that are produced, than with the interchange between the photographer and the subject in the photographic process.

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In one particularly disconcerting essay, Guibert recalls his father wanting to photograph his daughter’s chest, at the moment her breasts began to form, when his father says they are at the height of their beauty. This was, Guibert writes, ‘attempt at appropriation through the image’ (p. 38). There is something very odd and uneasy about this passage: the father believes he controls his daughter so completely, he is at liberty to photograph her as he chooses. But more than that, it is as if the father can, by photographing his daughter, deny her sexuality. His father would prefer his daughter not to age or to develop into a sexual being and attempts to ‘fix’ her in a photographic image. In a way, his father’s own feelings dictate his understanding of his own daughter; this is something that Guibert continually returns to. We cannot escape ourselves, even as we attempt to interact with and understand others.

Kawakami writes that Guibert makes it clear that ‘the ethical import of the photographic act is deeply questionable.’ However, I would suggest that, for Guibert, photography is a more ethically ambiguous process. He is aware of the tension in the way a photograph can appropriate and cause harm, even psychological harm, such as that which would have occurred in his father’s photograph of his pre-pubescent daughter. But he is equally aware that, insofar as identity is concerned, all a photograph can really appropriate from a person is something transitory and superficial.

In the brief passage titled ‘The Insult’, Guibert compares a photograph to a ‘glance’. He writes,

There are some people, when passed on the street, for whom a single glance seems to be an insult; the photograph then becomes a superinsult, the ultimate insult. (p. 76)

Guibert is acknowledging here that the camera relies on the existence of its subject to create its image and in this way it uses and can sometimes manipulate other people’s identities and understanding of themselves. Though Guibert remains acutely conscious of this throughout the book,
he is also asking whether a photograph really does appropriate its subject in any enduring and irreversible way. Looking at others is, Guibert seems convinced, part of what it means to be human and invested in the world.

In ‘The Threat’, Guibert writes about a man who watches him from his window, sitting by the radio. He finds this terrifying, because he cannot see the man’s face, though he can see some of his actions. This positioning is reminiscent of a camera, in which the camera partially obscures the photographer’s face, making it difficult to discern expressions. Guibert then writes,

> The same might be said about photography, about the rift, the schism between the world and its representation: what I was seeing from my window, as a result of the distance and the angle that rendered all those gestures unreal by obscuring the individual who was making them, was a kind of photograph. (p. 81)

It appears that the man on the other side of the glass assumed Guibert was watching him. Guibert concludes this passage, writing, ‘But this is no longer a photograph, it’s a novel.’ This is an acknowledgment that the photograph exists outside time — once elements of movement or story are introduced to the static image, it becomes narrative rather than photographic.

In this passage, Guibert is examining the idea that to represent something always requires a certain distance, or a ‘schism’ to use his word. In photography, this distance is achieved through the intervention of the camera, but in a way, Guibert is suggesting that this distancing effect is not the exclusive domain of photography. We live separate, isolated lives, he implies; the camera does not cause this fragmentation, but photographic seeing fits easily into our established patterns of perception.

Guibert seems to be suggesting that there is something inherently human about disassociated and de-contextualised forms of seeing, that perhaps even before the age of the camera, were characteristic of our way of perceiving the world. In other words, it is not necessarily the camera or
the prevalence of photographs that inclines us to see the world in this disconnected and fragmented way.

The essay titled ‘The Session’ is a scene in which Guibert does have his photograph taken. The photographer ‘D.S.’ tells Guibert that his method of photographing is secret and that Guibert must preserve its secrecy. During the shoot, the photographer circles him, bends over him and does not speak. Guibert writes about the experience,

I no longer control my face or my expression, they no longer belong to me. I say to myself, I’m like a child being tortured. (p. 88)

After the session, he takes a shower, perhaps wanting to separate himself from the experience of being photographed. The sensation Guibert describes here is akin to a physical violation, although all that is really at stake is his image. The connection between image, face and identity is strong, Guibert suggests, and the only time we relinquish our control over our sense of ourselves is when we allow ourselves to be photographed. Yet, when he is the subject of the photographic process, he acknowledges the acute sense of violation that takes place.

