‘Something We Can Only Desire’: Writing the Past in Recent Australian Literature

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An Extract from the Novel To Name Those Lost

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Abstract

In the last decade, the novel in Australia has come under increasing scrutiny from historians, academics, and the wider public as novelists offer a vision of our past that often sits uneasily beside more formal historiographic investigations. There is a general expectation that fiction should be truthful with the past. Fiction, however, often undermines the empiricist view of referentiality that history promotes, instead exploiting the paradoxical break from the referent that the imagined topography of fiction allows. This leads to what Ellison has called ‘referential anxiety’, or an uncomfortable awareness of the loss of reciprocity with the world. Given this range of responses and the paradox of which they are indicative, to claim that the novel is a form of historiography misunderstands the nature of truth in fiction. This dissertation focuses on three Australian novels that exemplify the problematics of reference, Kim Scott’s That Deadman Dance, Richard Flanagan’s Gould’s Book of Fish, and J.M. Coetzee’s Diary of a Bad Year.

The dissertation is paired with an extract from the novel To Name Those Lost, the story of an itinerant labourer and Black War veteran named Thomas Toosey. His journey takes him along the Launceston-Deloraine railway line during the early years of its operation as he searches for his son, William. Arriving in Launceston, Toosey finds the town in chaos. Riots break out in protest at a tax levied on citizens to pay for the rescue of shareholders in the bankrupt Launceston and Western Railway Company. Toosey is desperate to find his son who is somewhere in town amid the looting and general destruction, but at every turn he is confronted by the Irish transportee Fitheal Flynn and his companion, the hooded man, to whom Toosey owes a debt that he must repay.
Declaration

This is to certify that the thesis comprises only my original work towards the PhD except where indicated; due acknowledgment has been made in the text to all other material used; the thesis is 80,000 words in length, not inclusive of the bibliography or abstract.

Signed,

Rohan Wilson
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An Extract from the Novel To Name Those Lost
Introduction

There are, then, two ways of thinking about various things [...] The first tradition thinks of truth as a vertical relationship between representations and what is represented. The second tradition thinks of truth horizontally — as the culminating reinterpretation of our predecessors’ reinterpretation of their predecessors’ reinterpretation...

This tradition does not ask how representations are related to nonrepresentations, but how representations can be seen as hanging together. The difference is not one between “correspondence” and “coherence” theories of truth — though these so-called theories are partial expressions of this contrast. Rather, it is the difference between regarding truth, goodness, and beauty as eternal objects which we try
to locate and reveal, and regarding them as artifacts whose fundamental design we often have to alter (Rorty 1982: 92).

The concept of these two great traditions, as Rorty outlined in Consequences of Pragmatism, provides us with a ready-made lexicon for interpreting twenty-first century Australian literature — in particular the literature that deals with the past. In dealing with the past, the novel is regularly forced to confront the dichotomy that Rorty has described. On the one hand, it treats the events of the past as if they happened and as if they might be meaningfully reconstructed; while on the other hand, as figural language generates unintended meanings, the impossibility of pinning down precisely what a narrative means or describes becomes a central issue. Indeed, ‘imaginative literature, conceived of as fiction, is precisely that privileged form of communication that understands itself as separate from the sphere of the real, as self-referential’ (Ellison 1993: 6). It is the ‘self-reflecting mirror-effect’ through which fiction asserts ‘its separation from empirical reality’ that will be the main concern of this thesis (de Man 1983: 17). The way this mirror-effect develops within the narrative confines of a selection of post-millennial Australian texts will form the core discussion.

I make three related claims: first, that in a number of these novels, the attitude towards referentiality is paradoxical, desiring the certainty of meaning and certainty of denotation like that which historiography demands for itself, while at the same time being denied any hope of certainty by irony, metaphor, and allegory; second, that this paradoxical attitude to the ‘loss of reciprocity with the world’ can be seen manifesting in a range of possible responses, from exploitation, to investigation, to being reduced to what Ellison has called
‘referential anxiety’ as literature endures the break from the referent (1993: 6); third, that, given this range of responses and the paradox of which they are indicative, to claim that the novel is a form of historiography is to misunderstand the horizontal nature of truth in fiction.

My thesis is that twenty-first century Australian novelists, desiring referential certainty, but simultaneously being aware of the problems with reference, are forced to play out literature’s failure to denote over and over again, full of the realisation that ‘history is something we know we can’t learn, something we can only desire’ (Elias 2001: xviii). Rorty’s competing philosophical traditions, the first which imagines a divide between word and object, the second which imagines that divide as just another metaphor in an endless proliferation of metaphors, is a useful way of conceiving of the friction that is taking place within the texts to be discussed. It is friction generated by the desire to get beyond language to the actual past, to the events as they were — a desire which must always be thwarted.

Why must it be thwarted? The most apparent reason is that when writing history the ‘real past’ does not enter the equation. The past is lost and ‘what is at issue in historiography — and indeed what can only ever be at issue — is what can be derived and constructed from the historicized record or archive’ (Jenkins 2005: 16). Of course, that is not to say that the past did not occur. It did. But it only enters the debate ‘rhetorically’ and ‘theoretically’, never on its own terms, never as an observable or repeatable phenomenon (Jenkins 2005: 18). Historians must approach the past with a ‘certain brutality’, aware that explanatory categories may well be arbitrary, but similarly aware that without a framework for explanation, the past has nothing to tell (Ankersmit 2001: 5). This caveat applies equally to historiography and
literature. (Here, I must begin to draw a distinction between what I will call 
historiography, that is, the body of writing dealing with historical research, 
theories, and techniques, as well as with the narrative presentation of historical 
events; and what I will call literature, that is, the long prose writing which has 
as its chief characteristic a focus on human experience and on what is universal 
to that experience. Where these forms of writing begin to radically differ, 
however, is in the way they view referentiality, as we will see.)

There is, though, another source of friction in the novels to be 
discussed, one that is less immediately apparent than the well-established 
problems with gaining access to the past. As Rorty put it, we have a justifiable 
fear that only an ‘accurate transcendental account of the relationship of 
representation will keep the Knowing Subject in touch with the Object, word 
with world, scientist with particle,’ or even in fact ‘philosophy itself with 
reality itself’ (1982: 96). That is to say, it is generally accepted that language 
and reality have a relationship, one that is quantifiable and knowable. Rorty, in 
this case, is not so sure. He is of the belief that Derrida largely upset the 
view of the vertical relationship between word and object when he reformulated the 
whole question into the statement ‘There is nothing outside the text’ (1982: 
96-8). From that point on, the issue began to look much more like ‘the worry 
that we may lose touch with certain exigencies, conformity with which is the 
whole duty of man’, rather than the search for an empirical grounding for 
language (Rorty 1982: 98). The fear of losing touch is apparent in many places 
throughout the novels to be discussed, but so are other responses, ones that 
Rorty pays less attention to, such as the ruthless joy in Richard Flanagan’s 
*Gould’s Book of Fish*, the intellectual curiosity in J.M. Coetzee’s *Diary of a Bad 
Year*, or the desire to demythologize history in Kim Scott’s *That Deadman Dance*. 

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These responses necessarily have their roots in what Rorty characterised as the Kantian tradition. This tradition ‘takes scientific truth as the centre of philosophical concern (and scorns the notion of incommensurable scientific world-pictures)’, thereby presenting ‘itself as a straightforward, down-to-earth, scientific attempt to get things right’ (Rorty 1982: 92). The central issues for the Kantian tradition revolve around representation: there is an ever-present worry that the old problem of ‘the relation between thought and its object, representation and represented’ has been ‘handled in various unsatisfactory ways because of a failure to distinguish properly philosophical questions about meaning and reference from extraneous questions motivated by scientific, ethical, and religious concerns’ (Rorty 1982: 91). Sorting out these concerns will lead, it is hoped, to a more robust epistemology and eventually to complete knowledge. But Rorty thinks this can never be the case. Kantian philosophy is a ‘field which has at its centre a series of questions about the relations between words and the world’ — questions that the Kantian tradition never has, and never will, get past (1982: 91). We end up with endless proliferations of the same problem, phrased and rephrased in new vocabularies, but always stuck upon the same issue — can we know reality through language? What is the connection between event and description? Can statements about the world be true?

Each of the three novels reviewed in this dissertation similarly grapple with the issue of reality’s connection to language, but in every case it is the struggle itself that provides narrative tension as the language of the Kantian tradition fails again and again to achieve its aim. Before I move on to an examination of how this tension develops in, and what it reveals about, the novels of Coetzee, Scott, and Flanagan, it is necessary to look more closely at another aspect of it, which is the rivalry with the discourse of history. Rivalry is
a problematic metaphor, one that hides many of the nuances of complicity and overlap that exist between fiction and history, and for that reason it is not one that I would apply to the relationship as a whole. It does, however, usefully summarise some aspects of the relationship, such as the heat that is generated when historians and fictioneers come into conflict, as happened with the historian Inga Clendinnen and the novelist Kate Grenville in 2007 (which I will discuss in greater detail in Chapter 2), as well as the heat generated by the conflict of traditions proposed by Rorty.

On top of this, it is a metaphor that has been previously employed in the same context by J.M. Coetzee. In an address given in Cape Town in 1987, he discussed whether the novel had the potential to resist its ‘colonisation’ by the discourse of history. He was concerned that ‘the colonisation of the novel by the discourse of history’ would lead to novels that operate ‘in terms of the procedures of history’ and that ‘eventuate in conclusions that are checkable by history (as a child’s schoolwork is checked by a schoolmistress)’ (1988: 54). The only viable option for the novel, if it wanted to avoid mere ‘supplementarity’ to historiography, was the stance of ‘rivalry’ — in other words, a novel needed to be ‘prepared to work itself out outside the terms of class conflict, race conflict, gender conflict, or any other of the oppositions out of which history and the historical disciplines erect themselves’ (1988: 54).

Coetzee was using the word history in a different sense here — not just history as archive, or the past, but also history as authority. It is history in the same sense of the term that Martin Davies employed when he described the ‘already historicized world’ in which we find ourselves, a world where everything ‘would go down in history; everything would be historicised; everything would acquire a historical finish’ (2006: 1). It is history as dominant
thought style and dominant mode of practice. Re-presenting the past in fiction is not, Coetzee suggested, an escape from this dominant thought style, but acquiescence to it. He makes clear in the rest of his lecture that in order to avoid the fate of mere supplementarity, the novel should aim to evolve ‘its own paradigms and myths, in the process […] going so far as to show up the mythic status of history — in other words, demythologising history’ (1988: 54). While Coetzee’s critiques of the contemporary relationship between the novel and historiography is certainly polemical, it nevertheless offers us a portrait of the conflict that is a continuous feature of the relationship. On the one hand, the novel asserts its fictionality at every turn, its desire to exist in a space of pure imagination, generally free of the kinds of referential claims that historiography must make: but on the other hand, the novel has increasingly become a form of de facto historiography, making claims to historical veracity both implicitly and explicitly.

This leads to a predictable outcome: ‘at certain times and in certain places’, particularly in ‘times of intense ideological pressure’, the novel that ‘supplements the history text’ can often have ‘attributed to it a greater truth than the one that does not’ (Coetzee 1988: 53-4). In this case, ‘the space in which the novel and history normally coexist like two cows on the same pasture, each minding its own business, is squeezed almost to nothing’, effectively forcing the novel into either a position of ‘supplementarity’ or of ‘rivalry’ (Coetzee 1988: 54). I will address the question of whether this is something like the situation in which we find ourselves in twenty-first century Australia, or whether fiction can be said to be in a rivalry with history, in Chapters 1 and 2. But for now, it is enough to say that the tension that I have been outlining is on the minds of writers, Coetzee most notably among them.
On the other side of the debate, historians have also, of course, exhaustively discussed the notion of whether historiographic representation is a record of reality at all, or whether it is merely a representation of the ‘illusory quality of this reality’ (de Man 1979: 92). Historians are aware of the dangers of identifying the past with our accounts of the past, and it is unlikely that many would agree with a characterisation of historical practice that assumes otherwise. The Australian historian C. Behan McCullagh most lucidly articulated the consensus response to this challenge, and I will use his writings in this capacity throughout the dissertation. He is careful to avoid a ‘naive theory of historical realism that the world is as we perceive it, such as we all accept in our day-to-day lives’, precisely because ‘physical and cultural facts about perception do not allow us to regard that theory as strictly true’ (1998: 307). McCullagh prefers instead a ‘correlation theory’ that holds that a description of the world ‘is true if it is part of a coherent account of the world, and if the observation statements implied by that account could be confirmed by people of the appropriate culture and with the appropriate interests’ (1998: 307). In a similar vein, the English historian Patrick O’Brien offered this excellent summary of current practice: historians only ‘construct a narrative or model about some aspect of the past in order to generate a plausible story that will always remain conjectural, provisional, tentative; open to future disagreement and refinement and eventual obsolescence’ (2001). The point to take away from the explanations put forward by McCullagh and O’Brien is that while historians believe they are striving for a coherent account of the world, the limits of knowledge, as well as the limits of language, often seem to prevent it.

But even cautious historians such as McCullagh and O’Brien cannot avoid the need, at some point, to believe the truth, and thus the reality, of their
representations. McCullagh: ‘it is often reasonable to believe the best explanations of perceptions is that they are correct; and to believe that good historical explanations of the perceived data are true’ (1998: 307). O’Brien: ‘the meaning and validity of [the historian’s] work continues to rest upon two a priori assumptions (that are an anathema to postmodernists), namely that there was a meaningful past “back there” and that it can be plausibly reconstructed in the shape of narratives or models’ (2001). Regardless of our best intentions, at some point the study of history requires that a historical representation is to be considered as a plausible reconstruction of past reality, even if only provisionally. This is a fundamental claim in this dissertation, one worth repeating; the ‘meaning and validity’ of a historian’s work relies upon the possibility that ‘good historical explanations’ can be considered ‘true’ (O’Brien 2001; McCullagh 1998: 307). It is, therefore, no exaggeration to suggest that the possibility of history as a practice rests wholly on the potential for language to correspond with natural reality.

Yet both McCullagh and O’Brien have shown that this claim never sits comfortably with historians. As we have seen, they both insist that most contemporary historians are familiar with the issues around historical realism and referentiality raised by White, Rorty, and others. And as we have also seen, they both suggest that it is a straw man argument to portray the bulk of historians any other way. No doubt they would point to the self-aware histories written by academics such as Simon Schama, Greg Dening, and Sven Lindqvist, and to a generation of historians raised in full awareness of post-structuralist and postmodern criticisms of their practice as evidence of this. In fact, they would take every opportunity to distance themselves from what they would see as old-fashioned positivist empiricism.
But if language does not correspond or at least, to use McCullagh’s term, correlate with past reality, then what do they have left? Historiography would never rise above the level of speculation. It would command no more authority than a work of historical fiction, in which case the process of examining evidence, testing and retesting assertions, and honing representations would be entirely fruitless. Either historical representations at least have the potential to correlate with past reality, or they are speculations. There would seem to be very little, if any, middle ground here. It is easy to see why well-respected professors of history like McCullagh and O’Brien remain committed to the idea, when all is said and done, that the ‘meaning and validity’ of a historian’s work relies upon the possibility that ‘good historical explanations’ can be considered ‘true’ (O’Brien 2001; McCullagh 1998: 307). The point is precisely that history commands more authority than fiction because its representations are thought to correlate with, and narrate, past events.

It follows from this that as a way to support history’s claim to its role as a factual reconstruction of past reality, it has frequently been contrasted with the role of fiction as an imaginary construction of past reality. The common sense view of the relation between history and fiction would have it that history ‘has been what enables us to replace “myth”, or fictional accounts of the past, with fact — with true representations of what “actually happened”’ (Southgate: 2009:194). It has been said that fiction has its genesis in the study of history or may even be ‘the repressed other of historical discourse’ (de Certeau quoted in Southgate 2009: 195). In the same vein, Rorty (with his tongue firmly in his cheek) argued that the ‘need for a distinction between “responsible” and “irresponsible” discourse’ or the need to ‘distinguish sharply between science and poetry’ is what ‘makes us distinctively Western’ (1982:
The problem with this view is that fiction, as a form of writing like any other, is not precluded from making claims to referential certainty, or from being able to represent what ‘actually happened’ in historiographic terms. Indeed, some theorists have argued that fiction can claim to be describing past events, or reconstructing the past, with even more ‘reality’ than historiography. Tim Parrish, the American postmodernist critic and author, asked ‘why should a novelists’ interpretation of history be less true than a historian’s version of history that — as it must — elicits the objections of other historians?’ (2008: 7). He suggested that novels such as Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!,* Morrison’s *Beloved,* and McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian* are able to ‘compel their readers to accept their narratives as true in the same ways that historians expect their readers to accept their narratives as true’ (2008: 2). His thesis is simple: ‘These authors write history as a form of fiction’ (2008: 2).

In the South African context, Michael Green proposed the existence of a ‘resistant form’ — a form that ‘must be accorded a force of its own and treated as valid in itself, as it were, and not simply something entirely open to the manipulation of the present’ (1997: 33). This form, he suggested, is a ‘vital fictional activity’ which ‘fiction itself may be seen to carry out,’ although it does this ‘without making the fictional simply evidence for the historical or the historical merely something subsumed in the fictional’ (1997: 33). The novels that he saw as treating the past as valid in itself included Coetzee’s *Dusklands,* Plaatje’s *Mhudi,* and Rooke’s *Wizard’s Country.* In Green’s account, it is the ‘process carried out by fiction as an historicising form’ that is of primary concern, not a laboured distinction between fiction and history, or between various genres of fiction (1997: 33). The emphasis is therefore placed on the production of the historical, and the form it takes, rather than the content of the novels themselves.
The point I am trying to make is that, for those holding to the Kantian tradition, fiction can be seen as having a strong claim to referential authority. The attempt by Parrish, Southgate, Green and others at locating the historical inside the fictional amounts to ‘the urge to find a principled differentiation between science and nonscience, between first-rate picturing discourse and second-rate nonpicturing discourse, between talking about the world and talking about what we have “made up”’ (Rorty: 1982: 134). So while this kind of ‘physicalist semantics’ may not be able to ‘guarantee that we are getting the world right,’ or to address the ‘Kantian urge to slide a philosophical foundation underneath our science or our culture,’ it does go some way to ‘quashing the fear that science is simply a form of myth-making — the fear that there is no distinction between [language] and [reality] to be made at all’ (Rorty 1982: 134). These theorists are hoping to show that fiction can talk about the past in a way that is stronger than we would otherwise assume, stronger than the ‘weakest semantical relation in the area — mere “talking about,” in the sense in which we can talk about, but not refer to, non-existent, and specifically fictional, entities’ (Rorty: 1982: 132). In effect, they want fiction placed alongside history as a responsible discourse capable of telling the truth – the vertical, Kantian truth – about the past.

Of course, many fiction writers have long been championing this view of their own work too. In the post-millennial era on which I am focusing, the Australian writer with whom this view is most readily associated is Kate Grenville. In July 2005, Grenville gave an interview that proved to be controversial, producing a string of criticisms against her, and criticisms about the role of the novel more generally. In the interview, she made various claims as to the historical veracity of her book, citing the amount of research undertaken, and the way that research was inserted into the prose, and
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suggested that, given the fundamental importance of historical research, fiction might be able to occupy a position ‘up on a ladder, looking down at the history wars’, rather than falling back into one of the ‘polarised positions’ that characterised much historical debate (Koval 2005). But Grenville is not alone. Kim Scott, in a panel presentation in 2008, made these comments on the notion of history’s exclusive domain over the representations of the past: ‘Can historians be trusted with the past? [...] with all due respect for an audience like this, I start by saying, “No”. Certainly not exclusively, and certainly no one historian can be trusted and most definitely no one sort of history’ (Scott, Leadbetter, Baldassar, Rittler, Laurie 2010: 52). On the role of the novelist in writing the past, he had this to say: ‘I think novels can lead you to history; and I think they can do more than that. I think novels can help compensate for what’s not available in the historical material’ (Scott, et al 2010: 53). While there are nuances to each position that I will discuss in more depth later in the dissertation — particularly, Scott’s claim that novels ‘compensate’ historical material — for now, all I am hoping to show is that the novel is regularly ranked alongside historiography as a form that is capable of revealing the past as it happened.

But the Kantian tradition is only one stream of philosophical thought, one that Rorty opposes to a later, more radical philosophy. This second grand tradition ‘does not ask how representations are related to nonrepresentations, but how representations can be seen as hanging together’ (Rorty 1982: 92). From one point of view, we might see the practitioners of this stream of thought as ‘trying to do away with the notion of “referent” and saying things like “There is nothing outside the text”’ (Rorty 1982: 136). Thinkers such as Derrida, de Man, and White, were ‘guiding us out of the world of subject-and-object, word-and-meaning, language-and-world, and into a newer and better
intellectual universe’ (1982: 136). But from another, more useful, point of view we would recognise the flaws in conceiving of the debate this way. Instead, it makes more sense to see these thinkers as ‘using the Parmenidean [or Kantian] tradition as a dialectical foil, in whose absence they would have nothing to say’ (1982: 136). Without the tradition of the ‘compulsion to truth by reality’ the entire field of modernist and postmodernist writing ‘would make no sense’ and the ‘notion of “intertextuality” would have no deliciously naughty thrill’ (Rorty 2982: 136). Ultimately, without the ‘foredoomed struggle of philosophers to invent a form of representation which will constrain us to truth while leaving us free to err, to find pictures where there are only games, there would be nothing to be ironic about’ (Rorty 1982: 136).

Rorty’s way of thinking about representation owes a great deal to Derrida’s idea of a ‘white mythology’ – his term describing the failure to get beyond metaphor to the a priori essence of what it intends to capture. Derrida believed that the ‘constitution of the fundamental oppositions’ of philosophy, the essential metaphors such as ‘space/time’ or ‘signifier/signified’ inevitably ‘occurred by means of the history of metaphorical language’ itself: in other words, the history of our language constitutes our conceptions, which we then apply to the world and not the other way around (Derrida 1982: 228). He later expressed this more directly in the controversial statement ‘there is nothing outside the text [there is no outside-text: il n’y a pas de hors-texte]’:

That in what one calls the real life of these existences ‘of flesh and bone,’ beyond and behind what one believes can be circumscribed [by any text] there has never been anything but writing; there have never been anything but supple-ments, substitutive significations which could only come forth in a chain of differential references, the ‘real’
supervening, and being added only while taking on meaning from a trace and from an invocation of the supple-ment (1976: 158).

The important point here is that, for Derrida, the prior existence of the ‘real’ is not a question we need to concern ourselves with. The ‘real’ only takes on meaning as a function of language, and can only take on meaning when it is added to language as a concept. Under Derrida’s view, language ‘can usefully, for many purposes, be viewed as a system of representations’; in order for the study of moral philosophy, science, or history or any discourse that purports to describe reality to be ‘useful and productive’ all we have to do is ‘take the vocabulary of the present historical period (or class or society or academy) for granted’ and simply ‘work within it’ (Rorty 1982: 104). The difficulties begin, however, when the ‘Kantian tradition cosmologises and eternalises its current view of physics, or right and wrong, or philosophy, or language,’ thus bringing it into conflict with an opposing tradition that ironizes, and therefore referentially unsettles, the same language with which those views are expressed (Rorty 1982: 104).

What we often see in post-millennial literature in Australia are Rorty’s two grand traditions coming into conflict with each other, particularly where the recreation of the past is involved, as the paradoxical nature of referentiality becomes a central issue. The Canadian academic Linda Hutcheon, in her pair of complementary works *A Poetics of Postmodernism* and *The Politics of Postmodernism*, indentified the genre most interested in this issue as one that she called ‘historiographic metafiction’, of which she cites Doctorow’s *Ragtime*, Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, Fowle’s *A Maggot*, and Coetzee’s *Foe* among many others as examples. The criticism that this type of novel mounts against historiography consists of the typically postmodern and includes the problems of knowing the
past through language, the constructedness of narrative, an author’s position in relation to a subject, and power and its ability to define truth. What writing of this kind has sought to demonstrate, she says,

is that both history and fiction are discourses, that both constitute systems of signification by which we make sense of the past […] In other words, the meaning and shape are not in the events, but in the systems which make those past ‘events’ into present historical ‘facts.’ This is not a ‘dishonest refuge from truth’ but an acknowledgement of the meaningmaking function of human constructs (2004: 89).

Historiographic metafiction in particular often reveals through ironic dissonance the ways in which it creates, rather than presents, meaning. Its ‘theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs (historiographic metafiction) is made the grounds for its rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past’ (Hutcheon 2004: 5). In reworking these forms, it tests both the ‘naïve realist concept of representation but also any equally naïve textualist or formalist assertions of the total separation of art from the world’ (2004: 125). This is where Hutcheon sees the paradoxical attitude towards referentiality existing most clearly — in the desire of some fiction to critique the referential ideal that historiography represents, while at the same time presenting its own version of that same ideal.

The source of this unresolved contradiction is figural language. As Hutcheon explained it, fiction frequently desires the certainty of meaning and denotation to which historiography lays claim. Yet, in fiction more than any other discourse, no sooner does the text begin to quantify this certainty than the ‘problematics of figural language’ come to the fore and irony, metaphor, and allegory intrude upon the first-degree narrative (de Man 1979: 188). Paul
de Man undertook the most important work in this area, particularly in his books *Allegories of Reading*, *Blindness and Insight*, and *Aesthetic Ideology*. In these books, de Man charted the push and pull occurring in fiction as the text attempts to point beyond itself to the empirical, arguing that, owing to the discord between a sign and what it signifies, reading always has a two-fold effect, producing both an intended or literal meaning, and producing other metaphoric or figural meanings — an effect that he calls ‘allegory.’ Allegorical narratives present us with a number of difficulties. First, the text ‘shows the impossibility of reading it for its referential value, for its ability to represent literal events’; second, it ‘shows that when we read, we do not read the text, but our version of it’; third, that this ‘reading is not just an allegory of the text, but an allegory of the referential meaning’, so much so that reading ‘and understanding will never coincide’ (Tambling 2010: 157). In other words, allegorical narratives ‘tell the story of the failure to read whereas tropological narratives [or literal narratives] tell the story of the failure to denominate’ (de Man 1979: 205). We cannot help misreading a text when, by its very nature, a text precludes any certainty of meaning. Yet, the difference between readings also produces the possibility of irony, allegory, and metaphor, and therefore also the enormous potential, as de Man and Hutcheon have shown, for literature to deconstruct its own inner workings.

But there is yet another complication here as well, and it is the essence of the tension that I am hoping to reveal. Irony is, whether we like it or not, a form of never-ending questioning, a ‘permanent parabasis’ or interruption as Schlegel defined it (quoted in de Man 1996: 179). Our desire to comprehend, or to make comprehensible, a text is inevitably rendered suspect by irony’s continual interruptions. De Man reminded us that ‘what is at stake in irony is always the question of whether it is possible to understand or not to
understand’ (1996: 166). No sooner do we believe ourselves to have arrived at the final referent, the final point of meaning, than irony shows up to add yet another referent and yet another meaning to our interpretation. The result is that any assertion we make about the truth or falsity of a reading is itself subject to the same scepticism and the same unstable epistemological foundations upon which the reading is dependent. This quagmire means that literature’s ‘authority as a model for natural or phenomenal cognition’ is brought entirely into doubt (de Man 2002: 11). It returns us to Rorty’s observation about the ‘horizontal’ nature of truth as Derrida and others saw it, where truth is conceived of as ‘the culminating reinterpretation of our predecessors’ reinterpretation of their predecessors’ reinterpretation’ (1982: 92). We can never be sure we have arrived at the final interpretation. All we can be certain of is that vocabularies are proliferating, shifting, and sometimes disappearing.

Ellison saw in this ‘loss of reciprocity with the world’ a source of deep ‘referential anxiety’ in literature (1993: 6). But whereas he believed that literature might return from this ‘exile’ from the world by locating an ‘intimate link of an analogical sort’ between ‘the two separate domains’ that ‘can, and on occasion do, communicate’, theorists like Rorty and de Man have insisted on the necessity of a ‘non-phenomenal linguistics’ that ‘frees the discourse on literature from naive oppositions between fiction and reality’ (Ellison 1993: 157; de Man 2002: 11). Literature is fictional not because it somehow refuses to acknowledge ‘reality,’ but because it is not a priori certain that language functions according to principles which are those, or which are like those, of the phenomenal world. It is
therefore not *a priori* certain that literature is a reliable source of information about anything but its own language (de Man 2002: 11).

For the proponents of the notion of horizontal truth, such as de Man, Hutcheson, Rorty, and Derrida, ‘only literature acknowledges that it creates through narrative, rather than presenting narrative as the representation of some mythical prior reality’ (Colebrook 2004: 108). This ‘does not mean that fictional narratives are not a part of the world and of reality’; on the contrary, fiction is fundamentally a part of the world, so much so that what we ‘call ideology is precisely the confusion of linguistic with natural reality, of reference with phenomenalism’ (de Man 2002: 11). This confusion has the potential to ‘mystify’ us, or in other words to put us into a state of naivety, and de Man claimed that those critics who ‘reproach literary theory for being oblivious to social and historical […] reality are merely stating their fear at having their own ideological mystifications exposed by the tool they are trying to discredit’ (de Man 2002: 11).

So where does this leave us? In her book *Irony*, Claire Colebrook argued that reading fiction requires that we think beyond the traditional philosophical commitment to propositional, translatable, and non-contradicatory thinking, recognising that truth is not simply there to be referred to by an innocent language. Truth requires thinking through the contradictory force of language, its essential difference from both what is and what remains beyond question (2004: 173).

This is the point out of which I will develop the readings of the novels in the chapters to follow, the point that the ‘contradictory force of language’ will always override the desire for propositional or translatable referentiality. But
this can never be enough. For, at the same time, it remains the case that we can ‘only read texts ironically, seeing the tensions and relations between what is said and not-said […] if we commit ourselves to a sense and truth towards which speech and language strive’ (Colebrook 2004: 173). Without the notion of a literal reading, without the ideal a referential link to the world, without the possibility of historiographic truth, the second grand tradition that Rorty defines, the tradition of horizontal truth, would have nothing to reinterpret and nothing to ironise. Rorty was right when he said that the ‘ironist poet owes far more to Parmenides and the tradition of Western metaphysics than does the scientist’, because while ‘scientific culture could survive a loss of faith’ in referentiality, ‘the literary culture might not’ (1982: 137). Literature needs the possibility of the literal in order to make sense.

Given this, it is important that we do not lose sight of the need for literature to connect with the ethical realm of human experience. There is a danger that the ‘self-reflecting mirror effect of fiction’ becomes a toxic kind of ‘narcissism’ that glorifies ‘form for form’s sake’ and promotes a ‘verbose, pompous, and heavy-handed emphasis on the theoretical’ (Ellison 1993: 11). Many authors would agree with Timothy Parrish that ‘history is always a form of social action’ that obligates its readers to ‘accept its call to action as true or fight its claims’ (2008: 2). The authors I examine in the three essays that constitute the present study share a similar, common concern: that Australian history as ‘a single coherent story of a people progressing ever forward toward a social heaven on earth’ is a fallacy (Parrish 2008: 3). Any illusion of coherence in the grand Australian story, these authors suggest, is the result of ‘the success of a handful of white people commandeering the nation’s (and, since the twentieth century, the world’s) resources for the benefit of a few’ (Parrish 2008: 3). Instead, the truth about history for these authors is that it ‘is
not the same as the past'; it is ‘always for someone'; it ‘always has a purpose'; it is ‘always about power'; it ‘is never innocent but always ideological’ (Munslow in Jenkins 2004: xiii).

But as we will see, the moments of difficulty arise when these authors attempt to refer unproblematically to the events of the past. They are moments of difficulty, or of anxiety, yet they are also moments of opportunity that give an insight into the way the past is approached in fiction. In each of the chapters, I will examine the ways in which a twenty-first century Australian author engages with the past in their novel, how they respond to the paradox of referentiality, and how irony and allegory shift the terms of their narratives. This is the thematic unity that binds the chapters, but it is by no means to be considered a doctrinaire approach. Each essay consists of a close deconstructionist reading of a single text, as well as discussions on the concepts and theories that the text illustrates, and the political context around the novel. However, I do not propose to go into a detailed intertextual analysis of the relationship these novels share. While I acknowledge the value of that aspect of the study, it is less important to my purposes than a specific reading of each work in its context. Such a reading, I hope, will preserve the unique insights that each novel is able to generate through its interaction with the problematics of referentiality. The intertextual relation of the novels will hopefully be self-evident within the terms of the intellectual framework.

I have selected three long works of fiction published since the turn of the century that provide examples of the different responses to the dilemma of the historical referent in fiction. The structure of the chapters in which the works are discussed hews closely to the kind of historical movement that Rorty has described, starting with the immediate problem of getting outside the text
to an empirical past and whether this can be achieved in fiction in Chapter 1, before moving on to look at how the metaphor of the ‘outside’ is put aside through the use of irony in Chapter 2, to finally searching for a new vocabulary to replace the metaphor or inside/outside in Chapter 3. I begin with Kim Scott’s widely lauded novel *That Deadman Dance*, published in 2010. It is a work that seems, at first glance, to be less reflexive or self-referential than his earlier novel *Benang*, but that impression is very quickly overturned when we read it in light of de Man’s notion of an allegoric splitting or doubling. It is clear that the metaphor of the Dead Man Dance, rather than clinching meaning as Scott perhaps hopes, instead generates other uncontrollable readings. A narration of Scott’s own referential anxiety spins off from the historical elements of the book and any attempt at reading the text in a sincere way is complicated by the intrusion of these allegoric meanings. In essence, *That Deadman Dance* demonstrates the paradoxes inherent in trying to refer to past events in fiction, that is, trying to get beyond the text to the real. In this case, the problematic profusion of meanings that figural language generates interferes with the possibility of historical knowledge.

This develops into a discussion of irony, textuality, and the subversion of the real in Richard Flanagan’s classic absurdist history *Gould’s Book of Fish*. I find that, unlike Kim Scott, Flanagan appears to be comfortable with the contradictions of reference and in fact uses them to demythologise the central structuring metaphor of historiography – the notion that we can get beyond the text. Through the sustained use of irony, Flanagan is able to simultaneously assert his book’s fictional character, assert his desire to satirise history as a discourse, and expose referentiality as the single most important issue for both fiction and history. He takes a markedly different approach to the vast majority of authors who deal with the past, preferring instead to disregard the
procedures of historiography and uphold the fictional character of his work by ‘stating the continued impossibility of reconciling the world of fiction with the actual world’ (de Man 1983: 218). The result is a novel that takes a posture of rivalry towards the discourse of history and a playful attitude towards the problem of reference.

The third and final chapter extends this into a somewhat Rortian position as the metaphor of inside/outside is abandoned in J.M. Coetzee’s *Diary of a Bad Year*, in favour of a more useful vocabulary. Coetzee has spent a large portion of his career exploring the problem of history in fiction, through novels such as *Foe*, *The Master of Petersburg* and *Waiting for the Barbarians*, and this novel continues the theme, although doing so in a more nuanced, more investigative way than any of his other works. This is partly due to the device of the split page that Coetzee employs in order to separate the novel into discrete discursive portions. This technique has temporal implications; first, it allows narrative leaps between the macro and microcosms from the God-like ‘view from above’ that history prefers to the localised, human experience that is the usual territory of fiction; second, the jumps between portions of the page promote the juxtaposition of the material, exposing the discontinuities between them. History’s distilled time, exemplified by the essay section of the page, seems to sit above and apart from the narrative section, a discontinuity that is itself paradigmatic of the relationship between the individual and the historical. But no sooner does the text establish this binary than it begins to tear it down. The result is a charting out of the antipathy between the individual and historical time, followed by a demonstration of why that structure is arbitrary and illusory and only results from misunderstanding the nature of language as pure representation, or as Rorty said, pure reinterpretation.
The novels under discussion here (along with many others of the last fifteen years that I do not have space to discuss such as Carey’s *True History of the Kelly Gang*, Meehan’s *Below the Styx*, Wright’s *Carpentaria* and *The Swan Book*, Grenville’s *The Secret River* and *Sarah Thornhill* and McDonald’s *The Ballad of Desmond Kale*) labour at the same ongoing negotiation, desiring against their fictional status and mission the certainty that historiography would assert for itself, while knowing that any such certainty is an illusion generated by historiography’s discursive form. These novels rely on a ‘self-sufficient topography of significance’ for a great deal of their narrative potential, while never quite abandoning the desire to reach the real past or to bring it back or to describe it accurately (Ellison 1993: 6). This notion of fiction as separate from reality has conventionally been thought to situate fiction, and the novel in particular, as something like myth, quarantined off from representing the ‘true’. But, as I hope to show, literature is less a repressed other to history, and more a distinct, uniquely-positioned discourse that negotiates a different kind of relationship to the past, an impossible relationship, one that concedes its separation from the outset, but that nevertheless searches for ways to overcome the separation and, failing that, as it must, to reconceive of the relationship in new, more useful ways.

These novels are written by Australians and feature Australian settings, concerns, and characters. They are, therefore, recognisably Australian. I chose each in order to illustrate a specific response to the problem of referentiality in fiction, but also because these novels reveal a good deal about the recent debate occurring between the role of historical authenticity versus fictional liberties in works of fiction. As previously mentioned, the nature of this debate in Australia has been particularly public and particularly vicious, and has had wide ranging effects throughout the practice of fiction writing. One of the most
notable effects in the Australian context is the increasing use of the author’s note as a defacto bibliography and also as a kind of mission statement where the author spells out the historical context in which the action of the novel takes place. I deal with this in Chapter 1. Another effect has been to refocus attention on what it means to write both history and fiction in Australia in the twenty-first century, particularly given our deeply troubling past, including the horrors of the various frontier wars, the brutality of convictism, and the habit that persisted well into the twentieth century of ignoring these events. A movement developed over the final decades of the twentieth century that sought to re-examine the significance of frontier conflict and convictism, a movement that has gathered momentum and authority in the twenty-first century. Can fiction play a part in exploring these events as practitioners like Parrish believe? Or is the job of revealing the past the sole domain of historians as practitioners like Clendinnen believe? I deal with this in Chapters 2 and 3. The novels chosen for discussion all reflect these effects in a number of different ways.
One – Getting Outside of That Deadman Dance

When considering a definition of fiction, the common explanation would be summarised as something like ‘imaginative literature, conceived of as fiction’ is a ‘privileged form of communication’ that ‘understands itself as separate from the sphere of the real’ (Ellison 1993: 6). Fiction, after all, is the realm of the speculative. It is a space where authors are free to invent, describe, and ruminate — even in the complete absence of evidence that these ruminations and descriptions are plausible. Kim Scott’s most accomplished novel, That Deadman Dance, is a work deeply preoccupied with its position as a fiction, but at the same time with its relation to the past. De Man once insisted that ‘readers degrade the fiction by confusing it with a reality from which it has forever taken leave’, yet in the case of That Deadman Dance, which uses the history of the Albany region in Western Australia as a scaffold for narrative,
character, and thematic elements, it seems the reader is being specifically invited to confuse the events of the past with the events of the novel, or in other words to confuse where the boundary between the ‘inside’ of the text (its own topography of significance) ends and the ‘outside’ of it (the empirical reality of the past) begins (2002: 17). The presence in the text of these historiographic elements, while fundamental to the novel’s ethical project, also leads to what Ellison has called ‘referential anxiety’, or the turn away from the referent towards self-referentiality (1993: 6). So do we degrade Scott’s fiction by searching for a historical referent? Or is it his intention to use the ‘referential effects’ of fiction to reveal the tenuous nature of its relationship with the past (Ellison 1993: 8)?

There are, it must be noted, a number of very good reasons why Scott would wish to intermix the empirical, evidenced past with his own speculations. First and foremost of these is the obvious point that history matters. Deadman is a text that is engaged with history as a practice. Scott has said that ‘novels can lead you to history’ and perhaps even ‘do more than that’: they may, in fact, ‘help compensate for what’s not available in the historical material’ (Scott, Leadbetter, Baldassar, Rittler, Laurie 2010: 53). But the kind of history that matters to Scott is not one that we traditionally associate with historiography. His novel makes extensive use of sources such as old Noongar stories, the oral traditions of Noongar elders, and the ‘text’ of landscape. Writing in the ‘domain’ of the Noongar oral traditions helped him to ‘think differently’ than he was otherwise ‘allowed by the sort of documents available in the archives’ (Scott et al. 2010: 53-4). He built his narrative out of the evidenced past of the colonial settlement at Albany yet generated a different view of that material by infusing it with Noongar story and tradition, which in effect operate as Noongar historiography.
Secondly, the referential effects of fiction often serve an ethical purpose; in other words, they anchor the work in the realm of human action and experience. By limiting the ‘scope of the literary work to the aesthetic realm’ we run the risk of abstracting it from the ‘ethical domain to which it points, or seems to point’ (Ellison 1993: 9). A politically charged text such as Deadman, one that deals with colonialism, the legacy of white violence, and the loss or breakdown of elements of Aboriginal culture, has a particularly pressing need to retain access to the ethical domain that history represents. It would be doing the book a disservice to read it in such a way as to ignore the referents in the historical record to which it points. So while it is certainly possible, and in deconstruction even desirable, to free the fictional text ‘from the constraints of the real referent’ and read as if it was ‘a world of its own’ or a ‘self-created topography’, in this case it would mean shearing the work of a referential foundation that serves an ethical purpose (Ellison 1993: 9).

But nevertheless, fiction does have the effect of creating its own topography separate from the empirical world. This chapter looks at the ways in which the ‘tension between imaginary and real referents’ reveals the difficulty Scott faces in linking the ‘verbal texture of the work (the word)’ to ‘the world’ of which it is a part (Ellison 1993: 10). Given the often-flimsy nature of referentiality, it should come as no surprise that while Deadman endeavours to point beyond itself to the empirical past, it is not always successful in doing so. In fact, the slippage of meaning caused by figural language undermines the text’s ability to transparently signify at all in many places, in the process reminding us why Rorty is suspicious of truth as being a measure of correspondence with reality. Second- and third-degree narratives spin off as unexpected and unpredictable meanings grow out of the complexities of the text. Signification can suddenly come to a halt as these meta-narratives develop
and allegorical meanings become of primary significance. To avoid this, Scott takes steps to ensure that the text is read in specific ways, and in specific contexts. In *Deadman*, these steps include the use of the author’s note to clarify historical sources, and the use of known, recognisable historical events and situations.

But even steps as carefully taken as these can never ensure that the events in the novel point to one, and only one, real referent. In particular, with each repetition of the scene of writing in *Deadman*, the slippage between figure and referent that occurs with metaphor begins to gather pace. The text splits, and a sequence of elaborate substitutions are enacted. In effect, the text carries on a simultaneous meta-narrative, or an allegory, of its own referential anxiety. It displays what de Man would call deconstructive tension, and is, therefore, ‘suspiciously text-productive’, in this case in ways that generate allegory (1979: 200). The allegorical narrative that spins off from the literal-historical element undermines any attempt to read the text in naive or transparent way, instead demonstrating how the ‘problematics of figural language’ often render texts opaque (de Man 1979: 188).

Commonly, an author’s note is used as a way to delineate the documented past, or the real referents, from the more overtly fictional parts, or the imagined referents. Authors are generally hoping to trace a line around the inside of the text, its self-referential parts, and what is outside it, that is, the body of historiography on which the text draws and the empirical reality of the past of which the historiography is evidence. The author’s note provides scope for the listing of historical sources, the clarification of where the narrative departs from the sources, and the acknowledgement of previous research. Given that the intercourse between novel and source notes is clearly
‘complicated, vital, and productive’, it makes sense that reading the author’s note might change the way we read the novel (Westerman 2006: 369-70). Indeed, it also stands to reason that the author’s note might ‘produce and perform a text’s concern about how we do and should tell history’ (Westerman 2006: 369-70). Even though the author may intend for the note to make a distinction between the formal historical referents and the self-created topography of imagined referents, it may be that a note causes us to re-assess the often-problematic opposition that imagined and real referents share. In other words, while the author’s intention may be to ‘invoke the authority of historical research’ in order to strengthen the novel’s claims to historical accuracy, the outcome of reading the note could be very different, instead ‘foregrounding questions of how we ought to imagine, write, and read the past’ (Westerman 2006: 371).

This is something like the case we find in Deadman. Scott sets up various resonances between the material in the author's note and the text itself. The speaker in the author's note (and whether we take that to be Kim Scott or a Kim Scott-like character is another point of anxiety) insists that the correct term to use to describe the connection the text shares with other historiographic accounts is ‘inspire’, because ‘rather than write an account of historical events’ the speaker/author ‘wanted to build a story from [Noongar] confidence, their inclusiveness and sense of play, and their readiness to appropriate new cultural forms’ (2010: 398). There is a sense in which ‘inspire’ captures the tension that the text so openly displays; the desire for the authority of the historiographic mode of rhetoric, which is nevertheless continually thwarted by the slippage of meaning figural language creates. It is a strong indication of the deconstructive tension at the heart of the novel.
Reviewers have not surprisingly noticed this strain. They speak of the ‘historical-lyrical recreation of early encounters between black and white on the south coast of Western Australia’ (Fraser 2011); or of the ‘anti-historical’ nature of Bobby’s story (Clarke 2010). Philip Mead points out that for Scott, “research” is not an invisible and unproblematic practice: it is political, community-based and self-reflexive (2012: 149). Clearly, then, the historiographic or mimetic elements in Deadman jostle with the fictive elements for position in the narrative. But there is more than just a jostling at work within the text. What we find when look closely is that the text narrates, through the use of allegory, its own anxiety around the mode of its rhetoric.

