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**THE CONTEMPORARY UNCANNY:
AN EXPLORATION THROUGH
PRACTICE AND REFLECTION**

JANE ALEXANDER

PhD

2018

**THE CONTEMPORARY UNCANNY:
AN EXPLORATION THROUGH
PRACTICE AND REFLECTION**

JANE ALEXANDER

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of
the requirements of the University of
Northumbria at Newcastle for the degree
of Doctor of Philosophy

Research undertaken in the Faculty of
Arts, Design & Social Sciences

January 2018

ABSTRACT

My Creative Writing thesis comprises a collection of uncanny short stories that explores social, psychological and physical impacts of advances in science and technology, and a critical-reflective exegesis. Using a research methodology that critically examines insights emerging from creative and reflective practice, the thesis as a whole addresses the question of how the short story can be used as a particularly appropriate mode to illuminate contemporary experiences of science and technology through the creation of uncanny affect.

The exegesis offers a definition of contemporary uncanny fiction; the stories test a range of thematic, stylistic and formal strategies for achieving uncanny affect. The resulting creative work suggests a contemporary technological uncanny is one that develops and extends Freud's conceptualisation of *das Unheimliche*.

Chapter 1 establishes the theoretical background to my practice research, providing a historical overview of the uncanny as a phenomenon and literary mode. Chapter 2 draws on Gothic and posthuman studies and psychoanalysis, and short stories by China Miéville, Nicholas Royle and Ali Smith, to explore the implications of insights emerging from my short stories: notions of an 'uncanny of the virtual gaze' and the body as site of impact for science and technology characterise a technological uncanny particular to our age, and comprise an original contribution to dialogues and debates theorizing a contemporary uncanny. Chapter 3 applies these notions to the practice of creative writing, to investigate the impact of its location in the academy. Finally, Chapter 4 extends existing narratological theory to suggest how second person is a particularly uncanny narrative mode, and examines issues of form, voice, structure and sequence to contend that short fiction is an especially effective form for the creation of uncanny affect – at the level of the individual story, and the collection as a whole.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost I would like to thank **Northumbria University** for funding this Ph.D.

It is a pleasure to thank my supervisory team, **Professor Michael Green** and **Dr. Andrew Crumey**, for their critical vigilance and patient, generous support.

Astute feedback and constant encouragement from **Vicky Adams** and **Helen Sedgwick** has been invaluable in writing and editing these stories. My work on *Small Objects and Other Stories* was greatly assisted by the award of a **Hawthornden International Writers Retreat**. For their assistance with my research, I would also like to thank **Professor Christine Caldwell**, **Nicholas Royle** in his capacity as publisher of Nightjar Press, and **Charlotte M. E. Summers**.

Individual stories from this collection have previously been published online as part of Edinburgh University's **Lit:Long** project and in anthologies from **Freight Books**.

For emotional support, my thanks to friends and family; and most of all to **Aidan Kirke**.

Declaration

I declare that the work contained in this thesis has not been submitted for any other award and that it is all my own work. I also confirm that this work fully acknowledges opinions, ideas and contributions from the work of others.

Any ethical clearance for the research presented in this thesis has been approved. Approval has been sought and granted by the Faculty Ethics Committee on 24/08/2015.

I declare that the Word Count of this Thesis is 91,077 words

Name: Jane Alexander

Signature:

Date: 2 January 2018

PART 1: *SMALL OBJECTS AND OTHER STORIES*

Now Here

This time, I've remembered to check the map. I know where I am, in relation to where I need to be. And the sun is out, distant but clear, and the blackbirds are singing and I'm distracted by the flirtatious yellow of the daffodils, the feel of spring on my face, and so I walk for a while eyes dancing with gold, ears nose skin all dizzy with spring, and then—

Then – this is not—

This turning, surely—

There should be – shouldn't there be—?

Ridiculous! I laugh at myself, uncertain. I laugh because I'm not lost, not yet. It's just that I've come too far. Or not far enough.

I make my choice. Instead of walking shrinking circles, wearing a path in the pavement, I push on in pursuit of the next corner, chasing the brow of the hill, where surely the city will open before me.

I push on, and streets repeat themselves. The sun has edged behind a cloud, refusing to help. The daffodils are no use as signposts, all the same blunt yellow. I turn, and the world swings, too much and unpredictably. I'm unaligned: my straight lines are zigzagged. Each street, road, alley starts in hope and ends in disappointment.

Once again, I'm lost. Once again, I've failed.

But it's amazing the things they can do nowadays.

The chip itself was a speck of a thing. Dr Ramsay showed me, tilting his cushiony fingertip so it caught the light. I leaned in close, close enough to see the gridlines on its silvered surface, and the altitude lines of his fingerprints. Tiny, but sharp-

cornered; I was relieved to hear it would sit just under the skin at the base of my skull. There, it would pick up signals from GPS satellites.

The something they would put into my brain had no such sharp corners. It was soft. Microscopic. Alive. A bio-engineered single-cell organism, programmed to feed data from the receiver chip to my parietal lobe. Too small, too living to sit on Dr Ramsay's finger. He showed me a picture instead. The cell was oval, like a tablet; a mottled purple bug.

'It's really a minor procedure,' he said. 'Minimally invasive.' I wondered if he practiced that voice: deep and calm. I'd tried to be deep and calm when I told you I'd made my mind up. I'd repeated the doctor's phrases, word for word.

'It's like a faulty electrical connection,' I'd said. 'Inside my brain. And what this does is, it compensates for that bit of loose wiring.'

You winced. 'It's just the idea of putting something into your brain...'

'I know, sure; it is a bit yeuch. But in every case so far, it's been a complete success. And before I had my eyes done, remember I was squeamish? – the lasers cutting the lens; all those stories about how you could smell the burning – and now: ta-da!' My hands made sunbursts, miming enlightenment.

You'd narrowed your own eyes, letting me know you weren't convinced. You couldn't see why I'd take any kind of risk to solve such a trivial problem. To you, my absent sense of direction was part of me: frustrating, occasionally; amusing, frequently. Endearing, you'd once said. Little girl lost. But it wasn't you needing your hand held, going through life like a child.

'You won't be able to feel it,' said Dr Ramsay, 'once it's in.'

It would be inserted during a neuroendoscopic operation. I'd be up and about the next day. Really, they scarcely needed to knock me out.

They did, though – they knocked me out. Jesus, of course they did. This was my actual brain.

I woke up crying. I always cried after general anaesthetic. Tonsils; teeth; appendix. A chemical thing. There was no pain. Just a tenderness at the base of my skull, and a patch of wadding and gauze.

By the time Dr Ramsay arrived at my bedside to tell me how smoothly the op had gone, I was more or less composed.

'When does it start to work?' I asked, wobbly-voiced.

‘Now. Straightaway. Give it a go, if you feel up to it.’

‘Don’t I.’ I coughed, tried again. ‘Don’t I need to go outside?’

He shook his head. ‘Not necessary. You’ll find it’s extremely sensitive. It should work fine, even where the signals are faint.’

‘How do I...?’

‘Just think of a place. Anywhere.’

I thought of you, at home, waiting.

‘Oh!’

Dr Ramsay’s lips curved with professional satisfaction.

‘It’s like – that’s amazing. I just thought of home, and it *knew* – *I* knew.’

‘Try somewhere further afield.’

For some reason I thought of Germany. And there it was, massed off to my right. Berlin, I thought, and the sensation tightened, narrowed. The flat we’d rented last year in Prenzlauerberg. It tightened again.

‘So what’s happening, you see, is that the brain – your brain – is responding to the stimulus...’

As he spoke, I was swamped by a fresh wave of tears. Nothing to do with what he was saying, or Prenzlauerberg, or the tightening in my brain. The anaesthetic. A chemical thing.

‘... in effect creating its own navigational software—’ Dr Ramsay stopped.

I closed my eyes, covered them with my hand. ‘It’s just, sorry. It’s so bright.’

Dr Ramsay murmured something about rest: I heard retreating footsteps; a closing door. He’d left the lights on. I turned my face to hide in the dark of the pillow.

Through the next hours I floated in and out of sleep, in and out of tears, as the anaesthetic worked its way through my system. Each time I woke I tested myself. Orkney. Piccadilly Circus. The Sahara desert. I knew them all. A web, unbreakable and thin as air, stretched round the globe with me at its centre. And like the spider knows the arrival of a fly in its web – a tug, a tension, an almost weightless weight – I could think north, and I felt it. Could think Edinburgh Castle, and I felt it. Think James’s house, think Kazakhstan, think Sydney Harbour Bridge – and I felt it. My web was the size of the world, and my world was changed.

The first check-up, post-op. Dr Ramsay stood behind me, hands on my skull. His fingers were cool on the stubbled patch around the tiny scar. ‘That all looks fine,’ he said. ‘All working okay?’

‘Well – it’s amazing,’ I said. I would have told him all the things I’d told you: how in the mornings, first thing, I took a bus or a train to somewhere I’d never been, and walked like a cat straight home. How I walked all day, farther than I ever had before, through streets that appeared and intersected exactly as they should – like the city was building itself around me; like I was imagining it into being. How I’d started to drive alone, and the driver’s seat no longer felt like the wrong side of the bed. And more: how the first time I’d picked up my guitar, after the op, every note, every chord I reached for was there, in precisely the right place. Pitch, tone, duration. How I no longer had to shape the music; it was shaped for me. The notes perfectly spaced, waiting for me to happen across them. But he was already back at his desk, updating something onscreen.

‘Honestly,’ I said instead. ‘Life-changing.’ I hesitated, and then, ‘What’s funny though, is – I know it’s my imagination – but it’s like, sometimes, I can feel it.’

‘Ah.’ He smiled. ‘That’s, as you say, your imagination, of course. When you open your eyes in the morning, do you feel a tingle in your occipital lobe? No, of course you don’t. It’s really exactly the same. The same kind of sensory processing.’

I lifted a hand to the back of my head. Ran my finger round the soft stubbled circle. ‘Sure,’ I said. ‘I know that. Of course.’

It was by accident that I started to mess with it. I was striding north, swinging round each correct turn, and I thought of you. It was the weekend you went to London, and I was thinking you’d be on the train, still, but just about to pull in to King’s Cross. As the chip pinpointed those north London suburbs – Tottenham, Finsbury Park – 300 miles at the back of me, my step slowed slightly. The feeling was like being watched, by someone who’s behind you. There was the same urge to turn, to be facing the ‘right’ way. I held that picture of you, and increased my pace. At the back of my head, a pulse twitched. The faintest flicker. As if – as if the bug didn’t like it.

It was meant to be my final check-up.

‘Healed nicely,’ said Dr R. ‘Hasn’t it? And no problems at all?’

I took a breath. ‘I want it out.’

I could feel surprise through his fingertips. When he moved round me, back to his desk, his face wore a rumpled look. But his voice was deep and calm as ever. ‘What’s making you feel this way?’

So I told him about last week; the night you’d waited up for me. How I’d slept in the car, worn out from driving, because every day I drove further and it was never enough. How I’d yanked out the car radio because the music was like a war inside my head, the notes so imprecise, misplaced so painfully in space and time. How the sky was a single massive eye that never ever blinked; how my web was the size of the world, and I was trapped in its centre. How the bug knew where I was and pinned me there: always, exactly, and only – *there*.

All the things I should have said to you, when I got home at 4.23am and you asked me where I’d been – instead of screaming at you to get out of my head, and you walking away, and telling me I was too mental to talk to, and I had to go back to the doctor.

When I’d finished, there was a deep calm pause.

‘Well,’ he said eventually, ‘we can do it with a local. We can do it right now.’

It wasn’t until he’d numbed the back of my head that the question struck me.

‘How can you get it out like that?’

‘It’s a small incision; the chip’s right here, right under the skin—’

‘No. It. The bug.’

‘It’s not – it’s just a chip, you remember the one I showed you?’

‘But inside. The—’ I couldn’t find the word. I dropped my voice. ‘The living thing.’

‘Oh no. That won’t come out. It doesn’t need to. You can imagine, with its information feed removed – it has no function. It’s inert. Just a tiny part of you. It’s just a cell.’

The final appointment, I had to fight for.