The absence of photographs from the text draws attention to the similarity of written representations of people with photographic ones. Of the photographs that were taken, he writes, ‘the images that resulted from this session are completely outside me, like masks, like a morphological record.’ (p. 88). Guibert, in other words, does not identify with the photographs that were taken – they do not accurately represent him, at least not as he understands himself.

In ‘The Proof’, at a checkpoint on Friedrichstrasse into East Berlin, a guard checks a passport against the physical image of Guibert, and

...his head and eyes make a dozen passes – abrupt, mechanical, but precise – between the photograph and the face, to verify the concordance, the similarity of each point the face could be said to be divided into zones of resemblance, and with each glance, he strikes a key, he pardons the piece of your face that, as soon as it – together with other pieces – completes the puzzle suggested by the photograph, gives the green light, the permission to leave. (p. 124).
The guard approaches identification with a mathematical precision, as though identity is simply an accumulation of the face’s features: for him, the face does not exist outside time. Guibert is drawing our attention to the disconnect between the internal experience of the self and how our identity is evaluated by others. To Guibert, the nature of self is an interior question – one that cannot really be approached from an external assessment of a person’s facial features.

Guibert then queries what will happen if his face no longer resembles the photograph, or he if looked away or his mouth tightened. He goes on to write,

Or if an entire portion of my face collapses? I would be finished, there would be nothing left but to have my picture taken again in the first available photo booth, and the disparity between this image and the valid image would be even greater. (p. 125)

This passage captures the anxiety Guibert feels about who he is. Though the appearance of the face does not necessarily reflect our internal experience of self, it is crucial to the way we interact with others. Moreover, what Guibert is suggesting is that the face is the site at which the internal and external selves meet. Our faces are the means by which others identify and understand us. Without the face to represent the self, his concern is not that he would cease to exist, but that his means of interface with the world would be lost.

The connection between the face and portrait photography is explained by Andy Grundberg, as follows,

What is the source of this fascination with the human face as recorded by the camera? There are two likely explanations. For one, portrait photography may represent a reaction to the scepticism inherent in postmodernist thinking. Dealing as it does with what seems an irreducible essence of individuality, it can be seen as the last frontier of the genuine, a border of resistance to the depredations of the déjà vu. More than any other kind of images today, portrait photographs seem able to speak to us directly,
without any interference from our accumulated cultural baggage.\textsuperscript{145}

Grundberg goes on to conclude that, ‘portraits are so seductive they still manage to fool us into thinking that seeing is believing.’\textsuperscript{146} This is an idea that Guibert is exploring – that portrait photography is the recording of the face and also the way others are able to ‘know’ us.

Catherine Markey observes that the self is central to Guibert’s writing and his artistic project overall. He is a writer, Markey observes, who ‘always places the self in the text...calling on the reader or spectator to recognise his suffering and bear witness to it.’\textsuperscript{147} It is almost as though, for Guibert, there must be a spectator in order for the emotion or state he is describing to exist. To capture something on film, or represent it in written words operates as a confirmation.

In ‘The Betrayal’, in which an actress approaches the magazine that Guibert works for and tells the art director that they can use any photograph of her, except one particular photograph. Guibert writes,

\begin{quote}
And I don’t know why, whether he found the idea of betrayal appealing, or because he felt that the photograph where she thought she looked the most affected was also most eye-catching, but it was this very photograph that he chose for the cover. (p. 118).
\end{quote}

The actress later chose Guibert as her interviewer and a friendship between them developed and Guibert took her photograph himself. These were personal photographs that the actress hung on the wall of her apartment, but Guibert decided to sell those photographs to the magazine with the highest circulation in France. After the photographs were sold, he didn’t deposit the cheque from the magazine and he started to feel guilty that he had betrayed his friend. He writes, ‘I couldn’t sleep,

\textsuperscript{146} Ibid
\textsuperscript{147} Markey C (2010). ‘Une Oeuvre b:barbare et delicate: Hervé Guibert and the limits of representation’ in Damle A and L’Hostis A (eds) \textit{The Beautiful and the monstrous: Essays in French literature, thought and culture}, Modern French Identities 87, Peter Lang, Bern, p. 70
feeling dazed, depressed, humiliated, regretting what I had done as being a stupid, thoughtless act, a betrayal, something horribly petty.’ (p. 122). Later, he goes to the office of the magazine, returns the cheque and asks for the photographs to be returned to him.