The long list of historical sources that occupies most of the author’s note is of particular significance when considering this tension. These include ‘Neville Green’s *Nyungar — The People: Aboriginal Customs in the southwest of Australia*’, ‘Tiffan Shellam’s *Shaking Hands on the Fringe: Negotiating the Aboriginal World at King George Sound*’, and ‘Martin Gibb’s *The Historical Archaeology of Shore Based Whaling in WA 1836-1879*’ (Scott 2010: 398). While of course as a fiction Deadman is not making any overt claims to historiographic truth, the effect of listing these titles is to verify the referential status of the language of the novel, and to invoke the authority of historical research. This is not a pure fiction, the note says, but a fiction situated within a framework of historical fact. The novel is “‘inspired” by history’ and is therefore entitled to be read as literal in its representation of the past, so that the events in the novel have a real referent beyond the limits of the text to which the text points (Scott 2010: 203).

The speaker in the note here begins to create a predicament for the reader. The status of the language in the text, the possibility that it can refer to something extra-textual, in particular to a past event, is suggested as being
much more concrete than it might otherwise appear. The relationship between the author and the reader is established as one based on an ethical contract, an understanding that the author is representing the past as it was, and not misrepresenting the facts as historians understand them. We, the readers, can read in a literal way the myriad references to the settlement of King George Town and the early days of contact between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people along the coast, safe in the knowledge that there were such events and such times. The rhetorical mode of the text is, in this regard, a literalist one.

Yet, things begin to change when we realise that the novel is discussing ways in which its ethical contract can be made and unmade. It was always the case that texts are made intelligible by a preordained agreement as to their referential authority; this agreement however is merely contractual, never constitutive. It can be broken at all times and every piece of writing can be questioned as to its rhetorical mode (de Man 1979: 204).

What the author's note reveals is the manoeuvring taking place as the text strives for a rhetorical position from which to convince us of its truth, ‘if we understand by truth the possibility of referential verification’ (de Man 1979: 204). In order to attain referential verification, the possibility of a literal reading must be encouraged. The author’s note performs exactly this task, promoting the preordained agreement and reassuring the reader that its representations are to be trusted. It provides structural reinforcement for a naive reading of the text.

The prologue to the novel begins the work of undoing that trust. We meet Bobby Wabalanginy sitting on a headland and watching for whales to rise, and while he waits he works with a piece of chalk to make words on a slate. It
is a ‘complexly figured scene in the diegesis of imagined frontier settlement, dramatizing as it does an ephemeral moment in the meeting of an oral and a literate culture’ (Mead 2012: 148).

Kaya. Writing such a word, Bobby Wabalanginy couldn’t help but smile. Nobody ever done writ that before, he thought. Nobody ever writ hello or yes that way! Roze a wail… Bobby Wabalanginy wrote with damp chalk, brittle as weak bone. Bobby wrote on a thin piece of slate. Moving between languages (Scott 2010: 1).

Bobby uses English to write in his own language and, in doing so, is the first person to record those words in writing. The word ‘kaya’ has never before been written. This immediately raises a question for Bobby. Does ‘kaya’ mean hello or yes? Does it mean both? At that moment he is the only person who knows how to read the word ‘kaya’ and understand its dual meanings.

Bobby uses his new writing skills to record what he sees and does, writing things such ‘Fine no wailz lumpy see’ and ‘Kongk gon wailz cum’ (Scott 2010: 5). At this point, there is nothing to suggest that words are able to transcend their literal and contextual confines. For now, Bobby reads these entries literally, just as he writes them phonetically. But we know that a moment of insight is surely imminent for Bobby, and this is hinted at first by the description of Bobby as ‘wishing, imagining’ as he writes, and then on the following page the description of him writing ‘Thar she bloze!’ and somehow, he believes, making whales appear, and then doing it ‘again and again in seasons to come’, as if his words share a direct connection with the world itself, and do not simply denote (Scott 2010: 5). In this scene, we are being invited to speculate on how long Bobby will be able to maintain the ‘illusion that
[writing] can properly mean’ (de Man 1979: 202). It seems only a matter of time.

As if taking the cue from the pattern of Bobby’s reading and writing, the mode of the mimetic holds true for the novel for the early part of the narrative. We see a slow procession of characters introduced and the settlement of King George Town begins to take shape. The theme of writing is ever-present, firstly through Bobby as he becomes literate, but continued by Dr Cross, the de-facto leader of the new colony. He records what he learns about the Noongar, noting in his letters that they are ‘very friendly and often assist the settlers, several preferring European frock and trousers to the scant kangaroo skin and a good house to the cold bush’ (Scott 2010: 35). In fact, the use of the framing device of Cross’s letters within a broader story of Noongar self-representation only further foreshadows the narrative realignment that is imminent. It does not, however, bring it about, not just yet. It is clear that the early sections of Deadman take a conservative approach to how the scene of writing is portrayed, one that does not invite an overt narrative re-alignment.

The reasons for this soon become apparent. Until we arrive at the first performance of the titular Dead Man Dance early in Part II, the text has worked hard to maintain what de Man would call the ‘mimetic mode’ (1979: 212), or what McCullagh describes as the sense in which ‘words are commonly and regularly associated with things in the world, things which they refer to or bring about’ (1998: 143), the sense, that is, of their being something outside the text. The paradoxical nature of language, its literal/figural dichotomy, is always present, but until Part II the novel encourages a straight-forward reading in the service of its larger project of destabilising precisely this supposedly stable meaning.
By the time we arrive at the Dead Man Dance a literal reading has become entirely untenable. The description of the dance reveals the tension at the centre of the narrative:

You paint yourself in red ochre, neck to waist and wrist, and leave your hands all bare. White ochre on your thighs, but keep your calves and feet bare, like boots, see? A big cross of white clay painted on every chest. Each man takes a stick about the size of an emu’s leg, and sometimes you wave it about, sometimes carry it on your shoulder as you walk up and down very stiffly (Scott 2010: 68).

The dance, as we see, is not merely a celebration or an expression of cultural ties or an expression of tribal belonging: it is a form of history, a particular Noongar history, recording the arrival of the British at King George Town. The dancers re-enact marching drills performed by the redcoats, detailing the appearance and actions of the British and the Noongar response to them. It is a representation of past events intended as a form of communal memory.

As de Man explained it, there are moments of immense opportunity in a text where narratives can be ‘folded back upon themselves and become self-referential’ (1979: 205). This is precisely one such moment, as we come to understand that the Dead Man Dance mirrors Scott’s own attempts at organising the past. His novel reimagines the material of the archives, much in the same way that the Noongar reimagine the soldier’s drill. At this point, the text – even if only momentarily – moves beyond pointing to a real historical referent and begins to reflect on the gap that enables fiction to exist: the semiotic gap between figure and referent. In doing so, it removes the supposedly solid ground of history out from under itself. The result of this is that the ‘pattern of referential authority’ shifts ‘from a representational
mimetic mode [...] to a deconstructive diegesis', as the reader is made suddenly aware of the structuring allegory at the centre of the novel (de Man 1979: 212).

The original source for the Dead Man Dance is an account from the journal of Matthew Flinders, recorded in 1801 in Princess Royal Harbour, in which Flinders notes that the ‘red coats and white-crossed belts were greatly admired’ by the Noongar, and that the marching of the red-coats was met with excitement and ‘wild gestures and vociferation’ (quoted in Mead 2012: 146). At one point, an ‘old man placed himself at the end of the rank, with short staff in his hand, which he shouldered, presented, grounded, as did the marines their muskets’, a gesture clearly pre-figuring the Dead Man Dance that Bobby Wabalanginy and his people perform (quoted in Mead 2012: 146). This context is made clear in the author's note: ‘The military drill Matthew Flinders’ marines performed on the beach was transformed into a Noongar dance’ (Scott 2010: 399). Just as the drill was transformed by the Noongar into a dance with many layers of meaning, so too is Flinders’ journal transformed by Scott into something much more than a simple historiographic account. By providing this context in the author's note, Scott is able to signpost the moment of figural re-organisation in the text. We see for the first time the allegory of the Dead Man Dance as a proxy for Scott's own hike through the archives. Whereas previously the text had an uncomplicated, almost historiographic pretension, it now draws attention to the impossibility of reading fiction solely in that way.

But as Philip Mead has noted, ‘Scott is not about to trust the archive, not even in its powerfully originary form of Flinders’ journal’ (2012: 149). The novel takes as a starting point the events recorded by Flinders, yet the reconfiguration quickly moves the text beyond the historical account of the
dance into something new. From this point onwards, it articulates the dilemma faced by a Noongar writer in the 21st century trying to speak truthfully about the past. Scott’s ‘imagination works with a kind of alternating documentary current’, testing one form of historical representation against another, journal against dance, oral against written, fiction against historiography (Mead 2012: 149). In conjunction with these forms of representation, the narrative sets up another alternating current between the literal and the figural, as it draws in primary historical sources, like the journal, and secondary historiographic works, and transforms them into allegories of creative representation. The tension generated by the second and third degrees of allegory, as they question the possibility of reading the first degree of the literal, is present now in every aspect of the text as we progress.

So if our responses were conditional upon the previous regime of the mimetic before this point, after it our responses must take into account the reconfigured vectors of the narrative and search for those moments in the text that seem to point towards an imagined topography, rather than an historical one. We can no longer view these scenes as naïve realist representations of an historical time and place, as the speaker in author’s note would have wanted; instead, they seem to confirm our inability to directly access the past as it was, reminding us that textual representations draw on other representations, repeating each other endlessly. De Man describes the effect this way:

The very statement by which we assert that the narrative is rooted in reality can be an unreliable quotation; the very document, the manuscript, produced in evidence may point back, not to an actual event, but to an endless chain of quotations reaching as far back as the
ultimate transcendental signified God, none of which can lay claim to referential authority (1979: 204).

Under this scenario, *Deadman*, while being deeply concerned with the actuality of past events as we see in the author’s note, nonetheless resists the Western mode of correspondence with reality as ‘truth’ by embarking on a series of exchanges, promoting an extra-textual narrative, a narrative of deconstruction, that allegorises the referential frailty of historical representation, thereby unsettling the possibility of reading it straight-forwardly.

This pattern — transcendent allegorical moments revealing the tension in the text as it struggles to control the mode of its own rhetoric — becomes more pronounced as the narrative proceeds. One such moment, perhaps the most important moment, comes when one of the elders of Bobby’s tribe, Wunyeran, performs a dance that appears to share the characteristics of a journal (Scott 2010: 113). Dr Cross observes the dance from a distance:

> It was hard to be sure, the distance and all, but it seemed he was miming someone writing. There was the sharpening of the quill, the dipping in ink, the turning of a heavy page. He mimed what seemed to be a hunt. It was not a silent mime — clearly he was enacting what he spoke — but Cross could not hear the words and if he had he would still not have understood them [...] Wunyeran’s performance of the journey was structured in the way of an expedition journal. Or was Cross imagining things? (Scott 2010: 113).

Cross is interpreting the events by giving them a form that he is familiar with, the form of the journal, but he knows that ‘sometimes his perception of the world became very unstable’, and that therefore his interpretation is suspect.
and he may well be ‘imagining things’ (Scott 2010: 113). How does this fit within the wider established pattern?

Frederic Jameson describes a process peculiar to postmodern society, ‘one whose putative past is little more than a set of dusty spectacles’, whereby the ‘past as “referent” finds itself gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether, leaving us with nothing but texts’ (1991: 18). What we see here with Cross and Wunyeran is the unfolding of this bracketing, as first Wunyeran creates a performance text, and then Cross, observing it through his own cultural filter, brackets that text within another — his own interpretation of it as an expedition journal. The journey through Noongar country, the actual events to which each man is vainly attempting to refer, is slowly effaced as each text adds further brackets, further layers of referable meaning, to the original action of the journey. In Jameson’s view, the past is lost under the weight of historicism that follows it, and accessing the past was never, we now discover, a ‘matter of some old-fashioned “representation” of historical content’ but instead a matter of approaching ‘the “past” through stylistic connotation, conveying “pastness”’ (1991: 19).

Linda Hutcheon built on this aspect of Jameson’s thought by pointing out that, rather than assimilating the actual historical data in order to add a sheen of verifiability to a text, in the genre she calls ‘historiographic metafiction’ the ‘process of attempting to assimilate is what is foregrounded’ (2004: 114). By bringing this process to the foreground, ‘we see both the collecting [of historical data] and the attempts to make narrative order’ out of that data (Hutcheon 2004: 114). The net result is that the ‘reality of the past’ seems to be confirmed, but as it is a reality only accessible through textual
sources, it is in a very palpable way both unknowable and unconfirmable (Hutcheon 2004: 114).

To understand how the text of Deadman foregrounds the assimilating process that Hutcheon describes we need only to consider the historical sources listed in the author's note. The source for the Wunyeran/Cross passage is the record left behind by ‘an observant colonial diarist’, the records of a ‘verbal account by another Noongar guide’ that ‘exploited structural characteristics of the “expedition journal”, a popular literary form of the time’ (Scott 2010: 399). But of course this scene of referential bracketing — Wunyeran’s miming interpretation of the original journey, followed by Cross’ attempts at locating that data within the identifiable narrative framework of the journal — is simply further bracketing for the historical data in the author's note. As links in the chain of signification are added, we are left in doubt as to what the scene with Cross and Wunyeran was in fact referring. Was it intended to denote the colonist’s diary? Or was it referring beyond that to the past event itself, of which we have only the diary to inform us? The bracketing makes it impossible to know.

In addition to this, there is the further degree of allegory that is transposed into, and framed within, the passage. For, just as Cross observes Wunyeran’s performance and imagines it to be in the form of a journal, so, too, is Scott taking the archival material left behind by settlers and re-imagining it, this time in the form of a novel. His transformation of the material directly mirrors what both Cross and Wunyeran are doing, and what the colonial diarist did before them; assimilating historical data into their respective texts, conscious that the process of assimilation itself, rather than the data, is what is at issue. Before the turning point, this scene would not present as self-
evidently as it does, but given the narrative re-alignment that has occurred around the theme of representing the past, the implications of this scene now arrive with clarity. We cannot be certain what the final point of reference is intended to be and each possible referent has strong claims to being the intended signified.

It should be clear by now that there is always a tension between reading *Deadman* as a kind of broad-brushstrokes historical account of the past, and reading it as a narration of its own anxiety with that reading. Whenever we arrive at a moment of supposed historical actuality, such as Wunyeran’s performance or the Dead Man Dance, the narrative shears off into an allegory of the bracketing of historical representation that, at a stroke, undermines the previously established illusion of referential stability. The insight gained when we reach the narrative turning point at the scene of Bobby’s first Dead Man Dance extends throughout the many similar moments that follow, as time and again the text encounters the impossibility of locating a concrete historical referent upon which to hang a literal reading. The pattern, once established, holds true.

My intention is not to disregard the historical dimensions of Scott’s writing — on the contrary, as we have seen, historical data informs and shapes it at every level. But, more to the point, these moments of interplay between the evidentiary material and the framework of fiction also highlight the epistemological uncertainty around the status of historical knowledge. Rorty summarised the intrinsic nature of our uncertainty this way:

To say that the world is out there, that it is not our creation, is to say, with common sense, that most things in space and time are the effects of causes which do not include human mental states. To say that truth
is not out there is simply to say that where there are no sentences there is no truth [...] Truth cannot be out there — cannot exist independently of the human mind — because sentences cannot so exist, or be out there (1989: 5).

The moment we write sentences about the world we are imposing a structure for meaning-making upon it, one that does not pre-exist the sentence but is brought into being by the sentence. In Deadman, it is this process of imposing structures in the shape of sentences, dances, pictures, or whatever else, that occupies the most important sections of the text. For this reason, its underlying commitment to conveying the ‘past as it was’ only leads to tension, as the Jamesonian bracketing of historical knowledge within layers of representation reveals the impossibility of reaching back to a first cause or an a priori essence that the sentence or dance or picture captures. In fiction, this problem is heightened further by the fact that there are no historical referents for a good deal of the narrative — most moments are acts of pure imagination. Thus the true central concern of Deadman is with the metaphor of inside/outside and how the process of reading fiction forces us to question its usefulness as a descriptor.

There are other instants in the text that similarly call attention to the problem of referentiality and the final moment that I would like to examine is a one that provides insight into the way allegory also guides us towards the larger ethical concerns in the novel, revealing how, in colonial contexts, the problematics of figural language can be used to expose the difficulties around establishing what counts as historical truth. It occurs very late in the chronology of the narrative, when Bobby Wabalanginy is an old man sitting at home. He receives a visit from ‘the grown daughter and son of Jak Tar and
Binyan’ at his shack and together they ‘turn the yellowed pages’ of an ‘oilskin-covered journal’ that Bobby has kept, which is the record of ‘not what had happened but what will’ (Scott 2010: 161). The journal is marked with ‘faint lines of ink’ that seem filled with potential, yet tell ‘nothing of how he sang and danced on a whale’s back as the inside of the sea spilled all around him. Nothing of the people he had known, nothing of what they were seeing, thinking’ (Scott 2010: 161). This scene, while appearing melancholy, in fact serves a deeper affirmative purpose than it seems at first to do.

Again, given the deconstructive questioning that the text has developed, it is not possible to read this passage in a literal or naive way. The notion that Bobby’s journal recorded ‘nothing of how he sang and danced on a whale’s back’ and nothing ‘of the people he had known, nothing of what they were seeing, thinking’ strikes an immediately odd note (Scott 2010: 161). The ironic dissonance created between these two plainly apparent facts — the lack of detail in Bobby’s journal, contrasted with the wealth of detail about his life in the fiction — points us towards the structural dissonance of the novel: that is, the desire to gesture towards a historical referent beyond the text, contrasted against the knowledge that the truth of those referents is a product of the fictional text itself. We know what Bobby has seen and felt — the narrative has shown us that much. But the emptiness of his journal, of his recorded history, contrasts sharply with the full and detailed fictional history with which Kim Scott has provided him in the narrative. It is the tension between the fullness of Bobby’s fictional life and the emptiness of his historical life that propels the narrative forward.

Mead argues that the essential ambition of Deadman is to draw ‘a moment from the temporal margins of (imagined) history into the centre’ and,
in so doing, narrate ‘the centrality of language and writing technologies’ to contemporary Noongar culture (2012: 149). Traces of the very first Noongar writers have survived, to be ‘retrieved and written by Kim Scott’, the inheritor of that tradition, but they are only the faintest of traces (Mead 2012: 149). Bobby embodies these traces, both in his characterisation as a writer and storyteller, and in his ephemeral role as allegorical double to Kim Scott. Scott ‘imagines the difficulties Bobby has in being able to tell his own stories’, overcoming barriers of language and culture and, as we see reflected in the emptiness of his journal, barriers of time (Mead 2012: 149). The twist is that these difficulties are the same difficulties Scott himself experiences, as we see in the author's note. Like Bobby, Scott ‘can do no more than signify the real, constantly repeating that it happened, without this assertion amounting to anything but the signified “other side” of the whole process of historical narration’ (Barthes 1997:122).

Thus, even as the text aims to recover or retrieve lost historical moments, it rejects the conclusion that it is an historical work. Instead, it builds on the ‘tension between imaginary and real referents’ in an attempt to construct a ‘self-sufficient, highly coherent fictional world’ that wants to reach ‘beyond the borders of the text, to a complex and problematic “outside”’, but which is nevertheless aware of the allegoric dissonance this creates (Ellison 1993: 9). As we have seen, this becomes a feedback loop, as texts engender other texts, and meanings engender further meanings. It is the feedback between Scott’s fictional world and the historiographic context of his fiction that forces the text into an allegorical mode and therefore generates further intertextual connections, and so on, repeating the process.
This is the ‘self-reflecting mirror effect’ that de Man described (1971: 17). It is the effect ‘by means of which a work of fiction asserts, by its very existence, its separation from empirical reality, its divergence, as a sign, from a meaning that depends for its existence on the constitutive activity of that sign’ (de Man 1971: 17). Which is to say, the text is both explicitly and implicitly calling attention to itself as a construction, as a product of words and ideas, in ways that historiography does not. While de Man’s point is a fairly banal one — that fiction creates an imaginary topography for itself — nevertheless in Deadman we see it expressed in such vivid contrast to the mimetic pretensions of historiography that it is made to seem fresh and insightful all over again. Somewhat polemically, de Man adds to his formulation that it is always ‘against the explicit assertion of the writer that readers degrade the fiction by confusing it with a reality from which it has forever taken leave’ (1971: 17). Scott’s novel hedges its bets in this regard, inviting us to read it as a fiction, yet purposefully ‘confusing it with a reality from which it has forever taken leave’ by relying on a literalist mode of rhetoric in much of the early part of the text (de Man 1971: 17).

It is not surprising that an author such as Scott, a Noongar man writing Noongar history, should strive for this kind of outcome. While he attempts to maintain a ‘grounding in socio-historical reference, or at least supplement it’, searching for that grounding causes other ‘[e]pistemological, political and ethical tensions almost inevitably [to] come to the surface’, often taking the ‘form of questions of reading, or of misreading, and of the inevitability of misreading’ (Syrotinski 2007: 4). Whereas for some novels, such as Gould’s Book of Fish, the possibility of denomination is sometimes just an ‘aberrant trope that conceals the radical figularity of language’, in the case of
Deadman, denomination is treated as an ethical requirement irresolvably bound up with truth-telling (de Man 1979: 202).

But this tension also reveals how the mechanisms of figural language can be used to expose the sometimes-indeterminate difference between fiction and historical truth in colonial contexts. Scott has produced a counter-narrative to the usual historiographic accounts, one that explores the very process by which the Noongar were created as a representation, first by the reams of archival evidence, and then later by secondary historiography — not only for the consumption of a settler-Australian audience, but for Noongar consumption as well. Through its treatment of the problematics of reference, Deadman complicates the ‘simple notion that counter-history merely involves making the subaltern the subject of their own histories’ — rather, we see that when working at the limits of history, this kind of approach can show how ‘subaltern history will always mark those points where conventional historiography shields its own cognitive failures’ (Young 2004: 203-4). For Scott, sometimes those cognitive failures are revealed by ‘think[ing] differently’ through fiction, in a way that is not ‘allowed by the sort of documents available in the archives’ (Scott et al. 2010: 53-4). Insofar as he achieves this, his writing amounts to a counter-narrative, in the regular post-colonial sense and also, importantly, in the deconstructive sense as well. It is deconstruction as a form of decolonisation.

Furthermore, Scott’s desire to question the ways in which the Noongar have been, and continue to be, represented leads us to another more profound realisation: that representation is always out of control. Allegories, like the one that spirals off from the metaphor of the Dead Man Dance, always force their
way in between the reader and any final meaning intended by the author. Allegories of this kind show that the metaphor that is intended to clinch a meaning only generates another, other, sense, and so yields the impossibility of reading. That impossibility, then, may be defined and summarized in this way, and it is the point behind all de Man’s terminology: as the impossibility of knowing, or of naming, something or someone, or of being able to control the otherness of another (Tambling 2010: 159).

The metaphor of the Dead Man Dance, rather than clinching the meaning as Scott hopes, instead generates other uncontrollable readings that only demonstrate the impossibility of a univocal meaning in a text. The end result is that the ‘radical figurality of language’ prevents us from reading with any certainty at all (de Man 1979: 202).

This has implications for the way we think about Noongar representation. In working through the second- and third-degree narratives we are forced to confront the preposterousness of ever being able to truly describe or name the past in fiction because the moment we attempt it, the text splits, unwanted referents are dragged in, and the potential for clarity is destroyed. Fittingly, this is analogical to the process that the historiography of the Noongar people, and perhaps of all Aboriginal peoples, has gone through since settlement, as historians attempt to expose the flaws in the work of their predecessors, point out errors of method, find new interpretations, or muddy the conclusions of earlier readings. Elias argued that in novels of this kind, ones that deal with the ‘postmodern, post-traumatic, metahistorical imagination’, history is ‘not knowledge we learn and “own” once we learn it;’ rather, it ‘is something we know we can’t learn, something we can only desire’,
it is a ‘process’ rather than a ‘stable block of knowledge’ (2001: xviii). As soon as ‘the postmodernist mind intuits or is taught by relativizing social forces that true history is unfathomable, “history” comes to be merely “desire” for solid ground beneath one’s feet’ (Elias 2001: xviii). In the same way, the representation of the Noongar in fiction and historiography is better understood as being a process, the endless search for solid ground, rather than a perfect picture of that solid ground.

This is where Deadman employs deconstruction as a form of decolonisation. In a world where representation is ‘not just dominated by history, but dominated by history as knowledge already known, as the same old thing – as the dominant idea of our time’, the opportunity to reveal its cognitive failures surely needs to be seen as part of the broader project of decolonisation (Davies 2006: 1). Scott’s book reminds us that, in terms of the text’s desire to refer beyond itself to the past, we must recognise that ‘the referential sense is also a figure, a trope’, in the same way that allegorical meaning is a trope, which inevitably means we ‘always have one more trope than we want’ (Tambling 2010: 156). The outcome of excess or unwanted tropes, as we have seen, is to interrupt the otherwise stable meaning that a literal reading is often assumed to produce. In this case, it interrupts the historiographic attempts at containing or explaining Noongar Aboriginality.

So while at the level of the mimetic the narrative recounts the documented events of the colonisation of Albany and the ‘what could have been’ of Aboriginal-European interrelations, that is only part of the story, and the politically less effective part. After all it does not add anything new to our historiographic understanding of the events themselves, which are well-known. Instead, the focal point of the novel is less the importance of the events
themselves for Noongar identity, than it is the effect of the historicisation of those events and the ensuing violence that is done to Noongar Aboriginality. Scott is certainly not trying to downplay the importance of historical facts, and certainly not suggesting that events like Flinder’s landing never took place. The argument is more nuanced than that. He is keen to show that while the events may have happened, what comes after that, the historicising effects of writing, the bracketing, the representation and misrepresentation, are all equally part of the process, and cannot be separated in the end from the events themselves. It makes no sense, in fact, to even talk about the events themselves because what we know about those events is what we learn from the mountain of writing on the topic. All Scott can meaningfully talk about are the representations, the process of creating representations, and the process of creating Noongar self-identity through representation.

Even though the illusion of fiction is sometimes that it is as transparent, perhaps even more transparent than historiography, giving us a window into the past, that way of reading a novel like Deadman doesn’t hold up to scrutiny. By considering the ways in which Deadman conceives of its connections to the empirical, particularly with regards to the kinds of connection we associate with historical discourse, we can see how it occupies the contested middle ground between the figural and the literal, but remains within an imagined topography. The relationship Kim Scott’s novel shares with history is more interruptive than dialectical, and it generates these interruptions by drawing on extra-textual sources for its most important self-reflexive moments, thereby guiding us towards the allegorical dimensions built into the very fabric of the novel, and indeed into the fabric of language. The deconstructive tension that it displays so openly is a signal that it has other things on its mind, the foremost of which is testing the link between the word
and the world, the figure and the referent. In doing so it focuses attention on the broader concerns it has with what it means to mean, and what it means to represent.

But what would a novel that has altogether moved on from the historiographic metaphor of inside/outside look like? How would it conceive of its connection to the past and to the practice of history? *Deadman* is not quite prepared to let go of these things, even if it is prepared to vigorously question their value. Yet there are a number of novels that are prepared to think of truth ‘horizontally’ and as an artifact ‘whose fundamental design we often have to alter’ (Rorty 1982: 92). For these novels, historiographic truth often finds its validity in appeals to authority, to tradition, and, on occasion, to violence, not in the correspondence of sentences to an unknowable reality. Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria*, with its ambition to dismantle the Western ‘already historicised world’ and replace it with what I would call an Indigenous ‘already mythologised world’, has been widely acknowledged as ground-breaking in this regard (Davies 2006: 3). But whereas Wright’s novel is not interested in confronting directly the issues of Western metaphysics (not when there is an entire universe of Indigenous metaphysics to deal with), Richard Flanagan’s *Gould’s Book of Fish* has just such a confrontation in mind.
If *That Deadman Dance* narrates its own anxiety with the historiographic in fiction, then Richard Flanagan’s most ambitious narrative work, *Gould’s Book of Fish*, goes far beyond that, asserting its status as fiction and undoing our attempts at tracing a correspondence between the text and the world of the past. It demands this reading by presenting us with an irony ‘to the second power’, irony that spirals out of control in a way that ‘all true irony at once has to engender’, an irony that cannot return us to a stable, univocal text once it has begun (de Man 1983: 218-22). The effect is to create a ‘temporal void’
similar to the one encountered in allegory, as language searches for an ‘unreachable anteriority’ (de Man 1983: 218-22). In Gould’s Book, this spiral takes the fiction further and further from the world, revealing the conundrum at the heart of the novel, that the ‘Word & the World were no longer what they seemed, that they were no longer One’ (Flanagan 2001: 309).

As a novel, Gould’s Book is at once challenging and familiar, particularly to anyone conversant in Tasmanian history. The narrative is structured like a Russian nesting doll — a story enclosed within a story. The outer layer, the first that we encounter, and the latest chronologically speaking, is the story of Sid Hammet, a man ‘who discovered he was not who he thought he was’ (Flanagan 2001: 11). He is a forger of antique furniture and a petty criminal. He chances upon the Book of Fish in a Salamanca junkshop and is instantly captivated by the incredible tales it tells. The second narrative layer is, of course, the tales themselves. Written by the Sarah Island convict, William Buelow Gould, the Book of Fish is a ‘sad pastiche’ of historical facts and pure inventions, a book that Hammet suggests ‘might one day find a place in the inglorious, if not entirely insubstantial, history of Australian literary frauds’ (Flanagan 2001: 20). Gould describes the development of the Sarah Island penal settlement and bears witness to the procession of Vandemonian history, the horrors of convict life, the brutality of the military, the suffering of Aboriginal Tasmanians, and the rebelliousness of the bushrangers. Through it all, he continues to paint and it is his pictures of fish, commissioned by the proto-scientist Lempriere, that provide the book with its name.

The position that Gould’s Book takes in regards to history is immediately evident in the physical object of the book itself. There is indeed an historically documented convict artist named William Buelow Gould, and the historical
Gould was imprisoned on Sarah Island, and did, it is widely accepted, paint a Book of Fish. His paintings are on display at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery in Hobart, and the Sketchbook of Fishes in Macquarie Harbour is on occasional display in the Allport Library also in Hobart. Flanagan uses reproductions of the paintings from the historic Sketchbook of Fishes in Macquarie Harbour in his fictional Gould’s Book of Fish, beginning each chapter with a different species and a different watercolour. The effect is to establish the relationship Gould’s Book shares with historiography — and, that is, a rivalrous and deeply sceptical one. This is not a benign reproduction, as you might find in non-fiction, but a deliberate repositioning of historical material in such a way as to create moments of ironic parabasis as we encounter each new picture.

Flanagan has also fictionalised the few known facts about Gould’s life, creating from them a cartoonish caricature, a ‘silly Billy Gould’ whose name ‘is a song which will be sung, click-clack — rat a-tat a-tat’ (Flanagan 2001: 403). Whereas the Gould of the archive was given pardon in 1835 and went on to live well into the 1850s, serving as an assistant to a number of doctors and naturalists, painting specimens for them, Flanagan’s ‘silly Billy Gould’ lives only long enough to finish his collection of paintings before drowning at the Sarah Island penal station (Williams 2005: 36). Clearly, we are not dealing with a text that has pretensions to being read in a literalist mode. It takes historical material, transforms it, and gives it an entirely new identity and existence. In short, it creates a space where historiography, as the ‘sole, exclusive way of organising’ the world, is relegated to a secondary position and where the basis of its claims to an epistemology can be tested (Davies 2006: 3).
Irony features at the structural level in Gould’s Book and as a physical object it presents us with a number of immediately apparent ironic dissonances. William Gould’s paintings exist both as reproductions within the book and as historical objects, implicating the book itself as a physical representation of the world/fiction split that it is mocking. The effect is unmissable; it deliberately conlates the fictional book of fish found by Sid Hammet in a meat safe in a Salamanca second-hand store, the historical Sketchbook of Fishes in Macquarie Harbour housed in the Allport Library in Hobart, and the edition of Flanagan’s novel in the reader’s hand. From the outset, the text specifically sets up an ironic framework for understanding the continuities and discontinuities between referent and figure, past and present. Gould’s paintings, when placed in the fictional context of Gould’s Book, take on new ‘relational’ and ‘differential’ ironic meanings — they are both fictional and historical at the same time, both figure and referent (Hutcheon 1994: Ch. 3). It is, in short, a book that demands to be read with a sense of irony.

Hutcheon described fiction of this kind as being ‘both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay[ing] claim to historical events and personages’ (2004: 5). These novels make use of documented historical events, characters, and places not in a nostalgic fashion, as if we might be able to unproblematically reconstruct those times and places, but in a critical fashion, in order to show how we are imagining times and places as we write. For Hutcheon, such antagonism occurs because historiographic metafiction keeps distinct its formal auto-representation and its historical context, and in so doing problematizes the very possibility of historical knowledge, because there is no reconciliation, no dialectic here – just unresolved contradiction (Hutcheon 2004: 106).
In many respects, describing the friction between these elements of the text as an unresolved contradiction is perhaps just another way of describing it as irony. After all, irony often functions as a way to posit the critical distance required in order to safely excoriate, even if the text is ‘heavily implicated in that which it seeks to contest’ (Hutcheon 2004: 106). However, in the case of historiographic metafiction Hutcheon suggests that the subject-position from which the ironic meaning is attained is always paradoxical, in that it can only ‘enact the metalinguistic contradiction of being inside and outside, complicitous and distanced, inscribing and contesting its own provisional formulations’ (2004: 21). This can be boiled down to the contradictory proposition that historiographic metafiction hopes to problematize historical knowledge, while at the same time participating in the creation of historiographic knowledge. So it could be said, then, that the unresolved contradiction to which Hutcheon is referring is also the failure of irony, as she has conceived of it, to effectively disrupt the historiographic metaphor of inside/outside. Instead, fiction and history are left in a state of contradiction.

It is not clear, however, that irony has failed to disrupt this governing metaphor. I see in Gould’s Book a much more radical, much more destructive form of irony than that which Hutcheon sees in historiographic metafiction. I see an ‘absolute irony’ of the same kind that de Man sees in Baudelaire, ‘a consciousness of madness, itself the end of all consciousness’ that amounts to ‘a reflection on madness from the inside of madness itself’ (1983: 216). In de Man’s theory of irony, the ironic self thinks right to the edges of linguistic possibility, to the edges of what can be expressed through language. What we find is that the reflexive self it is not a stable point of knowledge at all, but a creation of language, a fiction (de Man 1983: 216-18). This leads, according to de Man, to the self of language (the fictional self) having an ironic relation to
the self of the world (the empirical self). So when in *Gould’s Book* the moments of critical distance arise and the ‘fictional illusion’ is disrupted by the intrusion of a second subject-position — moments that de Man refers to as *parabasis* — it is not critical distance that is being produced, but a heightened sense of the self as a fictional/linguistic construct (de Man 1983: 218-19). In de Man’s work this is an important distinction. The ironic, fictional self can never be unified with the empirical self, as ‘irony engenders a temporal sequence of acts of consciousness’ which never leads to synthesis and which is ‘endless’ (1983: 220). Irony, for de Man, is not complicitous with the empirical, but is antithetical to it. It does not seek unity, but only relates to the empirical as a different, sometimes opposite, meaning:

Irony divides the flow of temporal experience into a past that is pure mystification and a future that remains harassed forever by a relapse within the inauthentic. It can know this inauthenticity but can never overcome it. It can only restate and repeat it on an increasingly conscious level, but it remains endlessly caught in the impossibility of making this knowledge applicable to the empirical world (de Man 1983: 222).

The real world self and linguistic self are trapped forever in a cycle of trying to denominate, and being thwarted by the temporal void between the ‘Word and the World’ (Flanagan 2001: 309).

It is here, probing the temporal void between figure and referent, that we find a point of commonality for allegory and irony because, as we have seen, allegory also exists in an alternate temporal void to the meaning that generates it. In de Man’s view, this is the ‘same void we encountered when we found allegory always implying an unreachable anteriority’, and thus allegory as a
meaning is also temporally unmoored from the language that has produced it (1983: 222). The unmooring of meaning from language has radical effects for reading and understanding. Meaning no longer appears to share the concrete relation with the empirical world that the metaphor of inside/outside proposes: ‘What is at stake in irony is the possibility of deciding on a meaning or on a controlled polysemy of meanings’ (de Man 1996: 167). For ‘interpreters of literature’ there is something ‘very dangerous’ about irony as the understandability of literature is put at risk (de Man 1996: 167).

This is where Hutcheon underestimates the disruptive potential of irony. Theories of the referentiality of language really begin to pose a challenge to the possibility of the stable, single-voiced meanings favoured by historians when we consider the understandability of what is written. What connects irony and allegory most closely is their ‘common demystification of an organic world postulated [either] in a symbolic mode of analogical correspondences or in a mimetic mode of representation in which fiction and reality could coincide’ (1983: 222). The demystification taking place exactly mirrors the ‘self’s predicament as unhappy consciousness striving to move beyond and outside itself’ — that is, every time we try to move beyond language to the empirical we fail, stumped by the impossibility of unifying the linguistically-constructed self with the self of the real world (Mileur 1986: 334). In the same way, the mirror-maze of possible meanings generated by irony thwarts our desire to close off meaning, proving instead that irony is always a double-turn away from any knowable single meaning or range of meanings. It is always an irony of irony, or the ‘permanent parabasis of the allegory of tropes’, preventing us from turning away from irony, for to turn away is encounter yet another irony — the realisation that we cannot turn away (de Man 1996: 179).
What does this mean for the historian whose entire practice is reliant on being able to read straightforwardly, confident that the measure of historiographic truth is its correspondence with past reality? Can we ever accept that the reading of a certain document corresponds this way? It is no exaggeration to say that the founding supposition of all historiography is the Kantian verticality of truth as a relationship between a representation and what is represented. To challenge that supposition is to challenge the practice of history as a meaning-making discourse. McCullagh acknowledged this problem, and added that historians ‘cannot simply ignore the critics and assert naive empiricism once again’ (2004: 8). But nevertheless it is not easily overcome. We are left with the question of how historical knowledge can be ‘rendered intelligible again’ and how and, by what means, can its ‘credibility […] be restored’ (McCullagh 2004: 8)? Not all historians are as forthright as McCullagh in acknowledging the dilemma. O’Brien also agreed that the challenge posed by theories of the referentiality of language is a real one, yet added the proviso that ‘the issue comes down to […] ratios of determinacy to indeterminacy embedded with the forms available to represent the past — again not as truth but always as provisional but plausible and contestable conjectures’ (2001).

They do, however, arrive at very different conclusions about the seriousness of the challenge posed by deconstructive readings. McCullagh proposed a ‘new, more sophisticated theory of historical knowledge’ to help ease concerns, a theory intended to highlight ‘the fact that credible history is history which has survived criticism and is rationally justifiable, not merely the product of an historian’s imagination’ (2004: 8). Applying this theory to the notion of whether texts can have an objective meaning, he concluded that in fact ‘we often contrast the literal, basic, and intended meanings of a text with
what individuals take it to mean’ and ‘correct’ a person who reads the text ‘incorrectly’ — a process that suggests that meaning is established ‘not in a personal, idiosyncratic way’ but through a process of criticism and rational justification, leading to ‘objective’ and ‘fixed’ meanings (2004: 29). O’Brien is less convinced of the need to defend historiography. He notes that the ‘practice of “deconstruction” […] simply asks: where and in what ways does the mind, hand and voice of the historian appear in her text’ (2001). These questions turn out to provide a ‘familiar set of established rules for rigorous and disciplined criticism of competing depictions and interpretations of the same historical episodes’ (2001). This means that historians have indeed ‘been “deconstructing” each other's books and articles and been implicitly engaged in textual analysis for a long time now’ (O’Brien 2001).

Of course, my intention here is not to settle the long debate about the referentiality of language. It is enough to show that the debate exists, is heated, and is a source of anxiety in both historiography and fiction. As we can see, these discourses deal very differently with the question of referentiality, whether it is the spiralling ironies of Gould’s Book and the self-reflexive allegories of That Deadman Dance on the one hand, or the appeals to rational justification and the avoidance of ‘playful semiotics’ on the other (O’Brien 2001). But these differences are not at all easy to resolve, and in many cases have become entrenched, almost dogmatic positions with very little other than our own prejudice that allows us to decisively adjudicate which position is the stronger. So when Coetzee describes how, in ‘times of immense ideological pressure like the present’, the ‘space in which the novel and history normally co-exist’ is ‘squeezed almost to nothing’, we can see, in the terms of this debate, where the squeeze is coming from (1988: 54). The novel is forced to adopt one of two postures in regards to history, says Coetzee, either
‘supplementarity or rivalry’: it can either assent that irony and allegory are just playful semiotics and choose a role that is ‘self-evidently a secondary relation’ to what is often perceived as the real work of historiography, or it can operate in terms of its ‘own procedures’ and issue in its ‘own conclusions’ by attesting to the power of certain properties of language to fracture and undo the historiographic metaphors that also govern much recent fiction (Coetzee 1988: 54).

The ways in which Gould’s Book makes use of an ‘irony of irony’ to ‘assert and maintain its fictional character’ looks suspiciously to me as if this novel has taken a posture of rivalry towards the central metaphor of inside/outside (de Man 1983: 218). Rivalrous novels evolve their own ‘paradigms and myths’ and even go as far as ‘demythologising history’, and that is precisely what Gould’s Book aspires to — demythologising or, to use de Man’s term, ‘demystifying’ the existence of the ‘organic world postulated [either] in a symbolic mode of analogical correspondences or in a mimetic mode of representations in which fiction and reality could coincide’ (1983: 222). Rather than allow itself to be made subordinate to vertical conception of truth, deferring to the ‘procedures’ of historiography and eventuating in conclusions ‘that are checkable by history (as a child’s schoolwork is checked by a schoolmistress)’, Gould’s Book upholds ‘its fictional character by stating the continued impossibility of reconciling the world of fiction with the actual world’ (de Man 1983: 218).

Many reviewers of Gould’s Book have described this tendency. Bill Ashcroft argues that the novel ‘exposes the narrative strategies by which history is created by presenting an alternative history of Australia’s penal settlement’ and that history is interpolated into the novel ‘in a way that tends
to subvert its unimpeachable authority’ (2010: 35). In this reading, Gould’s fictitious account of the past is the authoritative one while the ‘official record is, paradoxically, the “real forgery” (Ashcroft 2010: 35). But Ashcroft pushes his argument too far. Gould’s Book, he observes, ‘performs an act of historiography that is extremely common in post-colonial writing’, namely, producing a ‘narrative that subverts the official line’ (2010: 35). Yet, as we will see, the uncontrolled ironies the text generates, ironies that run to the second degree, are the exact antithesis of historiography, not an approximation of it (2010: 35). And while the text certainly ‘subverts the official line’, it does so by undermining the possibility of interpretation, and by foregrounding the problematics of referentiality in language, rather than by engaging in what Coetzee would call ‘supplementarity’ (Ashcroft 2010: 35, Coetzee 1988: 54).

Jo Jones came closer to articulating why Gould’s Book is such an interesting case study. She argued that by using a ‘densely reflexive, ironic mode of expression’ the novel is able to reject ‘the dominance of notions of causation and progress in representations of the national past, a dominance encoded in linear historical narratives’ (2008: 115). The result is a book that ‘challenges the belief that the events of the past can be uncovered in an exact or scientific sense’ because in it ‘the past is shifting and, at least in a positivistic sense, ultimately irretrievable’ (Jones 2008: 116). For Jones, we are left with a past that can never be reconstructed through historiography, but can only be engaged with ‘through an aesthetic of the postmodern sublime’, or in other words, the sense that something vast and unknowable lies behind the evidentiary material which can only be hinted at, never fully comprehended (Jones 2008: 125). This leads Jones naturally towards concluding that Gould’s Book questions the dominance of historiographic metaphors by suggesting that a notion of the ‘aesthetic space’ of the sublime provides a better metaphor for
describing our relation to the past: ‘while the past can never be known in a full, unified sense, it is nevertheless a past of loss and should be approached through an aesthetic space on the edges of Enlightenment thinking’ (Jones 2008: 121).