Dr Ramsay’s voice was no longer calm, and nor was it quite as deep. ‘There’s nothing,’ he said, ‘over hundreds of successful operations – nothing at all to suggest the kinds of problems you seem to be experiencing.’ His gaze shifted from his screen to the clock on the wall behind me, until finally he met my eyes. ‘I can assure you,’ he said, ‘it’s quite impossible.’

Impossible that I could really feel it. A deep, buried itch, alive, like a virus. Impossible for it to be active. To be growing. To be steering me.

‘But – has anyone else had it reversed? Had the chip taken out?’

‘As far as I know,’ he said carefully, ‘yours is the only implant to have been removed.’

‘So then – you wouldn’t know. If it could carry on working.’

‘It’s impossible. There’s no data feed.’

I felt my mouth tug down, and bit the inside of my lip. I couldn’t trust my voice.

‘Have you been sleeping alright?’

I shook my head. Wanting to explain: it’s the bug, all night it keeps me half-awake, tugged every which way through the night.

‘Loss of appetite? Lack of energy?’ He jabbed at his keyboard, making a note. ‘I’d recommend you speak to your GP about the treatment possibilities.’

I sat silently as Dr Ramsay washed his hands of me.

‘He, or she, might suggest a low dose of Prozac, which is a very effective anti-anxiety medication ... or it might help to get away for a bit, if you can...’

But I couldn’t. I couldn’t get away.

I’d thought, somehow, the sea might confuse it. On the ferry, on deck, I’d let the wind pull my hair horizontal, let it batter me about. But when I thought of you, I felt an easterly twitch; I thought of the island, and it pulled to the west.

Today I climbed the highest peak on the island. The bug kept tugging me, making me climb as the crow flies, so I found myself sliding on scree, grabbing sharp handfuls of gorse. At the summit the sky was huge and the bug was stronger than ever. The day before, I’d explored the caves at the base of the cliffs. I clambered and crawled as deep as I could inside the rock, but the itch was always there.

It’s a little better now: at night, in the pitch black. Sitting outside the cottage, under a sky that’s solid with cloud, and studded, invisibly, with satellites. Everything unseen: owls, mice, bats revelling in the dark. Me, pinned to the earth.

Even under the ocean it will know where I am. Even under the soil.

What I’ve realised is that I’ll have to be burned, become multiple. I will become a cloud, in all directions at once, the million million specks of me irretrievably lost in the world.

I find I am looking forward to it.

The SleepHeart

In some ways, it suits you to live alone. It's easier to keep the place clean; you can watch your choice of film in the evening. At night, the bed's all yours. You could sleep diagonal if you felt like it, or stretched like a star, though so far you never have.

It takes you a while, when he's back, to get used to his body beside you. The heat of him, his long limbs. And he snores like a faulty exhaust, so that sometimes in the small hours you've lain there tense with irritation, willing him into silence, and you have to remind yourself: he'll be silent as the grave, one day. Or you will be – but if it's that way round you won't know, won't care. Won't be left with his absence.

The nights when he's alive and snoring and you've reminded yourself to be happy, you roll into the curve of his arm, press your head to the rise and fall of his chest. You try to record him with your body: his breath, the beating of his heart.

Chances are, it will be him. Men die younger, as a rule. Men over there die younger still.

At night, the bed's all yours; he's been away now almost five months. It is such a long absence. It is long enough to forget someone.

That's why you bought the SleepHeart.

He was reluctant, but you placed the order anyway. There was a special offer, free shipping and a discount for anyone on a tour of duty. Ten per cent off for being a hero. Your package came within 24 hours, but you held off opening it. When his parcel arrived at the camp three weeks later, you unpacked your boxes together. Lifted out your bracelets and your pillow-inserts.

'They're not going to let me wear this,' he'd said, unimpressed, dangling the bracelet from one finger.

'You only wear it at night,' you said. 'And it's unisex.'

He fumbled one-handed with the clasp; you wanted to reach through the screen, help him the way you did with all the fiddly stuff – his cufflinks, that long summer of weddings; the battery on the remote. But he managed it, finally. Grinned,

victorious; lifted his wrist so you could see it, silver against sun-dark skin and the ink of his tattoo. ‘So what’s it do again?’

The instructions were straightforward. In a couple of minutes, your devices were synced. You explained to him how the SleepHeart worked, how the bracelets would pick up the rhythms of your hearts, transmit them to the pillow-inserts. How you’d fall asleep to the real-time sound of his heartbeat; how he would wake to the sound of yours.

He’d grumped a bit: more useless tech that nobody needs. And at first he’d forget to wear the bracelet, so at night you’d press your head to the pillow and hear nothing but static, the emptiness of your own blood in your ears. But you wore your bracelet without fail, and you could see he found it endearing, your desire to feel closer to him. Gradually, he came round.

It’s hard to imagine his life over there. You think of dust, and a bastard hot sun. He is four hours ahead; now, as you’re travelling back from work, he’ll be playing a last game of pool or downing the dregs of a beer. As you turn your key in the lock, he’ll be ready to turn in.

Traffic was bad tonight, which means you’re home a little late, and half out of your work clothes when your tablet chimes. You hesitate before picking up – but you do pick up, of course, because imagine: tomorrow when you’re still curled in the warmth of your bed he could be under enemy fire, or facing a suicide bomber, or blown to bits by an IED like his friend Matthew was. Imagine it, how you’d feel.

‘Hello,’ he says, appreciative. ‘That’s a nice surprise.’

‘I could say the same to you.’ You’re in your bra and skirt; he’s waist-up naked, hair still black from the shower, droplets beading on his shoulders. You mirror each other, perched on the sides of your beds.

‘Yeah, I didn’t get time for a wash before.’ His voice is fractionally out of sync with the movement of his lips. ‘We were back late – nothing, just a duff engine, had to get a tow start.’

‘I like it,’ you say. ‘Are you, in fact, wearing anything at all?’

He angles the screen to show you, a slow down-and-up. His chest; the small softness of his belly; the towel nipped in to a fold at his waist, then slit across his thighs – then he breaks up as the tablet swings back to his face.

‘Your turn...’

You make yourself comfy, recline on the bed with your head on the pillows, your ankles crossed. A flattering position. Then you pan the screen down. When you tilt it up again, he's holding you in one hand and himself in the other. His movement is leisurely, deliberate. A drop of water trembles on his fringe, just above his eyes. You imagine him in the shower, head back, letting the lukewarm water wash him clean of sweat and dust. And now you're getting him sweaty again.

You prop the tablet where his head should be. Glance at his view of you, inset small and square, steady against his quickening motion. Now and then, his eyes drag from the screen; checking you're private, unobserved. Any minute his tent-mate could walk in on him, on the two of you together – and it worries you as well; but there's something about it. The thought of being watched.

From under your pillow, his heart beats faster. Onscreen, he judders. You lose his face as he forgets himself, leans back, lets the tablet tilt. The camp-bed shakes, 3,500 miles away beneath his chopped-off body – and you close your eyes, press deeper into the pillow, press against his heart till you almost feel it on your cheek – and your own heart thumping in your ears, chasing him, catching up – your rhythms entangled, beating now in time, in time, in time–

When you open your eyes, he's beside you looking down at you, propped on your pillows on his bed. Forearms on his knees, tablet in both hands. His lips move, then: 'Hang on a sec,' he says – and for a minute the screen is filled by beige, by the roof of his tent. The picture drains of colour; a light going off. There is an indistinct curve of flesh, then a close up of his face, fuzzy in the dark.

'I'm dead to the world already,' he says.

You roll your eyes, smiling. 'Typical. No, it's alright. Get some sleep – you must need it.'

He presses a kiss to his fingertips, his fingers to the screen – and you do the same: kiss, touch. Then he powers down, disappears.

You could sleep now too. You ought to get up, make something to eat. Instead, you let yourself drift: just a body, rhythm and heat. You are happy to stay quite still; might never move again. The skirt creased up around your waist, the bump of the SleepHeart inside the pillow. The bloom of your pulse, warm and open under your skin. It beats in your fingers, your chest, in your throat and at your temples – and where the side of your head squashes into the pillow, your pulse weaves with his.

The sound is a guide-rope, a knotted thread. It connects you to him, to somewhere that's elsewhere.

You're not sure if it starts with you, or with him.

A quickening. A sense of heat, of breath coming faster, shallower. Like he isn't sleeping after all – has been assailed instead with a memory of you, of what you've just done together. You imagine: he is trying not to creak the springs of his camp-bed; his tent-mate is sleeping just metres away. Slide your hand down once more, between your legs. Re-run him on the screen of your head. Conjure the detail of him: that clear line slanting in between his chest and his shoulder. His forearms working, holding tight; those capable muscles and tendons. His strength and his shower-wet nakedness. Your heart and his, perfectly synced–

You stop. In your chest, a glitch. A skipped beat.

You retrieve your hand. Sit up; press your fist to the bone of your sternum. Remember the way he stretched toward you, a kiss on his fingertips. His hand, his wrist.

Shower-wet. Naked.

Under your fist, your heart is beating as it should, just a little fast. Once you become aware of it, it's amazing how strong it feels. How loud it sounds, in a silent room. This must be what you were hearing, before; listening to your pulse, and imagining his.

Except–

You turn, slip your hand under the pillow, inside the case. Place your palm on the SleepHeart. Feel its silicone skin warm against yours. Its wire trails from the pillow-case, and you follow it down the side of the bed until you find the switch.

Off.

Now, when you press your ear to the pillow there's a dense, feathery silence.

On.

Now it's back again: a soft tattoo, pillow-muffled.

You tug at your skirt, pulling it down to cover your thighs. Think back, try to visualise – could you be mistaken? The angles, the stuttering of the image: how much, how clear, did you really see? But you saw the detail of water dripping from his hair. You saw the rough nap of the towel, the fold of the fabric at his midriff.

You saw his tattoo, the Chinese dragon swirling uninterrupted from his left bicep all the way down to his wrist.

You could text him. A casual question: *Hey, are you wearing your bracelet?* But he'd been so tired. The thought of waking him to ask, most likely waking his tent-mate too... You would sound needy, nagging. He'd be pissed off, would have every right to be.

And anyway you are certain – you are almost certain – that he wasn't. Not in the shower, where the water might have shorted the electrics. Not afterwards, as you watched him onscreen. Not as he started to fall asleep.

Not now.

The SleepHeart lies snug in its pillow-case. Each beating couplet strikes an upward intonation – a question, insistent, repeated.

You follow the artery of its flex till you reach the plug, and pull it out. In the sudden silence you realise you expected the impossible: that somehow the Heart would keep beating.

Late evening, and you're stretched on the sofa, tablet propped against your knees – a crime drama onscreen that you're only half-following. Thinking, instead, of what must have happened.

His bracelet lost, or stolen. Your SleepHeart hacked, synced somehow with a stranger's device. An accidental connection, like a crossed landline. Like the Russian voice that used to invade the Top 40, a spy hidden in your old analogue radio. But you don't know enough about how the SleepHeart works to know what's probable, what's possible.

You leave the drama running while you launch the browser, search for *SleepHeart problem*.

A broken clasp on somebody's bracelet. A volume control that doesn't work. Someone who says his insert gives him a hot ear, which he finds very uncomfortable.

SleepHeart problem sync.

A few people who say they've followed the instructions but still can't pair their devices. No-one with a problem like yours.

You remember how the heartbeat quickened, in time with your own.

It's close to midnight before you feel ready to sleep.

Face. Teeth. Alarm. Bracelet. It's automatic; you don't even think. But when you lay your head down, the pillow is flat and smooth. The SleepHeart is where you left it, flex wrapped tight around its body, packed away in its box. Sitting in the hallway, ready to return to the manufacturer.

Though you filled your evening with noise – with TV dialogue, a call to a friend, the late headlines – underneath everything, there was the silence. Now, eyes closed, you hear the quiet of night: the distant swoosh of cars on the street outside; closer, a gentle ticking as the bones of the house cool in the dark; closer, the fuzzy drumbeat of your heart inside your chest.

Sometimes, you would wake in the small hours, wake between beats of his heart, and time would stretch, silent seconds; you'd hold your breath, straining past the racing of your own pulse until you found his, sleep-slow underneath. It felt like proof: 3,500 miles away, he was there, alive.

The bed's all yours. So many months. Such a long absence.

You're not sure, now, what it is you've been remembering.