Although Guibert ultimately behaves in a way that accords with his own conscience, he also hints that this type of violation is not specific to photography. The way in which photographs reflect these sorts of violations and betrayals that occur in the world, of which humans are capable. Photography in a way documents the way people are capable of mistreating one another.

Kawakami writes that the betrayal in this essay reflects much of what occurs in Guibert’s self writing, in which his friends and lovers are, in effect, on show and used to Guibert’s own narrative end. However, she writes,

But the fundamental betrayal is the fact that a photograph both preserves and kills its subjects. Even if the model is pleased with the photograph, even if the photograph seems to do what it set out to do…the photograph betrays its subject by taking her out of time: by freezing, albeit momentarily, her temporal existence…he got what he wanted, an image of a loved one, but in doing so he killed her by taking her out of time, the only medium in which human beings exist.148

I am not as sure that Guibert so clearly considers the act of photography to always amount to betrayal in the way Kawakami suggests. Although Guibert is concerned with these aspects of photography, he also acknowledges the fact that identity is ephemeral and changing. It is not the photograph itself that does the damage to a person’s identity, but the use to which photographs are put, or the way in which people take advantage of the power imbalance between photographer and subject.

Partly, what Guibert implies in Ghost Image is that the very momentary nature of photographs is what prevents a photographic portrait from resulting in an enduring violation. Image, identity and the

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way we appear to others are short lived phenomena and whilst photography can betray a person’s own sense of self, the person from whom the photograph is taken continues to exist and to change. The photograph remains static, while the subject continues to live and change.

This is an idea that Jean Baudrillard considers in his essay on photography, ‘Photography, or the Writing of Light’.\textsuperscript{149} He suggests that one of the aspects of photography that is often identified as its flaw, is also the reason that it cannot ever fully supplant reality. He argues,

> We deplore the disappearance of the real under the weight of too many images. But let’s not forget that the image disappears too because of reality. In fact, the real is far less often sacrificed than the image. The image is robbed of its originality and given away to shameful acts of complicity. Instead of lamenting the relinquishing of the real to superficial images, one would do well to challenge the surrender of the image to the real. The power of the image can only be restored by liberating the image from reality. By giving back to the image its specificity, the real itself can rediscover its true image.\textsuperscript{150}

In a similar way, Guibert suggests that a photograph does not appropriate anything enduring from a person, because the person continues to exist, while a photograph remains static and, he suggests, becomes less relevant.

The fleeting nature of appearance is again raised in the essay titled ‘Photo Souvenir (East Berlin)’, in which Guibert is given the image of a man, presumably of his lover, as a young man. In it, he sees traces of the man he now knows, in his expressions. He observes the ephemeral nature of appearances and connects the man’s appearance with his memory of him which, he observes, will also fade.

There is obviously a connection here to Barthes, the connection between photography and death that was so clearly made in \textit{Camera Lucida}. Yet, Guibert is also suggesting something else – that photographs replicate our experience of life. This is a theme Guibert returns to with

\textsuperscript{150} Ibid, p. 143
some frequency in *Ghost Image* – the idea that identity and appearances are not fixed, they alter with time and any photographic representation of any subject suffers from the fact that it captures a moment that is singular.

In ‘The Betrayal’ Guibert makes a broader link between moral acts and artistic ones. Whilst photography confers on Guibert a certain power over his photographic subject, his ultimate decision not to publish the photograph, accords with his better conscience. Jennifer McMahon argues that,

A moral judgment involves identifying the right thing to do and the motivation to act accordingly. Unless the motivation to act accordingly is there, it is arguably not a moral judgment one has made. In other words, making a moral judgment requires drawing upon one’s own evaluation of an event, object or person, rather than simply adopting the position of an authority or applying abstract principles.\(^\text{151}\)

This, McMahon argues, is also the state of mind necessary to produce a work of art. It seems that what Guibert is demonstrating here is that the photographer is necessary to every photograph and that a photographer is capable of empathising with their subject, just as any other artist is capable of doing.