But there is a larger underlying problem with the way both Jones and Ashcroft have tackled the disruptive desire *Gould’s Book* displays, particularly when seen through the lens of postmodernism or post-colonialism. That is, if an author hopes to reject the dominance of positivist, empirical history, then attempting to do so through the writing of a piece of historiographic fiction is, ultimately, self-contradictory. All this does is reinforce the primacy of history as the only way to organise ‘the whole world of experience in the shape of past events’ (Collingwood in Davies 2006: 3). Our understanding of the world is the product of the practice of history: ‘experience cannot be conceived except in the shape of past events — except as knowledge already known’ (Davies 2006: 3). So historiographic fiction is not always simply disruptive and critical, but also complicit in establishing and maintaining history as the default form of all knowledge. Hutcheon was correct in identifying critical fiction like this as a type of writing intent on exposing the ‘meaningmaking function’ of our various constructs such as narrative or ideology but at the same time participating in those functions (Hutcheon 2004: 89). Both Jones and Ashcroft seem to overlook this point.

I think there is a better way to explain how *Gould’s Book* refuses the role of supplementarity and complicity and that is through exploring the circularity of irony in the text, the continual rise and fall of the subject-position. *Gould’s Book* shows us how and why irony ‘divides the flow of temporal experience into a past that is pure mystification and a future that remains harassed forever by a
relapse within the inauthentic’ (de Man 1983: 222). It demonstrates the unavoidable necessity of historical interpretation, while at the same time showing that no interpretation can ever close off the production of meaning — meaning continues to be generated without cease. Thus, the great irony of ironies, the spiralling irony, begins, as the text searches for a position from which to pronounce some final truth about the past, only to see that position and that truth instantly undermined by the very same irony used to establish it in the first place. The text can never return from the world of the fiction into the world of the real because it is forever removed, through irony, from the possibility of speaking univocal, stable meanings (de Man 1983: 222).

Many reviewers have dismissed Gould’s Book as folly for precisely this reason. Peter Craven writing for *The Age* called it ‘a monstrosity of a book’, saying that he could not believe ‘that a novel like this has been put before the public with such a mishmash of verbal collisions’ and ‘such lapses of judgment’ (quoted in Sullivan 2002). Will Cohu argued that while *Gould’s Book* featured ‘memorably eerie writing and cynical comedy’ it was ‘overwhelmed by the intellectual chaos beneath’ (2002). For Cohu, much of the chaos developed out of a skirmish between history and pure invention taking place at the heart of the novel:

On the one hand, [Flanagan] employs facts as stepping stones: on the other, he longs to disregard history altogether […] It makes for a book at war with itself, trumping ghastly fact with outrageous fiction, until extremities turn the reader indifferent. The historic impulse seems superseded by a mystic-holistic vision that is simultaneously a defence of a discursive literary style (Cohu 2002).
While it is understandable that Cohu and Craven would attempt an
historiographic reading of the novel given the subject matter, Gould’s Book
resists that reading by presenting us with a series of ironic interruptions,
making it difficult to say precisely what its representations of the past mean in
any definitive way. Flanagan has effectively pre-empted an attempt at reading
the novel as a supplement to historiography, with an eye for period detail or for
insight into the various historical forces at work, instead forcing us to question
the legitimacy of that reading in the first place.

One of the earliest examples of this comes when Sid Hammet tries to
finish reading the Book of Fish, but finds he cannot:

Every time I opened the book a scrap of paper with some revelation I
had not hitherto read would fall out, or I would stumble across an
annotation that I had somehow missed in my previous readings, or I
would come upon two pages stuck together that I hadn’t noticed and
which, when carefully teased apart, would contain a new element of the
story that would force me to rethink the whole in an entirely changed
light (Flanagan 2001: 24).

This is a moment of what de Man, following Schlegel, calls parabasis, or a point
at which the discourse is interrupted by a ‘shift in the rhetorical register’
(1996: 178). De Man further defines irony as the ‘permanent parabasis of the
allegory of tropes’, and it is precisely this permanent state of parabasis that
leads us to read irony in the passage (1996: 179).

In this case, we do not need to be especially suspicious in order to read
ironically. The irony is very clear: just like Sid Hammet, we are holding in our
hands a book that constantly forces us to ‘rethink the whole in an entirely
changed light’ whenever we discover something we have missed in our
previous readings (Flanagan 2001: 24). The passage itself exemplifies this tendency. It calls attention to its own fictionality by alerting us to a slippage of meaning; that is, the fact that the book may be referring to itself as an object, rather than referring — as the literal reading would suggest — to Sid Hammet’s Book of Fish. The passage points to something outside or beyond the literal and has for its function ‘the thematization of this difference’ (de Man 1983: 209). Again, de Man, via Schlegel, proposes that

the effect of this intrusion is not a heightened sense of realism, an affirmation of the priority of an historical over a fictional act, but that it has the very opposite aim and effect: it serves to prevent the all too readily mystified reader from confusing fact and fiction and from forgetting the essential negativity of the fiction (1983:219).

The text demarcates itself from the discourse of history through the repetition of such moments of intrusion, firmly establishing its imagined topography.

The process is repeated again and again. Each time we encounter one of Gould’s paintings, the text calls attention to its own artificiality, its own fictionality. Each time we read of Hammet’s experiences deciphering, decoding, interpreting his Book of Fish, we are confronting our own attempts at doing the same with our copy of Gould’s Book of Fish. The reader is constantly made to compare, and it is through this relational interaction that ironic meanings begin to emerge. The ironic meaning, then, is not simply the opposite or inverted meaning to the said but is ‘always different — other than and more than the said’ (Hutcheon 1994: 12). It emerges out of small moments whenever the text attempts to define its relationship to the world but fails to close off the multitude of possibilities and settle on ‘a meaning or on a controlled polysemy of meanings’ (de Man 1996: 167).
The scene in which William Gould chances upon the Registry, a hidden portion of the library on Sarah Island that houses the history of the penal colony, is another example of the way the text demonstrates a broader concern with referentiality and the problematics of irony. In the Registry, Gould uncovers ‘things so inexplicable & shocking in their effrontery, yet at the same time so compelling in their lucid madness, that they demanded further investigation’ (Flanagan 2001: 282). The records chart another reality; separate to the one in which Gould has been living during his time on the island:

The world, as described by Jorgen Jorgensen in those blue-inked pages, was at war with the reality in which we lived. The bad news was that reality was losing. It was unrecognisable. It was insufferable. It was, in the end, inhuman. (Flanagan 2001: 284-5).

Gould recognises Jorgensen’s history as a fake. But more than being simply fake, Jorgensen’s history is, in Gould’s estimation, ‘insufferable’ and ‘inhuman’ because it obeys ‘the laws of pattern & succession, of cause & effect – which never characterise life but are necessary for words on paper’ (Flanagan 2001: 284-7). That obeying the patterns of cause and effect is enough to render Jorgensen’s history ‘inhuman’ is an interesting twist. It suggests that in attempting to put the history of the island on paper in a straight-forward, literal way — the way in which historiography must by necessity operate — Jorgensen had failed to capture the human experience of the past.

Even so, Gould finds himself admiring the grand narrative of order and progress that Jorgensen has authored. It is highly successful at lending what Hayden White would call ‘the odour of the ideal’ to the messy human events taking place on Sarah Island (1987: 21). Gould comes to realise that everything he ‘had seen & known, all he had witnessed & suffered, was now as lost &
meaningless as a dream that dissolves upon waking’ (Flanagan 2001: 290). Jorgensen’s distorted record-keeping effectively wipes out the personal and the experiential from the history of the island, being the things that ‘characterise life’ and that therefore have no place in an empirical view of the past (Flanagan 2001: 287). This switch away from a focus on human experience and towards a supposedly objective, scientific view of the past is what Gould calls ‘the greatest piece of card sharping in history’ (Flanagan 2001: 286).

But we are at all times aware of the ironic dissonance hanging over this section. For while Gould is busy attacking Jorgensen’s histories as fake or as a trick of scientific thinking, we can never forget that it is of course Gould’s histories which are the fakes, whereas Jorgensen’s fit snugly within the historiographic accounts of Sarah Island. The world that Gould described simply never existed, or at least did not exist outside of the imagined topography of the text; there is no evidence of the Great Mah-Jong Hall on Sarah Island, nor of the National Railway or the Registry that he described. It is Jorgensen’s simple narrative of convict betterment and the emergence of a society based on Enlightenment values that sits neatly within the broader parameters of Tasmanian historiography (the ethics of such a reading notwithstanding). And this is, of course, the fundamental tension at the centre of the novel: the desire to delineate between the ‘imagined’ and the ‘true’, but the immense difficulty in doing so. The inescapable irony of Gould’s position — that he, on the one hand, seeks to find some final truth about his experience of the past, but on the other, that he cannot arrive at a final, closed meaning because of the constant intrusion of ironic meanings — sustains the narrative at all times.
Following this scene, Gould vainly attempts to bring Jorgensen’s lies to the world by escaping the prison island with a sled full of books from the Registry. Gould worries that unless he acts to destroy the books, ‘posterity’ would seek to judge everyone on the island ‘through the machine of the Commandant’s monstrous fictions! As though they were the truth!’ (Flanagan 2001: 312). But it is, of course, Flanagan’s own monstrous fictions that are seeking to relay some final truth about the past, not Jorgensen’s. Gould’s expressions of horror at the power these false histories have to shape our collective understanding might even be seen as a parody of the discomfort expressed, as we will see later in the chapter, by historians such as Inga Clendinnen and John Hirst at the power that fictional representations of the past have to confuse the reading public. What is clear, however, is that the continual interruption of the text by moments of parabasis like this renders the search for a final meaning, a final truth, doomed to failure.

Why is this the case? Because from this point in the text onwards, the second-degree irony begins to assert itself as the ironic meanings spiral out of control. Ironies generate their own ironies, in a strange, black hole-like gravity sink that pulls in all well-intentioned meanings and turns them against themselves, folding the text back upon itself as it grows distant from its referents. De Man explains it this way:

Far from being a return to the world, the irony to the second power or ‘irony of irony’ that all true irony at once has to engender asserts and maintains its fictional character by stating the continued impossibility of reconciling the world of fiction with the actual world (1983: 218).

The possibility of one sign and one signified corresponding becomes ever more remote as ‘inauthentic’ meanings gain ascendency: the text can ‘only restate
and repeat’ these inauthentic meanings ‘on an increasingly conscious level, but it remains endlessly caught in the impossibility of making this knowledge applicable to the empirical world’ (de Man 1983: 222).

Gould experiences exactly this phenomenon when trying to destroy the volumes of history he has retrieved from the Registry. He loses his way in the south-western Tasmanian scrub, an area known as Transylvania in the novel, and soon becomes utterly lost and desperate. He is rescued some days later by Twopenny Sal, his Aboriginal lover, and the ailing blacktracker, Tracker Marks. She feeds Gould and takes care of him and late in the night he wakes to find Sal burning the body of Tracker Marks, who has died of illness. Sal feeds the fires of Tracker Marks’ pyre with pages torn from the registers that Gould had ‘dragged for so many days with so great a sacrifice!’ (Flanagan 2001: 335). He is horrified. As he tries to save the books from the flames, he notices something strange about them: the registers are mirroring his own writing, turning it back against him.

In this passage, Gould describes what he sees, and it is worth quoting at length in order to show how Gould’s Book visualises the way that ‘ironic language splits the subject into an empirical self that exists in a state of inauthenticity and a self that exists only in the form of a language that asserts the knowledge of this inauthenticity’ (de Man 1983: 214). Gould observes:

With great violence, I screwed up the page & threw it in on the fire, only to see revealed on the next page a picture of a freshwater crayfish. It looked as if it had been painted in perfect imitation of my style. Trying desperately to avoid the conclusion that if this book of fish was a history of the settlement, it might also just be its prophecy, I then realised that the book was not near ended, that it contained several
more chapters, & with mounting terror I read on the succeeding page of how — ‘I realised that the book was not near ended, that it contained several more chapters, & and with mounting terror I read on the succeeding page of how—‘ (Flanagan 2001: 337).

Gould had believed the registers to be not histories as Jorgensen insisted but ‘monstrous fictions’ (Flanagan 2001: 312). Instead, he is confronted with the knowledge that what he thought was fiction is, in fact, history — his history, recorded alongside his paintings. Yet in the end, whether it is fiction or history, the problem remains the same; it cannot escape its own self-referentiality. It is a system of self-contained signs without any certain or decidable connection to the world beyond, even though it appears to imitate that world. In the same way, the Demanian linguistic self is forever split from the physical as ‘irony engenders a temporal sequence of acts of consciousness’ which never leads to synthesis and which is ‘endless’ (de Man 1983: 220).

Before Gould burns the last volume of the register it seems to be repeating his thoughts word for word; ‘I then realised that the book was not near ended […] “I realised that the book was not near ended”’ (Flanagan 2001: 337). This would seem to be the perfect visualisation of the way in which irony does not produce critical distance, so much as a heightened sense of the self as a fictional/linguistic construct (de Man 1983: 218-19). This passage showing Gould’s sudden insight is the focal point around which the whole novel revolves. Again, the text asserts its fictionality through the moment of parabasis, by preventing the ‘all too readily mystified reader from confusing fact and fiction and forgetting the essential negativity of the fiction’ (Schlegel in de Man 1983: 219). In this case, however, the irony is to the second degree. For, as is becoming clearer, each time the text attempts to find a subject-
position from which to criticise, and each time it then seeks to return to the empirical world having generated that ironic subject-position, it finds itself unable to fall back into discourse as if nothing has happened. Just as irony can turn the intended meaning of a text back against itself, so too can it turn the ironic meaning back against itself (de Man 1983: 218).

The effect of a second-degree irony is employed most fully in the novel’s Afterword. We are offered a brief extract from the ‘Colonial Secretary’s correspondence file, 5 April 1831’, which is taken from, we are told, the Archives Office of Tasmania (Flanagan 2001: 404). This last detail is suggestive, as it indicates an appeal to the authority of the archive and the stable historical meaning that comes along with it, an authority that might be able to ground the meaning of the passage in the empirical world. The Afterword reads:


The implication is that the history Gould has recorded in his Book of Fish — an account positioned as ‘the sorry truth’ told in opposition to Jorgensen’s ‘monstrous fictions’ — is in fact a fabrication (Flanagan 2001: 401, 312). The people he describes in his record, such as Jorgensen, the Commandant, and even Sid Hammet, are, therefore, simply aspects of his own personality, not historically verified people with an archival presence. Gould did not escape by transforming into a fish, as the closing passages of the novel tell us, but in actuality drowned in the attempt. It is with a kind of relief that we realise that ‘art and the world have been reconciled by the right kind of art’ (de Man 1983:}
218). Gould’s critique of historiography’s excessive claims over the past has revealed a deeper truth; namely that positivist, empirical history threatens to remove the human experiential element from our understanding of the past, thus rendering history inhuman. The sabotaging of Gould’s ironic subject-position by the revelations of the Afterword returns us once more into historiographic discourse, wiser and more wary of how we read historiography, thanks to Gould.

The problem is, however, that far from neatly wrapping up Gould’s story as we had hoped, the passage continues to generate ironic meanings. The notion that the Archives Office of Tasmania should hold the authority to decide the truth of the matter is enough to raise our suspicions on this point. So what we find, when we look further, is yet another moment of parabasis, this time disrupting the long-desired return into discourse that occurs when the text is reconciled to the world. The reconciliation turns out to be an illusion as a second-degree irony undermines the status of the knowledge generated by the collapse of Gould’s ironic subject-position; his position is, in fact, more ironic that ever. Why is this? Because the archival material quoted in the Afterword is fictional and does not sabotage Gould in the way that it appears at first to do. Instead, we find ourselves still trapped within the imagined topography of the text. The potential for the ironic subject-position to ever collapse in such a way that reciprocity with the world can be restored is called into question. Irony, it seems, just generates more irony. As de Man has observed, ‘the very moment that irony is thought of as a knowledge able to order and to cure the world, the source of its invention immediately runs dry’ (1983: 218). In this case, the idea that the Archives Office of Tasmania should have the final word on the matter quickly implodes as we realise that the Afterword is fictional, and that therefore what we are experiencing is an irony
to the second degree as the revelation of Gould’s fabrications turns out to be itself a fabrication. It seems that never ‘have art and life been farther apart than at the moment they seem to be reconciled’ (de Man 1983: 218). As a consequence, we are more mystified than ever by the continual intrusion of ironic meanings. Gould’s belief that ‘Word and the World were no longer what they seemed, were no longer One’ has been proven correct (2001: 309).

More than anything else, the adoption of this forever-collapsing, self-mocking mode of critique emphasises the absolutely inconsequential nature of its own intervention and the futility of the search for a platform from which to get an external view on history. The way that Gould’s Book is constantly torn between the extremes of criticising the assumptions and practices of historiography and then falling into those very same assumptions and practices is illustrative of the wider problems that both history and fiction have in making sense of the past. A brashly ironic mode of delivery such as the one in Gould’s Book reminds us that truth is not the product of referral by an innocent language, but is created by language in the first place. We cannot get beyond language to check if it really does correspond with the world. In fact, it makes no sense to talk about something like irony existing in the world at all. It is purely, and exclusively, a property of language, one that reminds us how all-encompassing language truly is.

But the destructiveness of irony also entails other problems for fiction, as David Foster-Wallace has pointed out. Irony, when used in this manner, has a tendency to become ‘enfeebling’ over a period of time (Foster-Wallace 1993: 183). It occurs because ‘irony, entertaining as it is, serves an exclusively negative function’, not an idealistic or a creative function, and is best understood, therefore, as being ‘critical and destructive’ and useful only as ‘a
ground-clearing’ device (Foster-Wallace 1993: 183). When it comes time to ‘replace the hypocrisies it debunks’, irony is found wanting as a tool for creation (Foster-Wallace 1993: 183). De Man makes a similar observation, but is more pessimistic about what he believes are the consequences: irony ‘interrupts, disrupts’ the ‘coherence’ and ‘systemacity’ of narrative, he argues, in effect making a ‘theory of irony’ the ‘undoing, the necessary undoing, of any theory of narrative’ (1996: 179). Every theory of narrative will ‘always be undone by the ironic dimension which it will necessarily contain’ (de Man 1996: 179).

Nonetheless, I am hesitant to describe irony in the purely negative terms that de Man and Foster-Wallace used. Without wanting to argue with their logic, which I find compelling, I would like to suggest that Gould’s Boo demonstrates a way to direct the destructive power of irony towards a beneficial outcome. Flanagan’s novel is not content to merely undermine and expose via the familiar process of establishing ironic distance between the object of the critique and the speaking position of the subject. It is not simply hoping to find a metaphysical position above and beyond the text from which to safely criticise history, while at the same time participating in the historicising project, as Hutcheon’s genre of historiographic metafiction does. Rather, it is hoping to demonstrate that fiction is not now, and probably never was, contained under the rubric of historiography.

Martin Davies began his study of historicism with a quote from Nietzsche; ‘There is no telling what history will encompass next’ (Davies 2006: 1). This, Davies pointed out, was a statement of the plainly ironic, because it was ‘always clear what the development of history as a human science would mean’: it would mean that all aspects of human life would fall under the
jurisdiction of history, that history would ‘absorb everything’, that it would historicise everything and that history as a practice, as a system of organisation, would come to dominate the public consciousness (2006: 1). As a method for organising human experience, history ‘not only organises the world in the shape of past events, but imposes its practice as the sole exclusive way of organising it’ (Davies 2006: 3). For Davies, ‘all knowledge’ must necessarily ‘revert’ to being ‘historical knowledge’ due to the way in which history conceives of its subject, which is, of course, anything that has passed in time (2006: 3). Historicism inevitably ‘constructs history as the dominant rationale of human existence in all its various economic, social, political, cultural, and religious forms’, leading to the ‘ultimate form of mental coercion’ — a cultural practice that imposes its method as the only way to explain humanity (Davies 2010: 1-2). Economics, medicine, astronomy, science, all branches of investigation and knowledge production must sooner or later look to the past and when they do, it is the historical method that controls how that knowledge is framed and understood.

While Davies’ characterisation of the practice of history is persuasive, he was not entirely correct about the status of the knowledge produced by historiography, as Gould’s Book shows. The concept of irony prevents historiography from becoming a totalising form of knowledge by preventing a text from representing in a literal and straightforward manner. Irony complicates every reading, and interrupts every attempt at signifying. It deconstructs the myth of history’s transparency and reveals it as yet more representations ‘hanging together’ through language (Rorty 1982: 92). Furthermore, it is only in the form of this deconstruction that fiction ever suitably engages with the totalising project of history. Irony is, in effect, the only useful trope when it comes to presenting a view of history as total. It is
also (ironically) the only useful trope for presenting its failure to achieve that totality.

So when Coetzee argued that the novel should aim to evolve ‘its own paradigms and myths, in the process [...] going so far as to show up the mythic status of history — in other words, demythologising history’, I believe that in Gould’s Book we have an example of precisely that (1988: 54). It resists the attempted ‘colonisation’ that ‘the discourse of history’ seeks to impose upon it (Coetzee 1988: 54). It is, in other words, the kind of novel that is ‘prepared to work itself out outside the terms of class conflict, race conflict, gender conflict, or any other of the oppositions out of which history and the historical disciplines erect themselves’ (Coetzee 1988: 54). So while I have earlier suggested that there is a trend among a certain section of professional historians, and among some literary theorists too, towards treating novels as a potential source of historiographic insight, Gould’s Book resolutely resists that trend and shows that some novels do ‘pose an incontrovertible threat’ to the authority of history, although perhaps not for the reasons generally assumed, such as the wilful misrepresentation of historical facts (Johnson 2012: 12).

At this point, it is worth taking a brief look at the wider Australian context for this discussion. Of immediate relevance here is the debate that took place between, on one side, the novelist Kate Grenville, and, on the other, three of the country’s most respected historians — Mark McKenna, Inga Clendinnen, and John Hirst. Grenville’s The Secret River found widespread praise from critics for its depictions of the early days of settlement along the Hawkesbury. Called a ‘formidable historical fiction, beautifully imagined and executed’ (Craven 2005), and ‘a sad book, beautifully written’ (Bedell 2006), it was shortlisted for numerous awards, including the Man Booker Prize. In July
Grenville gave an interview which was to prove controversial and would produce a string of criticisms against her in particular, but also against the novel more generally. During the interview, she made various claims as to the historical veracity of her book, citing the amount of research undertaken, and the way that research was inserted into the prose, and suggested that, given the fundamental importance of historical research, fiction might be able to occupy a position ‘up on a ladder, looking down at the history wars’, rather than falling back into one of the ‘polarised positions’ that characterised much historical debate (Koval 2005). Fiction, she proposed, offered ‘another way to understand’ the problem of conflicting truths in history, which was actually experiencing what it was like, the choices that those people had. And once you can actually get inside the experience, it’s no longer a matter of who’s going to win, it’s simply a matter of; yes, now I understand both sides and, having understood, the notion of one side being right and the other side being wrong becomes kind of irrelevant (Koval 2005).

Given this, she believed that she was employing a different method of approaching past events than the historian, which was the ‘way of empathising and imaginative understanding of those difficult events’ (Koval 2005),

Almost inevitably, this was met with hostility. Foremost among the critics of what Grenville called ‘imaginative understanding’ was Inga Clendinnen. In her essay ‘The History Question’, Clendinnen insisted that Grenville, in writing The Secret River, was performing the work of a historian. She explained it thus:

Then during her research for The Secret River Grenville experienced a deeper epiphany. She discovered she could write history after all. The
novel is a serious attempt to do history, but value-added history: history given life and flesh by a novelist’s imagination. Grenville sees her novel as a work of history sailing triumphantly beyond the constrictions of the formal discipline of history writing (2006: 17).

She found in Grenville’s approach to the writing of history evidence that novelists had ‘decided it is for them to write the history of this country, and to admonish and nurture its soul’ (2006: 17). She took issue with the notion that novelists had a ‘peculiar talent’ for exercising their empathetic imagination ‘upon fragmentary, ambiguous, sometimes contradictory evidence’ in order to arrive at their representations (2006: 20). Imaginative empathy, Clendinnen argued, did not help us to access ‘the actual past’, a place that is ‘slow’ and ‘problematic’ to access, and which always ‘affronts our expectations’ (2006: 20). For this reason, historians are the ‘permanent spoilsports of imaginative games played with the past’, showing that imagination and empathy of the kind Grenville described in fact destroy ‘all hope of understanding’ (Clendinnen 2006: 22).

Historians John Hirst and Mark McKenna also took issue with Grenville’s suggestion that imagination was the key to understanding the past. Hirst compared the approaches of Grenville and Clendinnen in his book Sense and Nonsense in Australian History, and found the approach of the historian more convincing:

Kate Grenville thinks that novelists, better than historians, can get into the heart and mind of past people. Depends on the novelist — and the historian. Between Kate Grenville and the historian Inga Clendinnen there is no contest. In her study of the first years at Sydney Cove, Clendinnen is not projecting herself back into the past: she knows that
these people, settlers and Aborigines, are very different from herself. You need to work hard to understand them (Hirst 2009: 86).

His remarks were in broad agreement with Clendinnen’s critique of the novelist as imaginative reconstructor of the past, a role that historians, who are reliant on a bedrock of evidence to support their interpretations, resist. Likewise, we find in Mark McKenna’s lecture ‘Writing the Past’ further confirmation that what historians find most troubling is the way in which the novel has been positioned as a potential replacement to historiography. McKenna was concerned about ‘the dangers that arise when novelists (and reviewers) of fiction claim for fiction, at the expense of history, the sole right to empathy and historical understanding’ (2006: 98). Grenville’s novel was a kind of ‘rival history’ or ‘fictive history’ that hoped to exist ‘beyond politics, beyond controversy, in some kind of “balanced” utopia (as if her novel were miraculously free of any interpretive stance on the past)’ (McKenna 2006: 104).

What the remarks of Hirst, McKenna, and Clendinnen suggest is that they, as a group, perceive a trend toward attributing to novels an almost historiographic truth-status. It seems clear that a certain section of the community of professional historians feel that ‘historical novels pose an incontrovertible threat’ to their own authority as experts and to the authority of their discipline more broadly (Johnson 2012: 12). Literary theorist Stella Clarke summed up the concerns of this group as the belief that ‘a lawless literary rabble has opted to fill the vacuum left by bickering historians and taken unsanctioned control of Australia’s past’ (2006). In doing so they are egged on by critics who praise ‘Australia’s top historical novelists, leading
them to think it’s fine to colonise territory traditionally owned by professional historians, on the basis that it is a terra nullius of truth’ (2006).

Of course, this is an argument that historians find flimsy at best. The credibility of historiographic writing generally relies on the possibility that ‘descriptions, interpretations, and explanations of past events can be rationally assessed and justified’ (McCullagh 2004: 1). It is a foundational assumption of historiography and Clendinnen insisted that a distinction must be made between the rational, justifiable conclusions drawn from evidentiary material and the ‘opportunistic transpositions and elisions’ of the same material that occur in fiction (2006: 16). This is not to say that imaginative interpretations are condemned in historiography — it is always the case that historians ‘interpret the evidence they collect by drawing upon an informed imagination which reflects their general knowledge of human nature and social processes, and their particular expertise in the field’ (McCullagh 2004: 1). But what has become problematic is the way in which novelists make a claim, implicitly or explicitly, to historical veracity when ‘in fiction it’s only the freedom from historical sources, the freedom from the historians’ obligation to be true to those sources that allows the restitution of the past to occur’ (McKenna 2005: 3-4).

The approach taken by Tim Parrish, the American postmodernist critic with a deep interest in history, is to settle the issue of referential anxiety by insisting that both historiography and long fiction form an identical ethical contract with their readers. In other words, many contemporary authors ‘write history as a form of fiction’ (Parrish 2008: 2). Parrish qualified this by adding that his argument is ‘not quite that history is fiction, or that fiction eliminates claims of history, but that we should treat some types of fiction as we do
history’ (Parrish 2008: 5-6). He was unequivocal about what this means for the novel: Historiography, he insisted, was ‘always a form of social action and as such obligates its readers either to accept its call to action as true or fight its claims’ (2008: 2). He offered as examples of the type of fiction that might be treated as history some American writers such as McCarthy, Morrison, and Faulkner, and argued in the case of Morrison that ‘she wants to be read as a historian and not only a novelist’ (2008: 2). While a close reading of these particular authors is beyond the scope of this study, I believe my readings of Flanagan and Scott nevertheless offer a strong counterpoint to Parrish’s claims. We might want to read novels as history — and perhaps some authors would even like us to read novels as history — but the fact remains that novels cannot bear that scrutiny. Figural language will always obscure the final referent of any sign; it will always render meanings unstable; it will always prevent us from reading with confidence.

The Australian cultural historian and novelist Hsu-Ming Teo found a number of other problems with Parrish’s insistence that ‘since modernism novelists have been not only critiquing history as a practice but also practicing history by writing, or making, it themselves’ (Parrish 2008: 2). Chief among her complaints were the ‘tediously repetitive attacks on historians’ in Parrish’s work that ignore the one big, obvious issue; namely, that postmodernism had not brought a great deal of change to historiography because its ‘significance seems to lie in the meaning and status, rather than the actual practice, of history’ (Teo 2011: 311). She suggests that the problematics of language normally associated with postmodernism do not preclude historians from ‘the painstaking task of going through the archives for whatever fragments are left of the past and […] determining the “authenticity” and value of such evidence, or compiling the remnants of real historical figures into a plausible history’
(Teo 2011: 311). The same qualification can also be applied to novelists who incorporate research into their own work. But although Teo is adamant that ‘novelists freely acknowledge that novels are not history, because we make things up’, she nevertheless ends her essay by posing the question “‘Is fiction history?’” and then suggesting that ‘sometimes it can be’ and that ‘if historical fiction is not always history, […] it is always historiography’ (2011: 312).

Again, I think this misses the point. It might be the case that whatever ‘the problematic qualities of primary sources, and whatever fictive qualities may inhere in historical works, in researching the historical background for our novels most writers act as though history and archival material provide some sort of accurate or plausible insight into the past’ (Teo 2011: 312). I certainly would not disagree with Teo’s sentiments. Yet, the issue remains; novels cannot stand up to the scrutiny of a reading that has as its goal the search for a final, external referent. For a work such as Gould’s Book, a work that is so self-evidently fictional, this claim is much easier to sustain. But even for a novel like That Deadman Dance, which at least began with pretensions of having a more transparent relationship to the events of the past, we saw how quickly that pretension collapsed into the mirror-effect of allegory and inter-textuality. No matter how much we want fiction to be more historiographic, we cannot get around the problematics of referentiality.

I will give the last word on the matter to de Man. Fiction, he suggests, ‘invents fictional subjects to create the illusion of the reality of others. But fiction is not myth, for it knows and names itself as fiction’ (1971:18). In the same way, Gould’s Book is not a supplement to historiography, to be read with an eye for period detail or for insight into the various historical forces at work, but instead stands in direct opposition at any attempt to include it under the
rubric of history. Although an historiographic reading of the novel is inevitable, particularly given the subject matter, it resists that reading by revealing, through the use of irony, the inherent instability of meaning.

In effect, *Gould’s Book* rejects the metaphor of inside/outside that is so important to the discourse of history. It finds the empiricism of that metaphor to be overtly scientific and dehumanising, and seeks to replace it with something more useful for its purposes, an image of language as circular, as always folding back upon itself, and as, therefore, having no need to look ‘beyond’ to justify its conclusions. In other words, it finds more value in conceiving of truth horizontally, as with Rorty’s second tradition, than vertically, as of between representation and object. We find a similar rebelliousness of spirit in Coetzee’s *Diary of a Bad Year* — but whereas *Gould’s Book* is interested in contesting the metaphor of inside/outside, *Diary* is much more interested in establishing a new metaphor, of reality as pure representation. As we shall see in the next chapter, Coetzee goes further than either Scott or Flanagan in exploring the potential that different vocabularies have for explaining the individual’s connection to time and to narrative.
Three – Refining the Metaphor in Diary of a Bad Year

The issue raised by my readings of Flanagan and Scott — perhaps the most central of all issues for fiction and history — is the question of whether language has the potential to access truth in the form of an a priori essence contained by a representation; or whether language is only representation, a surface image, that cannot connote with certainty anything other than itself. Rorty resolves this issue by suggesting that we consider these two traditions as vocabularies, and that we decide between them based on how useful they are in solving problems. The paradox, then, is that both of these states co-exist, in that we can find sincerity in language when we search for it, as historians
generally do, because we make of use of that vocabulary and work within its logic. Or, alternatively, we can find slippage of meaning and the proliferation of readings, as literary theorists tend to do, because we work within a Derridean or Demanian vocabulary. What changes is not the ontological status of representation, or the connection between word and object —that is a problem specific to the Kantian vocabulary. What changes is the worldview, or the ideology, or the thought style that each of these vocabularies provides us with. But if this is the case, what are we doing when we write about the past? Are describing something that happened? Or are we, as Rorty would have it, simply reinterpreting the reinterpretations of the past and refining our vocabularies?

This is very much the area of discussion that Coetzee wanted to consider in his novel, *Diary of a Bad Year*. The most immediately striking aspect of *Diary* is the form in which it is written. On the page, the text is split into discreet portions, at first two, then later three portions, separated physically by a line. Above the line at the top of the page are a series of non-fiction essays. The essays cover topics such as the history of the state, the development of apartheid in South Africa, Australian politics, the formalities of apologising, and a number of other loosely connected subjects. In a further twist the essays are voiced by a fictional character, the writer JC, which from the outset brings into question the nature of referentiality in the text, as the traditionally non-fiction form of the essay is placed inside the container of a novel. JC shares some startling similarities with his author, Coetzee, including being a vegetarian, being a Nobel prize-winning writer, and being the author of ‘*Waiting for the Barbarians*’, so that it seems at least plausible that JC is more of a mask through which Coetzee speaks, rather than a full-blown fictional voice (Coetzee 2007: 171). Below the essays is a pair of running narratives that detail both JC’s story, and the story of his neighbour, Anya, an ‘earthly incarnation of
heavenly beauty’ who becomes the object of his desires (Coetzee 2007: 149). The novel is further divided into two broad sections, ‘Strong Opinions’ and ‘Second Diary’ and it is the relationship between these disparate parts, the essays, the narratives of JC and Anya, and the broad sections, that generates a good deal of the referential tension in the novel. The pairing together of fiction with non-fiction, of discussion of larger historical forces with individual narrative, generates allegorical overtones that draw into the text the wider theme of writing and the processes of transformation and accentuation critical to creative enterprise.

The overall effect is to immediately force us to evaluate the frames of reference in which the novel is operating, insofar as it is not especially clear what kind of ethical contract Diary is making with its readers. Are we to read the essays as being fictional? If so, what are we to make of the similarities JC and Coetzee share? How far do JC’s views align with Coetzee’s? The answers to these questions are never really provided, although it seems safe to say that there is some similarity and some alignment of views. But this only further confuses the referential topography of the novel, as we are now left to sort through what is biographical, what is fictional, and what is non-fictional if we want to locate the referent. Just when we think it is certain the novel is pointing beyond itself to the empirical past, we realised that the rug has been pulled from under us and we are still inside the text, or still inside its context at least. It is clear that Diary has a highly complex attitude to the real, a paradoxical attitude. It is less a referential anxiety, than it is a desire to investigate the nature of links that language shares with the empirical, or in Rortian terms to test whether the notion of vertical truth holds up in fiction.
We get a lucid example of this layering effect in the essay ‘On the Origins of the State’ — the first essay in the novel. Here, JC discusses the development of the early state, a process wherein ‘gangs of armed men grab power […] do away with rivals, and proclaim Year One’ (Coetzee 2007: 7). He begins by observing that all accounts of the ‘origins of the state’ employ the premise that ‘some generic we so wide as to exclude no one’ must necessarily participate in order to bring the state into being (2007: 3). The problem is, he notes, that ‘our forebears too were born into the state as far back as we can trace’, suggesting that the state is always there before ‘we’ are (2007: 3). His conclusion is that as the ‘Hobbesian myth’ of the state cannot be proven historically, it therefore belongs in the realm of ‘myth’ rather than ‘history’ (2007: 3). He goes on to examine, and find fault with, the notion that we choose, as citizens, to live within a state because of the immediate benefits it brings, a notion that he describes by referencing the Kurosawa film *The Seven Samurai* (2007: 7). The Kurosawa film portrays the emergence of a ‘parasite’ class of bandits — an early form of government — that turns the ‘villagers into a slave population’ by forcing them to feed and house their new protectors (Coetzee 2007: 6). The film thus lays out ‘for our consideration a very early stage in the growth of the state’, one that, it is has become apparent, JC considers emblematic of the human condition (Coetzee 2007: 6).

The difficulty arises, however, when we attempt to trace the final referent of the essay. JC reads *The Seven Samurai* as being synecdochical of a larger historical process. Throughout history, bandits all across the world must have brought villages under their protection in a form of proto-state. This kind of historical movement must have been the basis for the emergence of the state. So, in that sense at least, the referent is a real one, a definable historical process. But *The Seven Samurai* is a fictional text. The events it depicts never
actually took place. This leaves us with an interesting dilemma: is the larger historical process that JC describes fictional as well, or is it real? The point that Coetzee is making, I would argue, is an important one. JC begins by criticising the Hobbesian account of the origins of the state as not history but myth, and proceeds to offer an account of the state taken from a fictional text — an irony that reveals a good deal about how such larger historical forces are conceived of. Accounts of the origins or the purpose of the state, such as the one put forward by JC, are always ideological in nature in Diary. That is, they are constructs of the mind that are overlaid upon the world, rather than the other way around. They are fictions that give shape to the world. I will expand further upon this aspect of the text later in the chapter, but for now it is enough to point out that Coetzee begins Diary with a description of ideology in operation.

How individuals relate to larger historical forces is, therefore, an idea at the heart of the text and one that also dictates the way in which it is structured. We can see how this works when we shift to the narrative below the line. The discussion on the birth of the state is contrasted against a commentary of JC’s experience meeting his new neighbour, Anya. He describes the ‘metaphysical ache’ he feels at the sight of her, a tribute, he says, to her ‘beauty and freshness as well as to the shortness of her dress’ (Coetzee 2007: 6-7). He attempts to make a conversation and, when that fails, is left with a feeling ‘to do with age and regret and the tears of things’, a feeling that was ‘too diffuse and melancholy’ for Anya to comprehend (Coetzee 2007: 7-8). Of course, the extreme contrast between the time scales above and below the line is stark, and not easily reconciled by the reader. We move from discussing periods of millennia, to discussing a conversation in a laundry. But it is the discursive contrast, more than the temporal, which generates much of the
drama in this case. The low comedy of the narrative seems a pale reflection of the intimidatingly intellectual content of the essay: the pun of ‘thongs’ (‘the kind that go on the feet’), and the observation that Anya’s ‘derriere’ is ‘so near to perfect as to be angelic’ are both examples of the deliberate accentuation of the differences between the sections (Coetzee 2007: 7, 8). The immediate effect of this dissonance in content and tone is to diminish the moment-to-moment life narrated by JC. The below-the-line world is unambiguously denigrated as less consequential and less meaningful than the world-shaping events of the birth of the state. JC’s narrative is left to occupy the bottom of the page, much in the manner of a footnote. In effect, his life experiences are trivialised by the weight of the history he writes.

Hutcheon has remarked that metafictional bracketing of this kind which shows a character ‘looking at — that is, creating through words — the novelistic world, mime the mind’s ordering and naming processes of coding and decoding, ciphering and deciphering’ (1987: 6). In that sense, Coetzee is very likely commenting on the way in which ideology operates, firstly the way the individual mind orders the world, and secondly the way power shapes the individual. The split on the page between the essay and the narratives of JC and Anya is also a split between more formal discussions of society at large in the essays, and individual human experience in the narratives. We can see that, in terms of the frames of reference, Coetzee is less interested in whether he can confidently refer to events in the past or to larger historical processes, than he is in mapping out the ‘processes of coding and decoding, ciphering and deciphering’ that allow the individual to live in an historicised world (Hutcheon 1987: 6).
The use of juxtaposing discursive formats in *Diary* has been the subject of a good deal of critical inquiry. In an article about ethical and novelistic awareness, Dolors Collellmir Morales noted that Coetzee was hoping to ‘swallow the world’ (in Salman Rushdie’s words) by establishing a correspondence between the macrocosm—the world at large, and the microcosm—the life of the ageing protagonist, the writer Señor C. In this way, Coetzee’s critical thoughts, his personal reflections and his literary creativity are interconnected within a frame of fictional experimentation (2009: 43).

While for Morales the ‘device of the split page is powerful in itself’, it is the ‘way [the separate parts] are finally integrated’ that shows ‘Coetzee’s mastery’ (2009: 44). What Morales does not explore, however, are the temporal implications of the leaps between macro and microcosm that are taking place — an oversight, if only because the temporal aspect is inherent in the page layout that *Diary* uses. We are presented with the commentary on time whenever we skip across sections and are ‘made keenly aware of the writer’s struggle to fit language to perception, matching the cut and flow of language to the cut and flow of time. In terms of layout on the page, the writer’s aim is to transform space into time’ (Horrocks 1976: 62).

For H. Porter Abbott, however, the use of juxtaposing ‘text types’ is ‘an ingenious way to get the reader to feel their difference on every page and in this way to experience the opposing claims of time and the release from time that is so much a part of the work’s content’ (2011: 197). It is the idea of time, and release from time, that Abbott believes underpins the construction of *Diary*. The essays of the ‘Strong Opinions’ section of the novel ‘belong to a world out of time where the mind exerts complete control. In this space, they
are ‘impervious to time’, so that crossing back and forth between the page sections equates to ‘being in time and being out of time’ (Abbott 2011: 197). This is an important point: the feeling of jumping between two temporalities creates a sense that history is a kind of artificial reality, a representation of the past, but one that never equates with the past itself. What we see in Diary is a belligerence that is ‘not necessarily an indication of the belief that history does not exist so much as the conviction that since no discourse has unmediated access to [the past], any utterance, but the novel in particular, can claim a qualified freedom from it’ (Attwell 1990: 588).

Further complicating any reading of Diary, however, is that the fact that the ‘emphatic separation of narrative and expository text types and the consequent page-by-page experience of cognitive re-orientation that this separation forces on the reader’ tends to generate a deconstructive tension in the text (Abbott 2011: 192). Several text types are placed in parallel in order to set up a ‘critical distance’ between these ‘different discourses, from different periods and historical contexts and from different genres’ (Attwell 1990: 610). The result is that, ‘using the materials of structure’, the text ‘casts in relief configurations of language — conceived as subjectivity, self-representation, myth, and ideology — which contain different accounts of the limits and possibilities of life lived out in history’ (Attwell 1990: 601). In other words, when Coetzee wants to chart some of the ways in which history, as the product of myth and ideology, limits the kinds of social structures we have and limits the kinds of lives we can live inside those structures, he does so by contrasting the non-fiction essay format with the fictional narrative. Under this logic, non-fiction comes to be associated with ideology, while fiction is associated with the individual.
Needless to say, the attitude that *Diary* displays towards referentiality is quite complex. Along with all the usual caveats about referential certainty, it treats non-fiction as a space to chart the power structures behind historical representation, while treating fiction as a space where we see the individual manipulated by, and manipulating, those same structures. The question of whether language can point beyond itself to the empirical is reconfigured as whether ideology, being a property of narrative, can be located in the processes of history, and therefore in the empirical realm. This is not the referential anxiety that we saw in *That Deadman Dance*, or the fruitless search for certainty of denotation that we saw in *Gould’s Book of Fish*. This is a more nuanced and exploratory approach, one that is intended to uncover how language relates to power and how it creates reality. So even though *Diary* is obsessed with history as an idea, as a practice, and as a cultural force for change, it is also antagonistic towards it, and determined not to recreate the same power structures that it is criticising.

How, precisely, does Coetzee go about this? Well, as we have seen, the unusual page layout of the novel forces us to juxtapose what Abbott calls the ‘text types’ — ‘the expository text type of the occasional essay’ and the ‘narrative text type of the fictional story’ (2011: 190). This discontinuity is itself paradigmatic of the relationship between the individual and the historical: history’s distilled time sits above and apart from the continuous narrative of JC’s everyday life below the line. The essays seem to float free of a grounding in the symbolic reality that JC’s narrative represents. We experience them as ‘interruptions’ of the narrative below the line, and as ‘self-contained and without, moreover, any particular temporal locations on the narrative time-line’ (Abbott 2011: 190). However, the positioning of these two terms on a thematic or semantic axis also creates another potential interrelation between
them, one that ‘On the Origins of the State’ explores through an allegorical re-
arrangement of its subject. History, under this scenario, appears as an external
force, separate to the individual but acting on the individual, or what might be
more correctly termed in this case the citizen.