You get up, go into the hall. The Heart is in its box, inert: cheap silicone and copper wiring. You scoop it out, carry it back to bed. Push the insert deep inside your pillow-case, the plug into the socket. Flick the switch.

On.

Gently, you nestle into the heartbeat. Keep your eyes shut. Slow your breath till your pulse ticks in time with the Heart buried under the pillow.

However many miles away, someone is there, alive.

Blood

Nick sits on the steps, surrounded by a heap of belongings: their rucksacks, the double duvet in its black plastic sack, the John Lewis bag with the brand-new bedlinen that David's mother bought them as a house-warming gift. The jackets they wore when they boarded the coach last night in the chill, damp dark, and shed this morning when they stepped into the blaring London sun.

Nothing seems real. They might be on holiday, or actors in a film. Last night David dozed with his head on Nick's shoulder but Nick couldn't sleep; he's been awake now for twenty-four hours. A few doors down, a townhouse is being gutted. The noise ricochets along the street, hammers and drills and workmen shouting to each other.

Their landlord is late.

David shoves at the smaller rucksack with his foot, clearing a space beside Nick. Budge up, he says as he lowers himself onto the step, wedging in close. David tilts his head so it touches Nick's.

Almost there, he says.

*

I take it you haven't told her yet, that we're going.

Nick doesn't look up from the sink. Keeps rinsing and stacking the plates. David's right, he hasn't mentioned it, not yet. But in a couple of months he'll be finished with college, and lately he's noticed his mother watching him with something sad and expectant in her expression. Yesterday he was home early, so he made her dinner; the two of them sat down to eat, and he noticed it then, a wariness in the way she glanced at him. That was when he realised: she was waiting for him to break the news, over the meal he'd prepared to soften the blow.

That would have been the time. When she was expecting it, was ready to hear it. But she had looked old, and vulnerable. She had looked afraid.

I know it's hard, David says. You obviously owe her, like, a lot. I mean, not the money stuff. He flicks the tea-towel dismissively. That's fair exchange. I mean, she's your mother. But we've got to get on with our lives. I'm sorry to be callous,

but if she could afford to pay our rent in London – and your train fare back, once a month – then fine. But she can't, can she?

David is right. His mother can't afford it. Even the allowance she gives him is a stretch. She's all but retired; she tries to hide it, from herself as much as from Nick, but despite everything she has less energy than she used to. There's only so much the proteins can do. There are no miracles, yet.

Although, right now, she's upstairs preparing for another date. This is how she chooses to use it, the sparkle he gives her. In a few minutes she'll be whisking through the house, make-up, perfume, the dress, reciting the things she has to remember: keys, handbag, phone... Her memory's holding up well, and she looks good for her age, well-preserved – but that lipstick... As soon as she puts it on it starts to leak from her mouth, into the scores of lines that fan out from her lips. David says she needs to use primer, says that's another thing Nick should tell her. Nick bats it back – *you* tell her – and David rolls his eyes; but he could. He'd get away with it. It's the sort of thing a Gay Best Friend should say, and that's the way he plays it now they're all happy families. Which makes Nick's mum the fag hag; another thing he wouldn't say out loud.

He would like her to meet someone. After he leaves, he'd prefer her not to be alone. It's bound to happen eventually, David says, she's still a good-looking woman, thanks to you. But there's a deadline now, even if she doesn't realise. It has to happen before he goes. Before she starts to feel – and look – her age. There was one guy who lasted a few months but he's not on the scene anymore, and Nick's not sure what happened to him in the end. Still, hope springs eternal, apparently. Most weeks she's meeting someone. She's always psyched before a date, even if the men so far have been mostly losers. Tonight she'll leave the house on a wave of optimism and come home gin-sad, disappointed again. It's the same dismal story: those men her age who use protein therapy are going for women at least a decade younger, and the men who can't afford the blood are falling apart.

*

Nick feels David's elbow in his ribs, then David rises to his feet. Stefan, he says, and holds out his hand to a man in a dazzling white shirt. Nick stands as well, hauling himself up with the railing, and shakes Stefan's hand. Nice to meet you, he says.

Stefan is a big man, broad-shouldered. The sun bounces off his shirt, a flat plane of white that grabs the light and leaves the rest of him shadowy and undefined. Nick has an impression of strength, and of thin red lips in a cropped grey beard. Stefan glances at their luggage, then fetches a set of keys from his pocket, steps over the bags to unlock the door. Nick braces himself, swings the larger rucksack onto his shoulders once more, feeling its weight push him a couple of centimetres closer to the ground.

He lets David follow directly behind Stefan. David is better with small-talk, and he's met Stefan once already; it was David who travelled down to view the flat while Nick was swamped with revision, David who was desperate to set their move in motion. He graduated a year ago, has been waiting since then for Nick to catch up. That's how you know I love you, he's said more than once – that I'm willing to stick around this shit-hole for twelve whole months, for you.

Nick brings up the rear, a bag in each hand. Lets the door click shut at his back. He has carried the sun's glare in with him, is blind in the gloom of the stairwell. He blinks to make out the curve of a handrail, the flights and flights of steps rising high above his head. Starts to climb. It's a Victorian townhouse, five storeys high, subdivided into apartments.

Is it all full? he calls up the stairs, and Stefan tells them yes; the rooms go quick, never any trouble. Nick hears the warning in his words. London is a city of opportunity, but of competition too. A city filled with young people from all over the world, and some of them have nothing to sell but their bodies, one way or another. The unskilled labour of their muscles, their energy; or sex, or sperm, or blood. Blood is the gentlest, the cleanest and, still, the most lucrative. They are entering a crowded marketplace.

*

Right arm last month; left one this time. It's the Australian nurse, Nick's favourite. While others have come and gone, Craig has been here for the past five years. With latex fingers he rubs a brown smear of iodine onto Nick's skin, a familiar medicinal smell.

This is my last time here, says Nick, and Craig looks up. Ah, really? We're gonna miss you, mate.

The first couple of times, Craig had complimented Nick on his veins, their obvious blue at the pit of his elbow, clear as rivers through his thin pale skin. We'll not have any problems here, he'd said; you make it so easy I could find a vein blindfold. Sixteen and giddy with a handsome man's hands on his skin, Nick had hoped the nurse might be flirting and not just putting him at his ease.

Craig never mentions the word *blood*. Perhaps there are people who don't mind the sight of it, pushing black through the narrow tube, but who faint at the very word. Just pump your wrist for me, he says, and gives him the rubber ball to squeeze. That'll get things flowing.

Sometimes, he tries to count them up, all his donations. It was once every two months, initially. His mum had explained it all, carefully neutral: her diagnosis, the possible treatment. She didn't try to persuade him; he offered, straightaway. He'd already lost his dad. Then he turned eighteen and the doctors gave the okay to donate once a month; and after the treatment was done, and she was in remission, the consultant was happy for things to carry on. Not strictly medically necessary, he'd said, but certainly the plasma seemed to agree with her. A family arrangement, for as long as legislation permits.

Nick doesn't feel it much, the needle going in. Just a dullness in his arm as the blood is pumped through the tubing and into the centrifuge. The plasma collecting in the bag, gold and foaming, doesn't look precious. It looks like waste, like concentrated urine.

Okay that's great, says Craig, we'll get these cells back to you now. Nick readies himself for the cold sensation climbing up his arm as the blood, minus proteins, is flushed back in.

He has always bruised easily. It takes three days, usually, for the local discolouration to fade and the skin to lose its tired yellow tint. Once a month, it's fine. In London it will be more often: once a fortnight. The thought makes his arms feel tired, makes the whole of him tired. But David can't donate.

It wipes me out, he said. I tried giving blood once, just like an ordinary donation, and honestly it took me a week to recover. That's not a great hourly rate.

You know it's not like that, though. Yeah they take your blood, but then they separate out the plasma and they put your blood back in.

Still, he said. They take your protein. Your energy. Your *life force*. He looked up from under his eyelashes. You're strong, you've got all this stamina.

So it's all on Nick. He is strong, always has been, but it's not like it doesn't touch him. He gets tired, just doesn't moan about it. Has an early night. Watches TV. Eats the steak his mother makes for him. A day or two later the ache is gone from the crook in his arm, and he's back at full strength.

Really, it's worked out well for both of them: him and his mum. The last three years she's paid for everything. Most of his classmates are graduating with loans they'll be paying off for a decade; meanwhile – if you don't count tuition fees, which no-one really does – he's leaving uni debt-free.

He doesn't know how it will be in the new place. The set-up is legal, just about, since no money will change hands; it's a straight swap, blood for rent. Even so, the area's grey enough that their landlord prefers not to set it all out in a contract. There will be less leeway, he supposes, but for instance say he gets sick, gets the flu or something, he can't imagine this Stefan will throw them onto the street. Not straight away. From what David says, he sounds pretty much like a reasonable guy.

*

Slowly, Nick's vision adjusts. The stairwell is panelled to waist height, painted in thick layers of chocolate gloss, and above that the textured wallpaper is painted an institutional green that reflects an underwater light.

Tell me about the flat, he'd asked; tell me more about what it's like. David hadn't mentioned the flaking paint or the paper curling from the walls, nor the smell of damp concrete. Probably, he hadn't noticed – David always looks for the positives. Nick climbs, and tries to do the same. He keeps his eyes fixed on David's back, on his shoulders and the top of his head which are just visible around the rucksack he's carrying. Amazing: to have made it here, with him.

*

It's always been David. The boy next-door-but-one, till his family moved to the far side of town. Different schools, different friends. Lost, but not forgotten. And then, that second day in college. Like something out of a fairytale. Spotting him in the

canteen. David holding court with a group of girls – and the blood in him rising till he could feel the glow right up to the tips of his ears. Breathing deeply, and carrying his tray to David's table; shy, testing, catching his eye, not sure if David would remember him. The gift of the look on his face, and his words – oh my god, *Nick!* – and the girls around him opening like petals to make space for Nick to sit.

He doesn't know he's doing it, cradling his left hand with his right one, rubbing his thumb across the palm, that thin raised line. Not until David lays his forearm flat across the table, in among the cups and plates and trays, his hand spread open, facing up. Wait, a girl is saying, so how do they know each other? And Nick reaches out, pushing his sandwich, his can of Coke out of the way. Offers his own hand. Oh, they're childhood friends, so sweet... Almost invisible, joining them, a silver scar; a single continuous thread.

It's always been David, which is why his mother's reaction is such a disappointment. He had thought she must always have known, just like he always has. Perhaps it makes her uncomfortable. Perhaps she's mourning the loss of her potential grandchildren, though he and David are definitely going to have kids, one way or another, they've already decided that. But he never anticipated her finding it difficult, never thought she could make his chosen partner feel so unwelcome.

It's David who puts it together, explains it to him. It's not me, he says. Or, it sort of is. She's worried about your arrangement. Keeping you clean.

Nick's anger takes them both by surprise. His outrage pushes up into his chest, his throat, so he can scarcely speak.

It's fine, says David, soothing him. I don't mind, I'll get screened and it'll all be hunky-dory. I'll charm her yet, you'll see.

But David – David-and-him – is the purest thing in the world. Brothers for life. Blood freely shared. His kisses. His clean, clean mouth.

*

Nick turns, and climbs, and turns again. The same landing repeats. Two flights ... three ... four. Their flat is at the top. Three doors off each landing, all painted black. He tries to do the maths. Say two people per flat, that's six on each floor, perhaps thirty altogether? Each person donating once a month, unless they're doing it like he

and David are. It's a daily supply. He looks up at their landlord as Stefan starts on the final flight of stairs, and tries to guess at his age. His hair is white, and the back of his neck has the bulging, raddled look of a man in his seventies, but he takes the fifth flight like a thirty-year-old.

Nick starts as a door swings open. A young woman, her face as suprised as his. He makes himself smile through the sweat and exhaustion. Hi, he says, but she's already retreating, the door slamming shut. And he realises, they are a reminder of how expendable she is. How easily each of them could be replaced.

*

In the end, it's his mother that says it. You know you can stop, she tells him, whenever you want. It's not something you owe me.

There are questions he doesn't ask: what will she do, without him? Will she try to find another supply, through one of those private places that advertise in euphemisms, promise rejuvenation and change their name every couple of months? Could she afford the black market rates – say, four times a year? He doesn't ask, because there are no good answers. And he doesn't tell her about the London set-up: the flat, and the clinic. He and David will both find work, he says, and she blinks and smiles and raises herself onto her toes to kiss him on the cheek.