Throughout *Ghost Image* Guibert is endeavouring to reconcile many of the moral deficits often associated with photography as a means of representing others with his love of the art form. Boule writes that,

Photography is represented throughout the book as an amorous practice, a way of monopolising the loved body especially with its absence in mind, or because one cannot possess it.\(^\text{152}\)

In a way, Guibert remains frustrated by his photographic acts, because they cannot ‘fix’ people in the way he would like, that would enable him to possess a person in any enduring sense. Photography is deceptive; it gives the impression of offering a lasting image of a person, but all it really offers is a glimpse. Although Guibert acknowledges that

\(^{151}\) McMahon J (Ed) (2014). *Art and ethics in a material world: Kant’s pragmatist legacy*, Routledge, New York, p. 2

\(^{152}\) Boule J P, p. 67
certain problems do arise in relation to photography, they come about because of the use to which photographs are put.

The photographer as the true photographic subject

Throughout Ghost Image, Guibert implies that the process of looking outwards through photography always reflects inwards. In other words, photography is always a deeply personal act for him, connected to love and to a desire remain connected to the world. This aspect of photography is put forward as one of its redeeming features.

In ‘Self Portrait’, for example, Guibert writes of how he collects the fifty five self portraits of Rembrandt, observing that he prefers the portraits of Rembrandt as a younger man ‘who makes a fool of himself’ (p. 62), to the older, more serious versions. It is no accident that Guibert has chosen Rembrandt’s self portraits to collect – the self is at the heart of most of Guibert’s writing and perhaps, counter-intuitively for a book about photography, is also crucial to Ghost Image.

In fact, this passage has nothing, really, to do with photography – it has instead to do with the artistic enterprise. Just as Guibert’s own artistic enterprise is orientated around an attempt at unveiling and understanding the self, many other artists have sought to find a way of representing themselves to the world. Guibert is highlighting the way that Rembrandt found fifty-five different ways to interpret and represent himself, perhaps in an effort to demonstrate that self-portrait is and has always been a legitimate artistic undertaking.

Guibert’s views in this regard confirm John Berger’s observation that photographs always reflect in some way on the photographer, even though photography is a representational art form. In fact, I would suggest this is one of Guibert’s deep convictions about photography. Berger writes,

For photographs are not, as is often assumed, a mechanical record. Every time we look at a photograph we are aware, however
slightly, of the photographer selecting that sight from an infinity of other possible sights.\textsuperscript{153}

In this way, Guibert used his photographs of others as a way of representing himself.\textsuperscript{154} Accordingly, although much of the book is outwardly directed, it nonetheless reflects an internal order within Guibert himself.

Certainly, in \textit{Ghost Image}, while a diverse array of photographic scenarios are described in the book, those descriptions offer very little insight into the subjects. Rather, the book’s true subject is both Guibert and his personal experience insofar as it assists him to reflect on his ideas about the photographic form.

Guibert himself is the subject of a photographic portrait in ‘Premeditation’, in which a young mail clerk he has worked with for years without speaking to, makes a request to take his photograph. Although they have never spoken, the mail clerk has a very clear idea of how he would like Guibert to be photographed. Guibert writes, ‘I’m amazed by the specificity of his request and hastily accept.’ (p. 86). Guibert alerts us to his own vanity here – that in some ways, the thought of being a photographic subject is flattering – the very idea of the camera’s attention is appealing, regardless of the result. This hints back to the book’s opening words, that photography is an act of love – not everything draws the attention of a photograph, not everything warrants that close attention. But, more than anything, what this passage suggests is that it is not strictly the camera’s attention that he finds flattering, but the attention of the person interested in taking the photograph.