Later in the essay, JC goes on to argue that France after World War II
had the opportunity to be the ‘first people in modern times to roll back the state’ after
their ‘German overlords’ had retreated and left them momentarily without
government (Coetzee 2007: 8). The problem though, as JC sees it, is that the
moment some unknown poet suggested anarchism, he would have been ‘at
once been silenced by the armed gangs’ intent on taking power (Coetzee 2007:
8). His reflections here on the silencing of the poet by armed gangs, in effect
the representatives of the soon-to-be-born state, through the historical
example of post-war France, add a synecdochical dimension to this passage. It
results in an exchange of characteristics brought about by the proximity of
these ideas, so that when we read of the anarchic poet, we quietly substitute
him with self-confessed anarchist JC, and then in turn substitute the forces of
the state, the armed gangs, with the forces of history against which JC is
grappling. The proximity of these ideas, their synecdochical relation, naturally
invites the process of exchange. Furthermore, the relational link between these
new elements immediately adopts the same axial relation that is suggested by
the form of the novel, a link so strong and well established that all other
thematic elements cohere around these two poles. Two apparently
incompatible positions are thus established — the weighty, imperial force of
history, and the citizen upon whom this force acts. The unusual form of the
novel directly repeats and reinforces the paradigmatic system that the text has
set up, entrenching it as a binary pairing around which the action of the novel
must revolve. But what is also clear under this regime is that history has
inevitably become associated with state power and with the exercise of political authority.

We find this structure repeated as the trope becomes further established. In the essay ‘On Political Life in Australia’, JC ponders the dominance of free-market ideology and the historical reasons for it: ‘The market is where we are, where we find ourselves. How we got to be here we may not ask. It is like being born into a world we have no hand in choosing’ (Coetzee 2007: 99). There is an anger behind the ironic statement that we ‘may not ask’ how free-market thinking came to be so dominant — asking is precisely what JC intends, but to ask means to somehow get outside the ideological dimension of the market, which of course is dominant to the point that questioning it seems unthinkable for many. In part, this is because historical thinking ‘has to start by presupposing its conclusion: that the past takes precedence. It must defer to the temporal, pre-emptive occlusion of the present that comes with already recognising the precedence of the past’ (Davies 2010: 49). In other words, what was defines what is. The weight of historical representation generates an acceptance of the status quo, ‘like being born into a world we have no hand in choosing’ (Coetzee 2007: 99). This world is a world shaped by a state-backed historiography that promotes free-market capitalist ideology until ‘we may not ask’ how we got to be here (Coetzee 2007: 99). Of course, following the logic of the established trope, the text should automatically set the individual in opposition to this position — and that is precisely what we find. Humanity is imagined as a collective of anarchic individuals, a polity of JCs: ‘But’, JC observes, ‘surely God did not make the market – God or the Spirit of History […] we human beings made it’ — we are born into a world not made by the ‘Spirit of History, but made by humans’ and ‘if we human beings made it, can we not unmake it and remake it in kindlier
form?’ (Coetzee 2007: 99). The desire here, it seems, is to establish an association between anarchist ideology and the citizen, and thus to reframe the citizen as, once again, the individual, free from the influence of history. As we can see, the thematic or semantic elements cohere around either pole of the binary.

In the essay ‘On National Shame’, this tropological structure is repeated with similar outcomes. In this case, JC discusses the spectacle of a ‘country’s honour being dragged through the mud’ and the decisions that that entails for the citizens of a country, or as JC puts it; ‘How do I save my honour?’ (Coetzee 2007: 36, 35). Immediately, the imagery, the vocabulary, and the metaphors begin to fall in behind the established positions. It is the business of ‘individual Westerners in general’ to ‘find way’s to save one’s honour’ which is a matter of, JC points out, ‘not having to appear with soiled hands before the judgement of history’ (Coetzee 2007: 36). Most interesting for my argument is the way in which history and the state are placed in co-dependence: the ‘US administration’ has an ‘unparalleled degree of control’ over the archival record: it will ‘let no trace survive, textual or physical’ of its worst ‘atrocities’ (Coetzee 2007: 36). Because history will ‘judge [the US administration] on the basis of the record [they] leave behind’, the obvious way for them to proceed is to let ‘the files be shredded, the hard drives smashed, the bodies burned’ (Coetzee 2007: 36-7). The literal and metaphorical associations between power and history here are overt, but the tropological elements uphold and take even further the possibilities they convey. It is ‘individual Westerners’ who, through the logic of the trope, are once again diametrically opposed to history, as the production of history is associated with the state, in this case the ‘US administration’ (Coetzee 2007: 36). As we saw earlier, the congregation of ideas around the term ‘individual’
includes anarchic ideology, symbolically represented by the notion that only suicide ‘would save one’s honour’, and as such is the only practical response to the oppressive alignment of the US administration with the weight of history (Coetzee 2007: 35). Thus, the two positions cohere again around core ideologies, terminologies, and metaphors of history as a powerful, external force, here signified by the image of the judge passing judgement (Coetzee 2007: 35-6). The persuasive power of the essay depends in large part upon the emotive impact generated by this strategy of binary positioning, aligning the ‘dishonoured’ anarchic individual against an overbearing, authoritative, state-sponsored history.

As we read further, we find that the logic of the trope is pushed almost to the point of compulsion, so that Harold Pinter is presented as an outraged and shamed individual with the ‘gumption’ to ‘embark on a contest which [he] is likely to lose’ when he speaks out against history in the form of the Iraq war (Coetzee 2007: 107); so that Cape town becomes the site of a competition between those who give history a ‘home’ in their consciousness and those who do not (Coetzee 2007: 87); so that an Islamist suicide bombing is re-imagined as a response to the historically established principle that ‘the enemy can have no heroes’ (Coetzee 2007: 26); so that the act of ‘willed obscurity, of inner emigration’ (a term ironically borrowed from Hannah Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, describing the reaction of anti-Nazi Germans to the horrors of the war) connotes an anarchism that defies its historical circumstance (Coetzee 2007: 12; Arendt 2006: Ch. VII). The established pattern even dictates JC’s relationship with Anya’s husband, Alan, a ‘hard-headed broker’ and JC’s natural ‘antithesis’ (Abbott 2011: 190). Alan’s attempt at hacking JC’s computer and emptying his bank account, in this context, appears to legitimise the tropological structure and to install it as an ethically
correct account of the world. It justifies the assertion of the text that the citizen is always at odds with the dual forces of history and state, here embodied by the character of the right-leaning Alan.

So the form of the novel, specifically the use of dissonant time frames, gives a visual and thematic shape to the central opposition of the text, the polarity between the individual and the historical. This development is extended throughout the text, becoming a narrative of paradigmatic significance. With the binary put in place, the text then generates an ethical conflict that drives the tension and pushes the narrative towards some unexpected outcomes, all as a direct result of the logic of the trope. Metaphor, ideology, and theme all cohere around either extreme of the polarity. The ethical investment placed into it becomes more and more apparent as the conflict between JC and Alan emerges and the tropological structure is thus legitimised as a correct account of the world.

But, as with many of Coetzee’s texts, all is not what it seems. In due course we find out that the essays actually form part of JC’s ‘contribution to a book’ to be titled ‘Strong Opinions’, a collection that will feature work from six ‘eminent writers’ on ‘any subject they choose’ (Coetzee 2007: 20-21). JC is excited by the offer to have his opinions published. He feels that he is ‘too old and infirm to enjoy’ the world after a lifetime spent writing and he believes that the essays are, in some ways, an ‘opportunity to take magic revenge on the world for declining to conform to [his] fantasies’ (Coetzee 2007: 22). As we have seen, though, the essays project one of JC’s most deeply held fantasies — that the individual is oppressed and controlled by state-sponsored history. It is hard to avoid the irony that he is hoping to reshape the world with his own writing on history. When encountering ironies like this, it seems clear that JC
is being gently mocked throughout the first half of the novel. The way that the lofty academic language of the essays above the line contrasts so vividly with the low comedy of his courtship of Anya below the line is comedy of the same species as his desire to take magic revenge through his writing. These moments reveal that the narrative has begun the process of deconstructing the binary at its centre. While JC frets about the alignment of power between history and the state, a second voice is emerging that questions the validity of these kinds of ideological structures by mocking the man who makes them.

De Man observed in the work of Nietzsche moments where the ‘rhetorical mode of the text’ compels the presentation of literal descriptions as truthful, even when the text is working to undermine the very truthfulness of those descriptions (1979: 98). He uses the metaphor of the split to explain this unusual disagreement, describing how the narrative ‘falls into two parts’ or ‘acquires two incompatible narrators’ (1979: 98). In Nietzsche, this second voice becomes an ‘intra-textual structure within the larger structure of the complete text’ that ‘undermines the authority of the voice that asserts the reliability of the representational pattern on which the text is based’ (de Man 1979: 96). The problem is, as de Man showed, that the emergence of this second voice in the text damages the credibility of the earlier narrator, by arguing against ‘representational realism’ as the simulacrum of reality (1979: 98). The second voice ‘is neither true nor false, since its horizon coincides with the awareness of its own illusory nature’ (de Man 1979: 98). This reduces the text to a struggle between two incompatible views. The central focus becomes, then, not whether the history/individual binary is a feature of reality, but a more fundamental point: that the ‘actual meaning of the [textual] appearance is not the empirical reality it represents but the Dionysian insight into the illusory quality of this reality’ (de Man 1979: 92). That is to say, a text such as
*Diary*, with its focus on competing modes of rhetoric, forces us to question whether ideologies flow empirically out of history, or whether in fact ideologies point us to a more Rortian outcome — the essentially illusory nature of this kind of verticality of truth.

If we return to the essay ‘On the Origins of the State’, we can identify moments where this dissenting intra-textual structure begins to break down the binary and show it to be the result of an over-reliance on metaphors of vertical truth. The essay begins with an analysis of the ‘Hobbesian myth’ of the origins of the state, concluding that the myth is faulty because it does not mention that the ‘handover of power to the state is irreversible’: in fact, citizens of the state are ‘born subject’ and what we find when we ‘trace’ through history is that the state ‘is always there before we are’, it always precedes humanity, rendering the Hobbesian account faulty according to JC (Coetzee 2007: 3-4). This leads JC to posit the Kurosawan account of the origins of the state as the superior explanatory metaphor, one that provides an explanation for the ‘protection and extortion system’ around which the modern state is based (Coetzee 2007: 7). The historical utility of his metaphor is then tested by reference to France of 1944, a time when the populace observed that ‘the retreat of our German overlords means that for a brief moment we are ruled by no one’, a moment that was soon seized by ‘the armed gangs’ (Coetzee 2007: 8). For JC, the example seems to confirm the Kurosawan account of the origins of the state.

But if we follow the rhetoric of the essay, both the Kurosawan and the Hobbesian accounts are constructs designed to explain a certain state of historical affairs. They are chosen as examples because ‘in an Aristotelian sense’ they are “truer” than what we call history’, as they deal with the
‘underlying patterns of force at work in our private and public life’ rather than ‘mountains of events without detectable pattern’ (Coetzee 1988: 53). While metaphors may not have the status of the historiographic verticality of truth, they nevertheless provide useful, viable explanations of human experience. But this line of thought also leads inevitably to the realisation that the essay can be read ironically. The Kurosawan account of the origins of the state — far from being authoritative or true — is, rather, fictional. Fiction, because it occurs at the level of the signifier and nowhere else. The difficulty, as de Man has shown, is that the ‘self-reflecting mirror-effect’ that defines fiction as separate from empirical reality also forces us to consider whether the truth that these accounts seem to produce is in fact reality reflecting back at us, or whether it is an arbitrary shape overlaid upon reality, as Rorty suggests (de Man 1983: 17). In the case of ‘On the Origins of the State’, the emergence of the ironic second voice reminds us that the debate is not as straight-forward as JC would have it.

So this is very much a moment where the narrative splits, revealing two contrary positions within it; the first, JC’s position, that insists on the potential of language to access deeper truths and the possibility that an a priori essence can be contained by a representation, or in this case a metaphor; the second, that insists that language is only representation, a surface image, that cannot, in and of itself, connote with certainty anything other than itself. As we have seen, JC’s position places the individual in a polarity with history. The second dissenting voice however, deconstructs JC’s position by asserting the essentially illusory nature of this kind of vertical truth and asserting, therefore the impossibility of a convergence between past reality and the text. As the scene of writing is staged and restaged in each new essay, the two contrary positions play out, one charting the antipathy between the individual and historical time, the other demonstrating why that binary structure is arbitrary.
and illusory and only results from a failure to realise the nature of truth as horizontal, as ‘always already representation’ (Docherty 1996: 131).

It was with something like these ideas in mind that Coetzee wrote his polemic ‘The Novel Today’ in 1987. Here, Coetzee outlined his concerns about the way in which we read novels as ‘imaginative investigations of real historical forces and real historical circumstances’ — an approach that leads to the ‘novelistic text’ becoming a ‘kind of historical text, an historical text with a truth-value’ (1988: 53). The argument that he made in this lecture can be summarised as the following: the novel demythologises history as a discourse. The issue, Coetzee believed, is that history ‘is not reality’, but rather ‘a kind of discourse’ that will ‘with varying degrees of forcefulness, try to claim primacy, claim to be a master form of discourse’ (Coetzee 1988: 55). What the novel does is to find a way to stand against ‘the appropriating appetite of the discourse of history’ and reveal that the ‘categories of history are not privileged’ but are a ‘certain construction put upon reality’ (Coetzee 1988: 54). It is instructive, then, that we find Diary doing exactly that.

As we have seen, the process of deconstructing the main organising trope early in the novel is carried out subtextually, using irony to undermine the trope of individual/history. However, the process moves into the foreground about a third of the way through Diary, when Anya takes up her role as secretary to JC and begins to type his dictated essays. This brings about another point of realignment. She immediately becomes aware of the overt nature of the framing in the essays. She points out to JC that the tone he adopts is a ‘know-it-all tone’ that ‘really turns people off’ (Coetzee 2007: 57). To her, the voice in the essays says ‘I am the one with all the answers, here is how it is, don’t argue, it won’t get you anywhere’ (Coetzee 2007: 57). Again, this echoes
the arguments around representation because, as Anya points out, there is a strong sense that JC is imposing a frame over his experience. Like ideology, his frame is an expression of ‘the imaginary way in which people experience their real lives, the ideal representation of a material process’ (Hawkes 2003: 121). We are brought to the Althusserian notion that ‘in ideology, men do indeed express, not the relation between them and their conditions of existence, but the way they live the relation between them and their conditions of existence’ (Althusser 2005: 233). The emergence of Anya as a voice in the novel marks the moment when the trope of the binary between individual/history is openly challenged.

Initially, this occurs because Anya senses a kind of false consciousness or self-delusion in his essays. She tells him that if ‘you positively have to write about the world and how you see it, I wish you could find a better way’ to do it, because ‘that isn’t how you are in real life’ (Coetzee 2007: 57). Given that the text has already begun to deconstruct its organising trope, the terrible irony of the phrase ‘real life’ strikes an immediate chord, one that further exposes JC. He is neither living ‘real life’ in the Althusserian sense, as an awareness of the material essence of the world, or in a Demanian/Nietzschean sense, as an awareness that ‘all empirical reality is illusory’ (de Man 1979: 93). He is living in an historically and ideologically fabricated world. When read in terms of the dismantling of the trope, we can see how Anya is trying to make him aware of ‘the nature of this imaginariness’ (Althusser 1971: 164). To begin with, this has little effect on JC. As we have seen, he is fully invested in the opposition between the anarchic, wilfully obscure individual and the coercive, shaping power of history. He replies by insisting that these are ‘dark times’ and that he cannot be ‘expected to write about them in a light manner’ — again, clearly expressing his desire polarise through the metaphor of light and dark (Coetzee
What is more, ‘dark’ is immediately linked to history through a pairing with ‘times’, while ‘light’ is linked with writing and the acts of the individual, in what amounts to a re-enactment of the trope itself, effectively demonstrating how bound up JC is with that thought-style (Coetzee 2007: 58).

In fact, what this conversation uncovers more than any other moment so far is how the text undermines JC’s position by positing a contradictory argument, and then ironizing his responses to that argument. Here, the counter-argument is the ‘tragic discovery’ that ‘all empirical reality is illusory’, insofar as it can never be reached through language (de Man 1979: 93). It is an argument that the text mounts more forcefully in the second half of the novel, as we shall see later in the chapter.

The emergence of Anya’s voice also allows Coetzee opportunities to further undermine his protagonist. In another moment of revealing irony, Anya turns the polarised metaphors that JC prefers back against him when she describes his view as the unending search for a ‘boxing match’, ‘your opinion versus my opinion, Muslims versus Christians’ (Coetzee 2007: 61). Given the textual realignment that is taking place, it is easy to see how this fits into the broader intellectual framework of the text. JC seems to be caught up in what Davies would call the ‘rhetorical strategies of incarceration’ that history deploys, or what in ‘The Novel Today’ Coetzee called the ‘oppositions out of which history and the historical disciplines erect themselves’, such as ‘propertied/propertyless, colonised/coloniser’ and so on (Davies 2010: 48, Coetzee 1988: 54). These oppositions lock JC into a historical mindset that implies ‘there’s no getting out of history’ or that ‘nothing can be done about it’, and also imply that the ‘the human need for history is inescapable’ (Davies 2010: 48). Of course, one of the outcomes of ironizing JC’s position in this way is to question whether there is an a priori essence behind any of his metaphors.
They are made to feel suddenly rhetorical, rather than historical. They perhaps amount to no more than an example of ‘rhetorical mystification’ that conceives of the ‘relationship between the figural and the proper meaning of a metaphor’ as a ‘blind metonymy’ (de Man 1979: 102). The central issue that the text is pondering now switches. It becomes the question of whether the trope of individual/history is an ‘imaginary distortion’ of the ‘real world’ or whether there can, in fact, be said to be a ‘real world’ at all, or simply endless representation of it such as the trope itself (Althusser 1971: 164). That we are now aware of this, that we can see how these rhetorical strategies incarcerate JC even further, is the result of the ongoing process of deconstruction that the introduction of Anya has speeded up.

One important caveat that de Man made about these kinds of deconstructive moments in a text is that the authority of these ‘metalinguistic statements’ must necessarily be considered as secondary to the authority of a naive reading, owing to the ‘limitations of textual authority’ (de Man 1979: 99). But while these statements ‘cannot be read as such out of the original text’ in the same way as a naive statement, they are in fact ‘sufficiently prepared there to come to the surface in the form of residual areas of meaning that cannot be fitted within the genetic totality’ (de Man 1979: 99). The deconstruction, of course, does not occur in the same way as a logical refutation or argument, but takes place between ‘metalinguistic statements about the rhetorical nature of language’ and ‘a rhetorical praxis that puts these statements into question’, with an outcome that is more than just ‘negation’ (1979: 98). In other words, the process is subtle, and subtextual, but is not any the less consequential for being so. When we read in Anya’s poking and prodding more than just a gentle mocking of JC, the text can no longer be assumed to be naively re-treading the arguments for a vertical understanding of
truth, since the ironizing and undermining of that position is developed enough to warrant investigation. What was potentially just a ‘self-contradictory’ text, one that only ‘hides its contradictions by means of “bad” rhetoric’, could now be seen as a one that is demystified, or aware of the limitations of its own textual authority (de Man 1979: 98).

This gets to the heart of one of the paradoxes of de Man’s work, and not coincidentally to one of the central concerns of *Diary*, and that is, the problem of historical correspondence. For even de Man, who has written extensively on this topic, and in many ways defined the arguments around it, hesitates to follow his argument to its logical conclusion. We can see in the way he is forced to privilege a naive reading of the text, over the deconstructive metalinguistic statements that he detects at work in Nietzsche’s writing, a tacit acknowledgement of the dominance and the authority of correspondence as the mode of truth. Even in cases, such as the ones outlined in this thesis, where the reality of some presence or feature is shown to be imaginary, or at least questionable, and where the ironic representation makes it clear that the semiological gap between sign and signified unsettles vertical metaphors of truth, even in these cases it remains that a naive reading is most often the authoritative reading, as de Man concedes. Again, in Rortian terms if one goes looking for sincerity, one is likely to find it.

But driving that concession is a desire to retain a notion of representation that is so ‘comforting’ that even ‘in the face of an aesthetics and a politics which are ever less “representational”’ many theorists are loathe to let it slip away (Docherty 1996: 116). It is the assumption that beyond language, beyond human perception, there remains an external or prior essence that pre-exists its representation. Thomas Docherty has perhaps most clearly
argued the case against this assumption, showing that de Man and others have not followed the logic of horizontal truth through to its conclusion. De Man, as many theorists do, and as all historians must necessarily do, assumes that history is independent of textual representation, something that could in fact be represented faithfully if only the self was not ironically distanced, in Demanian terms, from its self-representations, and therefore from the possibility of perfect presentation (Docherty 1996: 131). As soon as they ‘think representation in terms of correspondence between an aesthetic entity (text, painting, music, dance, etc.) and a historical or political entity (“reality”)’ they begin to make concessions that promote the authority of the naive over the metalinguistic, and to assume the existence of ‘a realm of history that is somehow prior to representation’ (Docherty 1996: 131). But what if, as Docherty argued, that assumption is faulty? What if ‘history is nothing other than representations, a series of enactments or mimesis’ (Docherty 1996:131)? If history is ‘always already representation’, then the question of whether we can get beyond language to the prior essence of the past becomes much less consequential, because that essence was always illusory, was always a product of the ironic individual consciousness (Docherty 1996: 131). We might instead conceive of representation as that ‘historical “moment” or time wherein consciousness of self and of alterity is produced’ — alterity in this case being the reflections of self produced through Demanian ironic spiralling or second-degree irony (Docherty 1996: 131-2).

Of course, both de Man and Rorty owe a debt to Derrida on this point. Once he had proposed the notion of the ‘white mythology’, the belief that we can get beyond metaphor to the essence of what it intends to capture, then the problems began to crystallise and take shape. It was apparent to Derrida that philosophy was erected out of ‘fundamental oppositions’, such as
inside/outside or language/reality, which were the product of the ‘history of metaphorical language’ itself; which is to say that the history of our language constitutes our conceptions of the world in the form of entrenched metaphors, rather than the world being the cause of our conceptions, as the empiricists would claim (Derrida 1982: 228). Derrida expressed this in his controversial statement ‘there is nothing outside the text [there is no outside-text: il n'y a pas de hors-texte]’, but it is important to remember that this is not a denial of the existence of the real world, so much as it is an expression of the belief that reality is simply another metaphor in a long string of metaphors that attempts to justify a correspondence theory of truth (1976: 158). As Rorty pointed out, while it is tempting to see Derrida as a philosopher of language enquiring into the nature of the relation of words to things, it is probably more useful to think of him as a rascal bent on demonstrating that philosophy is just another kind of writing, not a science that sees through to some eternal, universal truth (1982: 93). In the end, Derrida’s point was a simple one: you cannot stop the process of reinterpretation and metaphor creation through an appeal to metaphors.

The position that Diary spirals inevitably, and ironically, towards, is something like this. It reveals that history is always representation, experienced as something akin to a Demanian ironic doubling, in which the ironizing self-consciousness is produced through the repetitious act of realising the linguistic split from the empirical self, and thus the split from the empirical world; but — and here is where Diary differs from many novels — once we ‘introduce representation into the spiral’ we have potentially ‘regained access to the historical world’ (Docherty 1996: 124). This occurs because the ‘act of representation which grounds the very linguistic consciousness of which de Man writes, involves the historical enactment of the self’ (Docherty 1996: 124).
So even ‘if we can never claim to know that world to the same degree of mediacy with which we claim to know ourselves or our own consciousness’, we can claim that the repetitious self-representation and ironic distancing in which we are always involved do ‘not refer to a prior world as their ground: on the contrary they construct a subsequent world in a series of presentations and representations of the self which deny that self any “essence” or totality in the historical realm’ (Docherty 1996: 124). Ultimately, it is representation which is the ‘component that bridges the gap’ between an ‘ironizing self-consciousness and an unironized and therefore self-present history’, allowing us to ‘construe history itself as being nothing more than the representational enactments of the consciousnesses whose interrelations make it up as an empirical event’ (Docherty 1996: 124).

If we return to Diary, specifically to the ‘Second Diary’ section, or what Anya calls the ‘Soft Opinions’, we can trace the way the splitting of the metaphorical self of the novel, like the Demanian mode of self-representation, generates a tension between whether the text and the past event are related, or whether the past event is made up as an empirical event by the representational enactments of the self. JC appears to have shifted position from the ‘Strong Opinions’ section of the novel, prompted by Anya’s repeated challenges. The vocabulary, the metaphor, and the thematic elements all undergo a substantial shift that reflects this change in position: now, JC is concerned first and foremost with the schism between what is termed the ‘visible world’ and the interior world, metaphorically established as a ‘dream world’ (Coetzee 2007: 154). That shift is complicated, argued, and ultimately reframed by constant ironic intrusions until we arrive at something that approximates Docherty’s representational enactments of consciousness, or the interrelation between the ironized self and the unironized, self-present history.
The lead essay of the ‘Soft Opinions’ section, ‘A Dream’, presents us immediately with this new, altered framework of understanding. The terms of reference have changed: no longer is history the primary source of truth, knowledge, and danger for JC. Apart from the obvious assertion of non-referentiality that we associate with dreaming, the essay, in many other ways, demonstrates that JC has begun to shift away from the polarised view of the world presented in the ‘Strong Opinions’ section. He begins by recounting the details of a dream, which concerns the death of the body, and the passing into the afterlife of the soul, a dream compared to the story of Eurydice and her journey into Hades. The strategy here is to confuse the various realms of correspondence in which the essay trades — dream, reality, and story — to the point that we are made hyper-aware of the differences between reference to the empirical and to the imaginary topographies of the novel. So when JC, in the midst of the dream, realises that ‘it was all true, that this was not a dream, so to speak’, we sense, behind the play on words, the desire to find a grounding for his linguistic consciousness, given the failure to do so through the binary relationship with history (Coetzee 1997: 130).

The issue, however, is not the referential undecidability of the dream, but the problematic belief that consciousness can ever find grounding. The final lines of the essay exemplify this. Here, JC cannot avoid the ironic split created by the attempt to ground his consciousness. We are told that the ‘Greek view of the afterworld strikes [him] as truer than the Christian vision’ because the ‘afterworld is a sad and subdued place’, not the vision of delight that the Christian heaven offers (Coetzee 1997: 130). There is an implicit comparison taking place in these lines between the afterworld and the dream world, connected by the myth of Eurydice. The experience of the dream seems to confirm his knowledge that the Greek afterworld is a truer representation of
what an afterworld would be. But the word ‘truer’, rather than providing the kind of insight that the narrator appears to believe it does, only reveals the futile nature of the search for correspondence (Coetzee 1997: 130). JC uses the word ‘truer’ in a purposefully ironic way, applying it to things that are beyond the realm of empirical truth: the afterworld, the story of Eurydice. But irony of this kind is never really under control, as we saw in Chapter 2. It ‘engenders a temporal sequence of acts of consciousness which is endless’ and can only ‘restate and repeat’ this endless sequence ‘on an increasingly conscious level’ while never making ‘this knowledge applicable to the empirical world’ (de Man 1983: 220). We see this demonstrated again here, as the claim that a ‘Greek view of the afterworld’ is ‘truer than the Christian vision’ continues to circle without finding a grounding — JC wants to claim it as true, but recognises the irony of doing so, and thus is left in a paradox that reveals more than ever the split between linguistic self and the empirical world which, ironically in this case, is the world of the dream, and so the irony doubles and continues endlessly, searching for a grounding and never finding one (Coetzee 2007: 130).

Yet, there is also a very real sense in which JC is not trapped within this act of irony at all, but is in fact called into existence by it. For when he recognises the anti-empirical irony of the word ‘truer’ and the paradox it creates around his own self-hood, is he not also aware of how, despite lacking grounding in the empirical, his consciousness produces itself with every act of representation? Docherty was quick to pick up on this point. He suggested that the ‘ontological status’ of all such representations is what is of concern when assessing the possibility of empirical or historical reference, because in giving expression to the ironically divided self ‘the linguistic self has produced irony not at the level of the consciousness divorced from history but precisely at the
level of a quasi-textual representation’ (Docherty 1996: 122). He concludes that de Man ‘is wrong to locate irony as a problem of the self; on the contrary, it is a problem of the representation of the self’ (1996: 122). The final lines of the essay do not shatter the illusion that language can refer unproblematically; instead, they reveal that ‘all representations are now ones which correspond only to other representations’ (Docherty 1996: 123). That is to say, representation is all we have.

This sense of a quasi-textual representation of the self also features in one of the final essays of the novel, ‘On the Erotic Life’. It touches upon the notion that representation does not refer to the prior world at all but rather constructs a successive world that denies the ironic self any ‘totality in the historic realm’ (Docherty 1996: 124). JC describes a ‘womaniser’, a man named Guyla, who has ‘mastered the art of conducting a love affair through all its stages, from infatuation to consummation, wholly within his mind’ (Coetzee 2007: 143) Guyla is able to call up a “living image” of the beloved and bring it to life ‘until he had reached a point where, still in the realm of the imagination, he could begin to make love to this succubus of his’ (Coetzee 2007: 143). The narrator wonders whether if in his ‘heart of hearts’ Guyla would ‘not prefer the real thing’, but Guyla insists that he is in fact speaking about ‘ideal love, poetic love, but on the sensual plane’ (Coetzee 2007: 146). At this point disagreement emerges between them: JC contends that there was ‘the real thing’ and then ‘there was the kind of mental rape Guyla performed, and the two were not the same’ (Coetzee 2007: 146). It is a damning assessment, and one that we naturally find it hard to fault. After all, who would want to defend a rapist? But the conviction with which JC speaks gives off a kind of desperation; it feels hyperbolic, as if he is too quick to judge. Is masturbation really comparable to rape? Or is JC simply ‘compelled by the rhetorical mode of
Guyla’s proposal of a ‘sensual plane’ of meaning where representation no longer requires a referent, but is fully contained within itself, a ‘living image’ as he calls it, presents a challenge to the polarity of individual/history which JC has cultivated and which he is in the process of reshaping (Coetzee 2007: 143). JC is compelled into an overblown reaction by the challenge that Guyla’s ideas present. But again it is irony that undermines his position in the text, revealing the split in the metaphorical self of the novel, one that manifested as a two incompatible positions in the first section, and which now manifests in the ‘Second Diary’ as a tension between whether the text relates itself to an empirical event or whether, as Guyla suggests, representation exists on a separate plane of existence, self-contained and referring only to other representations, other texts, rendering the ‘real’ as an ironic category of meaning. The essay ends with JC observing that ‘we cannot do without the real thing, the real thing: because without the real we die as if of thirst’ (Coetzee 2007: 146). The repetition of ‘real thing’ encapsulates the desire to persuade, and again reveals how the text is working against JC, undermining him, even when he is no longer wholly convinced of the sustainability of his position. It suggests the same desperation and bad faith that characterised the earlier assessment of Guyla’s technique as ‘mental rape’. In fact, the word ‘real’, just like the word ‘truer’, begins to resonate with ironic tension, further undermining JC’s attempts at dismissing Guyla. They are both words that encode the very notion of a prior world within their established meanings, a world that is captured and summed up by that meaning. In short, they are words whose referent must, by definition, be beyond and outside representation. Yet, the text cannot sustain this. As we have seen, it resists at
every turn JC’s determination to locate the prior essence that is captured by a representation. By insisting on the primacy of the ‘real’ over the representational, JC only succeeds in highlighting how unsustainable his position is within the logic of the text.

What we see now is that JC is not trapped within this act of irony at all, but is called into existence by it, as a quasi-textual self-representation, a reflection of his own selfhood in the splitting of figural and literal meanings. Once more, the final lines of an essay collapse under the weight of this tension and reveal the true position of the text — that history is always representation, experienced as something like an ironic doubling, in which the notion of prior essence is unimportant. In fact, it is always at the very moment when JC believes he is doing so that the text, or the quasi-text of the consciousness, splits and results in ironic meanings that cannot be contained. Representation always becomes misrepresentation. As a consequence the ‘series of self-representations in which we are now involved do not refer to a prior world’ but instead ‘construct a subsequent world in a series of presentations and representations of the self which deny that self any “essence” or totality in the historical realm’ (Docherty 1996: 124). At this point, Docherty believes we have ‘regained access to the historical world’, although it is a world no longer divided between the real and the sign, but a world in which there is only sign, only representation (1996: 124). It is a world that exists for us, and has always existed for us, only in the form of representation.

I return now to Rorty’s description of the two great philosophical traditions that consider truth either vertically, in the case of Kantian correspondence, or horizontally, in the case of the ironists. The problem that the Kantian tradition cannot solve is why ‘writing always leads to more writing,
and more, and still more — just as history does not lead to Absolute Knowledge or the Final Struggle, but to more history, and more, and still more’ (Rorty 1982: 94). Despite this, the ‘copy theory of ideas, the spectator theory of knowledge, the notion that “understanding representation” is at the heart of philosophy’ remain the staple for historiographic writing and reading (Rorty 1982: 94). What is clear from my readings, though, is that these traditions sit uneasily beside each other, mostly because the second, while denying the foundations of the first, would have nothing to ironize, nothing to push against, without it. In Diary, we see these two fundamental approaches to making sense of the world come into conflict with each other. JC desires a solid, rational grounding on which to base his assertions about the world, but as the novel unfolds and his doubts grow, we soon realise that it is, and always was, the second tradition that is acting as the philosophical underpinning of the novel. JC’s position, which correlates with the first tradition, becomes unsustainable within the Rortian logic of the text.

Ultimately, the deconstruction of this pattern in Diary mirrors the desire that writers and readers always have — the desire that texts refer with intention and be literally true when it is claimed to be so. That the novel is founded on the tension to disrupt this is very likely no accident: as ‘The Novel Today’ shows, Coetzee has both an interest and a stake in challenging what Davies describes as a social practice that ‘not only organises the world in the shape of past events, but imposes its practice as the sole, exclusive way of organising it’ (Davies 2006: 3). By exposing the weaknesses behind the assumptions of historiography, Coetzee is continuing old and no doubt unresolvable debates around the status of knowledge, the possibility of truth, and the nature consciousness — questions that have occupied philosophy since its inception. However, what is new in Diary is the way in which these questions are framed,
the tensions they generate, and the clarity it brings to the discussion. Its rhetorically self-conscious structure forces us to question the confidence in the transparency of language with which historiography operates — a confidence which Coetzee’s fiction rarely allows itself.
Conclusion

The aim of this thesis has been to establish three inter-dependent claims: firstly, that in a number of post-millennial novels by Australian authors, the attitude towards referentiality is paradoxical, implying certainty of meaning and certainty of denotation through literalist modes of rhetoric, while at the same time grappling with the lack of certainty created by irony, metaphor, and allegory; secondly, that this ‘loss of reciprocity with the world’ manifests in a range of different ways, from anxiety in the case of Scott, to investigation in the case of Coetzee, to exploitation in the case of Flanagan (Ellison 1993: 6); third, that, given this range of responses and the paradox of which they are indicative, to claim that the novel is a form of historiography is to misunderstand the horizontal nature of truth in fiction. In looking at the
various strategies and preoccupations present in each of the novels under discussion, I have tried to trace the exact points at which the tension between the belief that an a priori essence can be contained by a representation, and the confronting realisation that language may never connote with certainty anything other than itself, emerges into the narrative fabric of these novels. It would be fair to say that the structuring metaphor of the thesis has been, then, a movement 'between inside and outside, between a fiction’s apparent self-referential self-sufficiency and its appeal [...] to a topography beyond itself, a topography that has its being in the concrete particularisations of community or history' (Ellison 1993: 155). What I have found is that the problematics associated with this movement — slippage of meaning, loss of certainty, undecidability of intention — while presenting enormous challenges for historiography, are in the end the crucial characteristics of language that fiction highlights again and again as being the location of vital knowledge. It is a particular type of knowledge from which historiography has, rightly or wrongly, often cut itself off. Fiction, on the other hand, has just as often placed the pursuit of such knowledge at its core.

Which is not to say that the ‘link between the literary question of referentiality and the ethical dimension of human being-in-the-world’ is immaterial (Ellison 1993:155). Far from it. As we saw with the work of Kim Scott, the interplay between the fabric of the fiction and the prior material to which it hopes to point, or which it brackets, is the central concern of this type of fiction. So while de Man conceived of fiction as a discourse that announces its separation from the real through its ‘self-reflecting mirror-effect’, he was certainly overstating the case when he argued that literature is not ‘a reliable source of information about anything but its own language’ (de Man 1983: 17; 2002: 10). It is a reliable source of information about how we imagine the
world to be, which in the end is all we can do. Like quantum physics, the connection that writing shares with the world is paradoxical and it is unintuitive. What my reading of That Deadman Dance reveals most clearly is that the moment we think the relationship language shares with the world is transparent and literal is the moment that we are at our most mystified.

But if Kim Scott was concerned with the link between the referential and the ethical, Richard Flanagan was interested in how far that link could be stretched before it became meaningless. His novel stridently asserts its status as a fiction, using irony to unsettle correspondence. The kind of irony that Gould’s Book of Fish ultimately reveals is a destructive kind of irony, an irony ‘to the second power’ that spirals out of control and prevents a return to a stable, univocal text (de Man 1983: 218-22). The point the novel makes is that a historiographic reading of that text in particular, but more generally of all fictional texts, is an exercise in frustration. We cannot possibly hope to pin down a final, exclusively external referent for any of the text’s signs. Furthermore, Gould’s Book reminds us that if literature can spiral out of control in this manner, then perhaps historiography is less certain than we often like to believe. Hutcheon hoped that historiographic metafiction did not represent ‘a degeneration into the hyperreal without origin or reality’ (as moments in Gould’s Book ironically suggest) but instead represented the ‘questioning of what “real” can mean and how we can know it’ (2004: 223). In some ways this is true: Gould’s Book does ‘make the reader aware of the distinction between the events of the past and the facts by which we give meaning to that past, by which we assume to know it’ (Hutcheon 2004: 223). But it goes deeper and further than this too. It reminds us that the historian’s ‘objective’ language is searching for an unreachable prior essence at all times. It reminds us that the
‘Word & the World’ were not only ‘no longer One’, but had never been One (Flanagan 2001: 309).

Of course, the main theme running through this thesis is the problem of the ontological status of representation. Can language access deeper truths? Can an a priori essence be contained by a representation? Or is it the case that the notion of a split between word and object is itself a metaphor, one whose usefulness has passed? This was one of the areas of theory that Coetzee explored in *Diary of a Bad Year*. His novel drifts slowly towards a radical conclusion: that history is always representation, experienced as something like an ironic doubling, in which the notion of prior essence is unimportant. History is always and only representation and, furthermore, always and only misrepresentation. Under this view, the dichotomy between word and object is a meaningless one — representation is all we have of the past that is available to us now. Writing about the past does not bring it back or let us see it — it merely creates new worlds, new understandings. Representation begets representation begets representation. While JC is reluctant to accept this, the logic of the text propels us towards it, even without him.

In fact, for Rorty the word representation is a problem in itself, because it suggests a connection between word and thing that is causal. It is exactly these kinds of word, and the ideas they convey, that are at issue. He suggested that:

When philosophers like Derrida say things like ‘there is nothing outside the text’ they are not making theoretical remarks, remarks backed up by epistemological or semantic arguments. Rather, they are saying, cryptically and aphoristically, that a certain framework of interconnected ideas — truth as correspondence, language as picture,
language as imitation — ought to be abandoned. They are not, however, claiming to have discovered the real nature of truth or language or literature. Rather, they are saying that the very notion of discovering the nature of such things is part of the intellectual framework that we must abandon (1982: 140).

So while McCullagh, and a great many other historians like him, are content to accept that ‘it is often reasonable to believe that the best explanation of perceptions is that they are correct; and to believe that good historical explanations of the perceived data are true,’ it is fair to say that the post-millennial Australian fiction I have been examining has had a hard time settling down with that assumption (1998: 307). No sooner have these writers acted upon that assumption, than figural language arrives to interrupt the correspondence and coherence of their work.

In any case, it is less that this type of literature reveals the ‘poetics’ of language than it reveals the ‘problematics’ of it (Hutcheon 2004: 224). It seems self-evident that literature like the novels of Scott, Flanagan, and Coetzee is engaged in challenging the boundaries between the ‘verifiably historical and referential’ and ‘the extra-literary narrative discourses that surround it: history, biography, and autobiography’ (Hutcheon 2004: 224). That much is not at issue. But I would argue that it is less about knowing where to find the borders between fiction and its neighbouring discourses — which is what Clendinnen, Hirst, McCullagh and many other historians see as the point of contention — and more about the process of writing in general and the truth-effects writing creates. For, as this kind of fiction shows, the metaphor of the ‘Word & the World’ creates as many problems as it solves (Flanagan 2001: 309). Again, it is not the province of this study to answer these questions, but to trace the way
these questions are impacting upon the practice of fiction in post-millennial Australia. It is fair to say that these questions have been, and will continue to be, of foundational significance for fiction that deals with the past.

Frank Ankersmit, historian and philosopher of history, offered a useful outline of what a Rortian conception of the writing of history means for us, and what, I would add, it means for fiction. He put it this way:

we should not think of historical reality as the already existing ‘Referent’ to which all our narratives refer, but as coming into being only to the degree that historical discussion — ‘conversation’ as Rorty would have put it himself — progresses successfully. The existence of historical reality thus is a matter of degree: the more agreement there is, the more secure its existential status will become — with the ironic implication that historical reality only achieves the status of existence if historical debate has come to an end and there is nothing left to be ‘historicized’. History then supersedes itself (2008: 93).

On one hand, fiction would seem to be part of this conversation. It has an interest in the existence of historical reality and an interest in presenting the human experience of that reality in a way that is convincing. In short, it is part of the historicising process. But on the other hand, it is also committed to destabilising, contesting, and unsettling this process. Much of the literature about the past problematizes the notion of agreement or successful progression. It contests the metaphors upon which historical understanding is built. Many may consider this destabilisation to be part of the Rortian conversation moving historical understanding forward, but I remain unconvinced that it is doing so in a way that promotes the kind agreement Ankersmit talked about. I would, however, argue that this aspect of fiction, its
potential to provide new vocabularies and new metaphors, its potential to point out what needs to be jettisoned from the old ones, is an essential function of the process.

For this reason, I read the three novels in this study as being conscious of, and resistive too, the ‘powerful [...], perhaps even dominant tendency, to subsume the novel under history’ (Coetzee 1988: 53). There has been a tradition of defining history against fiction, defining it as non-fiction, as the discourse that studiously avoids the circularity of irony and allegory. This hierarchy places fiction in the inferior position, as a discourse of the imagination rather than a discourse of scientific methodology. Coetzee called this the position of ‘supplementarity’ (1988: 54). But this hierarchy has been upended by the emergence of postmodernism and post-structuralism, which has shown that ‘all history is fictional, in the sense that it is a literary (rhetorical, aesthetic) construction based on evidence that is itself of inevitably questionable reliability’ (Southgate 2009: 195). The outcome is that historiography no longer appears to be non-fiction. It now appears as what it always was — a form of writing. Like all forms of writing, it relies on modes of rhetoric and structuring ideologies. Like all forms of writing, it is ironic and allegoric. So while there remains a tendency to subsume fiction under the rubric of history, as we saw in Chapter 2, it is less likely than ever that those things we hold to be historiographic, such as a vertical notion of truth or a commitment to the actuality of written history, will be sustainable in fiction. They simply will not hold up to scrutiny.

De Man observed that literature ‘is fiction not because it somehow refuses to acknowledge “reality,” but because it is not a priori certain that language functions according to principles which are those, or which are like
those, of the phenomenal world’ (2002: 10). I would add to this that while literature might be unsure of language’s relation to the phenomenal world, it is still much more inclined to engage with the problematics of reference, and to attempt to move beyond correspondence as the measure of truth, than historiography has ever been. The underlying suspicion that language shapes the phenomenal world drives the contemporary fiction I have been looking at in this study. Coetzee described this kind of novel as one that ‘evolves its own paradigms and myths, in the process (and here is the point at which true rivalry, even enmity enters the picture) perhaps going so far as to show up the mythic status of history — in other words, demythologising history’ (1988: 54). That is certainly one aspect of what is going on. However, it is also the case that these novels demythologise the status of their own representations as well. In other words, they contain the seeds of their own deconstruction. As we saw with Coetzee’s work, that process is often at the core of the novel, guiding the narrative and shaping the structure of the work.

My thesis is that early twenty-first century Australian novelists are forced to play out literature’s failure to denote over and over again, full of the realisation that ‘history is something we know we can’t learn, something we can only desire’ (Elias 2001: xviii). If we want to read novels as ‘imaginative investigations of real historical forces and real historical circumstances’, then we inevitably run into epistemological problems (Coetzee 1988: 53). Novelists are acutely aware of these problems. Their anxiety, their curiosity, and their outrage shape their narrative responses to it in ways that they perhaps could not have predicted. And that is the true beauty of writing.
Appendix: An Extract from the Novel To Name Those Lost

What is a good man but a bad man’s teacher?

What is a bad man but a good man’s job?

If you don’t understand this, you will get lost, however intelligent you are.

--Tao Te Ching, ch. 27.
The Letter

Her head hit the hardwood floorboards and bounced and a fog of ash billowed, thrown so by the motion of her spade. Maria was slight of figure, slim, with a quiet, softly coloured face. She crashed and the spade rang and the thrown ash found volume and then fell on her hair and her old faded pinafore. Beside the kitchen’s great red-brick hearth she looked the size of a child. Her light hair slowly dulled to grey under the raining grit. She lay entirely still.