Once Nick's mother knows they're going, and everything's certain, David seems far less urgent about their departure. Most evenings while Nick is studying for his exams, David comes round for tea. He helps Nick's mum to cook, then stays the night. When Nick goes upstairs to cram in some last-minute revision, David sits up with his mum over a bottle of wine; and when Nick sticks his head round the living room door to say he's heading for an early one, the response comes as a duet: night, love... David says he'll be right up, but come midnight Nick's still alone in his single bed. Crazy to be jealous. The slog of exams is almost done, and soon it'll be just him and David sharing the wine and the late nights. But he lies with the duvet pulled over his head, and his mother's flirtatious laughter spikes his dreams.

Down there in the living room is a photo of him as a baby, of his mum holding him. He is brand new; the picture must have been taken the day he arrived, just minutes after they'd cut the cord. She was already old, back then. She was almost

fifty, when she had him. But in the picture she glows like she's run a marathon. Shining and red, an exhausted smile. She's all naked shoulders, the top of her chest, too much skin. She holds him close and careful, pressed against her, and he's glowing too, a scrap of red-faced screwed-up shrimpiness, fists clenched and eyes tight shut like someone's turned on the lights when he's trying to catch some sleep. He wishes she'd take the picture down, put it somewhere hidden. It's too personal, too private to be on show like that. There is something shameful about it.

Nick wonders how much he'll find her changed, when he comes home from London to visit. How quickly she will age. The feelings swirl inside him, hot and gaseous. She should never have given him so much power. She should never have expected so much from him.

*

Alright boys, here we are. Stefan unlocks their new front door and leads them inside. Nick sheds his rucksack, sinks onto a lumpy sofa. He has an urgent hollow feeling; it's too long since he last ate. He zones out, lets David be the adult as Stefan explains the pre-pay meter, the window that's painted shut, the skylight over the bath that does leak a bit, but only when it absolutely pours.

It's not really a flat, more of a studio. One room for living and sleeping, filled with heavy darkwood furniture. An alcove kitchen with a two-ring stove. He hauls himself to his feet and takes a look at the bathroom. An enamelled bath, freestanding, streaked turquoise from the tarnished taps to the plughole. They'll need to get a shower attachment, though he's not sure how it'll fit on the monster taps. A toilet with a wooden seat and one of those high-up cisterns you flush with a chain. Cracked brickwork tiles on the walls, and black-and-white lino on the floor, though the white is more of a grey. He adds a bumper-sized bottle of bleach to his mental shopping list.

Stefan is handing over a folder. This is the clinic, he says to David, who passes it straight to Nick. The cover is glossy and bright, a photo of a smiling woman in a spotless white uniform. Nick imagines rolling up his sleeve to offer her his arm; wonders what sort of training they will have, at this new place. Craig's voice in his head: *we're gonna miss you, mate.*

Stefan's still talking. Two appointments every month, he says, and it's up to you how you work it, if it's one of you or both, so long as you keep your certificates clean and bang up to date. He holds out the keys, two sets. David pockets them both. That's perfect, he says.

On the edge of the bed, Nick sits with his eyes closed and thinks of a new-build. Fresh plaster and paint, shining laminate, the edges sharp and the surfaces smooth. Everything bright and easy to clean, the way it is at home. He hears the door shut; Stefan's vigorous steps retreating down the stairs.

Alright, isn't he? says David. And quite handsome, for an old guy.

Then the mattress sinks beside him, and his skin feels the heat of David close by, close enough that Nick can smell the overnight bus, the heat of the day, and his hunger and weariness recede. He turns, snakes his arms around David's waist, his back, up under his T-shirt. Nods at the John Lewis bag. Sheets on first? he says.

The heady smell of sweat and shop-fresh bedding. Will you still love me, David says, when I'm old and decrepit? Nick promises, knowing and not believing it will ever happen, that David's smooth brown skin will mottle and crease, his muscles sag, nor that his own fair hair will thin as his knuckles thicken, sculpting his fingers into the replica of his mother's twisted joints. They are all headed in the same direction and any reversals are temporary, but he feasts his eyes on David's flushed face, on his mouth big with blood and kisses, and thinks of two boys with a shiny penknife, and touches his lips to the scar that crosses David's palm.

*

Sometimes he can almost see it, a great golden cloud that rises from everyone his age, that swirls and sparks and is drawn into their parents and grandparents.

Sometimes, he can feel it as it leaves him. A kind of redistribution of wealth.

David doesn't believe in that. He believes in the individual. It's up to you, he says, no-one's going to hand it to you, your nice life. You have to make it for yourself. It's not like David will be living off Nick. If he can, he will work for their spending money – something where he can use his marketing degree, ideally, and if not he'll get a job in retail, or pull pints, serve coffee, whatever. It's true the only work he's had in a year is two months stacking shelves at Tesco, but in London it will be different. I'll look after you, don't you worry, David says. Will you cook me

steak? David twists his face in disgust. He's a vegetarian. Not sure we'll be able to afford steak, my love. Liver, then, says Nick. A nice bit of offal, that's practically cheaper than lentils. I'll keep you in iron tablets, David offers, but anyway it won't be for long. It's a young market, proteins. Not just literally. Middle man, that's the growth area. That's where we want to be.

He has plans. Nick is just happy to be a part of them.

*

The first night in the new flat he sleeps like a baby. The second night, he dreams.

He is pregnant, his stomach swollen tight, the skin almost translucent, veins marking out dark tributaries. Inside him, he knows, the baby is wrong, too small and wrinkled like a raisin but he can't make them understand, not his mum, not David who is there holding his hand. What's inside him washes out, somehow, on a tide of blood, and that's how it should be says Craig the nurse, there's always blood. He is holding it in his arms, staring into its wizened face, blood drying into the creases round its sealed shut eyes, its pursed mouth, but a different nurse, a stranger, says we'll put him in the wash and he'll come out good as new, and when the wash is done the nurse hands him a pair of socks rolled up into a ball, all sparkling clean.

Not our children, he says, not my child; and then he wakes, and turns, and falls back into sleep.

Flesh of their flesh

Dad.jpg

Portrait of my father Calum Lowell. Photographer unknown.

This must be in Redford Road, the flat my parents had before I was born – a garden flat, stairs would have been difficult for my dad. I remember his saying there were three steps from the back door up to the garden, and in the months before the operation even those three steps were more than he could manage. So this must have been a bit before. He's not quite at that stage, yet. You can see he's unwell, of course. The way his T-shirt hangs. Shoulders like a wire coathanger. Knees like tent poles under the blanket. And his skin: yellowed, almost transparent. But he was able to make it outside, sit in his chair, enjoy a fine day. It's almost a smile on his face, there. I think that's an Abelia shrub to his left, and that's probably why they put the chair in that spot. Dappled sun, and the smell of sweet almond.

People say that when you're dying, when you know that you're dying, those small pleasures become everything.

Though I've put photographer unknown, it's probably my mum.

Calum_and_Poppy.jpg

Portrait of my father holding me as a baby. Photographer unknown.

The file metadata is corrupted, so I can't be sure exactly when this was taken. But anyway that's me, smiling for the camera, and I can't be more than six months old, which makes it roughly a year and a half since my father's operation. You can see his skin has lost that see-through, jaundiced quality. He's solid, pink-cheeked, even though he must be tired with a new baby to look after – I'm told I was a colicky creature and a terrible sleeper. His hair is starting to go, that's the only thing. Again, it's probably my mum taking the photo.

But is this useful, at all? I don't know if it's what you're after; whether your interest is purely professional, or if there's a more personal connection. You did mention photographs as well as papers and so on, and I'm afraid as I said he didn't tend to keep that kind of thing, so there's not very much of either. The materials became problematic, that was a part of it.

You can always let me know if this is not what you need.

There was a similar photo that appeared in the evening paper around this time, a family shot of all three of us. My father wasn't the first successful recipient, but I suppose the treatment was new enough for his recovery to be a story – locally, at least. For a long time the cutting was on display, stuck to the fridge alongside my painting of our house, our family: Mum, Dad, me and Max the dog. But I think in the end Mum threw it away. She preferred not to talk about it: his illness, his recovery. I guess you'd say she was squeamish.

The cutting was from the Evening News. You could track down a copy easily enough.

*

Bacon_audio.m4a

Laundry_audio.m4a

Crayons_audio.m4a

Soap_audio.m4a

Recordings made by my father Calum Lowell, over a period of a year.

There are scores of these. Since we spoke, I've listened to them all, and I really don't think there's anything that will be of interest for your project – but I'm happy to send you the complete set if you'd like to listen for yourself. In the meantime, I've selected the ones where he's inadvertently caught some speech – there's nothing you could call important, but you might like to hear their voices. Our voices: I'm on there too. If you listen to Soap, you can hear me quite clearly. I seem to have got it into my head that I was to sing for the recorder. You can hear him shushing me, near the start of the file.

And that's me on Crayons, talking to my dad. I would have been lying on my belly, a roll of paper spread on the floor and a set of fat bright crayons. Our voices are not very clear, but it's something like this:

Me: This doesn't really make a sound.

Dad: No?

Me: No. Drawing doesn't make a sound.

Dad: Okay.

Me: So why are you recording me?

Dad: It's not you I'm recording. It's not a sound.

Me: Then how can you record it, if it's not a sound?

Dad: *(Pause)*. It's not *not* a sound.

On Laundry, that's my mother's voice. You get the machine filling, the load swishing round and round, and just before he stops recording you can hear her snapping at him. And it's my mother making breakfast, on Bacon. You can hear the give of the fridge door, the spit of hot oil – but you have to imagine the thick-sliced meat peeled apart in pale, cold strips, set to bubble and shrink and singe. You have to imagine what's left behind; the thin skin of fat, a white bloom ghosted on the pan.

I've heard it said that human flesh, when it burns, smells like any other meat. Inhale it on an empty stomach – the particles pushing in, unseen, lodged in the membrane of your nose – and your mouth will start to water.

It's only when she's ready to serve – when the meat is melting and tender and crisped, the fibres of muscle and stripes of fat perfectly ready to be severed, impaled, chewed and swallowed – it's only then that my mother notices the recorder.

Oh for heaven's sake. Calum, would you not–

That's where it ends.

She thought he was being fanciful; was worried I would pick up on his food issues, as she called them. But after a while we did stop eating the obvious things, the bacon, sausages, black pudding. It made a certain kind of sense.

Other things were harder to understand. I remember the last time I saw him eating bread. How he stopped, mid-mouthful. Sucked in his cheeks, ran

his tongue around the inside of his mouth, poking and pushing like something had stuck. He wrapped a hand around his throat, the way you nurse a pain or damp down a tickle, the kind that starts deep inside; then he coughed through a mouth of chewed-up bread, damp crumbs escaping his lips until eventually he spat into his palm. Stared at the greyish paste, as if it might hold an answer. Stood abruptly, shook it into the kitchen bin and rinsed his hand under the tap. Then he took the sliced bread in its plastic bag and threw that away too.

The whole time, I was watching, my sandwich half-eaten on the plate in front of me.

It's not *not* a sound.

The shriek of wax on the wooden floors. The fatty sheen of the painted woodwork, the skirtings and the doors, the window frames.

I could see him trying to ignore it, the way you refuse to notice someone you don't want to acknowledge. The effort was visible: eyes glazed, lips tight. Often he'd double-take, like someone had called a name that might have been his. Other times he would press his palms to the sides of his head, his temples, his cheeks and jaw, as if he was trying to muffle vibrations.

It does tend to be the case that, once it's developed, sensitivity will increase. We've learned this from observation, from experience. From our volunteers. Well, perhaps you know it yourself. The crayons turn to bones and fat in your hands. The sweetness of a penny chew melts into the slip of connective tissue. The taste of grit in a glass of wine; the whisper of bone-dust against your teeth.

There are plenty more audio files from after he'd given up on his recordings, but they're all mine; made-up songs, pretend radio shows and so on. I'm not sure whether he gave me the recorder or whether I just claimed it – either way, he'd accepted defeat, and he never wanted it back. But I didn't delete his files. They were important to him, at the time, so I kept them, just in case.