Markey has observed that one of Guibert’s key concerns was with the idea of artistic representation itself. In his two later books, written after Guibert was diagnosed with AIDS, \textit{To the friend who did not save my life} and \textit{The compassion protocol}, Markey writes that Guibert exhibits ‘his dying body as a literary and visual artefact’ and in doing so ‘tests the

\textsuperscript{153} Berger J (1972). \textit{Ways of seeing}. Penguin, p.10
\textsuperscript{154} Kawakami A (2007), p. 212
very limits of the artistic representation of the unimaginable’.\textsuperscript{155} In an acute irony, Guibert acts out some of his preoccupations in \textit{Ghost Image} with ageing in these two later memoirs; he writes about his suffering from AIDS, detailing the transformative process of decay and death. Luckhurst has observed that the reader implies Guibert’s known history in all of his work, even if written before his AIDS diagnosis.\textsuperscript{156} I would agree with this proposition and suggest that there were some assumptions Guibert expected the reader to make about his own work as they read: his homosexuality for example, is implied into some of the essays, as is his identity as a novelist.

Just as the photographer is implied in every photograph, for Guibert writing is also always a reflection on its author. In an untitled passage, Guibert writes,

T. told me that when he was a child he had to turn over the photographs of the faces and bodies he liked and hide them, as if he couldn’t stand them, as if they gave off a cold emanation that could be of no help to him. ((p. 152).

This is the entirety of that particular essay. The suggestion in this snippet is that there was something forbidden in the photographs, which T. liked but could not admit to liking. Because of what we know about Guibert, we infer that T.’s interest was homoerotic in nature. It would appear that the point of this particular snippet is to demonstrate that the author is the key to our understanding of the text, whether or not the text itself is about the writer or another subject.

In a similar vein, in ‘The Article’ Guibert is asked to write an article about the German portrait and documentary photographer, August Sander, whilst suffering from a fever. He writes that when he later reads the article, after the fever passed, he found the article he wrote was written in terms of his own solitude and illness. Guibert observes, ‘I

\textsuperscript{155} Markey C, p. 72
discovered that through those photographs, which were really quite alien to me, I had only spoken of myself, and this nearly terrified me.’ (p. 115).

Guibert seems to be suggesting here that just as the photograph reflects on the photographer, the interpretation of a photograph (and we infer any text) reflects on the viewer. In a way, he is contesting the idea that photographs are documents that ‘appropriate’ or have any operation in their own right – just as the photographer is implied in every photograph, so the viewer plays a role in the interpretation of what the photograph depicts. Photographs are in this sense dialogical, in that the subjective state of the viewer informs the interpretation of the image.

Conclusion

I have attempted to demonstrate that the stylistic and structural techniques in Ghost Image are an effort to link photography and writing as artistic forms, insofar as they involve the representation of others. In doing so, Guibert shows that photography is a subjective art form and that, in fact, subjectivity, desire and the self lie at the heart of Ghost Image and all acts of photographic representation. Whilst Guibert acknowledges the ethical shortcomings of photography, at the same time he suggests that life continually reasserts itself over the photograph, because the photograph is unable to change. Thus, while Ghost Image relies heavily on photography, as a text, it is ultimately reaffirming of life.
Conclusion

By way of conclusion, this thesis will consider another narrative that privileges the self, identity and photography in an effort to link the ideas considered in the foregoing chapters. The text examined in this conclusion is Lucy Grealy’s *Autobiography of a Face* and rather than undertake a close textual analysis of this book, I will examine it to the extent that it engages with the idea of the continuum of self that I have examined in the preceding chapters. I will suggest that *Autobiography of a Face* demonstrates the symbolic power of the face in representing identity and its limitations in capturing the lived experience of self.

Grealy’s 1994 memoir recalls her experience as a young girl being diagnosed with a rare facial tumour that gave her a five per cent chance of survival. In the process of removing the tumour, a third of Grealy’s jaw was also taken. The book recalls the period during which Grealy battled the tumour and the period during her teenage years through her twenties when Grealy underwent the process of surgery in an effort to reconstruct her face. As much as it is the story of Grealy’s face, it is also a story of reconciling her public identity and her internal experience of self.