When her son William Toosey came into the kitchen he did not see his mother Maria laid out in the cinders. He had a hessian satchel on his shoulder which he placed on the table. One by one he removed half a dozen beer bottles from inside and lined them up. He looked about nervously as he did this. He’d scratched the labels off each but by the caps you could tell where they’d come
from. What he hoped was that she’d drink the beer and not ask. Stepping away from the table he saw his mother on the floor and he gave a start and then smiled.

There you are, he said.

Ash fell. His mother lay as before.

Ma, he said. I’ve brought somethin.

He set his satchel on the sideboard. He crossed and crouched near her and the coals crunched beneath his knees. Her eyes were closed, her mouth ajar. Ma, he said. He wasn’t smiling now. He tried to lift her up but had not the strength in his arms. When he got around behind and pushed her upright she was as slack as a straw toy and fell forward at the waist and rolled.

Ma. Stop it.

He shook his mother by the shoulders. Her head lolled and she gave off a fine cloud that he could taste on his tongue as he breathed. He eased her to the floor and stood. This was stupid. She was shamming. He looked around the kitchen, his fists balled by his sides, and an instant passed where he wanted to hit her. He nudged her with his boot. Get up for God sakes, he said. There is beer for you.

Then she coughed and winced.

What’s the matter? he said. He brushed the ash from her cheeks. He throat seemed to be pumping beneath her skin. She turned her head, heaved, and let forth a thick liquid over the floor. Her eyes fluttered open and for brief time she gaped at the ceiling as if looking through it to the sky, the great blue above, but they closed again and she was still. William wiped her cheek, her
lips, with the sleeve of his shirt. He felt the heat from her brow. For a while he just knelt there. His mother wasn’t shamming. She was sick and she needed seeing to. He had to think about that. About what it meant. There was a doctor on Brisbane street, and he thought he might know the house, and that was all he could think of.

He ran. The worn dirt road he took led into town, flanked by homes of weatherboard and brick. Ahead only the innermosts of Launceston, a stretch of roofs studded through with church steeples, the river winding like a wide leather thread. The dawn sun perched beyond the water was already white with heat. He ran and his pulse thumped in his head. His boots hit with a puff of dust. A man in a tweed coat walked the road here and this man turned as William shot by, startled, and called, Ease down, for the love of God! William never even looked back.

The town park filled a few acres of grassland skirted about by cast iron pickets and planted over in a pageant of English willow and oak and pine that was wildly contrary to the somber gums lining the hills above. He knew every inch of that park. The cubbies, hide holes, blind switchbacks. The routes in, the routes out. All of it. But today, bundling through the gate with his breath firing in the hot dark of his chest, it seemed made new. He passed the ornate water fountain depicting naked cherubs at play in a pool and felt no cheer for the sight of it. The glass conservatory for the keeping of flowers gave his reflection differently, a huge-eyed boy, hair full of wind. He lowered his head and ran harder.

At the far side of the park he spilled onto Brisbane street and skidded on the dirt footpath as he changed direction. A gig rolled through the crossing that still had its lamps lit from dawn and he ran in the haze it made with his eyes
pinched. From the street he studied the neat white-limed houses searching for which belonged to the doctor. Plum trees was all that he remembered: two of them in ceramic pots by the door. Yet many had fruit trees, many had brass plaques, the residences of barristers, of insurers. He ran along a road that was lined with tall stucco and cut stone places, sucking back the smokey air of morning and scanning every house he passed, and just at the corner as he saw the doctor’s house, the potted trees by the door weighted with blue summer plums, just as he felt that small relief, a pair of constables primly uniformed in black stepped from a side lane into the full sun and set their black hound’s eyes upon him.

William Toosey!

He turned around. They were crossing the road each dragging his dawn shadow for yards behind, the taller one waving off flies while resting his other hand upon the butt of his billyclub. William breathed hard. He was swaying and he thought he might fall. This man was called Beatty and the low sun in his eyes made him appear to smile. He’d drawn his long billyclub, black and gleaming like a greasy crowbar, and was tapping his thigh with it. William glanced up at the doctor’s house and clenched his jaw.

Lovely mornin, the constable said. Just lovely.

William kept his eyes on the doctor’s place.

Wouldn’t you say, William?

Piss off.

Beatty prodded his mate in the chest with the point of his club. This other fellow was young and pale in his freshly-pressed uniform. Beatty prodded
him and then he gestured at William. Not one of your more helpful sorts, this one, he said to the fellow.

No, sir. Looks a rough one, sir.

Rough? Jesus, man. He’s a lad of twelve. You can handle a lad of twelve, can’t you, Webster?

Yes, sir. I expect so.

You expect so. Well God help us.

William looked from one to the other. He looked at the doctor’s house.

So, Beatty said. How’s about this brewery then. Terrible business.

William backed away.

I aint said you could move.

William paused. He was breathing even harder. Mr Beatty, he said. Me ma is sick.

The constable winced in disgust. What a load of mullock.

She fell down. I was goin in there for the doctor.

But Beatty wasn’t listening. Where’s Oran Brown? he said.

Eh?

Beatty tucked his stick in his armpit. They are shy quite a few cases, he said. Down at the brewery. As you likely know.

Mr Beatty, somethin is wrong with her. She needs a doctor. That’s God’s truth.
Beatty was smiling but he grew sober as he leaned towards the boy. I have Lally Darby under charge for it, he said.

She never went near the place, William said.

Young Lally is as guilty as a Jew and that is a fact.

It’s a slanderous lie. She don’t even drink.

Beatty grinned. He turned to his mate. Proper little solicitor, this one.

Yes, sir.

Thin as a lawyer’s promise too, Beatty said. Don’t your ma feed you?

Get naffed, William said and he reached for the gate. But Beatty was not about to have this. He laid his club upon the point of William’s throat and they stood for a time thus strangely couterposed, each staring hard at the other, before William let his hand fall. Beatty shook his head in mock sadness.

Weren’t just Lally, he said. She had Oran Brown with her.

Mr Beatty, I have to have the doctor.

Where is he? Where’s young Oran.

She needs help.

Webster, draw you stick, Beatty said.

This Webster hesitated, his fingers hovering over the handle. He looked at Beatty. He raised it from the holder on his belt and brought it about.

Give him a piece of it, Beatty said.

Webster gave a small laugh.
There's nothin funny about this. Jesus, man. Hittin a child makes you laugh, does it?

No, sir.

Then belt him. Good and hard, so he knows we aint fartin about.

You want me to hit him?

That's right.

Webster smiled. He frowned. No joke? he said.

No joke, Constable. Not a bit.

Webster came forward. He gripped the club in both hands, looking whiter than ever, his absurd moustache twitching. He stood near the boy who was making himself small against the paling fence and he brought it high behind his shoulder and held it there. Where, sir? he said.

Wherever you fancy, Constable.

Webster swung a tentative blow that caught the boy across the calf. William jumped. A deep and wounded scowl spread across his face.

Of all the fuckin— I said belt him, man. Belt him. Eh? You hear?

The junior constable looked around the street. Further along merchants at the assorted stores and tea rooms had started placing out signs and some stood on the footpath shielding the sun from their eyes and gazing at the little scene unfolding before the doctor's place. This new attention seemed to unsettle him still further. He lifted the club but did not swing.
You want to learn the job, Beatty said, well this is the job. We aint trifles and we aint half-hearts. We do what needs doin.

Sir, he’s a child.

Beatty shook his head glumly. I’m as troubled by it as you are, he said. Course I am. But young Shortshanks here believes he has the better of us. He wants to withhold what he knows. What do you say to that?

Webster’s cheek gave a twitch.

Constable, you are bound to it, Beatty said. Show me the man and I’ll show you the law, you ever hear that? So here you are, Mr Law himself. Stopped dead in his duties by a boy of twelve.

Might we not put him under arrest, sir?

For what? The boy has broken no laws I know of. Under arrest. Bleedin hell. Are you a lawman or aint you? All you want is the whereabouts of the boy Oran Brown.

Still Webster did not strike. His eyes in the harsh sun had begun to water. He lowered the club and stepped back. It’s not the proper thing, he said.

Well now, Beatty said. Well now this is your first week, and you are liable to a bit of nerves. No shame in that. None at all.

William stood watching with his mouth drawn tight. He didn’t know what to do but the thought of his mother was eating in his chest like spilled vinegar. You’ll know a man in small moments was what his father had told him. Here was one such. His own small moment. An appraisal of all his nerve. So he shuffled along the fenceline closer to the picket gate and reached for the latch.
Beatty came sharply about. With his long black club he planted a blow across William’s back that sprawled him on the dirt and when next William opened his eyes there was the constable, and behind him the sky, and the constable was speaking to him.

What did I tell you, he said.

William stared up at him.

I told you not to move. Now get up. You look a fool.

He rolled over. He was dizzy and his shoulder hurt. The folk in the street looked away as he climbed to his feet, for there was little to be gained in helping a thing like him and all and sundry knew it. He rubbed his shoulder. The world spun. He concentrated on the task of rubbing. His shirt was an old one of his father’s turned in the sleeves and when he looked up at the constable his eyes had grown hard and dark. My pa will hear about this, he said.

Beatty grinned. I’ll bet he does, he said. Well-known rogue is Thomas Toosey, he said to Webster. You can see the big dog’s nature in the pup. He stood grinning down at the boy from the shade of his peaked cap.

The boy held his gaze. See how you grin when he puts a knife in you.

The mirth fell from Beatty’s face. He raised his club with mean intention, a quick action. He wailed the boy about the legs and body in series of wild thumps, two-handed, like the axe blows of foresters. William covered his head and curled into a ball but one blow caught on his ribs, drove the wind from his lungs, and another on the bones of his spine caused him to spasm in pain. A rising dread began to fill his thoughts. Beatty would end him here in
the dust and sun. With each blow the pressure grew unbearable. Blood rose in his brain in series of exploding colours.

It was only the coming past of a butcher that caused Beatty to stop. He wheeled by with a barrow of meat cuts covered under a bloody hessian sack, his sleeves rolled to the elbows and stained red, meanly eyeing the constables as he crossed. Beatty turned and watched him pass, his billyclub half raised. Eh? See something as upsets you, John? he said.

I can pick a coward, the butcher said.

Oh cowards, Beatty said. Was we cowards last week when your cousin was robbed?

The heavy twine of the butcher’s forearms tensed. His jaw worked side to side beneath his mighty beard. He wheeled on. Beatty nodded at him. Soon ripe, soon rotten, John, he said. Better get that meat delivered.

When Beatty turned back his face had taken on a sour look. He rolled his tongue around his cheek as he studied the boy huddling on the dirt and that was all the space William required. He scrabbled to his feet and broke for the park at full pace.

Oi, Beatty called.

It was a burst of unqualified terror that propelled him. The park stood green and sunlit at the top of the street and he crossed the intersection for the gate, the spread of lawn, and beyond it the deeper glades caulked with black. He did not look back but the pounding sound of their ankle jacks and their calling and swearing came back doubled off the tall stucco homes and he knew they were close. Upon entering the park he hurdled without breaking step a
derelict fellow at rest on the grass and he stumbled and steadied himself and bolted for the western edge where close-set trees grew in a thicket bored through with crawl holes. He scrabbled into one such scrub-cave and hid. The constables, each with his stick, were lumbering over the grass for the thicket. They yelled for him to show himself. William bellied deeper into the mess of crawl ways cut by the passing of children.

Boy, you better show out here.

He could hear them clubbing at the brush. He slid through dead leaves, pine needles, keeping low. White light cleaved into the under-dark. All about small birds took flight. He pulled and crawled and found the far side that led onto Brisbane street and here he crouched to assess the likelihood of making the row of houses opposite. He could not see the constables, but he could hear them, hear the brush shattering where they clubbed at it. He looked either way along the empty street, took a breath, and ran.

The houses were huge and well tended and he mounted the first fence he hit, tossed his leg and tumbled after it and lay behind with his steam-hammer heart thudding at the cut grass beneath. They called and called. He put his ear to the palings. A cart rattled by and when it had passed he listened hard. The constables called and it was like the lowing of cattle, yet he knew they had not seen him. He also knew Beatty, the stubborn bastard, would not stop.

He looked around the yard where he’d sheltered. Trimmed apple trees and weeded gardens, a path winding through the shade. He sat up. Standing there in a broad sunhat was a gardener and he was all over burnt black with the sun with a full beard upon his face. He stared back at the boy. He had a broadfork buried into the earth and his foot was cocked on the crossbar
where’d paused in this action and he seemed about to speak when a call came from across the road.

You there.

It was Beatty.

You aint seen a boy come along here have you?

The gardener looked at William where he was huddled at the base of the fence and he looked at Beatty.

Rough lookin little bugger, Beatty said.

The gardener yanked up his fork. Soil fell from the tines.

Well? Tell me.

Should rather put out me own eye, he said and drove the fork into the ground.

You what? Beatty banged his club on the fence, giving William a jolt.

The gardener turned another sod and broke it.

I can arrest you for causin obstruction.

Do what you like.

There passed a heavy silence where the gardener worked the rose bed and kept his eyes low. William could see Beatty’s hand gripping the fence slat above him, the supple hands of a man who knew no labour. The fingers began to drum.

He’s the one as stole from the brewery, Beatty said.
The gardener shook his head wearily. He turned a sod.

He must’ve come along here some place, Beatty said.

The fork sank without a sound.

You must’ve seen the little prick.

You’ll have nothin from me, the gardener said.

Beatty slammed his club against the fence slats. I shall be mighty aggravated if I lose him.

Then best you get searchin.

The fingertips grew red with strain. He come along here, Beatty said, he must of.

The gardener levered up a solid lump rife with earthworms. He folded it over.

You hear what I said?

Now the gardener stopped. He leaned on his tool and looked about the yard, a jaded sort of patience to his grey eyes. No, he said without looking at the constable. You aint hearin me. Arrest me if you like, knock me about, whatever. I’ll not sell on a child.

William could hear the out-hiss of breath as Beatty wheeled away, the steadily receding slap of club upon thigh. He sat for a while listening and holding tight to his knees. He watched the gardener kneel to fetch out a stone that had surfaced and toss it among the flowers. He was faced away from William and nor did he look at the boy. The tool sunk with a press of his leg and he lifted a width of dark velvet earth. Rising carefully, William glanced
over the fenceline to where the constables at some distance scoured the park side of the street, poking their sticks into bits of planted brush and kicking through the shrubs, the pair of them with their sleeves rolled in the manner of sailors, calling for the boy to present or else take a flogging. He lowered down.

Get yourself along, the gardener said.

He had stopped work. His hands were cupped upon the point of the handle and his head was bowed so that he seemed to be talking to the very earth.

They’ll have me, William said.

I won’t harbour thieves.

He was lyin. It wasn’t me at the brewery.

I said get.

William took a breath ready to argue but the gardener had lifted his tool and swung and was coming for him, frowning, bent for a fight, the brim of his hat lifting from the suddenness of it.

Get.

I’m going, I’m going, he said. He began to edge away along the fence.

Stay gone.

Yes, sir.

The gardener stopped and stood in a wide stance, the fork braced at his hip.

That was a good thing you done, William said as he edged away.
Thank me by not comin back.

I will. I won’t.

As he crossed under the low, harvest-heavy branches of orchard trees he knocked loose some fruit and he cut toward the side fence with it thudding behind him. He topped the palings in a crazed leap, tumbled, and fell into the neighbouring yard. There was a bed of tulips into which he splayed on his back, the wind taken from his chest. He coughed and winced and could not breathe. He went loping across this new yard, heading for the next fence, the next fall. In that fashion, and with a shred of luck, he put some distance on the constables before taking to the footpath on Windmill Hill, heading to where he had a long view the road, over the park, and into town. He shaded his eyes with one hand. Beatty and Webster were gone, or at least he could not see them. Wind had laid over the smokes that rose long and lank and grey as drought plain grass above the town. Away in the distance the river shone like wet slate. He sat a moment on the gravel path in thought.

How long did he dare to wait? He remembered the ash on his mother’s cheeks. The shallowness of her breath. He put his head in his hands and sat considering what to do. There was also the matter of Oran Brown, who’d need warning of what Beatty meant, but that boy might be anywhere and now was not the time. In the end there was little else for it. She must have the doctor. He stood and scanned the park, the road, the stretch of houses that ran to the mud-coloured river. No sight of the constables. He wasn’t sure if that was a good thing or not. Keeping close to the houses along the hill, he set out for the doctor’s place. When he crossed the intersection his mouth was dry and his fists were clenched at his sides. But there were only the early risers, the men off to the wharf and the bakeries.
At the doctor’s place he unlatched the gate and walked up the path with his head swiveling to survey the street and he took hold of the knocker and was raising it when a fellow stood from out of the garden. He’d been cutting back rose bushes with iron shears which he was now holding out mid-stroke.

Mrs Hampson has already taken our bottles, he said.

What?

Yesterday. Returned them to the store.

I aint come about bottles.

The fellow lopped the tip off a stalk. He was concentrating gravely upon this task and seemed to forget the boy was there.

Me mother has taken a spell, William said. She wants a doctor.

The doctor looked up. He seemed puzzled. It’s Saturday, he said.

She fell on the floor. She won’t get up.

The doctor frowned.

Please, sir, she’s not well at all.

He looked around at his roses and then looked at the boy. Does she realise it’s Saturday?

She don’t realise much about much at the moment.

Can she speak?

No, sir. She’s insensible.

How far is it? he said.
Down the hill, down Cimitiere street.

There's an extra rate payable on Saturdays.

Yes, sir, very well. But you must come. She aint well.

The doctor sat aside his shears. Well, come on then. Let's see her.

It was the best part of an hour before he arrived back with the doctor and the doctor was in a coat despite the heat, hair greased flat, hauling a carpet bag that must have held his tools. William went almost at a run. He glanced back in spells to check the doctor was coming. The doctor would jog a few paces and then walk and then wave for him to slow down. At the front of the house William lifted back the latch and held the gate for the doctor. He showed him inside where she'd fallen before the kitchen fire and the doctor dropped his bag on the table and took one look at Maria and shook his head.

What's the matter with her? William said.

This lady has passed.

Is she sick?

She's dead.

What? William was sweating. His hair was lank. Aint you better check? I mean, she looks unwell.

She's blue, the doctor said.

So do somethin.

There's no question. She is past my help.

She's only thirty eight, and never a day of illness in her life.
My boy—

What kind of doctor can’t help a healthy woman?

The doctor smiled but his lips were thin and drawn beneath his military moustache. From the way the tendons of his jaw flexed he seemed to want to say more, but he had grace enough to unclip his bag and pull out a spiral-bound pad and a pencil, lick the lead and begin to jot.

She can’t be, William said. It’s a mistake.

He knelt beside her and the moment he touched her forehead he knew it was no mistake. She was cold and eerily still. Not like sleep, not like life. His throat tightened and he felt everywhere a creeping sensation of the skin.

What happened to her? the doctor said.

When William looked up there was no longer anything fretful about him.

Did you see her fall?

No.

Did she hit her head?

I just come in found her lyin here.

The doctor nodded slowly and without commitment. He studied William, his eyes flicking to the different parts of him, the hair like a sheaf of wheat, the loose and overlong clothes. He nodded and he took from his bag a pair of leather gloves and pulled them on. He came beside Maria and began carefully to walk his arachnidian fingers around her throat, around her temple,
and through her pinned-up hair. Last of all he opened her mouth to peer inside.

    Where is your father? he said.

    William had grown pale. He couldn't speak.

    You live alone here with your mother?

    After a moment he said, Not no more.

    Do you expect your father home soon? Do you have family or friends who might attend to you?

    William looked up. I don't need no help, he said.

    The doctor watched him a moment. He stood a retrieved his pad and jotted something down. His mouth tugged as if he was talking secretly and his japanned fountain pen moved and made a grazing noise. William looked away out the window where in the neighbouring yard he could see a girl passing sheets through a mangler and he thought his mother ought to be doing her washing too, given the weather, but his mother was dead and he was entirely alone in the world and he felt an utter fool for thinking it.

    You must have family or friends, the doctor said. Someone who can attend to you.

    I've an aunt and uncle. Cousins.

    Where are they?

    By the hospital hill. Over west.

    Good. That will do.
I aint goin there.

Pardon me?

I’ll be right by meself. Like I told you.

The doctor closed his pad. My boy, he said, tapping his pen. Half a loaf is better than no loaf at all. Go to them, or the police will be obliged to put you in the invalid depot.

They won’t send me nowhere cause I aint leavin.

You must be in care and the law won’t allow otherwise. Surely your father is nearby?

Listen to me. I said I can look after meself.

The doctor looked at William and his jaw knotted and unknotted. He tore a sheet off his pad and folded it and placed it on the table. Given your circumstances I’ll provide you with fourteen days to pay that, he said.

Pay what? You aint done nothin for her.

Fourteen days, hear me. Not a minute more.

She’s as dead as ditches, you bloody crook.

There’ll be someone along for her presently. I’ll see to it.

The doctor snapped shut his bag. He didn’t look at the boy. He strode through the parlour for the door, his bootsoles sounding on the floorboards, then muffling over the possum skin rug, then sounding again as he cleared it.

After the doctor had left, William sat and held his mother’s hand and wiped her forehead clean of ash. He straightened her collar. He wasn’t sure
what else to do. In the airing cupboard he found a bedsheet and covered her up to the neck and she stared back as if he’d just delivered some woeful news and after a while he stood and after a while he went about making himself a breakfast. There was a little salted ling, a stale heel of rye bread, and some butter for it. Generally it was his mother’s job, and he kept expecting her to say something and he’d turn and look but she was ever silent. Her face had changed, slackened. He saw now how the fine shroud of ash she wore picked out the lines at her eyes, her mouth. She’d grown old and he hadn’t noticed. He went and took her hand and told her he was sorry. For a long time he sat holding the stiffening fingers, his eyes welling. She stared at the ceiling.

I tried, he said. I’m sorry. I tried.

The doctor must have sent for the cart from the hospital dead-house, for in the early afternoon the driver hove up outside and called from the gate if they had a poor soul inside needed ferrying home. William was sitting with his mother as he had been these last hours. He stood and looked out the window. The fellow saw him and waved. He mounted the verandah, walking respectfully slow. He wore an old felt wide-awake which he doffed and held to his chest. William showed him through the door, through to the kitchen where Maria lay beneath the sheet watching the ceiling.

Oh dear me now, he said.

William could hardly speak. His throat felt stopped up.

Aint she young though.

Yes, William said.

Least she has come upon it peaceful enough.
William nodded.

Not all of them do, the cart driver said. He fussed with the brim of his hat. Had one last week, he said. He was a mess. A railways navvy. Been pickin out a blast from a tunnel wall which had missed its fire. Well, you can picture how it went. The thing goes off. Bang. All done.

William looked at him.

We carried the bits of his head back in a kero tin. There was a deal of the poor bugger we never found of course.

There was nothing to say. William watched him quietly.

A deal, yes, the cart driver said. But here, this is a scene of more than ordinary solemnity. This dear woman has met with a visitation from God. No misadventure here and no fool’s act. She is taken from us whole.

The fellow was full of emotion and his eyes glistened. An awkward quiet followed. William crossed his arms and uncrossed them.

Give us a hand, the cart driver said.

Now he went about the rites peculiar to his occupation, shaking out a handkerchief and folding a three-inch band which he placed under Maria’s chin and fastened at the top of her head to hold shut her mouth. Over her eyelids he put small pads of wet cotton and he straightened carefully her delicate limbs. She was bound in a bedsheet, wrapped and knotted, and then William took her booted feet under his armpit and they raised her up, the strain turning him a wild shade of red. It was all he could do to hold her. The cart driver watched him battle and nodded. The boy was doing this last and most absolute of acts and said not a word of sorrow. So it was, and so it should be.
In that manner they carried his mother out through the gate, into the street, and lowered her to the footpath. William was feeling the small of his back where he was bruised from Beatty’s club when he saw coming up by the town park two municipal policemen. Men he knew. They were at some distance and his best hope was that they’d not yet seen him. The thudding of his heart grew harder. With a count of three they lifted his mother onto the cart, into the sawdust spread in the bed. The driver squinted up at the sky.

She’s some summer we’re havin.

William watched the constables over top of the horse standing dead still in the traces. Aint it, he said.

Miserable business, the driver said. Plain droppin dead like that.

Yes.

Best I get her home out of it.

Yes. Thank you.

They threw a rope, tied it off. There were eyebolts placed for that purpose along the flatbed and the driver tensioned the rope with a sheepshank knot while from the edge of his sight William observed the constables. The driver remounted the dead cart bench, huffing in the awful hot weather, and chucked the reins lightly and the whole shoddy concern stumbled forward, his mother joggling, her boots over the tailboard knocking like she’d seen fit to dance to kingdom come. The dead-cart driver made a superstitious sign and spat as the cart trundled off, strange old fool that he was.

Before the cart had drawn away a length William was back inside the house. He found his leather school satchel, unused these last years without his
father, and filled it. His coat, a shirt and trousers, a pair of boiled wool socks. In his mother’s drawer he found a pound banknote and ten shillings loose which he pocketed and he stood a time surveying their room, the rusted iron bedhead hard under the window, squares of orange sun cast across the quilt, and he pondered on what he was about to do. They’d clobber colours into his hide which he’d never seen. Bash open his wine-bladder head. Only if they caught him though, only if they caught him.

Beatty banged his club on the door. This is Beatty of the Launceston police house, he said. If William Toosey is in there, I should like to speak with him.

William turned rigid. He could see them in cast in cameo on the window curtain. Demented shapes, as disproportioned as shadow puppets. He hooked the bulging satchel over his shoulder and backed away into the kitchen.

William Toosey! Present yourself.

By the kitchen table he paused. There was more he needed. He couldn’t leave yet. He stole into the parlour where, among the newspapers his mother kept piled by the rat-chewed armchair in which she sat each night, he found a printed biscuit tin and brought it to the light. Inside was her correspondance, sheaves of it, as well as blank paper and envelopes. He crammed this into his satchel. He gripped the bag and ran for the back door.

The yard at the rear was a spread of trampled grass hung across with washing lines. He could still hear the pounding on the door as he hit the fence and he lobbed his bag and threw himself over the palings after it. His high swinging boot heel caught a rope and made him topple but he was on his feet and dragging his satchel about his neck as he ran. The plot of land behind the
house had been dug with trench footings for some new place and he leapt these ditches and skidded in the dirt and went on. At road’s end was a fringe of wire fence and beyond that unploughed paddocks furred in thin and mousy buttongrass. They would not look for him down there, not these two. He trod down the cross wires and bent himself through the fence.

There was a certain hollow tree he knew on a patch of sand near the river bank that was long gutted by fire and weathered to a dull black, standing distinctly out of true, that reminded him of a figure hunched over a grave. He reached this tree and he sat within the hollow where he could see along the road to the house nestled in the lowering sunlight amongst the many such others. The gate was open. The front yard empty. There was no one below the ink-dark shade of the verandah, no uniformed men with their fearful billyclubs. He withdrew into the depths of the tree.

After a while he pulled his mother’s correspondence from the bag. Letters tied with ribbon, fifteen or twenty, all addressed in the same gaunt handwriting as if rather than paper it was a prison wall on which it was etched, all dated from three years hence until the last two weeks ago in December. He slipped this latest one from the stack and flipped it over. The return address was simply care of the Deloraine post office. He looked up at a sky ribbed with cloud. A pair of cawing pluvvers. When they had passed out of sight he pulled a sheet of paper and a pencil and began to write a letter in his own neat schooled hand, and he wrote with great care across the page, his eyes running and his tears punctuating here or there a phrase or smearing out a letter. He wrote and when he was done he signed off, folded the paper into an envelope and on the front he scratched a name that gave him a small thrill of awe even as the pencil spiralled through it:
Mr Thomas Toosey.
The Shed

The prisoner Thomas Toosey raised his eyes at the sound of boots to see amber light slanting through the fissures in the siding, light made hard by the weightless dust and growing longer and fuller as the bootsteps loomed. The door swung inward and standing in a hollow of dark was the deadman who had taken him. He was holding a primitive lamp, this deadman, and as he moved inside the shed the shadows wheeled around him. He ducked under the unhewn beams and squated by his prisoner, whistling, not a tune but a kind of birdcall, and he placed down the lamp and tested the bindings that made Toosey fast to the centre post. The lamp was a candle bedded in dried clay, shrouded by a beer bottle. Toosey watched it flicker.
I aint the one.

Shut it, the deadman said.

He hitched another knot in the bindings, took up the eerie amber lamp, and walked a turn around the interior. When he swung the light the shadows leapt like the dark was full of life. He looked down upon the prisoner and straightened his hat. The brim was folded back and pinned in place. He waved the lamp a little.

This’ll do you.

Listen now, Toosey said.

It’s a waste of breath, old mate.

I aint the one they want. I’m tellin you. Listen.

The deadman considered him a time. Then who are you?

Toosey inclined his head to look up. Hard luck, he said.

Oh a hard luck. You’re a havin a laugh, I see. Very good, very bleedin funny.

You hear me laughin? Toosey said.

The candle flame guttered as the deadman raised the lamp and tapped the amber glass. That’s you now, he said pointing at the flame. Caught. Good and proper.

Cut me loose, said Toosey.

Damned if I will.
There’s a boy in this. My boy. You’ll be makin an orphan of him.

You’re off to the constable I’d say.

Toosey shook his head solemnly. The constable, he said. Not these two. They’ll hoist me up in a tree someplace. With a nice bit of cord.

Will they now.

Believe it.

Forty quids, the deadman said. That’s what I believe.

A death on you for the sum of forty quids. You are some kind of saint.

I shall sleep like a lamb I promise you that.

Stringed grey hair hung to Toosey’s shoulders and when he tossed it back there was a quality to his eyes that was made mean by the nature of the light. He clicked his tongue. Course I could be wrong, he said.

Bout what?

The deadman might be you.

This seemed to unsettle something in the fellow. He puckered his lips and whistled his low and melancholy birdcall, shook his head, and he shaped up to his prisoner like he meant to give him a kicking. He half lifted his boot, turned his hip. But without another word he stepped back and bobbed out past the tools, the shadows stretching with the swing of his light. Toosey leaned against the post and watched the knife-light withdraw through the slats until he was plunged again into cold abyssal dark.
There were cows crying somewhere in the night and that was all the company he had until dawn. He sat and waited, his eyes open, his mind burning with thoughts of his boy. The sun was a long time in coming and then a long time ascending and yet he did not sleep but sat with his knees at his chest watching for the first of the sky in the unjoined clading. In the quiet and in the dark the cows called and Toosey waited to where the light shot through the wall like sheets of silk, to where he could see by it. Bailed hay mouldering in the stall, articles strung on nails, and piled by the wall tools for working the soil, tools for working wood. He stood by snaking up the post and shuffling his feet closer and once he was upright he could circle around in his tethers. His eyes jumped about for something of use. He would not be kept here. He was needed.

Among the straw he spied a hand scythe that had a curved and rusting blade and might have had an edge. He stretched out a leg. If he huddled down he could touch the handle with his toe and he inched it closer with little flicks of the foot and he soon had purchase enough against the dirt floor to drag it under his bootsole level with his thigh, and then, heaving, level with his buttocks. He rotated around the post so that his hands would reach and he lowered down and strained hard and he had the coarse wooden handle clutched cigar-like between two fingers when the deadman shouldered the shed door inward. A muzzle-loading rifle over his shoulder, a tin bucket in his elbow. He looked at Toosey and he looked at the scythe. He brought the gun to bear.

That’s a pretty trick, he said.
Toosey stood up rigidly. In the band of sun issuing through the doorway the oiled gun barrel shined almost blinding. He did not take his eyes off it.

The bucket sloshed as the deadman set it down, full of milk, a ladle hanging on the rim, and he assessed his prisoner and scratched himself through his waistcoat. Kick it over here, he said.

Toosey didn’t move.

Old cock, I will bruise you black. Don’t think I won’t.

With a flick of the foot, Toosey kicked the scythe towards him. The deadman tossed it among the various tools by the wall and then he knelt and filled the ladle from the bucket, held the lip up to Toosey. Toosey drank. The man dipped again and gave him some more. The cream was warm and rich in Toosey’s gut. The man lowered the ladle.

They’ll be comin this way again today, he said.

Who?

You know who.

Toosey watched him. That Dublin jacker I suppose, he said.

Aye, and that barmy little man that follows him about.

Toosey gave a snort of contempt. That’s no man, he said.

Whatever he is. Under that floursack he wears. Fucker gives me the cold horrors.

They aint to be trusted, Toosey said.

Course they aint. Any halfwit can see that.
I’ll tell you what I know. There won’t be no forty.

The deadman laughed. Gawd deary me.

Your Dublin mate has me mistook for another, Toosey said. That is truth of it.

The deadman drifted off to lean against the corner brace. He tucked the muzzle-loader under his arm and crossed one boot over the other and Toosey saw how the toe was closed up with roofing nails clinched flat with a hammer. In the rest of his dress he was like most tennants of that district, pants secured by means of a rope, waistcoat festooned with a watchless chain that fooled no one. Every bit of him patched and mended. He idly fingered the gun as he took his ease against the wall. He spoke.

There has been a good deal of talk about the town there has. Bout two men goin up and down chasin some poor fellow. I heard it at Williams’ and heard it at the Family and Commercial too. Cause, lord, cause people will talk now won’t they.

Prone to it yourself I expect, Toosey said.

So when I seen them wander by me fence I knew who they was. They waved me over. I have forty pound for a man called Toosey or Atkinson, says the Irish.

And you belive him?

Forty pound payable upon reciept he tells me. Know this fellow by his long grey hair and grey whiskers he tells me. Wearin always a small black billycock.
At that point the man bent down and plucked Toosey’s hat from off a strawheap. He tossed it at his prisoner. Now that I seen you, he said, I do believe him.

Toosey studied the hat where it lay upturned, light showing through the crown’s holes, a white crust of sweat, and he looked briefly at the man and looked away, as if what he saw was not to his taste.

There came a call from outside, a woman’s voice. Jacky. Jacky.

Stay out there, the deadman said.

Where are you?

When she appeared in the door she was clutching her skirts in her fist. She was delicate of frame and drawn about the cheeks, or it may just have been the tight coiling back of her hair. She peered into the murk, leaning forward, and said, You in there?

What did I tell you. Stay out of here.

I want to talk to this chap.

She stepped over the worn doorstop and past him into the inner dark, among the bladed light, and on seeing the rope-bound prisoner slumped in the shadows she put her hand to her mouth and stumbled back.

So help me, she said, breathless. I thought he was dead.

He’s all right. Aint you old cock?

Flies squabbled along Toosey’s bare weathered arms. He slowly raised his head to look at the woman, the wife most like.
Don't look like much does he, she said.

No. Cause he aint much.

What do they want him for?

That aint our concern. Long as I get paid.

The wife crossed through the light slats before him, the sequence lighting the fine hairs of neck like hot wires. She left the scent of lanolin and soap. He stared at her.

What have you done mister? she said. Killed someone have you? Stole a horse? What?

Toosey would not be drawn. He stared at the woman and waited.

He don’t look like much to me, she said again.

Well he got this Irishman fired up so I should think he done somethin to warrant it.

You got a name?

Toosey glared back at her.

He’s called Toosey or Atkinson or somethin, said the deadman. I know that much.

Cut me loose, said Toosey. Or they’ll kill me.

The man sneered. That’s more of your lies.

Maybe he aint done nothin, the wife said.

Girl, I swear you are as simple as strikin matches.
How do you know what he done?

Long as I get me forty I don’t care if he is king of the queers.

I’m not worth the trouble, Toosey said. Believe me.

Is that right?

Aye.

Then how is it you come to have a price on you? the deadman said.

Ask the Irish. He’ll tell you before he strings me up.

The wife crossed back past him, holding her dress off her ankles. Praps we ought not to keep him, she said. We don’t want no one killed do we?

Oh you silly bitch come here.

Her husband caught her by the arm and hauled her in against his chest, cupping one wide weathered hand about the back of her neck. He said, Give us a kiss fore you flap that stupid tongue again.

They stood clapsed to each other with their mouths together. Toosey looked away. When the deadman let her go she staggered a few steps sideward with the suddenness of it, smoothed the hair off her brow and grinned foolishly, her lips red and wet. Her husband leaned down and slapped her on the rump.

Forty quids, he said. That’s that buggy you will have wanted, and a fine young mare to pull it.

Would be nice, she said.

Don’t say I don’t take care of you.
I never said it. Only that you ought to be careful.

Careful, he said. Careful aint got no one rich.

No, I spose not.

Go see about them hens, and forget this old loony. It’s just him talkin big.

She wandered out into low dawn light that tinged all the fields in bronze and her husband followed her as far as the path of cobble where he stood staring into the oblique sun with his morning shadow gaunt upon ground. He broke off and was heading for the paddocks mumbling a curse when Toosey called from the dark of the shed for him.

You want to know what I done? he called.

A moment of quiet passed before the man cocked his head around the jamb. What you what?

What I done to the Dubliner.

Does it matter?

Matters to you most intimately.

The deadman looked down at Toosey hobbled there among the dark like a malevolent imp. He stepped inside, stood tall above him.

How? the deadman said.

He has offered you a sum, has our man. But he don’t have it. He has not more than a few pound.

You’re a bloody liar.
Hear me now. He does not have it. I know cause I robbed him of his whole worth.

Like hell you did.

Toosey just stared at him.

The man had jammed his hands into his coat pockets and he stood for a period contemplating his prisoner. He jabbed one finger at Toosey through the coat folds. You’re talkin out your arse, he said.

I dropped the money when you presented that gun at me, Toosey said. Two hundred pound, in a pocket pouch. Dropped in the ditch there by the road last night. Go see if it aint.

You dropped two hundred quids in a ditch?

Go see if you don’t believe me. No skin off your nose is it. By the road there where you found me, near the fence.

How old are you Toosey or Atkinson or whoever you bloody are?

Fifty nine.

Fifty nine, the deadman said.

Toosey nodded.

Old man, I don’t know how you’ve lived this long.

All the country air, Toosey said.

I swear. Robbin two hundred off a man as vicious as that Irish.
Me boy is alone. I told you. By himself in that arsehole they call Launceston. I intend to see him safe and sound, whatever comes of it.

I can tell you what will come of it, the deadman said. It’s you in a Deloraine cell.

Toosey tossed the hair from his face and sat looking up at the man, one eye asquint in the sun slant that shone upon him, in the stagnant air the sound of his breath amplified. He held the man’s gaze for a good long moment before he spoke. I’ve knowed the Dubliner half my life, he said. I tell you now. In the sight of God. He will kill me.

The deadman crossed his arms. Will he now.

I may have a prayer if you fetch the money. See it returned to him.

The deadman propped his arms on his hips as he stood in thought. He took up the gun that he’d stood against a crossbrace and he checked the priming and reset the hammer and stuck it over his shoulder. He looked down at his prisoner. The money bloody well better be there, he said. Else I’ll be back to kick in your teeth.

It’s there. Look in the ditch like I said.

The man crossed and stood in the doorway. Cropped land in belts lay framed in its oblong and beyond it hills rearing in a blue haze where the gum grew like a bristle of dorsal hair. He paused, studying the view toward the road, likely seeking out those two wanderers, the Irish with his hooded ally, but there was not their figures nor their dust upon that baked and peeling backroute. He put along the path toward the road holding the gun leveled at his hip. Toosey then closed his eyes and sought some comfort for his hands.
and shoulders and his wrists that burned. He dropped his head and in the false
dark behind the eyelids all he saw was his boy, the mop of his hair, the
thinness of his arms, and he was stirred to a rage.

#

Sometime later the wife came to sort through the tools by the wall. Toosey sat
foxing sleep and listening. Within that clamour and contrasted to it was the
slight and delicate sound of her skirts. He peered from under his lashes. She
was bending over the pile and the shape of her rump had forced the gathers of
her dress out flat, and it was a shapely rump at that. The falls of light through
the walls marked her back like smelted metal. She tugged a stirrup hoe from
the clutter and stood up straight and as she turned towards the door he lifted
his head to address her.

You need a short halter for that greedy horse of yours, he said.

She gave a short sideways step as if startled and brought the hoe up. He
aint no horse, she said.

He is draggin you into somethin. Bygod he is.

She flung the tool out into the daylight where it bounced and rang on
the cobble and she squared up to him. There was an agreeableness to her
features that at that moment was marred by a tightening of the lips. Whatever
you done, mister, she said. Whoever you hurt. I hope you get what you got
comin.
Funny how men will abandon good sense on the sniff of a few quid, he said.

Oh yes. Funny as a bloody funeral.

Toosey looked her over. Is he back yet?

No, she said.

He continued to watch. I was married once you know.

More’s the pity for her I expect.

She would have been near your age when we met, he said and narrowed his eyes. Twenty, twenty one. Near enough to it.

Where has she gone then? Your girl?

Spose you think I run her off.

She would need to be a saint wouldn’t she. Puttin up with the likes of you.

Toosey lowered his eyes. He nodded. That is the truth, he said. The kindest and dearest woman I ever knew. Only God knows why he sent her to me. But she grew sick of my drinking, the many years of it, and turned me out. Since which she has died.

The tears of the tankard, she said. You won’t get no pity from me.

I don’t want any, he said. What I want is to offer my example. I ought to have valued her while I could. That’s the crux of it. If you value your fellow, you will warn him not to cross me.
In the field the cows bayed like wolves. She stood and seemed to consider his words, looking down at him, sucking at her upper lip, but more probably she was giving inward expression to the distaste she held for this bushman. She smoothed back her hair and exited out into the sun, lifting the crusted hoe onto her shoulder and striking out for the crops, and Toosey, his head bowed behind a curtain of hair, was left alone with his life’s sorry tales.

#

Arriving back at the shed some time midmorning the deadman prodded Toosey in the ribs. He was slumped in his tethers like a carcass, mouth agape and limbs slack. He woke in a spasm. The cattledog was there and it pushed up to lap at his face and he did not pull away but let the dog taste his whiskers. One eye was dark and the other light as if it had been stitched from the pelts of butchered dead and when the man clicked his fingers the dog fell in alongside him. Now Toosey looked up at the fellow, saw the book-sized wallet tied with lucet cord upon which he was tapping his fingers, saw the grin he was wearing, his considerable teeth bared, and he knew he would soon be with his boy. He wiped the slober on his shoulder.

What did I tell you, Toosey said.

You’re up to your neck now, old cock. Eh? Aint you.

Not by a mile.

Up to your neck in shit I would say.
The Dubliner is goin to want his money when he gets here, Toosey said. And he will soon know who’s in possession of it.

I never saw no money.

Toosey breathed hard through his nostrils. He almost laughed. I picked you from the start, he said. The one who dances well when fortune pipes.

The deadman twitched a little at this.

Two hundred is a lot better than forty, Toosey said. That’s what you’re thinkin. Keep a secret from the Irish. Keep the money. Oh yes. But when you go to the dance beware who you take by the hand. For you don’t know the first thing about me.

A pissin old bushman due his comeupance. That’s you I’d say.

Toosey dipped his head. I am due it. But not today. Today I have out-thought you. If you want to keep that money, and I know you do, then it is a simple matter of cuttin me loose.

The man straightened up. He hooked one thumb through his corded belt as mind worked upon the problem of the bushman.

I’ll lay it out for you, Toosey said. Straight as I can. Cut me loose. Keep the money hidden. When the Dubliner arrives you tell him you never saw me.

Is that your fabulous scheme? Give away the money to avoid what you have comin?

That’s the first part of it. The second’s comin later.

It was a long and silent moment where the deadman turned away to pace the shed in a pretence of deliberation, as if he had a choice that he might
otherwise make. He dragged his sleeve across his nose where a sweat had formed upon it. Toosey waited while the man wandered, scuffing his nailed-up boot to make a divot, his eyes on the rutted roadway visible out the door, upon which would soon appear the two ominous figures, the Irishman and his brute. He replaced his hat and pushed on the crown and faced Tossey once more.

All right you tiresome prick, he said. All right. I’ll turn you out. But see now, I want you makin northerly over them hills. Swear it to me. You meet them micks on the road and it’s all our heads.

I have every intention of avoidin them.

Swear it.

Best if I keep meself intact. Aint it?

Then swear.

I swear.

The deadman studied him for a time. He whistled his birdcall tune. He stepped outside.

Among the tools and bits of harness leather littering the floor there lay an axe handle hewn from red-brown myrtle that was coming unsplit in the grain and Toosey was staring at it when the fellow returned, bringing with him the gun. He directed the muzzle at Toosey as he moved around the post, knelt down, and began to uncinch the ropes. Each of Toosey’s wrists bore angry welts that showed where the plaiting had bitten. He squeezed his fist to get the blood pulsing. He pulled his sleeves and buttoned the cuffs and sat looking around himself. The man was standing with the gun on him.

Go on, he said. Away with you.
Toosey rolled onto his hands and knees. The dog with its ears raised was watching him. He coughed and stooped into a crouch, coughing and spitting, haggard as he was. Lowering the gun, the man gave a little smile. He started to speak. You need the—, he said but then stopped.

It looked like a glowing iron come from a fire, igniting, dousing, igniting as it passed through the sheeted lights in succession, giving off a faint and even hiss, striking the man in the jaw and pitching him over sideways, his arms in a peculiar loose-limbed flail like rag things, the gun spilling, a red spray of blood aflame in the light shears and speckled with shards of teeth and his hat momentarily hanging where he’d been before plummeting with him to the dirt.