*

Scan0001.tif

List, handwritten by my father Calum Lowell, various dates.

I'm sorry this is all coming in dribs and drabs. One of the valuable things about this project, for me, is how it's prompted me to start sorting through; to think about how we might create a proper archive.

I've scanned this because you did say you'd like to see any original documents. He left it behind when he moved out, along with everything else, and somehow it escaped being thrown away. Different pens and pencils, so it looks like he added to it over a period of time. You may find it hard to decipher – his writing was always terrible and with age it only got worse – so here's a transcript.

beer
wine
cork
cigarettes
matches
juice
capsules (medicine, vitamins)
toothpaste
soap
shampoo
lotion
make-up (Megan)
sweets and cakes (Poppy)
meat of course
bread
aluminium
zinc
copper (electronics)
cadmium (batteries)
paper
crayons

toys (??) (Poppy)
pet food
bird food
washing powder
fabric conditioner
bone china
candles
floor wax
lubricant
paint
paintbrushes
pigment (bone black)
wallpaper
sandpaper
plaster
glue
antifreeze
photo film
x-ray film
concrete

So you can see, how difficult it became.

*

Dad_ID_tag.jpg

Calum Lowell staff ID tag (animal technician), University Hospital. Photographer:
Poppy Lowell.

Sorry about the reflection on the laminate, I'm not the world's greatest photographer and when I tried it without the flash the text came out too dark to read. You'd be welcome to visit and take your own photos, if it's of any interest at all. All we ask is that you avoid certain products; I'll send you the list. It's based on my father's, from all those years ago, though ours is more

complete. A lot of his research was trial and error, and of course he was working alone, his own test subject. Together, we've been able to compile a more comprehensive catalogue.

Given that he was so seriously overqualified, I imagine my dad had to pull some strings to get this job. He'd held some senior research roles, and giving up on his career wasn't something he discussed with my mother or with me. Though of course I was only ten; he would have assumed, not unreasonably, that I wouldn't understand such things. Even when he was very unwell, on extended sick leave before his operation, he'd always earned a good salary – so you can see why my mother reacted as she did. But it was because of the secrecy, I think – the lack of consultation, as much as the loss of income and status – that she finally asked him to leave. My sense is that, for a long time, she'd been staying with him out of duty. I don't think she would mind me telling you this. She was loyal to my father, but his behaviour had become difficult. Unreasonable, from her perspective. Controlling, even. His habits, the things he had to avoid. The things he wanted her to avoid. She went along with the vegan make-up, but the electronics was a real sticking point.

I think he was happy to go. To find somewhere he could live more quietly. I missed him, of course, but in a way – I'm not being flippant here – in a way, it was harder for the dog. You can't explain it to an animal – the change, the loss – and Max was never the same. Whereas I still saw Dad, as often as I could. His new job entailed working weekends and night shifts, and in any case I couldn't have stayed overnight in that flat; I say flat, but it was a single room, limewashed brick and boards, white and barely furnished. A single bed and a sleeping bag. A camping stove. A desk he'd made himself, just a few planks nailed together, and a plastic folding chair. It was spartan in the extreme, but it was peaceful there, at least. And with the new job, more and more, he needed that peace, that place of retreat.

You'll understand, perhaps. You mentioned your mother's heart.

In fact ... I'm sure I took a photo, later. I might still have it, of Dad in his room.

15.13.47.jpg

Portrait of Calum Lowell at 11c Craigie Lane. Photographer: Poppy Lowell.

The reason I took it was to show my mum, to show her why I was worried about him. When I asked him why he'd got rid of it all, the furniture, the camping stove, why he slept on the floor without even a blanket, I remember what he said. It's an obligation. That's what he said.

It was the first time I remember him using that word.

You can see it in his face. He looks ... not happy. Not content. He looks determined.

*

I'm glad you asked about the straw.

What you've heard is true, as far as it goes. That he compromised the hygiene of the facility: deliberately, wilfully. But there was only ever a small amount, no more than he could carry. It was a gesture, nothing more. And you have to imagine, working there – the dark, constant grind of it, shredding the air, scraping your nerves – it must have been beyond enduring.

They did have bedding, the pigs. That was all in accordance with government welfare standards. But they had to be raised in a sterile environment. White walls and floors. Medical grade paper, shredded for nesting. It would have smelled of hygiene and fear. Not of grass and earth and sun.

It must have driven him mad. How else could he have failed to realise what the consequence would be? Like introducing a speck of water into an egg-white mix; the whole batch is spoiled.

Their organs couldn't be used. Their engineered flesh was no good for meat. Their hide and their bones might at least have been used for pigment and glue. Instead, they were euthanised and incinerated. Each animal had a market value. £850,000 for a heart. £550,000 for a liver. £80,000 for a kidney. Skin, £1 per centimetre squared.

Or you could measure their value in lives, instead. Call it twenty? Thirty? My father gave his offerings of straw to seven of the pigs, before a colleague saw what he was doing.

He lost his job, of course. They sued him for gross neglect; he was lucky the judge ruled in his favour. But he did hold himself liable, for something other than his employer's financial loss.

He was painted as a saboteur, but to call him an activist is to utterly misunderstand his motives. He was never a militant, never valued animal over human life. I know I emphasised this when we spoke, and it's important for the family that it should be made clear in your book: my father was not the crank people say he was, and he was not a fanatic.

What he did was impulsive. At the Sanctuary, in contrast, we are always pragmatic. But if he hadn't acted as he did, we wouldn't be here.

The straw is part of our story. What we've kept is what was left, after he made his offering.

When you visit, I'll show you. You can see for yourself. See our animals, how they root and dig with their blunt sensitive snouts. How they hunt out smells in hay and earth and grass.

When I lift the straw to my face, breathe in the smell, I remember that word: obligation.

*

Calum_and_sign.jpg

Portrait of my father and Rosemary Mason with the Sanctuary sign. Photographer: unknown.

Rosemary was the first volunteer, my father aside, and for a brief time they were a couple. She's still with us, in fact. An attractive woman, as you can see, into her sixties and still trim in vest and shorts. Elsewhere she'd be the object of surreptitious, pitying stares; here, people don't even notice the grafts.

My father carved the sign himself, which goes some way to excuse the unevenness of the lettering. We take a great deal of care with our building materials, and on the whole this is a peaceful place – didn't you find it so?

The founding donor prefers to remain anonymous. I can tell you she was a wealthy individual who approached my father in the wake of the publicity from the court case. The slaughter of those seven pigs had offended her. She had the idea that laboratory pigs could be retired rather than euthanised; wondered if my father might be the man to make her vision a reality. It's speculation on my part that she herself was a recipient.

The first pigs came as a pair – two-year-old sows that had been used for pharmaceutical research. We have over a hundred now, many living with the effects of their use as research animals. Dad was always careful not to prolong a life if it meant the animal would suffer. He would pay close attention as he fed them, watered them, cleaned their quarters, and if necessary would do what had to be done.

Funding was a struggle, at the start. It was not an appealing cause. A pig – an adult pig – resists our attempts to anthropomorphise, to sentimentalise. Lacks the nobility of the horse, the loyalty of the dog, the beautiful challenge of the cat. Does not gaze at us from a face like a childhood toy, dark soulful eyes reflecting a flattering picture of our caring selves. Fixes us, instead, with eyes that are beady, thickly wrinkled, red-rimmed and pink-rinsed, framed with albino lashes. With eyes that are too alien, and too much like our own. With eyes that reflect to us our compromised, compromising selves. An adult pig is massive, meaty, hindquarters caked in mud, naked and bristling like a balding scalp, snout alive and twitching and glistening with slime, dribbling from a jawful of jagged teeth. It roots, it slumps and lumbers. And it screams like a soul in hell.

Maybe there was nothing altruistic, nothing selfless about the way he acted or what he achieved. Maybe all he ever wanted was silence. He was attacked for what he did, and mocked for it. When there is so much human suffering in this world how offensive it seems, how ridiculous, to care for these used-up animals. To give over 150 acres of land for no profit, no gain.

But my father was one of an ever-growing number. It's not a universal side-effect, not every recipient is aware – or more accurate, perhaps, to say that not all of them pay attention. But many do. Enough do.

And then there are the children. Aren't we the flesh of their flesh?

Honestly? It's not what I would have chosen to do with my life. But once your eyes and ears and nose and mouth and skin are opened to it, once the whole of you is open and aware – then, you no longer have a choice.

I think you're beginning to understand, now, how it is.

A pig is a product: this, my father accepted. But once the product is no longer productive, what remains? An obligation.

Nothing is wasted. Not the meat, blood, fat, bones, hide. And not the life that remains, when the purpose has been served.

*

DeathCertificate_scan.jpg

Death certificate for Calum Lowell.

Once the problems had begun to emerge with organs failing, his consultant had spoken to him, in principle, about the prospect of a replacement. How a second liver might see him into his seventies. And as far as I know, he hadn't ruled it out. But in the end it wasn't his liver that failed. It was his sense of balance. He was fixing the roof of the smaller barn. Leaned too far.

I've looked it up, just now: synonyms for obligation. In case it's of use for your project. Here's what the thesaurus says:

a liability

a requirement

a compulsion

an undertaking

a dues

a duty

a debt

a benevolence

a kindness

Since there was no doubt about the cause of death, the post-mortem was solely for the purposes of research. The pathologist said that, after such a long time, the liver was in superb condition: smooth and soft, a deep rich red. She said it was the best she'd seen.

This Christmas Give the Gift of Precious Memories

Brendan holds his Christmas gift in both hands. Now, what does this do? he says.

It's Jo who shows him. She presses something on the side of the frame, and suddenly Orla appears on the screen, jigging from one foot to the other. The camera zooms in closer, so Orla fills the frame from the waist up. She glances to the left, and Jo's recorded voice says, Go on...

Orla widens her eyes, looks directly at Brendan and announces: To Granddad, from us. Have a very – Merry – Christmas!

With lots of love... says Tom's voice. It must be Tom who is filming this, on his phone.

Yes yes yes, says Orla, and pulls an exaggerated remembering face: eyes up to her right, forefinger lifted, pressing a dimple into her chin. With lots of love from, *Tom* (she is suddenly coy as she says her dad's name) and *Jo* (practically giggling now) – and *me!*

The clip freezes on Orla's face, dissolves back into itself. Orla dances on the spot. Zoom in; Jo's voice: Go on...

Brendan lowers the frame onto his lap. Oh, yes, he says. Very good, thank you. He smiles at real-life Orla who is chanting along with her onscreen message: Have a very – merry – Christmas!

Here, Dad... Tom leans over to take the frame, and Brendan gives it willingly. Tom presses a button, and Orla vanishes. It'll just go round and round till we put the pictures on it. Jo, have you got the thing?

The clip of Orla is inside the frame: in the internal memory. The thing that Jo pushes into the side where it settles with a click is the external memory, with hundreds of photos on. And once it's plugged in and set up, the frame will show all the pictures in turn.

Oh yes, says Brendan, Yes, that's *very* good.

Himself as a boy. A teenage Mhairi. Photos he hasn't seen for years, and where did they get them from?

Sorry, says Tom. We would have asked, but then it wouldn't have been a surprise. I took good care of them. I put them back exactly where they were.

Come on Dad, says Niall. No harm done.

Brendan grunts. Turns the TV on. It's nearly time for the Queen.

He wishes he hadn't brought it up. But Tom shouldn't have let himself in like that. He shouldn't have gone digging about upstairs, and he shouldn't have taken his mother's albums. Surprise or no, he should have known to ask.

Jo is keeping quiet, playing with Orla. Brendan wishes she would smooth things over, the way Mhairi used to. It was Mhairi that made their Christmases – not just the hard work, the planning and buying and decorating and cooking though she did all of that, of course. She remembered things, made everyone welcome. When there was disagreement, she made peace.

He clears his throat. Now Jo, he says, and points at the frame which is showing an old square snap of the boys. Which one of them is that, d'you think? These babies are all the same to me.

Relieved he's out of the huff, the boys start to joke.

That's Niall, says Tom. Look how fat he is!

It's Tom, obviously, says Niall. They didn't bother taking pictures of Owen and me.

Had our hands full by that stage, says Brendan. You'll see, he says to Jo, who is due in January – not a Christmas birthday, at least.