The prologue ‘Pony Party’ reflects on Grealy’s teenage years, after her operation but before her facial reconstruction surgery. At the time, she had a part-time job taking ponies to children’s parties, during which Grealy was acutely aware of her appearance to others. At the parties, Grealy describes her awareness of the children’s reaction to, first the

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ponies and then to her face, ‘a strange triangular shape, accentuated by the fact that I was unable to keep my mouth completely closed.’ (p. 3). Grealy was self-conscious about her strangeness and her face became ‘her personal vanishing point’ (p. 7). This observation suggests the impact of her face was so overwhelming as to override her experience of self.

The dissonance arises mainly because inside Grealy is an ordinary, healthly teenager, while her public appearance suggest something is devastatingly wrong. The children observed her, registered something was strange about her appearance and then ‘inexpertly pretend not to notice’ her (p. 10).

The chapter culminates, as the pony parties often would, in the taking of the pony’s photograph, in which Grealy stood holding the horse, with the children gathered around her. Grealy writes that she tilted her head away at a precise angle so that her hair would fall over her face ‘a perfect sheet of camouflage between me and the camera’ (p. 11). Grealy contrasts the photographs taken of her at those pony parties with the medical photographs taken of her in hospital, which later appeared in medical journals. She writes ‘Curiously those sterile, bright photos are easy for me to look at.’ (p. 12). The photographs have a medical purpose and she describes being curiously unmoved by seeing a medical photograph of herself on the operating table. She writes,

Most of the skin on the right side of my face had been pulled over and back, exposing something with the general shape of a face and neck but with the color and consistency of raw steak. (p. 12).

She tells us that, even as a young girl she wasn’t particularly bothered by the photograph. In other words, the medical photograph does not hold power over her, because it does not depict her face, acknowledging that identity is constructed at the site of the face.

Here, the disconnect between Grealy’s internal experience of self and her identity might be contrasted with the contradiction examined by Duras in The Lover. The narrator’s project in The Lover was substituting the lived experience of self for the written one; in a way the internal
understanding of self gave way gave way to the public persona the narrator sought to offer to the world. The Lover’s agenda was self-aggrandising; an attempt to re-write the self – to make synonymous the narrator’s idea of self with how she was publicly perceived. In contrast, Grealy’s project is an interrogation of self – she is demonstrating the difficulties in reaching a true understanding of self and in reconciling that understanding with one’s public image.

Grealy contrasts the medical photograph to the photographs taken at the pony parties in which she is hiding behind her hair to obscure the deformed part of her face. The ‘dread’ she felt when she saw the camera removed from its case, I would suggest, derives from her awareness that the photograph will record her public appearance, her identity, in a way that does not accord with her internal understanding of herself.

This was one of Sontag’s key concerns about Arbus’s portraits – they show us her subjects in ‘in various degrees unconscious or unaware in relation to their pain, their ugliness’\(^\text{158}\). The camera could not capture how they thought or felt about themselves and its ethical shortcomings arise from this discrepancy. That is, they tell Arbus’s story about them, rather than than their own story about themselves. Though she does not specifically state this, Sontag’s attitude would have been vastly different, I would suggest, in relation to a photographic self portrait.

Ann Patchett, in her memoir about her friendship with Grealy, Truth and Beauty\(^\text{159}\) observes that her own impression of Grealy was that she was more popular, self confident and sexually experienced than Patchett. This adds another layer of complexity to Grealy’s relationship with her own public image – not only does it not accord her own experience of self, but her identity is itself open to interpretation. The acute discord is between Grealy’s perception of her public identity and her experience of being.

\(\text{158} \) Sontag S, On Photography, Doubleday, p. 37
\(\text{159} \) Patchett A (2005). Truth and Beauty, HarperPerennial
Later Grealy tells us that she saw the photographs as an adult and writes, ‘I look frail and thin and certainly peculiar, but I don’t look anywhere near as repulsive as I then believed I did.’ (p. 13). That is, the power the photographs held over Grealy as an adolescent diminished as her own understanding of self developed. There is a way in which Grealy is demonstrating Hervé Guibert’s idea about human experience re-asserting itself over the image. It was not the photograph that caused Grealy harm, but in a way a failure of self. Ultimately the years Grealy spends interrogating herself and forming an understanding of self render the power the photograph held over her less harmful.