Toosey was on his feet and standing over him and he raised high the axe handle and hammered it down. The deadman scrabbled over the floor making an unholy wail. There was a wild look to him and he screamed out for Toosey to stop but Toosey would not. He swung blow after blow and swung one that took the deadman above the ear, a vicious thing, well-aimed, that tore back the scalp to the bone and the deadman sagged and lay insensate among the hay, his fresh blood a brilliant shade on the straw. Toosey tossed aside the handle. He smeared his palms down his shirt. He crouched by the milk bucket and lifted the ladle off the rim and drank. In a corner of thick dark the dog cowered and turned its eyes away from him.

As he was dipping for a refill and trying to slow his breathing the light of the doorway filled with someone’s shape and a shadow settled over him. He looked around. Here was the wife, hand to her mouth and silent and horror-struck. He replaced the ladle. He nodded.

I give him fair warnin. Give it to you both.
Jacky, she said.

Reckon you better fetch yourself out of here.

What did you do?

I’ve done for him.

You what?

Best you leave, he said. They’ll be here soon.

She turned and bolted. Toosey followed into the white-hot day. She was going full flight among a herd of cattle and she stumbled and corrected herself, her eyes huge as she looked back. Yet it was not the wife fleeing that held his attention there in the noon sun. He pinched up his eyes. Away along the road blew a faint cloud of dust. He waited and he watched. The road cut out of the hills, down through gums stands rising chalk white from a cover of tussock grass, and among that scrub he saw two figures emerge from the trees in hint of movement and that was all he needed to see.

Back in the shed he found his faded black hat and planted it on and stacked in one corner was his swag and his few meagre things, a billytin, a pannikin, turnips, flour, raisins in a gunnysack. These he rolled inside his swag. Flies had begun to gather on the deadman, and, squatting there, he rolled the fellow onto his back and opened his waistcoat and removed the pouch of money from an inner pocket. He thumbed through, counting notes quietly to himself, and stuck the book inside his jacket. He took up his swag and settled it across his back, tugged down his hat brim, and stepped outside.

The seekers had advanced somewhat along the roadway and he pressed his hand above his eyes and studied them, two dark nicks against a sandbrown
groove, coming only to kill him. He turned and cut across the field towards the forested hills looming like great unshorn beasts from the farmland, keeping a steady measured pace out through the crops.
Two Seekers

They slogged side by side up the incline where horse carts had traced a pair of thin gutters down from the farmhouse. First came the aged man but in his age he was deceiving for his arms were as thick as derricks contained within a coat tightly buttoned at his wrists. With his hefty walking stick, with the printed neckerchief knotted at his throat, he seemed like some gentleman on tour, at leisure in his vast ancestral estate. Second came a shorter fellow and he was spindly armed and he carried a rolled blanket horse-shoed over his left shoulder. Upon his head was drawn a white cotton hood cut with eyeholes. They shared neither word nor gesture as they labored up the hill, studying that secluded parcel, two souls avowed in a common aim, two meant for combat.
The farmhouse was a crude building in a field of feed oats and they stopped near the cobbled forecourt and looked around themselves. There was no sight of anyone. The wall scantling was hand cut and the planks had buckled for lack of decent nails. Little sussex hens stepped with theatrical care among the weed and thistle. The traveller propped on his stick and removed his bushman’s hat, a limp and sagging thing, with which he waved away the flies. He had on his back a canvas satchel and when he took it off the pots inside clanged in the silence. He moved towards the farmhouse calling out a long cooee. The house listed a foot out of square and a row of props had been placed to counter the mighty lean. Clothes like the quartered dead were pegged on a rope between these braces and he pushed them aside as he bobbed under the poles.

He entered the kitchen, scattering hens. A fire burned in the stove with a pot of water on the plate. He made a slow circuit and found a crate loaded with turnips. A wad of butter on a dish. He picked it up and sniffed and put it down. He went outside again. The hooded man was standing in the shade, leaning on the shed. He crossed past him, came before shed door and stood staring into the depthless black inside, a black cut through with shafts of light. He was craning his neck to better see when a bestial scream came from within.

Mother of fock, he said and staggered back.

There burst from the dark a madwoman. She was wielding a blood-greased axe handle over her head and she caught him by the throat to club him, but the traveller was fit for this game. He broke her grip with a shove and stood facing her, waiting for what would follow. At her side was a stockdog that showed its teeth and growled. Woman and dog looked between those two strangers in a panic.
Careful there, marm, the traveller said.

Get out of it you bastards!

She swung hard. The traveller stepped aside and watched it sail by. On the backswing he caught the handle and disarmed her. She scrambled out of his reach believing herself in danger yet the traveller merely examined the point of the handle, frowned at the blood there, tested it with a finger, and threw the gruesome thing to the ground.

You done this, she said. You sent that man.

Oh, he said with a kind of sadness. That man. You’ll be meanin Thomas Toosey I suppose.

She was pressing the heels of her hands to her eyes. Oh my sweet savior, she said. He’s an animal.

He is, aye, he is.

A bloody animal, she screamed.

Where did he go, marm? Can you tell me that now.

You sent him our way.

Where is he, marm?

You killed…

The traveller waited for her to finish. What, marm? Killed what?

She had backed up against the layered wooden cladding. Slowly over a few moments she lost her restraint. A quivering took up in her limbs like the violent shake of a hypothermic and she pressed one hand over her mouth, her
eyes pinched and beginning to run, and she folded as if struck by something vicious.

At first the traveller seemed unmoved by her display. He watched her shiver and soon stepped away to scan the back paddocks, the thickly covered hills to the east, searching for sign of the man he’d tracked this last month through scrub stands and fern glades and down trails that ran everyplace across the district, a man he’d seen in his sleep, seen in the black scrags of burnt wattle, seen in the ever-rising dust of the foot roads. But his hooded companion was also watching and the suffering of the farm woman seemed to stir something in him. He moved closer to where she was hunched up, blood on her skirts, blood on her hands, her windblown hair like twine. He hung his arm around her shoulders and rocked with her and smoothed her hair and she collapsed into his shirt folds as if emptied of everything that filled her with life.

The traveller, resting on his staff, observed the scene from a small remove. What a blessed bloody mess, he said.

The woman sobbed. Beside her the hooded man with his stark black eyes sat holding her. That animal, she said through her hands. We was meant to be in town meetin his old grandma today. We was meant to walk into town.

For the love of God, the traveller said, what’s goin on here? We’ve come to find Toosey, not to focking hurt you, begging your pardon. At least let me see if I can’t help.

Dont you go near him.

Near who, marm?
She was silent, digging the points of her fingers into her forehead, raking at her skin.

Can you hear me, marm?

She looked out through her fingers as if from a cage. You’re Flynn aint you? she said.

Aye, Fitheal Flynn marm.

They talk about you, Flynn. In Deloraine. Mad as a sack of rabbits they say, the two of you.

Fitheal Flynn allowed himself the slight tugging of a smile. In matters such as this, marm, he said, better mad than dull.

Forty blinkin pound, she said. God you poor silly man.

Is your husband about? he said but then it all struck him at once.

Stupid, silly man, she screamed.

He glanced around, and his eyes settled upon the shed. He walked to the unlit doorway and peered through. On the ground lay a man spread in his own blood. Flynn removed his hat. Oh Jesus, he said.

Inside the heat was thick enough to cut. A squall of flies covered the bare parts of the fellow stretched out among the straw. His eyes were bloated shut and in the swelter the blood had congealed into a sort of tacky confection. Flynn stood over him, clutching his hat to his chest, chasing flies with his other hand. There was black around the deadman’s nose where his wife had tried to bring him around by some burnt rags. His shattered jaw was so
misshapen that his lower teeth no longer aligned. The gentleman knelt beside him.

Let’s have a wee look at you, he said.

Placing his hat aside, Flynn began to feel through the pockets of the husband, first the inner and outer of the jacket and then down to the waistcoat and pants. He pulled out a watch chain to which no watch was attached. He found a few matches in a box, mostly struck. But he did not find what he was looking for, a sheaf of bank notes written out in ten pound denominations, stolen from him by the miscreant Toosey.

On winking terms with devil, is Toosey, he called to the woman. You’re not the first he’s ruined.

He leaned over the husband’s mouth. Still breathing.

He stood and replaced his hat and arranged the droop of the brim so that he could see past it. When he stepped out into the furious sun the wife was watching him through the bars of her fingers. He flicked a thumb at the shed and looked away.

We best be moving him, he said. The flies are eating him up.

He gave a sharp whistle to the hooded man who was perched still with his arm about the wife. The pair of them entered the storeshed and soon returned hauling the husband between them and they swung him into the kitchen and laid him out among the unwashed plates and the enamled mugs and stubs of candle on the table, showing him no more regard than a side of beef. The fellow groaned and stirred his legs. Flynn stood looking him over, the grotesque lumps of his face like cancerous tumours, the lifted flaps of hair
thick with gore, and while he was a godless man he nevertheless crossed himself out of sheer superstition.

You had better be attending to him in here, marm. He has desperate need of you, I should think.

Flynn stepped into the sun before her.

He don’t need me no more, she said.

From the noise he’s making I wager he wants someone.

She looked sharply up.

Aye, what with the noise and the kicking.

She clambered upright and stumbled toward the house. The kitchen was otherwise furnished with chairs devised out of sassafras still in its bark, and she kicked these aside for some room and reached down a kerosene lantern hung on the crossbeam and lit it and placed it for light. She took a washbowl and a cloth and began to towel the blood from his head wounds.

My blessed saint, she was saying, my blessed saint. He’s alive.

By the foot of the table the hooded man waited with his hands upraised as if he dared not touch the battered man but that he knew all the same he ought to help. His head inside the hood was swiveling and tilting as he watched the woman at work and in the end he came beside and held the washbowl for where she could better reach it. The wife wiped away the foul matter of crusted blood and soil and straw from the fellow laid out there, cleaned up the lumpen jaw and the wide and cruelly split nose, and through it all her husband moaned. The hooded man took the fellow’s hand and squeezed it.
Which way did he go? Flynn said. He was standing in door blocking the light.

Please, my husband needs help. He needs the surgeon.

Marm—

He'll come for a shilling. Please, he won't live. He needs help.

No.

You must bring the surgeon. He won't live.

Listen. I should like to fetch the sawbones for you. I should like nothing more, upon my honour. But my companion and I have business with Toosey that will not wait.

Fitheal Flynn nodded towards the hooded man where he was waiting by the table gripping the limp hand of the husband. Window sunlight picked out the wealth of stains in the white cotton, old brown blood, rings of dust. Each corner of the hood stood like a dog’s ear and his eyes recessed in the shadows were black and dire. A journeyman passed out of some legendary land or a night terror given shape and substance, who could say. He replaced the fellow’s hand on the table and stepped back.

She looked from one to the other. Just who are you two? she said.

Farmers is all we are, marm, farmers of the Quamby.

I never saw no farmer get about with a pistol, she said and she pointed at the heavy revolving gun lodged in the band of Flynn’s belt. Flynn put his hand on the grip and let it sit there.

Which way did he go? he said.
She was staring at the gun. What? You mean to kill him?

That’s the head and tail of it, I suppose, marm.

Then do it without me. I'll have no part of murderin.

She wrung her cloth and set to bathing her husband, nothing more to say.

Tis less the murdering than it is the taking of justice. Don’t you see that? Well, and by God, and he has all but killed your husband.

She turned fiercely. Him? she said. I’ll tell you what I see. I see Jacky lying here needin the surgeon, and I see you with your gun and your hangman over there, mad as rabbits the pair of you, lettin him die. Who is the murderer? Eh? Who?

Flynn pushed back his hat. If he was bothered he made no demonstration but just narrowed his eyes and nodded. He turned out to the cobbles.

A huge wooded range filled the land behind the farmhouse, a field of white and somber gums studded through with darker wattle that everywhere hewed to the hills and Fitheal Flynn stood for a time in study, looking towards and over the paddocks, searching for some sign of the fugitive. He retrieved his knapsack and drew it over his shoulders and took up his travelling staff as well. An eagle cruised black before the sky’s water blue. For a time Fitheal Flynn stood sipping from a bottle bound around with twine and secured to his bag by a thong, considering the country presented there before him, the bird turning above the range of mournful gums. When he finally looked away, came about and stoppered his bottle, he saw crouching by the watering trough his one and
only child. His daughter Caislin. She had removed her hood and was splashing her forehead with water. She put her hand out to him.

Give us your drink, she said.

A lump swelled in his throat as he looked down at her. Is it hurting? he said.

She splashed herself. Yes, she said.

Oh my love, he said.

Give us it here.

He unwound the leather thong, passed her the bottle. She plunged it into the trough that was chipped out of a single block of stone fringed with moss from the damp. She plunged the neck and the surface boiled.

We should fetch the surgeon, she said.

His lump tightened. Come on now, he said and it hurt to talk. Come on.

We should.

Cross them hills, you see, and its clear country the other side. That’s where he’s gone, isn't it? Cross them hills.

Then let him run, she said and passed the dripping bottle.

No.

We’d be back tomorrow. We’d have that fellow a surgeon.
Give him a day, you might as well give him a year. No. We are close. We shall find him on the fields of the Liffey tomorrow or hang me from the walls of Derry.

Caislin Flynn dried her hands on her pants, stood, and with the ease of ritual drew the hood over herself and she was, again, that singular man all the world saw. Her, his truest blessing, hidden somewhere inside. The illusion of her manliness so complete, so compelling, that even he had taken it to heart and turned it, he believed, to their good.

There is them biscuits, she said, if you’re hungry.

I’m all right.

You look hungry, she said. You look pale.

Pale never killed anybody.

She fished a bundle from her pocket and unwrapped it, held out to him a pair of hard-looking meal cakes. He took a piece and bit into it, surveying the hills and hills of scrub as he chewed.

What a dour bit of bush, he said around the cake, and, by God, with him in it somewhere.

Flynn moved out into the field of oats that filled the back paddock, and here he paused and took stock of what he saw. For cut through the crop was a trail, snaking out towards the hand-cleared land beyond, the piles of unburned gum and bracken and rows of severed stone-grey stumps. A trail writ plainly in the broken oat plants, the heavy bootprints of one man. Flynn chewed his biscuit. You are some sort of fool, Thomas Toosey, he said.

Caislin drew up beside him.
See that, he said and pointed to the divots.

What if he dies? she said. Him back there.

Without another word Flynn set off, adjusting the knapsack on his shoulders, his tin pots ringing. She looked back at the house and she looked at her father hiking through the young oats. She lowered her head and followed after him.

That’s our doing, she called.

Flynn walked on.

We might have killed him, she said.

Still Flynn did not stop but spoke across his shoulder as he went. You struck that chap, did you? he said. You beat him three quarters dead with a focking piece of wood and focking stove his skull and whatnot?

Caislin trod in the tracks he’d made and kept quiet.

Aye, well, and keep your thoughts on what was done, he said. Keep them there. It shall stiffen your arm when the time comes.

He followed the trail toward the wooded range and where it led into wild land unwalked by common folk, the preserve of absconders and bushrangers. The sun grazed a barren sky above. They crossed into bracken taking hold at the scrub’s edge, formed up close together, father and daughter, and entered the bush among the racket of cicadas and the desiccant heat. They laboured up a rise that was loosely scrubbed with blackwood and great sallow swampgum, Flynn leaning into his stick and scouring the trail, beside him his daughter lifting her boots over the rearing stones and setting them heavily down.
Stiffen your arm, he said, as if he’d been considering it this short while. 
Stiffen your heart too. For that time is coming and we must not flinch.
In the early evening dark amongst the manferns of the damp hill’s foreslope Toosey unbundled his bedroll and sat watching his backtrack and waiting. He built no fire and took no tea but sat on the blankets peeling a turnip with his knife, passing slices to his lips. A bone-splinter moon rose wondrous within the overspread of stars, the dark below the gums deepening into blue and then black, but still no one appeared upon the slope. Had he eluded them? There was no way to know. He shaved a long shining slice, curved like the very moon above, and ate.

When it was full dark he unwound some wire snares from his coat pocket and spread them on his swagroll. Wallaby runs cut here and there through the brush and he walked out and planted stakes and hung the snares
with a four-inch loop across the hollows. He made his bed by a ridge where the warmth of the day gave off the stone and where he was hidden as if in a pair of jaws and after a time he settled back and after a time he pulled a crumpled envelope from his pocket. It was addressed to him, care of the Deloraine post office. He slipped the paper out and unfolded it. There wasn’t moon enough to read but he knew it by heart.

My dear Mother is dead, it said. I have been turned out of Home I have nothing at all Deer Father I wish you wood come back. There is no home for me with out you I have only You in the hole world to love. I hope You will stow this letter safly as a tresher of my faith in You your loyal Son.

He lay listening at the dark and charting out the matter of finding his boy in that dog-poor town. Below the canopy the shrieking of possums, the falling and breaking of sticks. It was easy to imagine someone spilling out of the dark for him, yet as he looked about there was only the night, the wide blackness sown with stars. He laid back and watched the moon loll onward into the void. He clutched that letter and kissed it.

#

Come dawn he stowed his bedding and walked out to pull the snares. In one a potteroo gone cold and wooden. He stuffed it inside his billytin for eating later. Having cleared the wires, he picked a path further west for country he had crossed in the winter, country which he knew in some manner. He descended down the rainforested slope where stringybarks grew tall and full of sun like gargantuan flowers, stopping to study the bush behind him, listening for
voices, the low-down dawn light burning his eyes, and he crossed a creeklet and mounting the far bank he scared up a host of crayfish that scuttled away to chimneys pitting the soil, and soon the relic rainforest lessened and he left the incline and within a mile the scrub thinned and then, on a sudden, he was standing on a plain of tufted grass that covered the land away to the bluffs. He followed the scrub’s edge where there was cover. Bent under his load of swag. The billytin in his fingers rattling and him setting a mad pace.

In the early afternoon he climbed a hillock and laid flat to scan the terrain he had crossed. He removed his hat and held it before the sun to shade his eyes. He could see over the backhills and grasslands he had recently quit and he could see kangaroo herds and feel their pounding through the earth and see a flock of rosellas dipping and swinging and making horrible cries. The sun caused his eyes to water which he wiped on his sleeve and it was then, as he was dabbing, that he saw a flash of white in the far-off scrub. The trees leaned, worked on by a current. He watched and waited, finger halfway to his face. In the bloom of the full sun his eyes teared. Nothing but the wind, the trees ajig. His own track left snake-like through the grass. An uneasy feeling remained lodged in his abdomen as he humped up his gear and left.

On the hard walk down the hill he produced the pocketbook and untied it and thumbed through the banknotes. They were stamped with the Launceston Bank for Savings insignia in fine blue ink and he considered this as he tracked out through a copse of long ago burnt gums that wore a green fur of regrowth. He counted the notes, retied the cord, and tucked the pocketbook into his coat. Late in the day he forded knee-deep through a creek, scrabbled up through ferns on the far side into the land beyond with the horizon light in his eyes, blunt light sheared by cloud, sheared by the whitish trees. Soon he passed
that country through and came upon the railway that has been his destination all day.

He stood gazing left and right along the rails. They split clear through the brush on a bed of blue metal, drawing away to a point in the infinite distance. He dropped his swag and kneeled in the ballast and pressed his hand to the iron. He sat for moment with it so and then he bent down and rested his cheeks against the bullhead. There was no pulse that he could discern, no movement, and so he stood and looked again along it. The sun was falling into the hills and throwing a thin wafting light over the forest. He resettled his bedroll and made easterly along the clearway beside the line.

#

I see you over there, the voice said. Don’t think I don’t.

Toosey had stepped off into the wayside and found a hollow in the feathery infant wattle where he could hide. He’d dropped his swag and was sitting on it to wait for the train. It was a meagre sort of nest beneath parched bush that was flaked with dark smoke-stack soot but he had a view of the rail line cutting around the bend, tracking up a hill, and that was all he needed. He would see the train before it made the incline, would have to time to set himself for the chase.

I said I seen you.

Then get along, Toosey said. You’ve seen enough.
On the far side of the track small figures emerged from the gorse. A boy of fourteen or so, and beside him and another boy who was younger and grubbier, and if they had anything more than the rags they stood in Toosey could not see it, no bags, bedrolls or blankets. They studied him through the brush. The older one towelled his nose with an overlong shirt sleeve and sniffed.

Has someone given you a touch up or somethin? he said.

Toosey looked down at the blood on himself. He hadn't noticed it.

Got any grub?

We are hungry is all, the younger one said. We aint hardly had more than a mouthful in days, I swear. A mouthful of bully is all we've had.

We aint ett well in days, the older one said.

How long till that train? Toosey said.

She'll be along. You'll hear it. Watch for the smoke over the trees.

When?

The boy looked confused. When you hear it, he said.

Toosey smoothed his moustache with the web of his thumb. He could see the boys watching him, gaunt and vulture-eyed. He reached inside his swagroll and found a turnip and lobbed it underhand across the rails into the brush beside them. They disappeared inside the gorse. There was a brief commotion as they searched, followed by a longer silence. He sat back on his swag. Something thudded on the litter to his right. They began to call over each other.
I hate them things.

That aint food.

We saw your meat mister.

Give us some meat.

We aint ett today.

You got any bread? Come on mister.

Among the fronds of bracken Toosey sat listening to the din and testing now and then edge of his knife. He reached and picked up the turnip. He stood. The boys were watching him across the barren of rail and blue metal where nothing grew save thistle, and he drew his arm and flung it hard and collected the smaller one squarely in the forehead. The boy rocked back and toppled into the brush.

Toosey stood grinning. It was a mean shot and he was grinning and thinking it a bit of sport, when the older boy pulled something from the bushes that looked like a mattock or a rake and stood holding it. Toosey's grin fell. He found himself staring into the cavernous eye of a rifle barrel. The boy palmed back the heavy mechanism.

You fucker you won't laugh no more will you, he said.

The younger one beside him began to jump with excitement. Shoot the pissers, Reggie, shoot him in the face. Go on.

I will if he don't give me that meat.

See now, Toosey said. Put that down.
Give us what you got there. That meat there and whatever you got. All of it.

Toosey stood perfectly still.

Give it here.

Come here and get it, Toosey said.

The older one made a motion with the gun towards the billytin. His small companion scaled the camber monkey-wise and crossed the rails, dragging a formless shadow that seemed to boil as it crossed the gravel beneath. The potteroo was stiff and stuck out straight from the can and the boy snatched it by the feet, his eyes never leaving off Toosey. Toosey stood very still, no expression at all on his face, watching the long birding gun that was trimmed on him.

How much you got? the older one said.

Toosey clicked his tongue. He looked away.

I know you got somethin. Turn him over, Georgie.

The younger one put his hands inside Toosey’s trouser pockets. Toosey made no move against him. He came away with a long twine-handled knife and a tinderbox and striking iron looped on a length of wire which he dropped on the ground. In the hacking pockets of Toosey’s thin tweed coat he found a clutch of snares and tossed them aside. When he dipped again into the hacking pocket he found a letter in an envelope folded and refolded until it had near worn through its creases. The boy studied it. He looked around at his mate.

He is skint.
Keep goin.

I have. There's nothin.

You aint done the insides.

I done em.

You aint.

The boy unbuttoned Toosey's jacket. He reached up for the cavities, found the pocketbook stashed there, and prised it away.

You find somethin, Georgie?

A purse.

Open it then.

He untied the cord. It's bills.

Forget the pocketbook lads, Toosey said.

Shut your bleedin gob. We want it, we'll have it.

Not this one. Forget this one.

Seems I'm the man with the piece but.

Toosey lifted his eyes, a dark and glassy brown. How far you think you'll get? he said.

I'll bloody fire on you see if I don't.

The boy had moved onto the camber and was aiming down at Toosey. He glanced variously at the bush and at Toosey as if he was beset by a whole
brace of swagmen more than just this one lonely soul. His finger tapped at the trigger guard in a light staccato.

You won’t find us, he said. You aint got a hope. We know these woods don’t we Georgie?

Better than any bugger, Georgie said.

Take the meat, Toosey said. You can have it. But forget the purse.

Come here, Georgie.

I have gone through some shit to have it, Toosey said.

Georgie!

The younger one was waving the pocketbook as he crossed the rails. It’s bills, he said.

And I will go through more to keep it, Toosey said.

The boy tapped at the steel trigger guard. He stared hard at Toosey.

You don’t scare me.

Take that purse and won’t neither of you will see another sunrise, Toosey said.

How much is in there? the boy said to his mate.

The younger one was fingering through the notes. I can’t read what they says.

Two hundred pound, Toosey said.

There aint.
Not another sunrise, Toosey said. As I live and breathe.

Show us one, Georgie.

The younger one held up a bill that his mate might read it. Toosey could see the boy’s mouth working as he made out letter by letter the denomination. He looked at Toosey.

This says ten.

That’s right. There is twenty bills there.

The boy shook the gun at him. Where’d you come on two hundred quids?

A sum like that, Toosey said. By Christ it will send men wild. And believe me when I say I’m the wildest man you shall ever meet.

Try it.

Reggie your name is it?

The boy said nothing.

I have a son, Reggie. Not much bigger than you. He’ll be on my mind when I find you in the dark. Tonight in the dark. It will sadden me a good deal.

You won’t find us.

Sad for your father. Sad I had to skin a boy what brings to mind my son.

You won’t find us I said.

Shoot him Reg. Go on. Shoot.

It’s just talk, Georgie.
Shoot him. Shoot him.

He won’t do it. He’s a pissin old windbag is what he is. Don’t let him scare you none.

Shoot him. He’ll come for us, he’ll find us.

Shut your gob a minute and listen. It’s talk George, that’s what. Talk. Like it was talk in Westbury, remember. That bugger never come and this one here won’t find us neither. We know these woods.

Toosey felt it before he heard it. There was a quivering to the air, a distant violence and then a screech to freeze the blood. He turned and stood gazing out along the gleaming steel with his ear cocked to the sky. The boys too heard it.

She’s comin, the younger one said.

Above the canopy to the west seethed a great grey thunderhead marking the passage of the engine as she neared. Hordes of jackdaws and parrots and cockatoos vacated the clearway trees in a single screaming cloud, sent aloft by the steam disturbing the growth by the rails. When her stout black maw drew around out of the scrub and with the blare of her horn it was like the coming of a sea vessel groping through a fog. She slowed on the upward slope and behind the engine came carriages and flatbeds and boxsided trucks and the drawgear snatched loudly along the consist where the slack was taken up. The windows crawling by were packed with travellers of every kind, workmen and women in fur hats and children pressing their noses to the glass. The boy had not removed his eyes off Toosey and had not removed the gun. The carriages rattled behind him in procession.
Georgie, he said over the howl of the train.

The younger one watched the train with stark wonder.

Georgie, make ready for it.

I am. I’m ready.

Mister, you try to chase us and I’ll fire a ball through you.

Toosey was staring at the gun.

Fire and be done with it, the boy said.

The train shuttled by in a huge commotion.

The boy tucked the butt to his shoulder. All right, Georgie, move.

Now?

Now. Move.

High-sided guano trucks rattled past. The younger one was hardly taller than the running gear he jogged beside but he sprang and caught the wooden side rack to haul himself aboard. The older one backed up. Training the muzzle on Toosey still. At a distance of some yards he turned and slung the rifle and ran.

In the seconds that followed Toosey knelt into the bracken and went about after his letter. He’d humped that sorry-looking thing over the district for weeks and would not lose it now. He stuffed it in his pocket, and his knife and tinder with it, and he shouldered his swag and followed the train at a steady lope. Holding his hat, the swag bouncing. Riled like he’d never been. It was the last carriage and he ran between the rails from sleeper to sleeper as the
train laboured uphill. Running hard, scowling, he lobbed his swag overhead into a gated tray and caught the hangladder and climbed. The boys had found purchase on the sideboards with the gate wedged under their armpits. The three of them eyed each other across the empty wagon.

There sounded in the dusk’s gloom a thundering report and the piece of planking by Toosey’s leg splintered. He looked down. A fist-sized hole was punched clean through the board. When he looked up the boys had scrambled over the barrier, the rifle with them, scrambled and toppled into the last of the guano muck, the rifle sliding about, the truck rocking, and they flattened against the boards and covered their heads. It wasn’t until the second crack tolled and died along hills that he knew what had happened. Every nerve ending in him fizzed at once. He turned and looked downline.

Two figures sprinting full tilt up the straightaway. He could hear their boots crunching in the gravel and could see the pistol being leveled at him. He heaved himself over the barrier as another gunshot sounded and the wood burst beside his ear. He toppled into the guano muck.

Fuckin Jesus, he said.

The boys stared at him, astonished. Who is that?

The gun, lad, the gun.

They fed it out. Toosey set back the hammer and kneeled with it propped at his shoulder. The seekers had made ground on the train, close enough that in the fading daylight he could see how the girl wore a white hood. He wasn’t ready for the shock this gave. He’d heard people talk, yet seeing her for himself was another thing. He almost put the gun aside in shame. Let them be, was the thought he had. You’ve done enough. But another shot smashed
the planking by his arm and he felt the wind of the passing lead and he knew
for all the world he had no such choice to make. He rose with that firearm and
centred the Irishman along the barrel. At this the seekers broke for the
sidescrub after shelter and he tracked the Irishman to the left and jerked the
trigger. The hammer gave an empty clack. He looked at the pan. It was
unprimed.

Where’s your powder? he said to the boy.

Aint none.

Don’t piss about. Give it over.

The boy shook his head. There's none at all.

What?

It's gone. All of it.

In the bush by the rail line the Irishman continued at a flat run, flushed
and heaving as the wash from the smokestack eddied past him. Some yards
back his hooded shadow lumbered along and for a time the two of them grew
smaller. Toosey watched through the holes in the wood. He had begun to
believe them gone when the sound of the engine changed. It was losing speed
shy of the hill’s peak and slowing and hissing of its pistons grew laboured.
Toosey wiped his palms on his shirt and then he removed the knife from his
jacket. Now they were gaining ground. Looming ever more distinct. He turned
to the boys.

Get up the back, he said.

They talked over each other.
Who is that?

We never done nothin did we.

What have we done to them?

They’re killers.

Get up the back I said. They won’t hurt you. Just keep your mouth shut.

Toosey rolled onto his knees and stole a glance over the rim of the barrier and dropped down again. Just get up the back, he said again.

The Irishman was first to make the train. He grabbed the hangladder and heaved himself up. Through the bullet holes Toosey watched it unfold, a run of events as if in dream, the thick knots of knuckle locking on the rungs, one, a second, and then the corrugated forehead and pinched eyes of Fitheal Flynn as he rose into view. He chose his moment to lean above the barrier swinging the knife. It was directed at Flynn’s arm. The blade cut a gash there in the coat and Flynn let go of the ladder, startled, and toppled onto the rails. He crashed and rolled in spray of gravel. The engine was broaching the hill and the whole train built momentum as the heavier front end descended and hauled with it the long snaking consist. The Irishman clambered to his feet, aimed his gun, and called.

Square off to me like a man. You hear me, Toosey? Like a man.

He fired a useless shot above the truck. The train pulled away ever faster.

A batch of sweat had formed in the ridges of Toosey’s face. He wiped it. Wiped away the damp hair. He looked across at the boys and they stared nervously in return. His small black hat sat in the muck rocking with the
motion of the train. He brushed it off, replaced it. The carriage passed further into a wooded cutting and the sun flickered in the overhang of limbs, picking two frightened boys out of the shade at intervals, their eyes like clean spots in the grime, staring through the unsteady light.

Who are you mister? Some kind of runaway or somethin?

I told you, he said. The freight truck swayed beneath them, the bone-break sound of the wheels. I’m the wildest man you will meet.

The boys drew close to each other. They hardly dared take their eyes off this uncommon bushman, for he was not yet done with them. He stood with the sway of the truck, clutching the side gate, and stepped towards them. He put out his hand.

Now, he said. I want me money back.

The older one fumbled from his pants the leather pocketbook and passed it up.

Toosey eased it off him. He stood a moment longer looking down at them. Then he turned and shuffled to the rear and took up a place by the bullet-holed gate. Through the wounds in the wood the country passed by and in time he closed his eyes and appeared to almost doze off, so that when he sat rapidly upright and began to pat himself over it caused the boys some alarm. He slapped at each pocket in turn, felt around inside his jacket, and produced a creased and stained envelope. Once more he leaned back, holding that letter, and like a child with a sugar-rag it somehow soothed him. Lowering his hat across his eyes and leaning back, he locked his hand in his lap and rocked with the ocean-roll of the train.
They descended out of gum forest, Flynn and his daughter, and followed the rails across the flatlands west of Longford. In the late dark the stars hung like points of ice, looking singularly cold and distant. The whole moon steam-white. They walked and Fitheal Flynn sang along a few bars of a taverner’s ballad he knew from the old country, tapping his stick to keep time. Tis well I do remember that bleak November day, he sang, when bailiff and landlord come to drive us away. Soon the few faint lights of Longford loomed up out of the plain ahead. They walked ever towards them.
At Longford station they left the tracks and dropped their bedding and other pieces under the raised platform deck and they crouched there beneath it for a time assessing the town across the mud streets, a row of double-height buildings following the curve of the main road, erratic in design and material, a bank with fluted columns of white stone and a plain emporium painted green. Elsewhere a brick hotel under the sign of a carven coat of arms. Light from the hotel windows spilled onto the street and that was all the light there was. It would be a long night, the current in a series of many such.

They found what small comfort they could under the platform decking sheltered in their blankets, empty bellied. Soon a song started in the hotel that drifted faintly by. Caislin had a wedge of damper which she had wrapped and kept from their last meal and she passed it to Flynn but he was in no mood to eat. He sat cleaning the bulldog pistol, pushing spent shells with the ejector pin and ramrodding the cylinder with a rag, holding the barrel to the moon and peering through it. She watched him from her slackly hanging eyeholes.

I'm to blame, he said. I had him clean as daylight and I missed.

It wasn't clean, she said.

Near as we will get.

He packed in new rounds from his shirt pocket.

O'Malley should never have give you that, she said.

Let me be worrying about it.

You aint thinkin this through, Pa. What if you had shot him today?

He exhaled. The world would be thanking me, he said slowly.
And if you’d been caught for it?

Flynn snapped the cylinder closed. Aye, well, he said. Would have been a bastard, wouldn't it.

It’s the money, she said. That is all we want.

No.

We aint after blood.

Flynn looked up. We are not after money neither.

Caislin fell silent. There was fiddling now from the hotel that was only dim where they were camped, dim and made mournful by the wind.

He could be anywhere, she said.

That made him smile. No, he said. Tis the bills. They are not worth a cuss till he changes them.

Someone might change them for him.

Two hundred pound? Flynn said, his eyebrows drawing together.

Then what?

He does it hisself. Does it at the bank.

Launceston, she said.

Another thing, he's a wife and child there.

Bloody Launceston, she said and her head dropped.

Watch how you speak.
That’s twenty mile.

If we be leaving at dawn, we’ll make it by night.

I know. Don’t make me like it any more though.

Caislin broke apart the bread. She lifted the hem and passed bits up to her mouth.

Take that off, he said.

No.

You need air. You need light.

He could see the outline of the cotton shifting with her jaw. She chewed and he watched her. Then she removed the hood.

Flynn drew a sharp breath. He looked away. Oh my girl, he said.

She folded the hood by bringing in the corner and doubling it through the middle and the cotton was as mottled with stains and was as soft and pliant as a sheet of ancient vellum. She lay it neatly aside on her bedroll for replacing in the morning. She tore the bread and ate more.

Soon Flynn began to cry. It was a quiet sound, constricted, and he wrung his hands and could not look at her as he squeezed his mouth and eyes closed.

My love, he said. Forgive me.

That won’t help us, she said.

Forgive me.
Caislin worked the hard wad of bread around with her tongue. That don’t matter no more, she said.

I shouldn’t have left you there. Left you with the money.

We’ll get it back. That will be the end of it.

Flynn wiped his eyes.

Let Toosey get away and where’s the use in any of this?

Aye, said Flynn, I know. You’re right, course you’re right.

Caislin turned away and stretched out on the canvas still in boots as was her habit. She tugged the blankets around her chin.

Go to sleep, she said.

All right.

But he sat for a long time feeling a familiar ache. She was outlined against the dark, all in black, like a feature of the land. Her breath rising and falling. He grit his teeth until his jaw ached. He squeezed shut his eyes. That one name wandering the blank of his mind. That one thought and deed. After a time he took up the pistol and cracked it and finished loading the cylinder.

#

The sun, risen from a fire in the hills, had burnt for an hour and below the paltry station platform in the shade and in their exhaustion they slept. The tin whistle of a guardsman woke them in the brewing warmth of morning. Flynn
crawled from their cubbyhole and stood and arched his back, blinking in the hard light. An imposing double-span bridge stretched across the river into town, the stone centrepier set upon an island, and a locomotive was running the whole length of it sending blooms of steam up through the girders. He popped his back and watched the train roll and halt with a horrendous squeal. The guardsman signalled folk to stand clear of the dropaway and blew his whistle and moved along the carriages unlatching the doors of first and second class. Flynn scratched an armpit, he sniffed it.

Rouse yourself, he said.

But Caislin had stirred already at the approach of the engine and sat gowned again in her hood.

You must be hungry, she said.

I could gnaw off my own arm.

She went about the rolling of the blankets.

The sound of applause caused him to look up. He scratched himself. Pouring out of the carriages were upwards of a hundred formally dressed Rechabites, each wearing across his shoulder a splendid blue and gold sash proclaiming the title of his independent order. Some held aloft ornate banners strung on poles and others carried brass instruments, playing scales to warm their lips, beating senselessly on drums. The crowd applauded and Flynn shook his head. What in the name of fock, he said.

Who are they?

Caislin had dragged out their gear and stood now likewise staring.

These English love to to play at dressups, he said.
The Rechabites paraded into town. After an interval the two of them humped up their gear and followed. With their week on the backroads they’d slowly acquired the look of derelicts, which by many measures they were. The folk they passed in the road stepped aside at the sight of them. Flynn though kept his head high and looked elsewhere.

The smell of bread brought them to a red brick bakery sheltered by a painted awning and written with the name Smiths. A bell rang atop the door as it opened and rang again as it shut and they stood in the shop gazing variously at the wicker baskets stacked with loaves and pastries and the sacks of flour piled like corpses. The proprietor emerged tucking a cloth into his apron string and he placed both hands down on the stone counter. Flynn came forward. He pointed at a gallon loaf. He began to speak but the proprietor was looking past him at Caislin.

What are you sposed to be?

Flynn had a handful of coins and he doled them out on the counter. Give me a loaf of that there, he said

An Irish clownshow is it?

Pogue muh ho-in, Flynn said

Some mick bloody clown show or somethin, the proprietor said. He reached for a loaf and placed it before Flynn and took two of the coins. His eyebrows and sidewhiskers were white with flour and his jowls shook when he laughed. The peatbogging clown show, he said and laughed with himself.

They broke bread squatting in the street as the Rechabites stood about conversing in their dozens, shaking hands in strange fashion with one another,
a secret perhaps devised amongst themselves. A tent had been erected in the main road that served ginger ale from a washtub and a woman came past, four mugs in each of her hands and passing them out. She came past and she saw Caislin and gave a little start. What the devil, she said and steered away, sloshing ale in the dust. Some fellows had contrived a podium out of apple crates and soon the chief ruler took to it and raised his feathered bicorn and called for quiet. Behind him some fellows held a banner that depicted Jane inviting Jonadab onto his chariot and stitched across the silk in black lettering was the motto: Is thine heart right, as my heart is with thy heart.

Brothers, said the chief ruler, we are come here today to loudly condemn the making, levying, and enforcing of the railway rate.

This was met by wild applause.

Oh Jaysus, Flynn said.

We should be movin on, Caislin said.

Would you look at him up there. I’d like to punch him in the cakehole.

There were three great historic curses, the chief said. War. Pestilence. Famine. But corruption is the unknown curse. Our movement has energised the social and religious minded among us. We have brought hundreds out of a state of serfdom and created in them a spirit of manliness. We have introduced to them the qualities of independence and taught them how to make their own way to self respect.

Applause and raised hats. Caislin, her head swiveling inside the cowl, studied the rallied men and women. They’re lookin at me, she said.
But it’s easy to rob an orchard when no one keeps it, the chief said. While our backs were turned, the legislature has fallen in league in with private shareholders. They have imposed a rate on all of us in order to make good the losses of a few speculators. They confiscate our property, steal our money, and make ruins of our lives. How can they do this, brothers? How can their authority extend even to our property? To our purses? Does it only take an act of parliament to shed us of our rights? No, brothers. It is because they believe us weak. Because they believe they are allowed the undue exercise of power over the supine and the insipid.

Flynn stuffed into his mouth the last of his bread. Says the man exercising his power over the supine and insipid, he said.

The crowd was mostly families, Sunday dressed in suits and hats, folk come off the many farms sewed like quilting into the flat land around Longford, come in their carts, come on horseback, come to hear the chief ruler, but as Flynn looked across them now, chewing, he saw that barely an eye at all was turned to the chief. The better part had come about to stare at Caislin.

By the blessed fock, he said.

We should go, Caislin said.

Flynn leaned on his staff and stood. What? he called to the crowd. What are you lot of fools looking at?

Many looked away then. Mothers pulled their children close. Fathers crossed their arms. But one young fellow continued to glare. He took a few steps nearer and he had a rag knotted convict-style around his neck which he was adjusting as he spoke. He was a fellow full of his own self importance. He
loosened his tie and spoke. That leper’s got no business amongst decent healthy folk, he said.

Flynn twisted his hands around the staff. Leper?

Get him away. We don’t want him here.

What, and you’ve never seen a hangman before? Flynn said.

He’s a hangman like I’m the Queen of Spain.

Caislin pulled his arm. Pa, let’s go.

Flynn stood for a time locking eyes with the fellow. The leather of his hands creaked on the hardwood staff. Ever seen a man get dropped? he said.

The fellow shrugged.

Takes a special breed, I will tell you. Dropping men all day.

He’s no more than a boy.

He is what he is, Flynn said.

Tell him to take that bag off. He makes folk nervous.

Well, and it’s precisely that he wants you nervous. What’s the good of a hangman who calms?

The young fellow rubbed his throat. Perhaps he wanted to say more, for he drew breath and straightened, but he seemed to think the wiser of it and in the end he turned, stuck his thumbs through his belt, and walked away.

Please, Caislin said, let’s go now.

Aye, and we can go, he said as he stared after the fellow. We can go.
He parted the crowd with his staff like a weary shepherd of old and pushed through and Caislin behind him clutched his knapsack. They passed the crowd in the main street paying no heed to the muttered contempt that came to them. She kept close to him where the crowd was thicker and he could feel her tugging at the straps of his bag. The street sloped away fringed by buildings down toward the mud and reed flats of the distant river, peopled along its length, and he was peering towards the bridge when the tugging grew more insistent. Wait, she said and tugged. He looked across his shoulder.

Mornin.

The local constable was standing there. He was all in black and was as skinny as a pull-through for a rifle. On his cap the crest of the Territorial Police caught the sun and the chinstrap on his lower lip stirred as he spoke. Some concern has been expressed about you two, the constable said.

We’re leavin, sir, Caislin said and she pushed Flynn forward.

I’ll require you to move along, the constable said.

Yes, sir, she said. We are.

She pushed at Flynn’s back but Flynn would not be moved. He was staring down at the constable. He braced himself on his staff and leaned closer.

Require me what?

You heard what I said.

Aye. Is minic a gheibhean beal oscailt diog dunta.

The constable swayed back. Aint you a barmy little so and so, he said.

Pa, let’s go.
Caislin was pushing him when Flynn took hold of the constable’s jacket collars. The fellow seemed to shrink inside his clothes and they stood for a moment in that curious embrace before Flynn delivered a powerful shove and said, Away and tug your willy, boy.

The constable stumbled. Folk nearby turned to see what had transpired and they were frowning or craning their necks. Flynn leaned calmly on his staff.

See now, the constable said and he gestured at Caislin where she stood motionless in shock. I’m requiring you to move along. That’s all. There’s no call for aggression.

Don’t look at him, Flynn said.

A brief disquiet crossed the face of the constable.

You want to be looking at me. I’m the cause of your trouble.

The constable switched his eyes onto Flynn.

You see, I belong to the stamp of man as states his principles. My principle is never yield to the Crown.

Folk in the crowd had one or two begun to shuffle away. There was talking and pointing, and Caislin seemed turned rigid with it. The constable scanned the crowd and when he looked back at Flynn he had drawn his billyclub. This aint County Kerry, he said and he waved that long black finger. Now get yourselves along fore I come up in a temper.

You take me amiss, boy.

I what?
Wave that thing all you like. We’re not under your yoke. We don’t take instruction from the likes of you.

The constable snorted. That’s Fenian talk, he said. I can arrest you as Fenians.

Caislin stirred to life. She grabbed at his elbow. Leave him be, Pa. Remember what we’re about.

Flynn lifted his hand to her for quiet. It’s not politics we are talking, he said. We are no part of politics and no part of the law. We are stateless. You understand?