I'm sure, she says. Though it's easier now, isn't it. Not the babies, I mean, the photos. It's too easy. You end up with a million pictures, and when do you ever look at them?

The big screen is showing Disney's *Rumpelstiltskin*, but his attention keeps shifting to the smaller screen beside it.

It's distracting, the way it keeps changing. The way it jumbles things together, different pieces of the past. Old black and white photos. Those square 1970s snaps: holidays; first days at school; Tom (is it Tom?) in a football top, clutching a silver cup. And lots of picture that aren't his. Scores of those. Owen and Alyssa, Tom and Jo, Orla most of all.

He worries that she'll be spoiled by it. That it makes her too much the centre of attention. But she is, of course, at Christmas especially. The only grandchild; she gives them something to focus on. She's his delight, and his consolation. A little girl is quite different from a boy. He is floored sometimes by sorrow that Mhairi's missing out on her.

He doesn't want to be rude. He'll wait until tomorrow, after they've left, then he'll switch it off at the wall. Though it's useful when the ads come on to have something else to look at. Orla watches too, during the breaks, scooting over to kneel up close, reciting the names of the people she recognises, asking about those she doesn't.

Is that daddy, or uncle Niall or uncle Owen?

It's a picture of Mhairi lifting one of the boys, smiling up at him. Brendan leans in to see more clearly. He can usually tell when it's Owen because Mhairi's hair was shorter; and it's true Niall was a fat little baby. But he can't always be certain. They wore each other's hand-me-downs, and all of them were fair. Which is why Orla points at the next photograph, the baby with dark brown hair held off her face with a flowery clip, and announces: that one's me.

It's a square snap, sitting centred in the black glass of the frame.

The photo arrives the week before Christmas, along with a slew of cards. It's Mhairi that opens it, somewhere in between making Tom's sandwiches and shouting at Niall to get up *now* and wiping chocolate Readi-Brek from around Owen's mouth. While he reads the paper she's tearing envelopes, skimming greetings, announcing the names. The Hamiltons. His aunt Betty. Gordon and Liz and Pete.

What's this one? she says, frowning at the photo. There's a name written on the back; she reads it out. But – no surname, she says. And no card. She checks the envelope. Bren, do we know who this is from? She drops them in front of him: the photo, and the envelope on which Catherine has written the address but omitted his name.

No sender, he says, and crumples the envelope. Wants to crumple the picture too. Instead he takes a glance, then returns to his newspaper. He is counting the months in his head. Mistake, must be, he says. No-one we know, I don't think.

What a shame, Mhairi says. She's a pretty thing. I suppose we should keep it in case ... well...

In case what? he says. I don't think anyone's going to come knocking on our door for it.

It's not till the evening that he gets the chance to look for the photo. But it's not with the Christmas cards, where they're displayed on shelves and sills. It's not sitting out anywhere obvious. Mhairi must have thrown it away.

Each year, in the week before Christmas, he watches for a similar envelope. Sometimes it will slide out from a bundle of cards. Thinner than the rest; address, but no name. He'll slip it into his pocket where he'll feel its corners prodding him, wait till he gets to work before he throws it away unopened. And some years there's nothing – unless there is, and Mhairi gets there first.

By Boxing Day Orla can tell them apart, the new photos and the old. The colours are different, she says, and the old ones are a little bit blurry, and they're square which means you get more frame around them. She's interested in these old, square photos, wants to know why there are fewer of them than the normal ones. Brendan explains about old-fashioned cameras, how you had to buy film and then pay to have your pictures developed and printed. You were much more careful then, he says, because of the cost. Photos were mostly for special occasions like birthdays and holidays.

Orla wants to know, were they poor? In the frame, they're on holiday in Portugal. Brendan behind the camera, Mhairi and boys screwing up their eyes against the sun. In front of each boy sits an ice-cream sundae. Three grinning faces, three spoons held aloft, ready to dig in.

Brendan shakes his head. I wouldn't say so, no.

Until she turned sixteen. That was the arrangement. It meant things were tight, but that was the cost. That was the price you paid. Theirs was a traditional marriage; Mhairi had her housekeeping each week, later on her part-time job for spending money, but he was the breadwinner, he managed the bills. Finances were his affair. And he would have kept his side of the bargain – but seven years in, the payments had started to bounce back: transaction failed.

There could be all kinds of reasons. He hadn't tried to find out. It had made a big difference. Six months on, he'd spent the extra cash on their first family fortnight abroad.

The picture slides into a new one, a wedding shot of Owen and Alyssa.

No, lamb, he says to Orla. They were certainly never poor.

A Christmas medley fills the pub with a flat, hungover atmosphere.

Like listening to three-day-old turkey, says Frank, and Brendan and Leo laugh. They drink their pints, pass on news of the children, the grandchildren. They're long enough retired that they no longer talk about the office.

Well, says Leo. He pushes his chair back, reaches for his coat. Promised I'd only stay for one. Mary's home alone with the grandkids. She'll scalp me if I'm not back.

Ah, give her my best, says Frank, and Brendan says the same. Then it's just the two of them, tide-marks ringing their empty glasses. Time for one more, and one more after that.

Frank had both daughters to stay over Christmas. Five grandkids, all under the age of ten. Great to see them, of course, he says, but boy is it great to see them go. He fiddles with his hearing aid. I'd to turn this fella down, I tell you, that's how loud they get. He raises his glass: to peace and quiet. His wife (whose name escapes Brendan just at this minute) passed away three years ago. A year before Mhairi.

Frank's eyes used to be a startling blue. Time was he could get any girl, just by giving her a twinkle. Once, at the end of a second round, he'd started in with some loose talk. Leo had shut him up sharp, said he didn't want to hear. Mary and Frank's wife – *Deborah*, that was it – they'd been good friends.

Now, with Leo away to his wife and the ghost of a twinkle in Frank's eyes, Brendan wants to ask: did you ever...? He wants to ask, d'you remember that Catherine girl – dark, pretty – a cousin of James McCabe? Do you hear from Jamesie, ever? Instead he has one drink more than he means to, has to watch his step on the way home. It's dark, and frost is thick on the pavements, the ground unsure beneath him. Several times he skids, and nearly falls.

In the spare room he waits for the computer to whirr and blink itself awake. He uses it only for email – mostly keeping in touch when Owen is off on his travels. Not Owen, no; it's Niall that's the travelling one. Mhairi was more up with computers than he is. She used to buy things over the internet, and when the boys emailed pictures she'd send them off to some internet company. A couple of days later a package would slide through the letterbox, filled with snapshots: Owen and Alyssa's honeymoon, Niall with monkeys in India, Orla's birthday party. Mhairi would hand them to him so he could admire the latest shots of their children, then she'd file them away in an album where he'd forget to ever look.

He opens up Microsoft Internet Explorer. Searches for "Catherine Wilson". He doesn't remember, or he never knew, whether she was a C (381,000 results) or a K (186,000). Either way, it's a common name. And the other thing with women is, they change their surnames. They marry, and disappear.

He deletes "Catherine Wilson". Sits with his fingers over the keyboard, the little black cursor waiting in the blank search box.

He is trying to remember. The sound of the name, in Mhairi's voice. The shape of it written in Catherine's hand, on the back of the photograph.

Voices drift in from outside. A child, calling daddy. Wanting her father to look.

The computer sighs as he shuts it down.

He is making his way downstairs when he realises his mistake.

The voice is not coming from outside. There's a girl inside the house.

He clutches the bannister, heart going mad. Look at me, she says, and he takes a deep breath and then he laughs out loud. You eejit, he says to himself. He'd forgotten about the frame, how it can do those moving clips as well as showing photos. By the time he reaches the living room, it's showing a picture of the Eiffel Tower, half-obsured by somebody's thumb. Whatever was playing, he's missed the whole thing.

It took him a while to notice, but there are different kinds of transition from one picture to the next. There's a dissolve, where the pictures gradually fade from one into the other. A slide, where one picture slips off to the right while another pushes in from the left. A cut, where the pictures blink into a second of black. He is watching the transitions, wondering if he's seen them all, when the girl slides onto the screen. She is three, maybe four. Brown corduroy pinafore, dark hair like a helmet. The photo square inside the black frame.

There's no time to search for the instructions. He has the frame in his hands, running his fingers along the sides in search of a button to make it pause. In a panic, he presses at random. The girl gives way to black.

He's still holding the empty frame when the phone starts to ring – and when he answers and hears a woman's voice, the name rises up into his consciousness. Amanda, he says. As soon as he says it he knows he's got it wrong. That was not her name.

On the phone there's a silence, then the voice says: Brendan it's me, it's Jo. Tom is running late with Orla; she's just calling to let him know.

Tom does the drop-off in a rush, but when he comes back to collect his daughter, Jo must have spoken to him. Who's Amanda then? he says. Something you're not telling us?

Brendan shakes off the blanket Orla's had him wearing, pretending to be a wizard. When I start with the internet dating, he says to Tom, youse'll be the first to know.

He hands the blanket to Orla, and she gives him a careful look. It's the expression she wears when she's re-evaluating things, accommodating some new piece of information into her view of the world.

Dad?

He hears the voice, and then he remembers the sound of the key in the lock. It's Niall – Owen – Tom – it's Tom, of course it's Tom. But today is not his day for Orla – and Tom doesn't usually let himself in.

Dad, I've been phoning!

Brendan tries to explain. It's always cold callers, he says; I get up from what I'm doing, I go all the way through to the hall, and it's just strangers wanting to sell me things, new windows or panels or whatever it is.

Yeah, alright, says Tom, but you can't just not answer. And why didn't you get the door? I thought something'd happened. If you'd keep the mobile charged I could phone you on that instead. You'd know then it wasn't cold callers.

Now Brendan thinks about it, he seems to remember the phone did go a couple of times, but the truth is he didn't really notice. He was watching the photos in the frame. He shouts through to Tom, who's gone to make tea: D'you know, can you rewind these pictures? I had a look in the instructions, but ... the writing's so small, and they're not awfully clear.

Tom reappears with a mug in each hand, places them on the coffee table. Dunno, he says. Jo's better at that sort of stuff. I can take a look if you like. He picks up the instruction leaflet from the table, sits beside Brendan on the sofa.

Look at that, says Brendan. That's your granny and granddad. They are standing in front of a pebbledash wall: his mother and father, himself in school uniform sandwiched in between.

He and Tom sit for a while, watching the procession of photos.

You like it, says Tom. He's not looking at the pictures now. Brendan can see from the side of his eyes that Tom is watching him.

Oh, certainly, he says. It's a grand present, really it is.

Their wedding photo has sat in the same place for forty years – and now here it is in the new frame as well. Side by side, the two of them briefly doubled, the printed picture in shades of dust and the one in the frame glowing with contrast, lit from behind. Mhairi's dress illuminated. Their faces brighter. Life sparkling in her eyes. She smiles, and he thinks of what stretched ahead of her, of everything she couldn't know: the marriage; the children; the sickness and death. When the picture blinks into black it's replaced by a shot very nearly the same, but this time it's in colour. Mhairi preferred them in black and white, thought they looked classier altogether, but in colour there's something about it that makes him lean in, close as he can get. You can see the red-gold her hair once was, where without the colour you'd say it was mouse. And her flowers, pink and red, and the red picked up in his buttonhole. You can almost see the promise he made her that day, of the kind of man he vowed to be.

She was the one with an eye for a picture. Who chose the photos to go in frames, on the walls and the shelves and the surfaces, in every room of the house. But they become wallpaper. That's the problem. You forget to see them at all.

That's what the frame does: it shows the things that he forgot to see.

It's a fine, mild afternoon; spring's far off still, but it's somewhere over the horizon, and he and Orla are on their way to the park.

You know that other girl, Orla is saying. Well, I don't think she likes me.

Some trouble at school, he thinks, between Orla and her friends. It's how girls are, falling out and what have you. Three sons have not equipped him to deal with this kind of thing. If Mhairi were here... But that's not what Orla means. No-o, she says, and her tone lets him know that he's being stupid. In the photos. In your photo-frame.

Which girl is that, he says, you mean your granny when she was young? Is she black and white, this girl? There are several photos of Mhairi as a girl – with her parents, her sisters, her classmates at school. He wonders what kind of stories Orla's made up in her head.

No, she says again. They're old, but not ancient-old. They're in colour? They're the square ones?