As an adult, Grealy undergoes several unsuccessful attempts at facial reconstruction surgery, which prove painful, protracted, expensive and ultimately unsuccessful. In one procedure that takes several months, Grealy has skin grafts taken from her thigh and applied to her jaw. Though initially successful, her face ultimately reabsorbs the grafts and her face returns to its pre-operative appearance.

Finally, Grealy gives up on the surgery and takes up the ‘geographical cure’ (p. 212) of living abroad. After one final attempt at surgery Grealy writes, ‘I couldn’t make what I saw in the mirror correspond to the person I thought I was.’ (p. 219). Grealy stops looking at herself in mirrors for several years, she tells us that her final act of asserting herself comes through ‘shedding’ her image (p. 222). This is a recognition of the symbolic power of the face. Though the face is the way we recognise each other, it may have little or no bearing on our experience of being.

*Autobiography of a Face* concludes with Grealy sitting in a café with a man she has just met and is attracted to. She imagines what she must look like to him. She writes,

Society is no help. It tells us again and again that we can most be ourselves by acting and looking like someone else, only to leave our original faces behind to turn into ghosts that will inevitably resent and haunt us.

As I sat there in the café, it suddenly occurred to me that it is no mistake when sometimes in films and literature the dead know
they are dead only after being offered that most irrefutable proof: they can no longer see themselves in the mirror.

...I wanted to tell this man I was with about it, but he was involved in his own thoughts and I did not want to interrupt him, so instead I looked with curiosity at the window being him, its night-silvered glass reflecting the entire café, to see if I could, now, recognize myself. (p. 223).

We need this public confirmation of ourselves, she concludes, as much as we need to reach an internal understanding of ourselves. This point is perhaps demonstrated best by the fact that it is a mirror Grealy refers to instead of a photograph. It is the mirror rather than the image Grealy seeks out to test the relationship between her image and her new found understanding of self. The significance being that the mirror aligns more closely with the self-portrait than the portrait. Grealy leaves us uncertain as to whether the two are capable of truly being reconciled.

Grealy embarks on her memoir in order to reclaim her understanding of self, which was thrown into chaos by the damage to her face. The written word has its power because it allows the writer outwardly to project their understanding of self. Unlike Duras, she engages in an inquiry of self, her project is to make the mysterious aspects of self more knowable. The need for this derives from her feeling an apparent discord between her own understanding of self and her image projected through her 'peculiar' face.

Those who take Grealy’s photograph are able to assert a devastating power over her, which is one of Sontag’s key concerns about the photographic image and of portraits in particular. However, Grealy may be more closely associated with Sontag’s ‘poet delving into her entrails to relate her own pain’\(^{160}\) than with representing the pain of others. Certainly, Sontag’s concerns regarding the ethics of representation cannot be readily applied to Grealy’s memoir.

Ultimately, echoing Guibert, subjectivism prevails, our understanding of the self changes, it is revised, revisited and reshaped.

\(^{160}\) Sontag S, p. 40
And yet, our portraits, our faces, represent us in the world; without our faces, our identities would collapse. Perhaps what Grealy achieves is a stronger understanding of self – her self interrogation leads her to a point where there remains a disconnect between the experience of self and her identity represented by her face, but it exerts less power over her. Her association with self is stronger and the feeling of detachment from her image, representing her identity, becomes less debilitating.

This is the continuum I have tried to capture in this thesis, the continuum of self and identity and the ethics of representing that continuum in photographic and written portraiture. The ethical issues that arise in portraiture are to do with the difficulties in representing human complexity, with the way in which portraiture seek to represent the self as singular and thereby reduce the complexity of the lived experience of self. *Autobiography of a Face* offers a challenge to the ethical difficulties involved in acts of photographic and written representation of the self. It demonstrates that the act of questioning the self, of seeking to represent human complexity over attempting a singular representation of the self, may ultimately be regarded as less ethically contentious.
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