I understand, the constable said. You’re anarchists.

I’ll make it simple.

The constable watched him closely.

You’re a man and I’m a man.

He tapped the stick in his palm. And so what?

So that is all, Flynn said.

I’m a man and you’re a man?

Aye.

And what’s he? The constable jabbed his stick at Caislin.

He, Flynn said, is the mouth of the lion.

Sounds like politics to me, the constable said.
Flynn’s great unruly brows dug together. The problem we be having is this. You would put yourself above me, which I refuse on the grounds that you’re no more and no less than anyone. I see why you don’t like that, but there we are.

The constable lowered his club. His face fell as he considered this. He began to speak but stopped. He cleared his throat. Two pound a month I’m paid, he said. Two. That don’t hold me to much in the way of politics. I take me two and do what I’m told.

There is the root of your troubles, Flynn said. Take pride, man. Be your own master.

They were attracting a rancorous gaze from the crowd of villagers and the lines of sashed and suited Rechabites. Flynn doffed his great hat to them, as a gentleman might. And for all of you, he said, who put yourselves below a waffling fool like that fellow up there. You hang the petty thieves but give the great ones power. Wake up to yourselves. Look around you. He replaced his hat, set it straight. Now, he said to the constable. I’m leaving but it’s not your own instruction that has brought it about. I do it as a free man.

He took his daughter by the hand and led her through the droves of people, the path opening before them as startled folk stepped aside and closing again behind.

Take your leper and go, someone called.

Fenians! called another.

They walked and did not look back.
At the bridge that crossed the weedy river towards Launceston Flynn halted to resettle his load like a moutaineer and drink from his corked bottle. Caislin at his side was still watching to their rear, the huddled set of her shoulders showing her concern. He offered her the bottle. There was a buggy coming over the bridge driven by a stout young fellow smart dressed and as he passed he stared at Flynn and his strange companion, and Flynn in return just touched his hat. The cart rolled on and from the backwards facing seats two children with their mouths agape at the odd ghostly face of Flynn’s daughter. Caislin looked away. They moved on.

The roadside grass sang with summer insects. The fields, boxed with hedges of sweet briar, held flocks of sheep that huddled beneath the riverbank willows or lay like dogs panting with the heat. Flynn had not recorked his bottle but walked with it, slugging from the neck and looking about the country there, the condition of the stock that grazed. Land parceled up with post and rail fencing and ordered like pastel-hued tiles around the earth’s curve. It was all so thoroughly a small misshapen, transported, bastard England that he felt alien in it. As they walked his daughter turned to him. You think I should take it off, she said.

Flynn pursed his lips. He swigged from the bottle.

You do, she said. I know. I’m makin trouble everywhere.

Flynn said nothing but watched along the river. He drank.

But I can’t, she said. Not yet.

All right, he said.

I will though, she said. Soon.
Well that would be all right too.

Across the river the Rechabites had struck up a march. The dry metalled road where they paraded seemed to smoke such was their number.

Well here’s how things stand, she said. There’s no money for food more than a crown or two. There’s Ashley and little Branna we’ve left with the O’Malleys, without nothin for our landlord, nor for his. And here’s you, the man who won’t talk to the police.

When we make Launceston I’ll talk to some fellows who know some fellows, he said. We’ll turn something up. We near had him yesterday in just that manner.

She surveyed the road with her lonely breath hissing in the fiber of the hood. She said nothing further. What further could be said to such a man as himself? What that would annul all the world of his rancor? She knew him better. More, she wore that rancor too. Handed down from him, and it fit her poorly for it.

There is a bit of cunning needed, he said. Yes, and rightly there is. Toosey is no sort of fool. Let me tell you something about him, from when I knew him in the Port.

I’ve heard all your stories, Pa.

Be quiet, and listen, he said. There was a fellow in with us by the name of Chauncey Johnson.

I know about Chauncey Johnson. You told me. Toosey smashed him up with rock. I know.
The point being, Flynn said. The point being that we need a bit more sense about us than Gimlet-Eyed Chan Johnson ever had.

You Irish aint known for sense, she said.

And what are you? Tasbloodymanian?

I’m nothing at all. I’m the sole of my kind.

Good girl. That’s the way.

The parade began to mount the sandstone highway bridge, at the head the chief ruler signalling with his marching baton and the satin banners of each order floating plumply above the crowd. Flynn looked across at the calamitous sound of the parade and scowled and sniffed. Some rat cunning is what’s needed on our part, he said. To be sure.

There’s nothin clever about killin him, Pa.

He had hiked up his knapsack though and was stepping into the road, the lonely toll of his pots lost among the mounting parade racket. She adjusted her bedroll and followed.

Did you hear me?

Flynn said not a word. He walked on, wearing a look of deep concern like an etching in stone.
Launceston

Come the deeps of night Thomas Toosey stole soundlessly out among the rolling stock of freight trucks and carriages into the fringe of reeds at the riverbank. The hills above the river outlined black before a sheen of stars. He stumbled and cursed through the mud as he made across the banks to the bridge that joined outlying Invermay to the city proper. Before long he was walking through the town of Launceston, casting an eye up and the down the unpeopled streets, his shadow circling as he crossed pools of light below the gaslamps. He passed by the tall gold-stenciled windows of Blundells Glass and China and caught a glimpse of himself dragging over the irregularities in the pane, like his image given back off a lake. With his few sorry effects, his odd round hat. Called from the pits of some wilderness. Not a sight for a weak stomach. He looked away.
He walked up past Prince’s Square where in the dark and in the small wind the oak and elm hissed. The houses here were of failing sort. Rows of untrue fences. Tin rooves scabbed and flaking. He walked to one house that was a narrow conjoined box with a narrow yard in front and stood gazing up at it. There was a light burning behind the curtained window and so he removed his hat and smoothed his hair. He lifted the wooden gate and entered, scaled the steps, stood before the door. He knocked twice.

The woman who answered was holding a candle and when the light of it called Thomas Toosey from the dark of her verandah, holding his faded hat and standing at a civil distance, her face fell in ill-temper

Minnie, he said. Good evening.

She stared, her head nodding very slightly.

You look well, he said.

I’d hoped you were dead, Thomas.

He tapped his hat to dislodge the burrs. There were holes spaced around the crown where sun and rain, countless years of it, had eaten the felt. He stuck his finger into one. Wilhelmina—

So did Maria.

He let out his breath. He thought about what to say but there was nothing to say.

Michael will be along, she said. He won’t be pleased to see you neither.

I’m not much of a man, he said. I know it.

You’re no sort of man at all.
I know it, he said.

You left them penniless. My sister and nephew.

Not penniless, no. I sent them every bit I earned.

Maria died believin in her heart that you despised her.

You’re wrong about that. I wrote to her. She knew my feelins.

Minnie brought the door around to close it. Goodbye, Thomas, she said.

He put his hand to the panel. Now hold on, he said through the crack.

Goodbye.

I done the wrong thing.

Remove your hand.

But I come to set it straight.

You left her, Thomas. You can’t correct that.

I want me boy, he said.

Minnie inched back the door, one large eye, as white as river quartz, peering around. He isn’t here, she said.

Toosey stepped back. He exhaled and looked down at his hat. When he looked up he was frowning. Woman, do not piss me about, he said.

He came here once. He’s a troubled boy. Never a minute of peace with him. He wouldn’t stay for fear of the police.

Where is he?
I don’t know. Such a father, such a son I suppose.

Toosey replaced his hat. He stood quietly staring at her. So help me, that better be the truth, he said.

In the pale light of the flame she looked unwell. Listen, she said, talk to your brother-in-law. You know what he’s like. Walking the town all day, gabbing. He’ll know a thing or two about your boy.

Toosey glanced along the road. Will he be long?

I shouldn’t think so.

He looked along the road and looked back at her.

You’ll have to wait out there. I won’t have you in the house.

Very well.

Minnie stared at him a moment. You never even come to her funeral, she said.

For which I am sorry, he said. Now and forever.

Sorry pays no debts does it.

No.

He stepped off the verandah. The door crashed closed behind him, the locks turned over. He unslung his swag and dropped it on the ground. Then for a time he sat on it thinking. The truth was this: he had liquored himself up day after day until she, his lonely Maria, could no longer bear it. He’d left her in poverty and she had died. The sun rose and set and that fact never changed. It was a truth to tear him to pieces.
For a long time he thought about leaving. He could ask around the pubs. Someone would have seen his boy. But he lingered nevertheless and late in the evening he saw shifting among the shadows in the road one shape deeper and darker than all and when it crossed a band of moon it was, as he knew it would be, a handcart set on a pair of huge wheels, horseless, rolling as if of its own volition. He stood by the gate as it neared. The wheels turning crookedly on the axle. A great worn grindstone set in the centre rigged with pulleys. Dear Polly I’m goin to leave you, the cart sang, for seven long years love and more. The greaseless hubs shrieked at each revolution. It rolled up before the house and fell silent.

Ho there, Toosey called.

For all his years the knife sharpener had grown gnarled and hump-backed and shaped around his contraption like a trimmed shrub. He raised his eyes off the road and saw the bushman standing arms folded by the gate.

Thomas bloody Toosey, he said.

He came forward with his hand out. A tottering prophet, limp with age.

Brother Michael Payne, Toosey said.

They gripped hands across the fence and clapped each other on the arms.

Among the instruments on the cart was a small towel and Brother Payne, raised off his derby, mopped himself with it, and dried his sparse white hair. He wore a wild set of muttonchops below either ear and these he dried similarly.

You look well.
I’m troubled by a bit of looseness, Payne said. Dare not trust my arse with a fart.

He folded his towel and placed it upon his other implements. Jesus, man, he said. Your hair.

Toosey’s mouth tightened. There’s three years in it, he said. Three since Maria marched me out. Three since I cut it.

Sounds a Catholic thing to do, Payne said. Punish yourself and think it will be well.

It won’t be well. I know that.

No it won’t. But you aint come to talk haircuts have you.

I’m after me boy.

Payne nodded solemnly. Expected you would be.

Toosey reached inside his jacket and removed the crumpled letter he’d carried for weeks. He held it up. William wrote to me, he said.

Yes. I know.

Of all the low acts I’ve done, Toosey said, and you saw most of em.

I saw a lot.

Leavin them alone is the lowest.

Payne huffed air from his nose. What makes us noble, he said, is a system of compensations. Reward each suffering, recover every debt, repay a sacrifice. You have it in you, Thomas. God don’t make us without a notion of rectitude. But the question is, can you act upon what you was bestowed with?
I’ve come back only for that.

Start by quitin the rum, Payne said.

Toosey spat in the dust. He looked down to where the cud lay and smeared it with the toe of his boot. Says the kettle, he said.

I mean it. Rum is what brought you here.

Three years I’ve not had a sip. I’m a mended man.

From his pocket Brother Payne pulled a tavern pipe that was carven with harps and shamrocks. He packed it from a pouch and popped a match on the mighty grindstone that was rigged to a flywheel in the bed of his cart. He sucked the flame down to the bowl. You know where he is? Payne said as he puffed. Your boy?

No, but I reckon you do.

Payne passed him the pipe. Stewart’s, he said.

Trent Stewart?

The same.

Toosey put the pipe to his mouth. Lad needs to eat I suppose.

A lot of the young ones visit. Around noon usually. But that aint the whole of it.

What else?

Well, he said. Listen—

What else?
I’m told he has favorites.

Toosey’s look blackened. What’s that mean?

He has a room, does Stewart. Out back. Where he shows himself.

I’m not followin.

Payne crooked his forefinger and waved it. Shows himself, he said. To the ones he can trust.

As the import of this slowly settled upon him a series of expressions crossed his face, at first a frown of concern, and then, as he understood, his brow began to lift and his mouth to drop. I’ll be damned, he said. The filthy beggar.

William knows a villain from a saint. He won’t fall into bad ways.

I’ll rip his guts out.

Payne wheezed, or perhaps coughed. Don’t sound to me like you’ve mended your ways one bit.

Has someone told the police?

He took the pipe from Toosey. There was a deep and blackened divot upon the crosspiece of the cart where he’d emptied the pipe bowl year after wearisome year, and he did so again now. You would tell them would you, he said.

My oath.

Then you are a new man.
Toosey took up his swag. He hauled the rope over his head and settled the load. He opened the gate and stepped into the street.

What are you thinkin? Payne said.

That I’m goin round there.

Not tonight you won’t. Your boy aint there. Stewart only gives them a bit of lunch. You want your boy, wait till he’s there before you go kickin up a stink.

Toosey smoothed down his moustaches.

A man like Stewart won’t need much in the way of persuasion. Present there on his doorstep. See what he makes of a nine-lifed bushmen like yourself.

There’s another matter too, Toosey said and he turned his eyes away. I need to find William tonight.

You shan’t find him tonight, old mate. Not a hope in hell.

Some larrikins wandered past that were taking turns from a bottle, wiping their mouths, weaving drunks, their thumbs through the braces rigging up their pants. Toosey watched them pass and when he looked back there was a bitterness to him that showed in the set of his jaw. It must be tonight, he said. From the breast of his jacket he pulled a bank note.

It was crisp and thick and flecked with blood and Payne looked at it and he looked at Toosey. He snatched it away. Oh, he said. I see it. I see it now.

Tonight, Toosey said. You understand.

You are as thick as bull’s walt, Thomas Toosey. And that is a fact.
Toosey made a little grunt.

Oh Jesus what have you done.

Nevermind what I’ve done. Just help me find him.

Ten years we was in Port Arthur. Workin the land like beasts side by side. You learn about a man after that, don’t you?

Those sentiments caused a silence to pass between them. At length Payne said, And the sum?

Toosey looked askance at him.

It’s a fair lump, Payne said, or I’m a prancin fairy.

Two hundred quids.

By Christ, Payne said and tipped back his hat. He stared at Toosey like he was seeing him anew. I thought you was turned away from thievin, he said.

You can’t steal from a crook, Toosey said.

Who was it?

Toosey clicked his tongue. A sweat was beading up on his brow and he raised his small round hat and palmed the damp back over his hair. The Dublin man, he said. Fitheal Flynn.

Flynn of the lowbooters?

The same.

Flynn who pulled his own tooth with farrier’s tongs?

Him.
I tell you now. Without a skerrick of doubt. The Flynn I know would hunt you unto the end of days for a sum like that. He would dig you up by moonlight and make soup from your bones.

This caused Toosey some unsettlement. He studied Payne across the coarse and heavy grindstone rigged between the wheels of his cart. The bigger trouble is that I doubt it’s even the money as has him most nettled, he said.

Why?

Nevermind it now. That is a tale for another time. When I find William we’ll leave off the island and that’ll be the end of it.

Course, you have another dilemma too, Payne said. Don’t you? He held up the note.

I know, Toosey said.

You need gold.

You’re right.

Then forget it tonight. Forget it. Just have yourself at that bank first thing. Change the notes. Fetch the young one. You’ll be on a steamer by dark. You’ll be off and gone.

Across the town, across the little universe of its lights, Toosey could see the black moonlit flats of Invermay where Trent Stewart kept his place. He put his hands in his pockets. He knew Payne was right but it didn’t pay to come out and say it.

Stay with us tonight, Payne said. Have a feed.

Don’t think Minnie would appreciate that.
She’ll do as she is told.

Like hell, she’s as willful as her sister, he said and the thought of Maria then was like cold water down his back. No, he said. I know a place.

Play it smart, Thomas. Keep your head. Get the boy clear.

Payne doubled the bank note through the middle and passed it to him. Toosey looked at the note for a moment before shaking his head. Keep it, he said. For Minnie and the kids.

It’s your burden to carry. I aint about to help you clear your conscience.

Toosey nodded. He took the note. Fair enough, he said.

With that done, he started down Batten street toward the main road. When he glanced around Brother Payne was leaning on his handcart watching him. Nothing in his eyes but a flagging forebearance, like the world had lost its capacity to surprise. He raised a hand. Toosey touched his hat in return.

Along the footpath his boots fell and the billy rang against his leg. He walked listing places in his head where a man might unroll his bundle, the river bank, the windmill hill, the basin, but not one of them was better than an open flat prone to all manner of weather. He crossed streets made grey by the weakish gaslights and when he reached Prince’s Square he squatted by the cast-iron fence pickets and made sure the pocketbook was safe. The remnant heat of day was giving back off the bluestone base. Beyond the pickets, in the fountain square, were flowerbeds in bloom and stands of sapling willow that made a pissing sort sound as they shifted. He looked along the street either way. Nothing. The windows all dark. The streetlamps hissing. There was one place he knew where he would be sheltered. The bridge by the rail line. He
stood. He went on. As he walked his mind worked upon the image of Trent Stewart spitting out his broken teeth.

#

The bridge was on the far side of town and he was a while making it. He worked his way beneath the wooden span by sliding down a mossy bend and pitching his swag before him. Under the bridge a fire was burning and three men stood before its scant throw of light. They looked up to see Toosey crouch below the supports and stand and straighten his hat. Men like ghosts of men, tall and sere and attired as if out of a grave for the common dead in illfitting jackets and underclothes stained with sweat. The bridge was known among the town derelicts as a decent place to doss down and they seemed unsurprised to see Toosey. He looked from one to the next, humped up his bundle on a piece of cleared ground, and sat on it. One of them spoke.

Evenin.

And to you, he said.

Holdin any baccy about you?

Toosey looked them over. Wish I was.

How’s about any rum?

I got tea and sugar if you got water.

We got water.
Well then good.

They had a common billy boiling above a pitful fire of driftwood and weeds and whatever was at hand. Toosey dosed it with tea leaves and the last of his sugar. They watched it steep in silence and when it was done took a round from it likewise in silence. One of the men was familiar to Toosey and they studied each other through the smoke. Footsteps beat on the wooden bridge above, passed by, and this man was first to speak. He was called Bryce and he was a piece of work. He wore no hat but had a band of cloth tied about his head and like a Chinese gold digger he’d knotted it at his brow. He pointed at Toosey.

I know you.

Toosey looked away downriver. I reckon you do.

I know you, he said again. He turned to the other two men. This is the chap give Gimlet-Eyed Chauncey Johnson a floggin, he said.

The other men watched Toosey intently.

Old Gimlet-Eyed, one of them said and this fellow was thin from hardly eating so that when he fetched himself another drink from the billy his collarbone hollowed out and the slack skin of his neck pulled taut. That were twenty years ago, he said.

Bryce waved his mug at Toosey. Tied your hand with a rag and a piece of brick, he said. That made a job of it.

They all watched him. Toosey threw his dregs on the fire in a cloud of steam. They talked on.

Gimlet-Eyed Chan, the other man said.
Course he’s dead and gone now, the third said.

Thank God for it.

For a time nothing more was spoken. They each watched the coals throb in the debris of driftwood, mosquitoes coming and going along their bare arms, enormous mosquitoes the size of moths, and all the while Toosey sitting as if deep in study and never removing his eyes off Bryce. Soon he cleared his throat and spoke.

I weren’t the one.

You what?

Was the Irish fellow. Irish Flynn. Was him as hit your mate, not me.

Bryce grinned. He was mostly toothless and his gums and the stubs of his teeth shone luridly in the fireglow. That is a lie, he said.

He was a month confined for it, said Toosey. Hooded and left in the dark.

The corner of Bryce’s lip curled back. You, he said. You was a month in the black house you dog.

Call me a dog again and you’ll be held to account.

Toosey watched him though the heat haze. On a string around Bryce’s neck was a buck-horn handled knife that he lifted from out of his shirt and let fall as if that was all he needed to say. The river sucked at its banks and the wild frogs chirruped and they held each the other’s eyes a good long while. Toosey smoothed down his moustaches.

The facts are in the tellin, he said. It’s the story as makes them.
What I know is what I saw.

I done some low acts, he said to Bryce. Done some things would make any man ashamed. He paused here to let his import settle upon them. But I’ll tell you now, he continued, I never touched a whisker on the chin of your dear mate the gimlet thief.

I never said he was me mate.

Whatever the hell he was, Toosey said.

Old Gimlet-Eyed, the thin one said. My word.

Toosey bent and spat into the fire. He sat quietly for a time, watching them. After a suitable break he spoke. Was Flynn give him the name too, as you well know.

That’s some pretty nonsense, Bryce said.

Given him on account of the gimlet he stole and was flogged for.

Codswallop. He was called Gimlet owin to the oddness of his eyes. And it was you give him the name, not Flynn. You. That’s why he come for you.

The fire popped and sparked.

I never touched the man, Toosey said.

Bryce stood up sharply. Then I’m a liar am I? Is that what you want to say?

Toosey also rose.

I won’t be slandered, Bryce said.
And I aint slandered you. So sit down.

There is one thing I will do for scoundrels, he said and he grasped the knife he wore around his neck and waved it.

Why do you have to be a prick about this?

Tell them I aint a liar.

Toosey clicked his tongue. I’ll tell them what I was told by a black man many years ago. That history is the art by which we live our lives. Now, you have your history and I have mine and they’re as singular as the hairs on our arse.

Leave my arse out of it.

Point is, no one’s callin no one a liar. You got your story. I got mine.

Funny sort of fact that can change for the tellin.

Toosey glared at him. Sit down fore you get yourself killed, he said.

Bryce lowered the knife. And he wasn’t me mate.

Fair enough.

I just reckon you was owed a bit of somethin, Bryce said. Talk about your low acts all right. Why don’t you tell us why you was in Port Arthur? Eh?

This caused Toosey to stiffen. Shut your mouth about that, he said.

The lowest act of all.

She was a murderous lying bitch, Toosey said. She done it, not me.

That’s your story? She done it? What a laugh.
Toosey held his eyes a while. Horseclop somewhere in the still, the hiss of the fire. Bryce chewed the whiskers on his lower lip and did not look away. At length Toosey stepped into the dark beyond the firelight, and unbuttoned himself and took a piss. He stared over the river at rows of ships moored or made fast to the dock, the hulks of black along the bank. Around the fire the delinquents watched him. Something was spoken among them. He buttoned himself and went to unroll his bedding. He started to shuck off his boots but then thought the better of it. He laid back on the canvas, hauled his blanket up, and, thus covered, he felt for the pocketbook and removed it from his jacket. The other men spoke in quiet tones and shifted about. He stuffed the pocketbook into his pants where it was safe.

A cart crossed onto the bridge. As it passed the commotion filled the hollow underneath and grit fell through the bridge boards, fell on his cheeks, disturbed the surface of the river with rings upon rings. Toosey lowered his hat over his eyes and waited. He heard the men mutter between themselves and he heard the fire hiss as it was fed. He listened for bootsteps heading his way through the weeds but there was only the whisper of the fire, the squealing billytin. Bryce, in a low voice, called to him through the smoke.

Toosey, he said. You got any more tea, cobber?

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By daylight he was abroad among the early risen citizenry and he had turned his shirt inside out and braided back his long grey mop, tied it off with cord, and he nevertheless made for a ratty sight lugging his roll of sailor’s canvas. In
the first glare of morning he walked up Tamar street where a fish-barrow trader pushed his load and called his trumpeter and cod and where the factory hands lingered in threes and fours to smoke. They all watched Toosey pass for the angle of his hat, set low and to the side, was something sinister. At the corner he turned for the centre of town along Cimitiere street. Here the tall row houses crowded up the road and cast elongated shadows and the upper storey glass was of a thick gold, like a plate, full of the horizon sun. Soon he was passing shop fronts on which were emblazoned names in neat type, Jones and Son, Robert’s Drygoods, Chung Gon, and he knew himself close to his destination.

In the inner streets of Launceston he stood below the telegraph lines gazing up and down the carriageway. There were canned goods emporiums and coffee palaces. Coaches idling by under loads of netted luggage. He walked on until he found the place he wanted. It sat on the opposite corner curiously out of unison with the local squalor. Horizontal bands were sculpted into the masonry. Fluting into the papapets and columns. It seemed to tell of the spirit of wealth taken hold in the colony. He resettled his swag and crossed among the carts plying the street towards the Launceston Bank.

It was not yet even seven. Toosey perched upon the stone steps waiting and eyeing the folk in the street and after a time he pulled the envelope from his pocket. It was worn and crumpled and seasoned with the ash of campfires. He opened the flap and lifted the paper. The pencil had begun to fade. He watched an ice wagon come along tilting to and fro with the weight and the horse making a racket on the hard-packed road. He watched the merchantmen at their shops unbolt and open glass-paneled doors for a day of trade. Folk crossing in high collars, scarves, women with little hats of rabbit skin perched
on their heads. The slow advancing of all things, and him at war for the frozen instant of that letter. They all kept their eyes away from Toosey, as he well knew they should.

The doors swung on nine and he was first inside. The ornate ceiling was hung with a clutch of glass gaslights that gave a tolerable warm glow above the rank of tellers and Toosey approached the first stall smoothing down his moustaches and studying the stretch of white cornice as he shrugged off his swag and dropped it at his feet. His billytin clanged obscenely. The other patrons looked around at him. He delved inside his jacket for the pocketbook he had borne along these last weeks, opened it, smiled, and pulled the banknotes. As if he had some business being there.

Makes for a sight don’t it? The whole place.

I suppose it does, the teller said.

Would give a man a conniption, Toosey said as he looked about.

Behind the barrier glass the teller drummed his fingers on the desk pad. His hair was parted in the middle and pomaded down so that it appeared to be made of tar.

Well? What will it be?

Toosey held up the notes and counted them onto the counter. He pushed them forward.

I want these done up in gold.

The teller looked down at the notes. They were stained with blood, the prints of fingers, in a vivid biblical red. He fanned them out. Each more filthy than the previous. Wrinkled up and tacked together where the stains had dried.
Relics of a frontier where men swore their debts in flesh. He looked at the notes and he looked at Toosey.

Say again?

Gold. Need them changed for gold.

What is your name?

Atkinson.

Have an account here do you Mr Atkinson?

No I don’t.

The teller looked him over. How did you come by this money?

Come by it? I earned it. Worked like a bastard for it.

The teller tapped the pile of notes together and then counted them onto his deskpad. He gave Toosey a long and steady glare.

Wait here, he said.

He went among the desks in back of house until he came beside another gent in a drab threepiece and bowtie. As the teller spoke into his ear this drab gent turned to squint at Toosey through his glasses. Toosey removed his hat, palmed back his hair, and placed the hat upturned on the counter. He smiled at the gent. Some small discussion was had and shortly the teller returned with the fouled banknotes. He tapped the stack a few times on its edge as he considered Toosey across the counter.

Why don’t you open an account? Collect the interest?

No. I want gold.
You understand that two hundred pound in gold is much more than a man ought safely to carry.

Toosey looked away. He muttered something to himself, some profanity. He looked back. I aint bothered by a bit of work, he said

I don’t mean that. I mean what if you’re robbed?

They’ve tried that already. But here I am.

The teller drummed his fingers. All right, he said. All right. If you mean to insist on it.

I insist, Toosey said and he replaced his hat.

It was agreed as a figure of a hundred and eighty four lately minted Melbourne gold sovereigns. The teller counted the pieces into a cotton sack that he handed across to Toosey and Toosey knotted the cloth and rolled it into his swag. When he heaved it to his shoulder the coins rang inside the canvas like a string of muffled bells. He was turning to leave when the teller leaned close to the barrier glass and said, Must have been a decent bit of work you did.

Toosey’s face blackened. What?

That’s a lot of money for a labourer.

Toosey took a long breath. He looked around. He settled his swag and stepped away from the counter. Several men were queued at booths and they watched Toosey coming past but looked promptly away when he caught their eyes. He was about ready to break someone’s nose.

Outside the sun lay like a pour of hot pig iron, giving off a sharpish heat while the air yet felt cool. He put along St John street attended by the sound of
coins to where blocks of light and dark lay cast between the rows of stores and the street was full of people among the many boutiques and dried goods emporiums. As he walked his demeanour changed. He held his eyes forward, locked shut his jaw, tugged his hat. He soon built to an awful temper. He had in mind a picture of Trent Stewart holding his bloodied mouth as he walked the town streets, his thoughts at work, his forehead furrowed, but there was something needed doing first. Before he could reckon things out with Stewart. He had to leave the gold somewhere.

Along a short way was an overhead sign that showed a silver painted sphere and bore the title Star of the North Hotel etched into the inch-thick wood. He stood below this sign glancing between it and the hotel, a weatherboard block resting on a base of freestone dressed with cement, ornamented by iron balustrading running under the windowboxes. The effect was to garb what was otherwise a mongrel sort of place with some pretense of hospitality. He was mulling over the prospect of going back to that goat-faced teller to make a deposit and glancing up and down the street, scratching his balls through his threadbare pants. He tucked his bundle under one arm and climbed the stairs.

At the reception desk the automatic smile of the clerk fell as Toosey crossed the lobby with a billytin making a hollow toll, grim in his bloodied clothes and his road dust. The clerk lifted his hands in objection.

Sir, he said and his voice was strained, we have a dress policy.

Toosey looked around at the frieze-patterned wallpaper that was faded and torn. The wainscotting scarred with the marks of dragged trunks.

I must ask you to leave.
He removed his hat and slapped it. Bits of grass seed fell in a light rain to the floor. He dropped the hat on the counter. The clerk cleared his thoat.

You have a strongbox in here I suppose, Toosey said.

Sir, I—

Toosey dumped his bundle, making a whump that filled the grand cavern of the lobby.

Sir, I’ll call for the constable if you do not remove yourself.

Toosey proceeded to fish through his swag for the coins.

Sir?

I aint walkin to another hotel and I aint goin back to the bank, he said. He placed a new sovereign on the desk. Just need the use of your strongbox a while, he said.

I’m sorry, sir. No.

Eh?

It’s for guests only.

Toosey gazed hard into his face. Then give me a room.

The clerk leveled the guestbook on the counter and adjusted the pencils beside it so that each was spaced apart, set straight, finding some kind of peace in this ritual. When he was done he looked up at Toosey with a weak smile. Sir, he said and he cleared his throat. Sir, I think you have the wrong impression of the Star of the North. We are a well-reputed hotel. Thus, the requirement that you be neatly attired in order to take a room.
Toosey snorted. He seemed to want to speak further. His jaw below the tufts of his whiskers worked back and forth. He looked about the lobby. This arsehole town, was all he said. He reached into his swag and produced another of the coins. It flashed like a struck match in the light of the window.

Two? the clerk said.

Two. For you to overlook your policy.

There was a small silver bell upon the counter which the desk clerk lifted and shook. We best ask Mr Gong, he said.

Good, Toosey said. Call him out.

All was quiet. The clerk watched the door in the pannelling behind him. He rang the bell again.

Maybe he'll find me a bleedin room.

The clerk was ringing the bell furiously.

The man that appeared from the pannelling was tall and slender with his dark hair slicked back. Plainly oriental. He closed the door and stood and crossed his hands at his waist. His eyes flicked to every part of Toosey. His face remained calm but his nostrils flared slightly at what he saw. He smiled and bowed. Ah, he said. Welcome to Star.

Toosey looked at the clerk and he looked at the oriental. He frowned. Is this a wind-up? he said.

No, sir.

I am not the sort of man to be winding up.
This is the owner. This is Mr Gong.

The oriental was so tall he looked down on Toosey. Toosey slowly replaced his hat. He leveled it, set it right. To hell with you, he said.

Scruffing his swag, he turned and started towards the doors.

Oh, Gong said. Oh you mean bastard huh?

Toosey looked around. That’s right, one as prefers his own kind.

What your name?

He stopped. He crossed his arms.

Your name?

Atkinson.

Let me tell you, Mr Atkinsons. I am mean bastard too. Oh yes. You like that?

Toosey was laughing openly.

We mean bastard, we understand. We see each other.

You see me, do you?

The oriental eyed his battered hat, his canvas roll, and his smile began to broaden. I am from Guangzhou. We say stand straight and do not fear the crooked shadow. I stand straight, Mr Atkinsons? Do you?

Straight as a rod.

Gong smiled and bowed, as if his point was thusly made.
I’m offering two gold vickies, Toosey said. Two. For the right to lodge somethin in your strongbox.

Oh lot of money.

I can as easy take it elsewhere.

No, Mr Atkinsons. No no. We help you.

Will you now.

You want my strongbox. You have valuable thing. Yes?

Toosey reached inside his bundle, fished around, and pulled the money sack. Gong’s narrow eyes grew round.

Ah, he said.

Two is fair. Two for the use of your strongbox. That’s the simplest two vickies you’ll ever receive.

Gong was staring at the sack. How much? he said.

A hundred and eighty five.

Oh.

I’ll be back for it. Might be anytime, might be midnight when I come. Might be tomorrow. But when I come, you be ready to give it to me. Right?

This very safe hotel. We keep money safe.

There is no need to concern yourself, the clerk said. Mr Gong is here day and night.

Oh yes. We take care of money.
Toosey inclined his head slightly. Whenever I come. No question.

Yes, sir.

Oh yes.

When he dropped the money sack on the counter the sound of all the coins seemed to call them to attention. The clerk stiffened. Toosey stood drumming his fingers as the clerk scribbled out a note. He pushed the guest register across to Toosey and Toosey wrote Thomas Atkinson in ill-formed letters and signed it the same. He laid his sovereigns in the crease of the book and pushed it back. Gong, standing dead still, could be heard to breathe. He spread his gloved hands.

Welcome to Star hotel, he said.

He approached the bushman at the desk and smiled. Without warning he picked up Toosey’s old bundle. Toosey caught it by the rope.

Unhand that.

I take you to room, Gong said.

Room be blowed. I only want the safe.

No no. I take you room. Good room.

He had the bundle under his arm and was motioning for Toosey to follow. A huge flared staircase filled the centre of the lobby and Gong mounted the first step and began to climb.

Give us that here, Toosey said. He crossed the lobby and ascended after Gong.
Nice room. This way.

The landing was lit with dim oil lamps placed in sconces and Gong led him to the end of the hall and, looking back, smiling at Toosey, he pointed to a tall pine door that was inlaid elaborately with blackwood to make an eightpointed compass or star. There was a delay as Gong slipped on his glasses and fed a key into the lock. He glanced up at Toosey.

Just moment, he said.

The key knocked in the latchworks. Inside was an enormous postered bed buttressed either side by stout-looking bureaus, the timber marble dark and waxed to a high shine, and over the floor a square of Asian carpet. Gong dropped the swag and moved off to draw the curtains while Toosey walked a turn around the room, picking up ornaments and replacing them. He opened the door to the bathroom and peered inside to where a great claw-footed tub was stationed above a spread of cream tiles gouted in black. He frowned and backed out, and glancing around his attention was taken with the sideboard upon which stood, like something a child would drink, a row of tiny whiskeys and rums. Gong was crossing the room to leave but Toosey clicked his fingers.

See here, he said and clicked.

Yes?

There’s someone else. A boy. I might bring him here later.

You need company, eh?

What?

I know nice girl, Gong said. White girl.
Toosey just stared at him.

Gong was smiling, his eyes jovially narrow. You like I send company?

No, said Toosey and waved him off.

Very clean girl. Very nice fanny.

No.

The oriental nodded and bowed. Toosey was picking through the miniscule bottles of whiskey, bottles of gin, when he saw Gong still lingering by the door, still grinning.

I know nice boy. White boy, yellow boy.

Away with you.

Gong backed out of the door, bowing, displaying the part in his hair. Toosey reached out and smacked the door closed.

The window onto the street was glazed with an oily grime. He stood by, watching the folk drift below like phantasms, rippling and stretching in the streaked glass. Watching for someone, he realised, as he leaned on the frame. He polished a clean place in the glass to better see. He wouldn’t breathe easy this time. That mad Irish mongrel would come, there wasn’t a doubt in the world.

Find the boy. Get off the island. He sat on the bed and ground at his eyes with the heel of his palm. It was three weeks since the letter, and who knew how long before it. The lad alone all that time, street living, a gentle-hearted little thing hardly ready for it. Toosey walked again to the window and looked out, pondering what pitiful few choices remained to him. But all he
could think about was his boy and the deviant Trent Stewart with his wattle-grub cock hanging through his fly.

He left the room and went downstairs.

Outside the heat had brewed into a thicker sort of thing that dried the throat. He crossed through streets where barefoot children called wax matches at a penny a box, mopping himself on his sleeve as he went. At the crossing with Tamar street he stopped and looked over the row of cheap-john shops and corn stores toward the river slick and brown like the outfall of a sewer and beyond that the low-rooved homes of Invermay. He felt again for the knife inside his coat, resettled it, and set out.
South of Launceston

By noon the Rechabite parade was swarming over the farming town of Perth. The chief ruler, in his bicorn like a rooster strutting, called a halt and marshalled his followers into ranks, staging soprano and baritone apart, arranging them, and, satisfied, leading into a hymn that carried on the hot baked wind. The citizenry of the town had lined out the main thoroughfare and they were a beggarly lot that wore straw hats and sad linen smocks. They stood in silence watching the marchers sing. The women each with a herd of children. The menfolk, glaring, sunburnt from labouring in fields and gardens. There were three separate public houses along the main road and noon drinkers emerged blinking and naked-headed into the sun only to be set upon by recruiters waving paper questionnaires for a place in the order.
Fitheal Flynn and his daughter observed all this from a distance.

I ought to have shot a few of them, he said.

Caislin quietly stared. What a lovely song, she said.

*Tis the sound of inducement.

They were quiet a while and then she said, Wouldn’t it be wonderful to join a choir?

Ah, and you will my love. You will.

Flynn shuffled off along the road for Launceston and left Caislin gazing at the odd festivites, standing alone, and soon, lifting her voice, she began to sing along. Flynn was climbing the long hill ahead and her song played above the farmland and the road, catching at the strings of his heart. He looked back at that singular figure, covered, dressed as a man, and a great despair rose in his chest. What had he made of such a precious soul? What sort of beast?

The highway was in heavy use. It had been corduroyed in places with spilt logs and outside of Breadalbane they passed a team of fourteen paired steers hauling a eucalpyt slab of such a weight that it cracked the thinner of these. The bullocky called good afternoon to them with a waving hat which Flynn returned. All day they passed travelers coming along, a woman bent under a load of kindling, leaves in the morass of her silver hair, itinerant men walking the road for work, boys in bare feet, boys as thin beggars. By late afternoon they were crossing the Kerry Lodge bridge on a steep river gully. Caislin ran her hand over the parapet walls where indentured men had placed a coping of broken stone, men like her own father. Clear water trickling, the sound of the river. Her hand following the wall. The winding highway led
through the valley wheat tracts and the market gardens of Youngtown and they passed fields and lone farmhouses and they passed the tall white houses of the well-to-do and the clutches of huts nestled like hogs asleep in a mud wallow.

Do you remember the toffee Ma cooked up?

Through the eyeholes two dark wet jewels staring at him. Flynn looked away to the wooded slopes of the valley. She loved to see you eat, he said.

It got stuck till I couldn’t chew.

That’s how she liked it, he said. Thick like.

I could never eat it.

And she would laugh. Watching your fingers in your teeth.

They walked half a mile in silence. Some of them toffees I tossed in the grass, you know, she said after a while.

Oh did you.

They made my jaw hurt. I hated them.

Flynn put his age-speckled hand on her arm. Never mind.

Do you think she’d be mad?

No.

I shouldn’t have done it.

Well, and by God, girl. She is gazing down from up there in fits of laughter. Not one ounce of love did she hold back from you. Not for any reason. Forget something as silly as that.
A scrap collector came leading his belled and tassiled horse by the bridle. He stared at the hooded girl. Flynn watched him go by, standing in the centre of the road, leaning on his staff.

It’s ones like him you ought to watch out for, he said.

Should I pray to her? Caislin said.

Over what?

Tell her where I put them toffees.

He took her by the hand then and led her along, a somber lump in his throat. He could not answer.

What they needed was shelter. Off the road in the backways, among the painted board cottages, there remained homes the earlier generations had abandoned, huts of wattlestick caulked with clay, rude barns fabricated from logs, and they picked along the outer parts of a hill where the road was dry, scanning the hovels dormant in the fields for one they could use. Many appeared to have collapsed in disrepair but smoke ran from the chimneys nonetheless. Occupied by what downcast creatures who could say.

Did they make you build things? she said. She was trailing along behind her father some yards, one hand tucked under the rolled blanket roped on her shoulder.

Who, my love?

The soldiers. The wardens.
At first Flynn said nothing. He picked his way over the potholes and bigger stones. I built a blessed lot of road, he said at length. It was hungry work and we were always hungry.

What was you in the Port for?

You know why.

Hittin some bugger.

Aye.

Did you hurt him?

A long silence. The tapping of Flynn’s staff on the road. Not as much as I should have liked, he said.

They walked another quarter mile before Caislin said quietly, What was he in there for?

Who? he said but he already knew full well.

That man, she said. Toosey.

Flynn stopped. He looked back at her. Girl, don’t be wasting thoughts on him.

Is he a killer?

They hang killers.

Then what? she said.

Then it doesn’t matter, does it.

So tell me then. If it don’t matter.
Aye, he said and pointed his stick at her, that’s your mother’s canniness you have.

I want to know what sort of man he is, she said.

What sort of man, he said with a snort.

That’s right. If we are to do him a mischief, I want to know.

Well you aren’t as canny as I thought if you need to ask that, he said and he turned and continued on. And it’s him that did us the mischief, he said.

I imagine he robbed some squatter. Or bushranged out west.

Flynn kept walking. Tis not a fit subject for a girl.

She hurried after him. I’m not a girl.

Yes, you are.

No, I’m a woman.

She said it very plainly. He looked up at the sky, gripping his staff, his soul wringing inside him. Ellen, would you listen to her, he said.

Did he steal a horse?

Bejaysus, how would I know.

What do you know then?

All I can tell you, he said, is what I was told by that spiteful lot of men that was general at Port Arthur.

Behind the cloth her black eyes narrowed. I don't want lies, she said.

That rogue is flush with lies and fock all else.
Flynn walked a while without saying more. Gazing over the hills, the pallid fields of wheat. When he turned to her his face had soured. There was a girl, is what I was told, he said. I don’t know, a servant girl, ex-government. Like as not a girl without much in the way of sense. Point being, Toosey had her with child and this was all a long time ago, to be sure, but it was told to me as such.

How long?

Twenty years at least.

It sounds like what Jilly Connell done.

Aye, and it might have been. Only Jilly Connell done what was right by his girl. He married her. Toosey has no notion of rightness at all.

So what? He was gaoled for that?

That’s not the whole of it, no. When the little bastard was born this girl had a fit of the nerves. There was some conspiracy between the pair of them. God knows what. But the wee’un was killed.

How?

Put a cord about its throat. Tied it off. They done the deed and buried it by the river, which wasn’t clever. It was turned up by and by. Wrapped in a piece of towel and some brown winsey, I was told. Wearing a little apron.

Caislin walked with her hands in her pockets and her eyes down. She kicked a stone. Might it not have been bad luck? she said.

Twas bad luck. They should’ve hung him.
I mean, might the girl have blamed Toosey for her own neglect? Or might the wee’un have just died?

Flynn snorted. More fiddler than dancing man, is our Toosey.

Caislin took another swing at the stone. Why should anyone want to kill an infant? Their own infant?

You can ask the man himself when we find him.

A few yards further up Flynn found what he was after. Within a field of thistles stood a dark and smokeless shack dropping bits of its palings and sprouting weeds along its roof thatch. The door hung slightly ajar and inside all was still. Flynn lifted his staff and circumscribed the shack in the air for Caislin and she looked at the shack and looked away without a word. Thus it was agreed upon.

They stepped over the low drywall and picked through the scotch thistle for the front door, Caislin watching the road over her shoulder. The door was a few handcut planks suspended off a hinge of rope and Flynn pushed it back with his stick. Sun shafts pierced the dark where the roof stood open to the sky. He looked around the room. There were blankets and other bedding strewn over the stone floor and on one wall a table stacked with empty tins and candle stubs in jars. They moved into the room and pulled the door closed.

It was a long and peaceful hour they wasted removing their boots and socks to let their feet dry and eating the last crust of Longford bread. Caislin was seated against the wall on a pile of mouldy blankets and nodding her head now and then in sleep. Flynn watched her from the corner of his eye as he wrapped his blisters in shreds of sheeting. He whistled.
Oi, he said, don’t you be drifting off now.

Let me bloody sleep.

We can’t stop here. And watch your mouth.

Let me sleep a minute. Please.

Like hell.

He threw a wadded length of sheet at her.

Please, she said. She was clasping her knees and bracing her head upon them. The sun through the ceiling cast light over her frail white feet but left the rest of her in darkness. Flynn said no more on the matter. In time there rose a rhythmic breathing from the shadows where she slept, long and even and calm.

So when later he heard talking, at first he thought the girl was muttering in her dreams. He peered up from his work of mending the satchel straps with knotted rag. The sound seemed to waft through the breach in the roof and he bent his ear to it. Voices, coarse and loud. He stood to look out of the window hole and he saw, lifting their boots over the drywall and approaching, a band of young men, a good few of them. He had time to shake Caislin awake and seize up his staff before the door bundled open.

The first of the gangers stepped inside the hut. He had a strangely stiff gait and his shadow wormed like a dying man in the oblong of light cast on the floor. When he turned and saw Fitheal Flynn this ganger had time to cease smiling and knit his brows together before Flynn shoved him to the ground by his shirt collars. A general cry went up from the group outside the hut. The other gangers had mounted the verandah and were crowding about the door.
but when they saw Caislin, a fable horror, hooded, holding coolly by her side
the bulldog gun she’d drawn from Flynn’s belt, they stopped dead and stared.