Alright, lamb, he says. I know the ones. But... He doesn't want to ask. They walk in silence for a bit. Orla's looking down at her feet, scuffing her soles as she walks.

Why doesn't she like you? he says at last.

Orla glances up at him. I think she feels jealous, she says.

This'll be about the baby – Orla's new brother or sister, due within weeks. He knows something about that. When Niall arrived, Tom was inconsolable; when Owen was born Niall hit him with a, what was it, a broom or some such? Hard enough anyway that Mhairi brought him to the doctor just in case.

She stares at him. Like... Orla narrows her eyes in an impression, squishes her lips together. Brendan holds her hand a little tighter.

Do you know her name, lamb? This girl who's jealous of you?

Orla shakes her head, tugs her hand from his and runs a little way ahead, avoiding the cracks in the pavement.

She's not called Amanda, she shouts back over her shoulder.

When Orla comes next, she makes a beeline for the frame. But he has it unplugged, the power cord tucked away in a drawer. It's been playing up, he tells her, and she screws up her face, asks what he means. It's broken, lamb, he says. He doesn't want her watching it any longer. Getting ideas. She's better off with her cartoons, Dora the Explorer and all of that. But when he comes back from a trip to the bathroom he finds her cross-legged, staring at a picture of Niall in his graduation gown. She's found the flex, plugged it in, switched the frame back on. I fixed it for you, she says, without looking away from the screen.

That evening, he drags the armchair across to the spot where Orla was sitting, so he can see more clearly. He turns off the main light so it won't reflect off the screen, which makes the glare from the lamp more visible. He switches that off too. Then there's only the glow from the frame, and the living flame of the gas fire flickering red.

Orla grinning up at a snowman, a head taller than her. Somebody's holiday, white sand, blue sky. He falls asleep watching. Wakes with gritty eyes in an overheated room, blinking at Mhairi's smiling face.

He kills the fire, and when he bends to turn off the frame at the socket the room falls into darkness. He straightens up, stands for a moment, the house lying dark all around and above him. He knows its shape by heart; climbs the stairs without turning on the light.

In bed he lies awake for an hour, two hours, trying to remember. Emma ... Angela ... Matilda. He tries the names in turn, and each of them is wrong. When he finally falls asleep, his dreams have the quality of photographs, static scenes that blink and fade and slide from one to another.

In the little attic room, Brendan ducks his head under the sloping ceiling, tries to catch his breath. Up here in the angle of the roof is where Mhairi kept family things of all kinds. Inherited things: a tea-cosy, hand-sewn by a maiden aunt; an ornamental elephant. Up in the archive, he used to say. You'll find your mother there. The room is lit by a small skylight. There's no overhead light, just a feeble lamp that spills a small circle of yellow. It's gloomy even in summer; this time of year, even at the brightest part of the day, everything's colourless and blurred. The roof is too sharply pitched for cupboards and shelves; the stuff's in boxes mostly. Everything she wanted to keep. She did the work of remembering for both of them, but now he's on his own. It seems more urgent than ever that he should recall the name he once knew. The trouble with the frame is you can't see behind it: the writing on the back.

The albums are stacked inside two plastic crates, with scores of paper wallets containing negatives and loose prints. Just as Tom said: he'd put them back exactly where he found them. Brendan carries them down, one box at a time. They are heavy, unwieldy, tricky to manage on the steep staircase that bends tightly at its middle. He is panting, sweating by the time he has both boxes in the living room.

He sinks onto the sofa, stretches down for a handful of wallets but his hands feel clumsy, all pins and needles. The wallets slip from his grasp, spill out onto the floor. He slumps back, breathless, dizzy. Just a moment to catch his breath, then he'll start to look.

The sound of it, so close. Like if he shifts the angle of his head, he'll catch it through the roar of blood in his ears. He lets his eyes close, and reaches for her name.

When he was a boy, he came off his bike on a fast downhill. Ripped the skin of his arm from elbow to wrist, gouged a dent in his knee, cracked his skull off the kerb. The rest of that day was muffled and distant, his mother a stranger as she painted Mercurachrome onto his wounds, made him drink sugary tea. A view of himself from the outside. A body that wasn't his.

That's how it feels now. What's happening is nothing to do with him. It's all on the other side of the glass.

That's Orla, the small girl tugging at him, calling him granddad, climbing halfway onto his lap. That's Tom with his mobile phone in his hand. Tom pulling Orla by the arm, telling her to get off, to wait outside. When she backs away, Brendan seems to feel her small weight still. Her corners, her arms snaked round his neck. He forms his lips around the word, tries to call her by her name, but his voice, his breath, won't come. That's Tom, crouched by the sofa – and Brendan can hear his urgent voice, but the scene is losing colour, shrinking away – and then he can't see it at all because Orla has moved in front of him, interposed between him and the shouting, and all he sees is her face up close. Her hand pressed against the glass. His vision edged by black.

Madeleine: that's what he means to say. But it's too late. Dissolve, or slide, or cut. Any moment now, the picture will change.

The Hatayama Code

Version number: 1

Produced by Senior Digital Analyst for: Government Digital Service

Classification: OFFICIAL

This briefing document reviews the background to, and summarises current understanding of, the phenomenon known as ‘the Hatayama Code’. For detailed analysis, strategic recommendations and budget implications please refer to Committee Report CM 10356.

Background

The Attention Symphony was originally conceived by sound artist Tomoko Hatayama, and created as part of an interdisciplinary research project hosted by the National Centre for Contemporary and Digital Media. The project was intended to produce a sound map of cyberspace – both the worldwide web and the physical internet that underlies the surface network of websites and links.

Hatayama’s composition was generated according to algorithms that translated the weight of internet traffic into a musical performance. The world’s most popular online locations were represented by sound frequencies across the full range of ten octaves audible to the human ear. The volume and duration of each note corresponded respectively to the total number and length of visits to that site; access via static and portable devices was distinguished by timbre, and visits from each of the seven continents differentiated by key. The aim was to make audible the global patterns of internet use, allowing listeners to hear how we disperse our attention in the online space. Due to the quantity of data that was required to be processed, the symphony was unable to present a real-time sound map. Instead, it played continuously with a delay of 24 hours, so listeners would hear an abstracted rendition of what the world had paid attention to on the previous day.

During initial playback sessions, the project team had already recognised that the sound output appeared to deviate slightly from the data inputs. The algorithms were checked and re-checked, first by software engineers at the Institute and later, once

the symphony had been made public and the level of interest and potential significance had become clear, by independent experts. All algorithms were found to be complete, leading to the suggestion that the anomalous elements must be expressing some unknown additional factor.

According to Hatayama: ‘We tried at first to eliminate the anomaly, but it was a persistent effect, what sounded like this top layer of data over the music we’d expected to hear. We thought of it as a glitch, but the more we listened we began to hear it as something intricate, delicate.’

Public Response

The Attention Symphony was launched, complete with anomaly, at the London FutureFest. Live streaming commenced simultaneously, attracting some interest from UK media and online technology communities. The first observation of a repeating pattern in the symphony was made six days later, by a chatroom user at technophile.eu.

There followed a period of increasingly fierce debate, initially within the tech community but spreading via social media. Large scale repetitions were an expected effect of the Symphony, as patterns of attention followed established paths at particular times of the day: for instance, a series of regular peaks in volume representing the 70 million daily searches via China’s baidu.com, followed several hours later by a C major surge from North America [see full analysis at CM 10356 section 7]. However, a growing number of listeners claimed to have noticed recurring patterns on a smaller scale, identifiable through the arrangement of fractional moments of silence. Initially these claims were dismissed as simply demonstrating the human desire to find meaningful patterns in random data; meanwhile those listeners who were alert to the repetitions insisted the symphony must be measuring something we hadn’t known could be measured.

Though computer analysis found no evidence of small-scale regular or periodic patterning, and such patterning could not be – and still has not been – objectively verified, the weight of subjective opinion was sufficient to suggest that there were indeed unexpected repeating elements within the symphony, occurring only in what Hatayama had referred to as the ‘top layer of data’, i.e. those anomalous sound elements which seemed to be expressing some unknown factor.

The question of meaning was first raised by users of social media, and was

picked up swiftly by the mainstream media. Questions as vague as *what does it mean?* were reformulated as *what is the Attention Symphony trying to tell us?* The term ‘Hatayama Code’ was coined by the *Guardian* newspaper, and went viral. By this time the symphony livestream was being played continuously by many millions of devices in Europe and the US, the subcontinent, south-east Asia and Australasia – gaining sufficient attention for its location to become clearly audible in the sound map, so that the music performed its own popularity. And though a significant body of experts still maintained that any apparent patterns in the symphony were simply evidence of apophenia, the public imagination had been captured by the notion of a hidden message to ourselves; something we could understand, if only we could discover a way to read it. Artistic translation emerged as a popular decryption strategy. Dancers translated the music into improvised movement; artists, professional and amateur, attempted to paint and sculpt the sonic patterning, with some striking similarities of colour, shape and texture [see selective summary at CM 10356 section 18(2)(b)].

None of these activities can be said to have illuminated the phenomenon.

Current understanding and implications

Early fears that the Hatayama Code could pose a threat to global cyber-security have dissipated over the 12 months since it was first detected. The possibility of alien contact, though widely discussed online, is considered extremely unlikely.

Hatayama herself has noted that to pay attention is a political act, one that confers authority on, for instance, religious institutions, governments, parents and educators. (Hatayama has distanced herself from the notion of a Hatayama Code, preferring to talk of an ‘Attention Armature’ – a term not widely used, which indicates how the anomalous sound elements are supported by, or moulded around, both the world-wide web and its physical infrastructure.)

Others have commented on the transactional nature of attention (see, for instance, Duckett and Macfarlane, 2003) and speculated on the role of global corporations in the contemporary attention economy. The popular theory that the phenomenon would be revealed as a highly sophisticated marketing tactic was however undermined when attempts to reverse-engineer the anomalous sound elements and map them back onto the worldwide web failed to reveal any particular connections between the various loci of attention.

What recurs is the idea of meaning. We cannot say for certain that there is meaning in what we hear, and yet we feel certain that, just beyond the limits of our ears, there is something we wish to tell ourselves about ourselves. For many of us, the Hatayama Code seems to suggest a way of thinking about the least satisfactory aspects of our digital existence. Certain compulsive, repetitious behaviours. A hollowing, or loss of self. A sense of dispersion, diminution, fragmentation. In the process of writing this report, I have tabbed repeatedly into my browser and cycled through a familiar routine of websites, depositing on each a trace of my attention [full list supplied at Appendix D]. I did not choose to visit them in the sense of making a conscious decision to do so; I had no purpose in going there, and once there I was not sure why I had come.

It has been argued [CM 10356 section 19] that what we choose to attend to is not, in fact, important. It is merely an excuse for looking, and the act of our looking is what matters. We look *at* one thing, and *for* another thing that is quite different.

The repetitions in the Attention Symphony display this characteristic: while volume and pitch are variable, the temporal arrangement is consistent. We think, therefore, that the emphasis, the expression, may be changing; but that the message encoded there remains the same.

If we could read this message, we would know what it is that we are really attending to. We would know something about ourselves.

Current and future research

At the time of writing, the Hatayama Code is the focus of 81 major research projects [summarised at CM 10356 section 32(3)] employing methodologies that range from pattern analysis and topological data analysis to ethnomathematics and medical imaging. Thus the full machinery of human and artificial intelligence grinds away at this puzzle we have set for ourselves.

Meanwhile, there is a growing body of thought [CM 10356 section 12(1)(c)] that sets itself in opposition to this analytical approach. Each fresh hypothesis, each layer of interpretation, takes us further from meaning; the more we study this phenomenon, the less we will understand. To close our eyes and listen is to come close to understanding, as close as we will ever get; like the difference between a word whose shape we recognise, which balances on the tip of the tongue, and an unfamiliar word spoken in a language we have never known.

You The Story

SHARE

or

SAVE

Sometimes he thinks he should automate it. There's a checkbox in the settings: if he were to click that box, each diary entry would be uploaded on the dot of midnight. But there's something about doing it manually... It's a morning thing, part of a routine that allows only the most minor of variations.