Get along now, she said.

But they could only stare.

She lifted the pistol and cocked it. Get along I said.

The sound of the turning cylinder sent them breaking for the low
drywall, vaulting it for their lives. Caislin stepped outside, the gun still up. She
watched them flee down the road holding that pistol on them all the while.

You’re in me snug, said the young fellow laid out on the floor. He was
struggling to his feet.

Flynn came to this ganger and with his staff cracked him a settling blow
across his head. The youth tried to cover himself and Flynn jammed one boot
flat between the fellow’s shoulders and pressed him out. He propped on his
knee as he studied the sorry sight pinned below.

A wonderful piece of luck, he said to the lad.

This is my place.

What is your name there, my son?

You can kiss my arse breeches down you can.

Flynn struck him again. Your name?

The fellow clamped his arms around his shaven head. Jane Eleanor Hall,
he said cringing.

Flynn’s feathery eyebrows lifted. Playing games will get you hit, he said.
I aint playin. I'm a girl.

Well, Flynn said, you're the ugliest girl I ever saw.

Go and be buggered.

Jaysus, and where's your hair?

Go to hell.

Best you smarten up Miss Jane Eleanor Hall. For you have yourself in a nice little quandry.

It's comin, she said. Tell Rabbit I will have it soon.

She was pressed down hard on the floorstones and even bending her neck about she could not see Flynn. I don't have it yet, she said trying to twist out of from under his boot. The devil knows how, but I will have it. I swear. I will.

From her place on the floor she could however see Caislin. She stopped her struggle and stared. What's wrong with him? Is he sick?

In the column of roof sun the cotton cowl was made brilliantly white, the folds below the nose twitching with each breath, the fathomless pits of the eyes. The ganger rubbed her bruised head. You aint Rabbit's boys, she said.

No, lass. We are not.

Hall bent her neck around. The lack of hair made her eyes look big. A pair of showy bastards is what you—

Flynn drove down the butt of his staff. She cried out.
Listen to me, lass, lest you come to end your days on this here floor. Shut your mouth and I’ll remove my boot off you. Can you do that?

Hall nodded slightly under his stick.

All right?

All right, she said.

Flynn moved back and stood before the door. He gripped his staff and watched as the girl draw first to her knees, rocking back into a crouch with one leg cocked out stiffly, the tears in the grime of her face leaving clean streaks. Her eyes jumped back and forth between them. At length Flynn addressed her.

Your place is it?

The ganger nodded.

Then I apologise. I believed it empty.

Silence. The ganger seemed to be waiting for her fate to unfold, if it would. When nothing happened, when they merely stared at her, she climbed to her feet in series of practiced hops, cocking her lame leg out to the side and backing away to the wall. The sun pillar gave a lively gleam but left the corners of the room cased in darkness and it was to these sites the young ganger looked, as if she hoped to disappear wholly into one.

Flynn removed his droopy hat and fanned himself with it. She’s hotter than Satan’s arse, he said.

Why’s he lookin at me like that? Hall said. She was watching Caislin, watching the bulldog gun.

And a nice wee snug it is too.
Is he sick? Why’s he starin at me?

Saving for the great bloody hole in the roof.

Tell him to take that bag off, Hall said.

Flynn snorted. He won’t make hisself known to the likes of you.

The ganger pressed back against the wall, blooms of mould blistering the spoiled paint.

But I will tell you his name, said Flynn, for tis a name well known. A name even you will know.

Never seen him before, she said. How could I know his name?

But you do.

Jane Hall backed away further.

This here man is Jack Ketch, he said.

A look of concern crossed her face. It aint, she said. Ketch is a story.

Who says stories aren’t real?

You’re shammin me.

Tis Ketch all right, said Flynn.

Hall edged another pace towards the corner.

I should think a fine young city arab such as you, Flynn said, would come to hear of the man Ketch.

They call all the hangmen Ketch, she said.
They do. Aye, they do.

Tell him to take off that hood.

There was a long pause as Flynn pulled his stick close and settled his weight upon it. He looked her head to toe. Could find a man in town, Miss Jane Eleanor Hall? he said. A man who didn’t want to be found, say. A man called Thomas Toosey or Thomas Atkinson. Could you do that? Would you know how?

I never heard of no Toosey before, said the ganger. So hows about you leave me be.

Here he paused to hang his hat off the weighted bulb of his staff. I will confess that Toosey has his reasons to avoid me, he said. We have an account to settle with him, you understand.

Hall looked from one to the other.

Having known Toosey many a year, having spent a portion of my life in confinement with him, you can trust me when I say that he is fairly due to the gallows.

Jane Hall seemed not hear. Her eyes cut about the room.

Are you listening, Miss Hall?

Yes sir, she said.

God forbid you come to harm merely cause you didn’t listen.

Please sir. I’m listenin.

You should understand I provide this counsel for your benefit.
I’m listenin. I am.

Shall I continue?

Yes sir.

Flynn reached up and smoothed his sparse hair across the width of his forehead. I run cows on a tenancy in Quamby, said Flynn. Run them for beef. Was a good year for beef, did you know that?

No.

Oh, and it was. We made us a profit, my three daughters and I. Sold eighty head up Deloraine way and took our banknotes home for safe keeping. Never trust a bank, Miss Hall. What are they, after all? Feeding off of honest men like march flies.

Yes, sir.

Flynn wrung the neck of his staff, the leather of his hands creaking. But somehow this man Thomas Toosey got word of it, he said. And in he come. He waited till I was away, watched the house I reckon. When he come my daughter was alone.

Talk to the traps, Hall said, if he’s stolen from you.

Lass, tis Ketch and I shall settle him.

For stealin a few quids? she said.

Money is not the matter.

Kill a fellow for stealin, she said. Why in hell would you do that?
If it was the stealin, Flynn said, we should have our money and let him be, by God. But the blood that beats in him is old blood, tried in war. It was the blacks he fought as a boy. Indentured to a frontiersman in the east. Now it’s whichever poor soul he happens upon. He is a powerful fiend, is Toosey, and murder follows him about. Just two days past we saw a man who’d fought Toosey fist and claw. Oh, and he fought. And for it he was killed.

Police round here are nasty bastards, Hall said. He won’t get far. They’ll hunt him out for you.

You aren’t one of these who bow down in fear of the law, are you, Miss Hall? A moderate woman? Whatever is, is?

She looked at him. Eh? she said.

The lessons of Paris are learned, the lessons of Ballingarry. Are they not?

She propped hard in the corner of the hut, staring back at him. You’re a mad pair of bastards, she said.

The madness is to meekly submit. Meekly lay down and accept servitude. Withdraw your consent, Miss Hall, and they cannot control you. He smiled, exposing his brace of crook teeth. I see a fortuity in meeting you, Miss Hall, he said. A girl who knows the town. Knows how to hide herself. Knows how to ask around.

Jane Hall curled back her lip. You want a cripple to go hunt a killer? she said.

Not hunt. Lay eyes on him, that is all.

Lay on eyes him he says. I think you have me mistook for another. I aint cut out for this.
You’re cut fine for my purpose.

And what if I find him? Hall said. What then? I’m bloody lame.

Mostly in these cases, he said, the horse thinks one thing and the rider another. I expect you shan’t even look for him. You’ll hole up snug somewhere and wait for us to pass through. Would you do something like that, lass?

Jane Hall cocked her head to one side. She kept quiet.

Of course you would, Flynn said, such is your nature. So let me propose an offer, to be sure of your loyalty. I’d be willing to pay for word of Toosey. Let’s call it a pound for a sighting. Two for his whereabouts.

She looked at him and her eyes glistened.

Hearing me are you? he said.

She licked her upper lip. Ten, she said

Flynn lifted a single woollen eyebrow.

Ten pound.

His hands on his stick creaked and twisted.

I find him. I show you where he is. You give me ten.

Flynn shook his head. No.

It’s my neck I’m riskin aint it.

Flynn gave a slow tip of the head. Take a look at Ketch there, he said.

Eh?

Are you lookin?
She nodded.

Get yourself a good long eyeful, don't be shy about it.

Yes, sir.

A man remade in image of a beast, Flynn said. A man given over to blood as the mouth of the lion is given over to blood. Is he not?

Hall blinked rapidly. She straightened up.

Make war with him at your peril, Flynn said.

To show their sincerity Caislin tucked the gun into the loose band of her trousers. She pushed back her sleeves and there were foul blistered scars along her forearms, bound about in part by stained bandaging. Hall looked into the black pits centremost of the hood and was rendered silent by what she saw.

So you'll have your ten, lass, he said. But you would not be wanting to upset Mr Ketch here.

No, sir. Thank you, sir.

You would not want to disappear, say.

No. I wouldn't do that.

I should think not.

If I can show you where the scoundrel is, she said. If I can take you to the place. That is worth ten.

Aye, you’ll have ten.
Flynn dipped into his pocket and produced a knotted leather purse and shook some coins into his palm. I am entirely sincere about this, he said.

He put out his hand for the young ganger and it hung there, solitary in its intent, until Hall shambled forward out of the dark corner, plucked the coins from it, and pocketed them.

Entirely sincere, he said again.

What’s he look like? she said. Your man Toosey or Atkinson?

You will mark him by his hair which he keeps long and braided like the Indians of America. He’s near sixty and perfectly grey. Wearing always a billycock.

Give us a day or two, she said. I’ll need a day or two.

You have everything to gain, Miss Hall.

He stepped clear of the door and he held out his arm as if to guide the young ganger through it. She hobbled slowly forward. On the threshold she stopped and looked them over, one then the other. He spat in his hand and put it out to her. They shook.

How will I find you? she said.

No one forgets a hangman, lass, do they now?

No, she said.

So ask around, he said. We won’t be far away.

She looked at them both and shook her head. She hopped into the afternoon heat, her halt leg scything through the thistle and tussock grass, and
mounted the drywall into the road. It was quiet thereabouts and she moved alone over the rutted mud and through the fringe of land with only the rhythmic scrape of her leg disturbing the silence. When she was out of sight down the way Flynn said, We need to be leaving.

Why?

If she finds Toosey, she might come the queer with him. Perhaps propose to sell him our whereabouts and therefore enlarge her own profit in this game.

Caislin dropped her head. That was our last few shillins, she said.

Spent well too, if it turns up Toosey.

Unless she comes the queer with him.

Then it’s a mess of a business, right enough. But it’s a mess anyway, so there you have it.

And here’s us with nothin to eat. Not a bite.

Flynn held up his hand and tapped on the gold band he wore. It was so scuffed and dull that it looked almost part of him. Time has come to sell this, he said.

No, don’t do that.

Listen to me now. I’ll put the ring into pawn. That is all.

No.

We’ll soon fetch it back.

It’s the last thing you have, Caislin said. To remember her.
Remember? Here you are, my pearl. My treasure. Not the ring. I look at you and I can never forget.

Yet when he had spoken he moved off to retrieve his knapsack, his stick, and for a time he could not look at her. For in truth he was not sure who she was, this girl in outsized pants rolled at the ankles, outsized coat and shirt, cowled in a stained cotton flour sack. He had made of her something she was not. He shouldered up his bag and stepped outside. Forgive me, Ellen, he said to the sky.

#

They assembled themselves beneath the lessening sun. A road led away up the sloping hills into an intermix of sparsely placed blue gum and sassafras saplings, a carpet beneath of infant bracken, and they were cagey of disposition, Flynn and his daughter, as they stepped over the low stone wall slouched under loads of bedding to put forth upon the road. They looked for a moment towards the distant town spires hooped in smoke and the river traders at anchor before turning away and making for the open woods where the road led. A half mile of distance had them among thin trees. Flynn tapped his staff as his daughter followed behind like some mythic animal made tame.

Launceston’s the other way, she said.

I know.

They walked on further.

Where are we going? she said.
Just up the way.

Caislin looked around. Stands of black wattle and gum left for shade by squatters. The track a pair of cart troughs.

Why? she said.

Flynn kept walking.

She lowered her eyes and followed on.

Later a mounted cattleman cleared them off the path as he came through at a gallop and he whooped and cracked his riding crop on the animal, crouching in the saddle bone-still as the horse thundered beneath him. They stood by and watched him pass. Through their legs the ground trembled. The horseman among the gums made a wind that stirred the bark rags and raised the birds. He left a track through the scrub where he’d ridden, and the seekers stepped back onto the road, themselves silent, treading among his divots. A tinge of late sun in the hills beyond as of fires alight in other lands.

Further on Flynn paused near a pair of huge fallen trees that lay by. He turned to survey thin woodland and he put aside his staff and climbed the trunk. It was a long time dead and collapsing in rot. He jumped off the far edge. Caislin in the wayside, waiting, saw him stick his head above the trunk.

This will do us, he said.

For what?

For the night.

She dumped her bedroll and sat on it.
They soon had an arrangement out of sight of the road consisting of a shelter rigged from a blanket and a ring of fire rocks that held the billytin. Not that they carried any tea to brew, nor anything by way of food. It was only the habit of weeks on the road that did it.

I’ll be for walking into Launceston, he said and he began gathering his coat around himself and neatening his sagging hat.

What about me?

He stood up. No, he said.

Am I to stay?

Aye.

Alone?

Flynn stood looking down at her. He put his hands on his hips. Remove that thing off and I’ll take you, he said.

She lowered her head. The mottling shade cast through the canopy crept over the cotton.

Taint prudent to be having a hangman in the town, he said. Folk will talk. If Toosey is around he’ll soon hear.

Caislin sat in quiet.

You don’t need it. Throw it away.

He adjusted his listing hat. When he looked at her again his eyes were soft, his lower lip heavy. Throw it away, he said.

I can’t.
The girl I remember, Flynn said, my daughter, she was a brave one. This girl before me, well. Who would say as much about her? Tucked away in her costume, hiding away.

He started tearing then, without sound, his lower lip aquiver and the lines around his eyes deepening. You are the pulse of my heart, he said after a time.

I know.

But I want my daughter back.

I know.

Where’s my daughter?

In the trees the breeze made an ocean sound. Flynn dragged a hand across his cheeks to dry them and he reached to the small of his back and lifted the pistol from his belt. Take this, he said.

She looked away.

Don’t be talking to anyone now, he said.

I won’t.

And keep hidden.

Just leave the gun and go.

He passed her the stubby gun gingerly. She dropped it on the dirt and sat studying it over her knees, hunched, the ears of the cotton sack wilting in the damp and the heat.

If some bastard comes near you—
He'll get shot, she said.

Aye, well, and will you do that?

I’d rather not have to.

No.

Course, she said and looked up, you know what happened last time you left me alone.

Flynn nodded. I know.

But you’ll do it again anyway.

He turned his eyes along the road. My beautiful girl—

Don’t say that.

Take it off. Come with me.

No. I told you. Not yet.

He exhaled. He stepped onto the road. Then I’ll be here by dark, he said.

He tramped out along the track that led to town, leaning on his staff. When he looked back at the campsite his daughter was staring at him. She’d removed the hood and her naked face floated sadly in the scrub. The sight of it stopped him. She did not wave or do otherwise than stare with the gravity that had lately become her chiefest part. He touched his hat to her and walked on. A cold stone hanging in his chest.
Invermay. Here lived the dregs drained from the town, funnelled into one hole. For no one of any influence would inhabit a quarter as cursed with mosquitoes and as openly pitted with rat nests as was this part of town. A flat swamp edged by a marshland of tall reeds and deep mud. Toosey, his billycock lowslung upon his head, made his way in the early afternoon through the shabby and ramshackle homes in the backalleys where garlands of washing as if for some festival festooned the verandahs. The mud in the street had dried to hard shale that cracked as he walked and the silt beneath rose through his bootprints. He went, his eyes shifting warily about, with his fists stuffed inside his pockets.
Further on he passed children conferring on a vacant plot of land. It was serving duty as a tip, overrun with castoff bedding, bits of blown paper, coiled wire. One of them was screaming. He halted in the street and called to them and the children scattered. The screaming continued, the cold and horrendous sound of murder, and he saw the small fire they had burning and saw the cat they had somehow made fast to a fence slat. He crossed through the debris to the fire and stood looking down. The cat had its hind quarters burning in the coals and was shrieking and thrashing. It was bound about with wire so that its eyes and bloated stomach bulged. He looked around for the children, turned a circle. They were nowhere he could see. He spat. In the end he brought his foot down upon the cat’s head, and again, until the woeful noise was stopped. He wiped his boot on a grass tuft. He moved on.

By and by he came to the premises of Trent Stewart. It was a grim house of unpainted boards and he stood without the castiron gate gazing up at the second floor windows. The eyeholes of a skull. He lifted back the gate and mounted the verandah. Without removing his hat he raised the knocker on the door and let it fall.

It was opened by an old hollow-cheeked matron. She peeked around the jamb, studying the grim-looking man on the step, the holed jacket he wore, blood on the shirt beneath. She must have been seventy at least and had a look about her like she’d been licking vinegar.

Only children in here, she said. We don’t take men.

I aint come about a feed.

She squinted at him.
You have a boy sometimes, he said. Goin by the name of Toosey. Master William Toosey.

I told you no men allowed.

I’m only askin to see him.

Who are you?

I’m his father.

The matron turned and called over her shoulder. Mr Stewart! There is a fellow out here.

The whump of boots tolled somewhere inside the house and soon a big round-bellied gent rolled up behind her in the hallway. He peered over his half-spectacles.

Yes? What is it Mrs Crowthers? he said.

This chap wants to come in.

I should like to see my son, Toosey said.

Sorry, we don’t allow men on the premises.

Told him as much, the matron said.

We allow girls and boys and girls and boys only, Stewart said.

Listen, I don’t care what you allow and I don’t want to come in. Just let me boy out here on the step and there won’t be no trouble.

Stewart pushed back his glasses. This really is improper, he said.

Improper can go and fuck itself.
Mrs Crowthers made a small strangulated gasp.

Well, Stewart said. Well now. There is no call for profanity.

Let him out front here like I told you then.

The children are eating. You will have to make arrangements to meet your son elsewhere. Outside of lunch hours, of course. I am sorry.

You could get real sorry yet, sunshine.

With hardly a movement Toosey had drawn his twine-handled camp knife and was holding it by his side. The blade was lean and tapered and the corrosion on its steel stood darkly in the light. Stewart saw it and seemed suddenly to understand the quality of the fellow on his doorstep. His cheek gave a twitch.

Look here, he said but Toosey placed his free hand on his chest and shoved him backwards. He pushed through the doorway into the narrow hall. A rack hung with coats toppled as he crashed past and he paused upon the patterned hallway runner surveying the rooms that ran off the corridor, his mouth hardened into a line, his whole frame taut with purpose.

Stewart took his chance to flee. He ran onto the verandah and descended into the street in a series of awkward falters. The matron tailed him, stumbling. From the gloom Toosey watched them go. He shook his head and spat. He opened the first door in the hall. A sitting room occupied by leather armchairs, a commode stacked with rows of books. Next came a kitchen, in the shadows an iron stove, the pots on top steaming poisonously and making a rattle. There was a window across the kitchen and he could see in the rear yard a wooden outbuilding beyond a mire of stagnant water and refuse and strings
of washed clothes. He passed through and pushed the loose latchless door at the back. Voices of children were coming from within the paling building that looked like a chicken house. He stepped into the yard towards it.

When he entered they looked up as one from their plates. A dozen or more of them, arranged along a narrow table. In the centre of the table a pot of soup, a board with loaf of soda bread. Some of the children put down their spoons, some stood and backed away. A boy near to him spoke.

Aint no men allowed in here.

Where is William? he said.

Here.

A boy at the rear of the place, younger than the rest, stood and pushed the crate he was sitting on. He was in a tweed coat patched with hessian and his hair hung dull and dusty. Toosey studied him across the room.

I'm William.

Toosey clicked his tongue. You aint him, he said.

That's the only William here, mister.

Well it aint him.

He looked around the table. If Stewart had chosen these children with some rule in mind it was of a range Toosey could not discern, for they were a mix of the young and the half grown, orphans off the street or runaways or thieves, dressed in adult's clothes so that they seemed to have been magically shrunken, one boy wearing a woman's bonnet, another girl exhibiting a scar like warpaint lengthwise down her forehead and over an eye that was
consequently white and unfixing. Toosey had seen a scar such as that before, on a man hit with a red-hot stoker. It was at this girl that Toosey found himself staring. She addressed him.

You got a cheek comin in here, she said.

There’s not much time, Toosey said. He has gone for the constable I reckon.

Then best you leave, mate, the girl said.

William Toosey is his name, the boy I’m after. He lived out by the park. Cimitiere Street. His ma has died of late. He’s on his own.

I know him, said one of the boys and he was sitting holding a spoon of soup before him. Will Toosey, he said. I know him.

You know where he is?

The boy put down his spoon. He stared up at Toosey with a pair of frank green eyes. He was red haired and his face was all over freckled, even to his lips. In the town, he said.

No he’s not, the boy beside him said. I saw him near Thrower’s.

When? Toosey said.

This mornin.

He won’t be there now, the redhead said. They will have give out the bread already.

What do you want him for anyhow? the scarred girl said.

I’m his father.
You look like a bummer.

Toosey looked down at himself. I’ve had a time of it gettin here.

Why aint he with you? If he’s your son.

He will be, by and by.

The girl narrowed her good eye. My Pa come huntin about for me, she said. Come in here like you are. Where’s that Molly? Where’s that Molly? I’ll bloody murder her.

A little round of laughter went up among the children.

Well, he’s never found me yet, the girl said.

The children nodded.

Toosey pulled the letter from his pocket and unfolded the paper and held it up. He’s asked me to help, he said. See. I want to help.

He’ll be out by the Coach and Horses, the redhead said.

Or buggerin around at Rabbit’s.

Toosey studied the row of grubby faces at the table. You should be with your families. All of youse. Not here with this Stewart. He’s a fiend.

Stewart feeds us, the scarred girl said. My pa don’t feed me. Stewart’s a decent sort and you’re an old tramp.

Some of the children nodded. Toosey’s face grew dark.

Go on, mate, the scarred girl said. Get out of it.

He reached into his jacket. Which one of you can find William?
The children watched him.

Bluey, he said and he pointed at the redhead. You can find him.

The kid sat with his mouth open, breathing through his nose.

There’s a gold vickie here if you can show me where he is, Toosey said and he produced the coin from his pocket.

The redhead boy jumped off his crate and rushed forward, but now all the children jumped and rushed at Toosey. He gripped the redhead under the arms as the children bunched around him. He carried the boy out into the sun.

I can find him, the children were each one saying, I can find him. Give me the coin. Give me the coin.

Toosey walked through the mud in the yard hauling the kid. He did not look back at the rest. They called to him and tugged at his jacket, following in a pack, but he did not look. For his soul could not bear the raking. He reached the low stairs to the house and pushed the readheaded boy forward and the boy started to climb and then stopped. At the head of the steps, standing in the kitchen, was Trent Stewart. He had a cricket bat and when he lifted it the round damp stains of his armpits showed.

Children, he said, children do not follow this man.

Toosey thumbed back his hatbrim and stared up at the fellow wavering in the doorway. They met eyes across a few measured breaths. Toosey was first to speak.

So help me I will knock out your teeth.
He began to climb the steps, dragging the boy behind him. Stewart backed away and raised the bat above his head. On the blade was a series of red troughs from the ball. He clenched his fingers around the leather grip like he meant to swing it but when Toosey reached the top of the steps Stewart started reversing among the racks of hanging spoons and cookpans, tracking prints in the scattered baking flour. Toosey never removed his eyes off him. He worked Stewart backward with that baleful glare. He walked through the kitchen into the hallway dragging the redhead along with him.

Stewart called to him. You won’t go far. The police are coming.

Hearing this Toosey paused. He stood in the hallway scratching at his whiskers and staring out the open front door to where the startled matron was waiting in the street. Others had congregated with her, men and women and children. He scratched his whiskers and then he turned and stood framed in the kitchen entrance. Stewart raised the bat again.

That boy of mine comes back, I want you to tell him I’m in Launceston.

Stewart swung tentatively to keep him away.

Tell him I’m at the Star of the North.

The police is who’ll tell, Stewart said and waved the bat.

Toosey stared. You’re seein me as genial as I will get. If I have to come back you’ll find me different.

With that said he walked off down the hallway holding the boy by the hand. A few folk had congregated outside. He came down through the front gate, adjusting his hat, his eyes straight ahead. As he walked out among the gathering, walked out leading the boy along, they parted around him and
formed up again as he passed. No one spoke. From windows white faces watched him come along the laneway. He led the redheaded boy out of that place in silence.
In the early afternoon two boys came up through the buckled hovels of Invermay, slim boys, lank as saplings, and they were animated and talking incessantly as they walked and only looked up now and then to see where they were before bending together once more in chat. One of these boys was William Toosey. With the sun and dirt he was almost dark and his mass of hay-coloured hair was dirty enough to stand on end. At Holbrook street they left the footpath and crossed and went on. The boy beside William was barefoot and he walked with his long spare arms hanging straight down and his feet slapping the hard earth.
What did it look like? William Toosey said.

Like anyone’s looks, the boy said, who was called Oran Brown.

Just pulled it out did he?

Right out.

Didn’t he say nothin’?

Oran moved stiffly. His feet were bruised and it slowed him. He said what do you think about this, but I didn’t think anything about it and I told him so.

William Toosey bent down and picked up a stone and threw it. What would anyone think of a fat fool who shows himself, he said. They’d think him mad.

It looked like a thumb, Oran said.

You know what I would’ve done?

What?

Cut the blinkin thing off.

How?

With me knife.

You aint got a knife.

I got a knife.

William Toosey reached into the pocket of his trousers. They were deep pockets and he had to sway to reach the bottom as he fished about. After a
moment he brought up a jack knife and held it out. Oran tried to touch it but William snatched away his hand. He unfolded the blade and lay it on his palm, grinning, and let Oran see it. Gleams like cold pale fire rippled in the steel’s mirror.

Fetched it out of Johnson's, he said as he admired it. Johnson never even saw me.

Oran wanted to touch the knife so much that he was hopping. He kept pawing at William’s arm. Give us a go, he said.

No.

I only want to hold it.

William lifted his hand a little and let Oran take an eyeful. The blade was short and wide and stamped with a cutler’s mark at the thumbrest. It was set in a handle of stained and varnished pine burl. Oran pawed at his arm.

What a beauty, he said.

It aint sharp yet, but I’ll sharpen it.

William carefully folded away the knife. The action was still tight and always gave him a start when it snapped shut. He slipped it into his pants.

Don’t go back there with Stewart no more, he said. Don’t go when he calls you.

He give me half a crown.

Bugger that. Bugger goin back there with him.

Do you reckon?
Course I reckon.

They walked on.

They crossed the street then, throwing reedy shadows on the road, the two of them, past tenements and past homes of tired board before drawing up in front Trent Stewart’s place. It was fenced with dark-coloured pales and the boys stood by, clutching the rim of the fence, gazing up at the house. A woman in a neighbouring yard watched them across the washing she was pegging up and she had a child tied in a sheet on her back, another clasping at her skirts, and another crawling in the uncut grass. Oran scratched his lousy hair and looked away from her. He was nervous and it made him scratch all the more.

What did I tell you? William said.

I’m hungry, Oran said.

What did I tell you?

Said don’t go back with him.

Well don’t.

Come on, I’m hungry.

I aint muckin about. Don’t go there with him. He is mad and it aint safe.

Oran had not washed in weeks and he smelled of turned milk. The grubby smock he wore was falling off his shoulders from where it had torn on a nail. William hung on the fence assessing the pitiful sight of him. There were things he wanted to tell Oran. Important things, he thought. Words his mother had said. The way she would tuck in his shirt, or comb his hair from a cup of water. He didn’t know how to explain these things but he wished he could. It
seemed important that Oran knew too. That while their days were a deep and lasting hardship, beating sun and bitter night, bruised and bloodied feet, it would not always be so. They might huddle in the dark and weep with hunger, one beside the other. Whisper in fear like fugitives. But there were times and places in his heart that warded off the pain. Likewise did Oran need the old and the ever-remembered.

Be sure and do what I said.

Oran nodded.

Run if he calls you.

He was still nodding. It was Oran who’d brought him first to Stewart’s, showed him in and had him fed at the dinner table in the workroom. Without that soup they were long nights laying in the dark. He pulled the knife. Here, he said.

Oran looked at the folded blade. He took it.

Keep it to hand.

He was cupping the knife. He just looked at it for a while and in time tucked it into his smock.

All right, he said.

Where you can reach it.

I can reach it.

If he calls you, leave. All right?

All right.
If he touches you, cut him.

Yes, Will. I'll do it.

William lifted the gate latch and let the boy through and they climbed the steps together and knocked on the door. There was no answer so William made a fist and pounded harder.

It was Stewart himself who opened it. He squinted at the boys through his spectacles and when he saw it was William Toosey he seemed to puff up, blinking rapidly, and he stepped onto the landing and caught a grip of William’s shirt front.

You, he said as he hauled William to the gate. You can keep out of my house.

What?

Keep out.

He shoved the boy into the road. William stumbled and fell. He did not understand. He lay staring up at Stewart. Then he stood and moved toward the gate. Stewart yanked it shut and pointed at him across the pickets.

If you come here again I shall give you in charge of the first policeman I meet.

Oran was crouching on the verandah wearing a bewildered sort of a gaze.

What have I done? William said.

And tell your father the same.
A spark started inside of his chest. It flared until he felt hot all over. What? he said. Who?

Stewart was thundering up the steps. He put out his arms to haze Oran before him through the door. William clung to the fence and called, leaning over, his voice cracking in his throat.

Was my father here?

That was enough to make Stewart turn. He turned and posed on his verandah, arms cocked on his hips, jacket tails kicking where he pushed back the flaps.

Your father is a brute.

Was he here?

A brute and a madman.

Was he here?

I have a gun in the house. Tell him that.

I don’t know where he is Mr Stewart. I aint seen him in years.

Stewart descended onto the first step and pointed his finger. I shall not hesitate to shoot. I will put him out of this world. Tell him that.

I don’t know where he is.

Stewart dropped his hand. A shameless, disgusting brute, he said. Poor fathers make poor sons, William. Steer away from that fellow.

He has come to help. He has, I know it.
Stewart moved off for the door. He stopped, one hand cupping the knob, his head bowed, and looked back at William with a lift of his eyes. He’s at the Star of the North, he said.

Thank you, Mr Stewart. I mean that. Thank you.

Stewart shook his head sadly. He twisted the handle and disappeared in the hallway dark.

The sun in the unmarked sky blazed. William could hear his heart at work. He was sweating and his heart was working and he stepped away from the fence into the road where deep shadows crept outward from the homes like spills of ink that edged the street in black. The Star of the North, he whispered as he trotted toward the river in its banks of mud, its weed and whip-thin willow, sucking past at street’s end. His father was here. His father was looking for him. He began to run.
Standing in the squared shade of houses. Dry, hungry, hot. Toosey’s heart had somewhere begun missing its beats and he mopped himself and waited for it to settle. A desperate heat was descending over the city. It rippled above the black slate roofs like fumes. He would find his son and they would sit and eat, as they had in other, better times. They would eat and talk about Maria and he would try to put across why, when she was the only candle in a terrible dark, he had left her alone. But that time was hence. Here and now a small red-haired child was staring up at him, for all the world meaning to look angry and seeming instead like the sun was too bright.
What’s your name?

Robert, said the redhead.

Bobby.

It’s Robert.

Right, Bobby. Where’s this boy of mine?

You tore me shirt.

Bobby held up his sleeve. The linen had split cleanly through the shoulder so that it sagged and showed his freckled skin.

We had to leave out of there quick, Toosey said as he studied the street.

I aint got another.

Never mind about it. Buy yourself a proper one when you have this vickie.

The boy looked away. He was upset.

So now. Where’s William?

The boy said nothing.

Toosey smoothed down his moustache. He stood for a time watching the empty road and his rickety heartbeat was like water dripping in the dark well of his chest.

Did you see him or not?

The boy nodded.

Well then. Tell me where.
But the boy folded his arms and would not be drawn.

Toosey spat and looked back at the boy. It’s a shame about your shirt, he said. But we’ll have you a new one.

The boy made some show of wrapping the shreds about his arm, letting them fall. He looked forlorn. Toosey could not abide it. He caught the underside of the boy’s jaw and brought his face around. What’s the matter with you? he said

Bobby held his eyes closed tight.

You’ll soon have a new one I said.

He could feel where the boy had gone rigid. He stared into that little face and his eyes grew hard. Where’s William?

The boy pointed along the street.

You sure now?

Yes.

No more nonsense?

No.

He let go and stepped back. I need your help, he said to the boy. Will you help?

Yes.

Then no more nonsense.
They walked Brisbane street to where the boy had pointed. The road ran through a stone gorge of merchant buildings, two sheer walls, tall and ordered, and some stores fronted with awnings, some with signs. Geometric shade lay on the dirt. The sun in the slots like mortar. Along the road he could see men on horseback and see a great rising dust and they walked and as they neared he saw a number of folk milling, a hundred or more. Something was happening. He slowed his pace.

You saw him down there? he said.

The boy nodded.

When?

Today.

Toosey exhaled. Looks a lot of people, he said.

He tipped back his hat. Even from here he could see teams of city children wandering the skirts of the crowd. Bobby came to stand beside him.

How is he? Toosey said. I mean, is he well?

Bobby looked up. He shrugged

Thin as a crown piece, that child. Ever since he come into the world. I hope he’s eating enough. Boy needs to eat.

The crowd seemed tame enough. He squinted up his eyes and watched a while.

What does he, I mean, what does he do mostly? Does he have friends?

I’m his friend, Bobby said.
Do you go fishin? What does he like doin?

Bobby just looked at him.

You fish don’t you? Children always fish.

The child dropped his head. He fiddled with the thin rag of sleeve bunching at his wrist.

Fish, Toosey said. I should teach him how. Soon as I can.

Will you show me too?

You?

Bobby nodded.

Not you. I’ll have enough of a time with one.

He walked on and the child followed. The crowd had amassed in the road before Bell’s Mart. They milled before the door to the purchase room or lined the footpath under shelter in their hundreds. Toosey stood in the street and he was not sure what it meant, this gathering. Most folk looked to have come straight off the land or out of factory work but a few were dressed as if for Sunday service in top hats and coats. A hawker with a wicker basket walked the crowd calling out rye bread, sausage, salted herring, while another chap was selling nobblers out of a keg of brandy hanging from his neck. On the bed of a cart a hatless bald-pated fellow stood to speak and a round of cheers immediately rose from the crowd. He took his place and there was an uneasy air about him as he raised his hand for quiet. He carried a newspaper rolled for an impromptu gavel and the noise died off as he clapped it in his palm.
It is a simple fact that greed has henceforth been given the status of law, he cried and the crowd cheered and hooted. Greed that drives men to corruption, he cried, to salaciousness, malice, brutality, and moral abandon. And we know that whenever they send city bailiffs to claim our property and the parliament allows it, whenever a family loses their home and the parliament allows it, whenever private citizens are robbed to pay the debts of a few shareholders and the parliament allows it, we are reduced, cut away to almost nothing, cut by a brotherhood of butchers thinly disguised as a system of governing.

A great cheer.

We know that after all these crimes have been enacted, he cried, all these lies furthered, all these trespassers given leave to steal, all these men beaten and whipped for defending their families, all these patriots humiliated, at the end of all the sordid greed and the arrogance a vast wound has been opened and day after day our island bleeds out its heart-blood. All of it done in the name the Launceston and Western Railway company. All of it done to fund the disaster that railway has become.

The crowd hooted.

But it was not the campaigner crying from the cart that had Toosey’s fullest attention. It was the children wandering the edge of the crowd that he watched most intently, pauper children, scrawny and barefoot, rugged in scraps of shirts or jackets, tendering little cups into which would be sometimes tossed a penny or a shop token. Toosey stuck his hands in his pockets. He didn’t like a busy town. With the noise and uncertainty. He liked a wild grass plain. A lonely road. He wiped his mouth. But there was little else for it. He could easier fish out his soul with a boathook than he could leave his boy.
You saw him here? he said.

Bobby was standing close beside his leg. The crowd seemed also to disturb him.

Kid, he said.

The boy looked up.

I said you saw him here? Today?

He nodded.

Right. That will do you then.

The boy dropped his head.

Get yourself home.

He shuffled about and faced away from Toosey. He crouched then and, like he’d broken something inside of himself, began to sob.

See here, lad, Toosey said. That’s enough of that. Get up

The boy didn’t move.

Get up, Toosey said and lifted him by the collar.

He rooted out from his pocket the sovereign and pushed the coin into the boy’s snotty palm. Take it, he said. Have yourself a feed somewheres. Get you a new shirt.

The boy hardly moved. He would not look at Toosey. His eyes ran. The scraps of his shirt gathered at his armpits.

You’ll have a new shirt, Toosey said. Like I told you.
Please find him, the boy said.

Toosey hooked his thumb through a belt loop. Don’t worry about that, he said and he stood regarding the boy, the pitiful state of him. Listen, he said take care and don’t lose that. It’s a lot of money.

But the boy wasn’t listening. He shoulders rose and fell as he cried into his hand, the other clutching the gold. Toosey shook his head. He gave the lad a little shove. Go on now, he said.

The boy wouldn’t move.

You must have somewhere. Go on.

No one wants him, the boy said.

I want him.

The boy resumed his crouch in the centre of the street. The balls of his knees, so bulbous through the holes in his pants, looked the only sturdy part of him. Toosey smoothed his moustaches. He thought to walk away and might have at other times of his life but what he did instead was fish another coin from his coat and place it in the child’s hand. Then he crouched, knuckles to the dust, knee bent, and spoke into his ear.

He’ll be well, he said. But you must be well too. Go home. Look to your father.

I don’t have one.

A home?

A father.
Toosey straightened up. He gazed down the road. They aint good for nothin anyways, he said.

The child crossed his arms over his knees and buried his face in the crook of his elbow. He made a few hiccuping sobs. His shoulders spasmed. Toosey adjusted his hat and looked about and when he looked back at the boy he couldn’t think of another word to say. He moved away beneath the awning cover of Brownhill’s butchery.

In time the child stood. Coins in hand, of which he seemed unconcerned. He went away in a daze wiping his nose. Along a few yards he caught his feet on a cart trough and fell. Toosey took a step towards him. The boy stood and walked on. Grit on the legs of his pants. His nose running. Toosey exhaled. He’d been holding his breath and thought himself suddenly daft. He straightened up and walked the other way.

The great unruly crowd had started funnelling through the purchase room doors and he stepped to where he could see it all. Through the narrow doors they shoved. Some fell and were stepped upon. There came ever more of them from along the streets until they numbered rising several hundred. Dust rose curling away on the brief riverwards wind. Men like long dull shades inside it. But there were more here than purchasers. A small mob had begun to build that was off to one side of Bell’s, a corps of armed men and fellows with clubs and blades, one with a breech loader and one with a coiled bullwhip, looking around themselves, assessing the play. They gathered around a cart not sharing a word but merely staring at the purchase room with intent.

Toosey was uneasy about all of this. It looked concerning. He reached into his jacket and felt for the knife. He watched the men in the carts. They sat quite still, staring. He saw one lift a rifle and lay it down and he saw one kick a
box of cartridges and that was enough. Whatever it was, whatever was happening here, the larrikins and the idle boys had drawn draw to it. He stood by, grinding his jaw. It would be a proper rumpus in the absence of the police. It was a turn of events for which he could not have accounted.

Let them burn wouldn’t you say.

Toosey looked around. A man had come to stand beside him. He could see where the man had a big dip of tobacco in his cheek and he thought he might have seen the man before, in prison or on a forested back road. What? he said.

I said let them burn.

The whole areshole place can burn for what I care.

The man rolled his chew to the other cheek. It might well, he said.

The purchase room filled with all it could hold and the rest, those left outside, the elderly, the laggard, clustered up around the wide stencilled windows of Bell’s. Soon the street stood vacant but for the few carts, the few men perched in the beds, and here and there a wandering child. Toosey studied the faces of each. One a little girl in a loose summer dress. She held her cup to a loutish type leaning on an awning pole, her other hand above her eyes for the sun. The lout tossed her something. Then away she went to the next fellow she saw, displaying the blackened soles of her feet. Toosey could not watch.

A high-sided cart pulled by a black mare in blinkers rolled down the Charles street hill with the squeal of its axle horribly like a crow. The people in the street gave way before it and some of them were waving their hats and the surly teamster on the bench lifted his hat to them in return. It pulled up before
Bell’s and Toosey saw now that a troop of men were squatting in the bed. They were six, all dressed in black, and they had on black gloves, tall hats wreathed in black crepe, and wore stern expressions to a man. They dismounted one by one and stood looking about.

Now you will see it, the fellow beside Toosey said.

A murmur went through the crowd lining the windows. Some stepped away and others removed their hats as if out of respect for these men and everywhere people began looking back at the street and the six undertakers there. Toosey stood with his arms crossed, watching. Everything about it made his hair stand up.

The six in black dragged something heavy off the cart and laid it in the middle of the street and when they stood they had mounted lengthwise along their shoulders a grey clapboard coffin. At the windows, folk abandoned their places wholesale. The crowd drew back entirely from the doors and the undertakers lumbered up to the wide entranceway with their load and dropped it. Foremost of them was a huge bull-necked fellow, thick-jawed, his shoulders distending the seams of his coat, and he pushed back the coffin lid and retrieved from within it a tall forester’s axe. The women screamed. One fainted dead away onto the road. The undertakers shouldered up the coffin and ducked through the doors inside the purchase room darkness.

The fellow beside Toosey swigged from a flask of spirits. He motioned for Toosey to take a drink but Toosey shook his head. He watched the room for what would follow. Long instants of silence. In the crowd folk craning their necks to better see. Toosey narrowed his eyes but nothing in the sunless dark inside had shape or substance. Then came a roar. The devil-like pitch and intensity startled him. That was followed an instant later by even more
tremendous howl inside the purchase room as the place fell into general panic. People rushed for the doors, clambering over benches, over chairs, and women screamed and men pulled them by the arm and some fell and were trampled and some fought over the backs of folk gone down or climbed from pew to pew and the crowd rolled outward from the doors like the bursting forth of water, the undertakers among them kicking and lashing out while in the street some of the armed men began to give fire overhead, the small sharp reports of revolvers and with it the heavier thud of rifles. The windows of Bell’s shattered as folk began to spill from there onto the road, gripping their hats, running, looking back at the scenes inside the purchase room and shouting and all along the street echoed the endless crying of horses, the breaking of glass, screaming.

For a while Toosey just stood watching. He could not quite believe it. The crowd drew away past the stores and hotels and a core of a hundred or more men led down the street in a march with glass breaking everywhere as larrikins started to loot. But even as he stood with his arms folded and his uneasy feeling turning to outright alarm he saw the town’s vagrant children in twos or threes. He saw the girl with her cup. Children bewildered, running to each other, huddling up. The whole scene awash in gunsmoke. Toosey tugged down his hat.

Here you are, he said to himelf. The ex-drunk. The thief. What have you to show?

A fresh round of gunfire made him flinch.

Whatever was left of his wicked life, and he knew it might not be much, whatever was left was owed plainly and honestly to that child.

He started forward into the smoke.
Afterword

The critical and creative components of this dissertation are halves of a mutually reinforcing project. The idea of ‘writing the past’ is what I take as my object of study, and what I undertake in my writing practice. The novels discussed in Chapters 1, 2, and 3 provide the intellectual and artistic context for my own work, but course the primary context of *To Name Those Lost* is, first and foremost, a historical one. As the title suggests, the act of writing the past is an act of naming what has been lost. Toosey suggests that ‘history is the art by which we live our lives’ and for him history has a specific meaning – they are the fictions he creates about himself, either to hide his past or present a
past that is useful for his purpose. Just as the fiction I write both hides the past and presents what is useful for my purpose.

Historically speaking, men like Thomas Toosey, ticket-of-leavesmen, who had been an integral part of the Tasmanian genocide and the colonisation of the island, began to settle into an independent lifestyle after the end of the war. However, independence became harder to maintain as the century wore on, especially when the rollout of rail lines brought an influx of people into the northern districts and tenancy farming began to flourish. When the LWR Company collapsed in 1873, the state government imposed a levy on every citizen living near the Launceston-Deloraine line in order to fund a bail-out – an action that announced the emergence of the new age of capitalism on the island. While familiar enough to us today, at the time a bail-out was considered so radical that it caused rioting and other acts of civil disobedience in Launceston and the outlying districts. These competing forces, old and new, anarchic and capitalist, are embodied in the characters of Toosey and Flynn.

But of course, there were no people like Toosey or Flynn. They are creations. What can creations tell us about the forces of history? What can they reveal that reading history books cannot? I have no answers for these questions. I try to answer them anyway.


Brewster, Anne. "Can You Anchor a Shimmering Nation State Via Regional Indigenous Roots?" *Cultural


Shipway, Jesse. "Wishing for Modernity: Temporality and Desire in Gould's Book of Fish."


Author/s: Wilson, Rohan David

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