Today, for instance, he wakes easily and gets up with the first alarm, ten minutes earlier than usual. Then it's shower, shit and shave, and the coffee brewing as he climbs into his suit, enjoying the clean, every-second-day smell of a fresh shirt; and while he drinks his coffee, he reviews his yesterday.

Last night my sleep quality was poor. The alarm woke me at 07.10, and again at 07.20 and again at 07.30. At 07.30 I got up.

Yes, that's right: his late start had set the pattern for the day.

At 07.51 I shared my You The Story entry for 03/09/2015. At 07.56 I checked my email. At 07.57 I checked the weather forecast, which was for sunshine and showers. At 08.14 I left my house and walked quickly to the tram stop. I arrived at the tram stop at 08.21 but I did not catch the 08.21 tram.

He'd heard the bell clang as he rounded the corner, had seen the tram slide away from the stop. Had known there would be no seats free on the next one, that he'd be late for work – and thus had the day progressed, staggering from one tiny disappointment to the next.

But today, like every day, is a fresh start.

SHARE

or

SAVE

Though he does this every morning, has been doing it for the past three years, there's always a moment – his thumb held just above the icon – when he feels he's on stage; alone in a dim and dusty space, with the curtain about to rise on a packed auditorium that stretches to the edges of his vision. It's a little hiccup of adrenaline – too small, too fleeting to register in his datastream. Though the action of sharing each entry makes it into the next day's narrative, that speed-bump sensation never does. After all, the auditorium, if it were real, would be the size of the smallest meeting room at work, with an audience he could count on the fingers of one hand.

SHARE

or

SAVE

He's never chosen to save without sharing – but it's the act of choosing that allows him the brief warmth of the spotlight. He presses his thumb to the screen.

Congratulations PerfectDay001! Your entry no. 1103 has been shared.

[]

By the time he gets back from work – shopping dumped on the counter, water on to boil, lid flipped up on the laptop at the kitchen table – he knows what kind of entry he's making. With the light two-thirds gone outside the window, the shape of his day is fixed, and he knows where it will sit on his personal scale.

When he chose his username – well, he can't be sure now what he'd been thinking; whether it was ironic, or aspirational. But he thinks perhaps he'd meant it as an acknowledgement of possibility. *PerfectDay001*. Only, you couldn't know,

could you? Whether you'd made your perfect day. Not until you were dead. Only then could your entries be ranked, so that one comes out on top.

There is a contender. Entry 921 is leading the field, way out in front. But he hopes, in that far-off future when the sun goes down and the boats are called in – when his final entry is uploaded – hopes it won't be the one. He hopes there are better still to come.

18.00: at this time the new entries are mostly from India, with a scattering from central Asia. There are a couple of users he follows from GMT+6: IT Guru in Mumbai, and GraniteCityOiler, an Aberdonian based in Kazakhstan. He's already selected the latest from IT Guru when he registers something unusual; swipes back, sure he's made a mistake. Top and right of the screen – there's a red number that tallies his day's reads:

102

He stares.

On the tram that morning, he'd skimmed the latest entries from other users; had noticed before he closed the app that his own entry had been read eight times. Which is nothing in comparison to the most popular users, each of whom can rack up hundreds of reads in a day – but it's unusual for him. His days are never favoured, rarely rated. They tend to gain three or four reads before they drop off the list of recent uploads.

It had warmed him, the thought of eight people somewhere, sharing in his day.

103

His first thought is that the display has become corrupt, somehow. That if he quits the app and relaunches, the counter will settle back where it ought to be, somewhere in single figures. Because there's nothing special – is there? – about his yesterday. He had missed the tram, taken a late lunch, spent the afternoon in meetings. Stayed behind for half an hour to make up lost time. He'd made the weekly phone call to his mother, watched TV and surfed the web, and gone at 11pm to his fitful sleep.

The only other possibility... His stomach clenches. He's seen it happen once or twice before: over in the forum, someone will link to an entry they find laughable in some way, then scores of users will pile in, adding their comments. He's seen it get nasty before now. People get carried away, post things they wouldn't dream of saying to somebody's face. *Why bother? What's the point of you? If my life was that boring I'd fucking kill myself.* He's seen people close their accounts, delete their whole histories. And he's seen others banned from the forums – but in a system where everyone's anonymous, it couldn't be simpler to sign up again with a new username.

104

Right now, people are reading his entry. What are they looking for? On the hob, at his back, the saucepan of water is rumbling towards a boil. He gets up, tips the pasta into the pan and sets the timer; stands for a moment, adjusting the heat. Then he sits back down, clicks through to yesterday.

Last night my sleep quality was poor. The alarm woke me at 07.10, and again at 07.20 and again at 07.30. At 07.30 I got up. At 07.51 I shared my You The Story entry for 03/09/2015. At 07.56 I checked my email. At 07.57 I checked the weather forecast, which was for sunshine and showers. At 08.14 I left my house and walked quickly to the tram stop. I arrived at the tram stop at 08.21 but I did not catch the 08.21 tram. My heart rate increased by 14%. I was agitated. I caught the 08.31 tram, which was very full. I got off the tram at New Street and walked quickly to my office. I arrived at my office at 09.06.

He stops, narrows his eyes. *I did not catch the 08.21 tram. My heart rate increased by 14%. I was agitated.*

There's been an upgrade.

He doesn't remember installing it, downloading a patch or ticking a box, but perhaps he did – in a rush, without thinking. His can feel his face fold into a frown: he tries not to be one of those people who are outraged by every website redesign, every app upgrade, but this... No: he's not sure. Not sure at all.

I was agitated.

The wristband can measure his pulse, his galvanic skin response; the phone can pick up on his tone of voice. The app can record those stats, those variations. But agitation isn't a stat. It's – what? An assumption. An interpretation. It's a dash of made-up colour, on a page of black-and-white.

Is it true? *I was agitated.* Yes, okay; he might have sworn as the tram glided past him – probably did. Probably rolled his eyes, and shook his head.

If there has been an upgrade, they'll all be talking about it in the forum. All the familiar names: Darkside, Scenester and Omar22; Michael_M and NumeroUno. And there it is at the top of the list: a thread titled *New beta test?*

Michael_M

[member]

Just seen this <http://youthestory.com/user2754/entry1103>. Check it out:

“My heart rate increased by 14%. I was agitated.”

What is this, another beta test or what?

Darkside

[member]

Haven't seen a call for beta testers since v4.7. Anyone? Could be an upgrade?

Though I haven't noticed anything. Going to check my settings now.

Duy Nguyen

[member]

WTF? This has to be a user hack. Surely???

The discussion goes on for three pages. By the second page, they've moved on from speculating about how it's done to whether or not they approve. Someone called Nice Eyes reckons it's *pretty cool, I wanna do this too!!!* But Nice Eyes is a

no-one – whereas Omar22 is a long-time member, the father figure of the forum, and in his opinion *this upgrade – if it is an upgrade and not a misguided user hack – introduces a degree of subjectivity that's incompatible with the objective recording of geotagged / bio data. In short, I'm concerned that this compromises the integrity of the whole You The Story project.*

Perhaps he should say something. Tell them he hasn't installed an upgrade, hasn't hacked his settings or signed up as a beta tester. But he's never posted before – and besides, the speculation is what's driving the traffic to his entry. People are rating it: five stars, one star. Soon, he'll have overtaken entry 921.

That one was different, of course. The tally had risen slowly – and probably half the readers were him, reading at work without logging in. But he doesn't need to read it now. Not anymore. He has it by heart, the important part.

*I left work at 17.32. I walked 497m south-east along New Street then 602m east along London Road – away from the tram stop, away from his flat, because this was the first light evening in March, because *the weather was sunshine and showers and the temperature was 14 degrees centigrade* and he'd smiled as he walked, at the promise of spring so close on the horizon of the year; had slung his jacket over his shoulder and rolled up his shirtsleeves to feel the softness of early evening. At 17.49 I stopped head tipped back to stare at a rainbow that had painted itself across the sky, curving up from shining roofs where a shower had smirred the east of the city. And when he lowered his gaze, that was when he saw her. At 17.52 I entered into conversation. Helen! He had called her name, and she had turned, and though he'd known her straightaway – her slight frame, that reddish hair catching the sun – for a moment she hadn't recognised him. Then she had smiled, bright, eager to please. I talked for 9 minutes no no, that's fine – I mean, it's been so long, I almost didn't recognise you either *and while talking I walked north-east along Edward Street* yes, he was heading the same way... Matching his strides to hers. As if he had forgotten how to walk, as if walking and talking at the same time was an almost impossible task. Not to trip over his feet, or the cracks between paving stones. Not to walk too*

close beside her or too far away. *My heart rate increased by 21%*. Not to make some accidental statement about his hopes, his intentions; about the feelings that were bumping about inside him. *The conversation ended at 18.01* but the adrenaline coursed through him for hours; that night he'd lain awake well past midnight, reliving, remembering, letting his imagination run with the minutes they'd spent talking. From those nine minutes grew hours, days of reverie. Dreams of how it could have been more perfect. For instance, if they'd been travelling on in the same direction...

But of course, back then, he hadn't known where she lived.

Sleep sucks at him like quicksand, and he wakes slowly. On the fourth alarm, he forces himself out of bed. It's a used-shirt day, and that's just how it feels.

Over coffee he reads his latest entry, yawning, sinking into mundane detail. The number of emails sent, the number of instant messages; his movement around the office, from desk to canteen to meeting room.

At 15.26 I answered my phone on the seventh ring. He remembers the call, of course: it's rare enough for a colleague to phone instead of typing their communications. *The phone call lasted for 4 minutes and I spoke for 32% of this time. My voice became louder and I spoke more quickly than average.* His colleague had been chasing a report he should have completed the week before. *My skin temperature rose by 0.5 degrees. I felt angry.*

Angry. He wouldn't go that far. And he's sure his colleague Maura, if he were to ask her, would laugh and say, *angry? Goodness, no.*

A lively conversation, as the stats indicate. But anger is not a feeling he recognises.

SHARE

or

SAVE

He hesitates; hovering his thumb over SAVE. But at the top right of the screen, the tally is up to 173. Gently, he touches SHARE.

Before he leaves for work, he composes a message to the developers of You The Story.

This is to inform you that my account appears to have been upgraded, perhaps to a new beta version?

It is unexpectedly hard to write: perhaps because he can't quite imagine there are real people behind the system; that someone will read his message.

I do not recall authorising this and so–

Perhaps also because he's not sure what he means to say.

–since this upgrade introduces a degree of subjectivity which is incompatible with the objective recording of geotagged / bio data–

Whatever's gone wrong, he's not sure what he wants them to do about it.

–please revert my account to the current standard app.

When he presses send, he has the sensation of chucking a pebble over the edge of a cliff.

[]

He arrives home soaked, with his jacket over his head like a hood: just as he'd stepped off the tram, the sky had cracked open. In the bedroom he peels off his wet outside clothes, cocoons himself in pyjamas, slippers and dressing gown before padding through to the kitchen to start the water boiling. With the rain beating against the window and the gas hissing companionably, he settles to the glow of the laptop.

His latest entry has been read an astonishing 320 times. Ratings are evenly split between one and five stars. And beside the counter, there's an icon pulsing: the

envelope that indicates Private Message, which has never called for his attention before.

please can you tell me your code your using because i could nt figure out how to do this at all

Hey PerfectDay001 it's so cool what you've done, would be great if you could share so just PM me if you don't wanna post in the forum it's all good

Just cos they're talking about you now doesn't mean you're not still a boring twat

I don't even know how your doing it but you better stop this bullshit cos we're so getting you barred

There are scores of them, the cheers and the jeers. The auditorium stretches before him, standing room only, raked up and out to infinity – and all he wants is to kill the spotlight, bring down the curtain, hide safe and alone on the darkened stage.

Even as he watches, another message appears:

Thank you for your recent query. Your account has now been investigated and we can confirm that you are using our standard account settings.

There is no name attached to the developers' reply, no sense of human agency. He reads it several times, and still has no idea what it means. Have they switched his account back to normal? Or are they denying any issue? He clicks to reply; sits staring at the blank window, the cursor blinking behind the glass.

Then he quits the app, folds the laptop closed.

It is dark, without the glow from the screen. It's turned to night outside, the window opaque with condensation from the pan on the hob which has boiled itself nearly dry. But he doesn't feel hungry, or tired. He doesn't know what he feels.

The clock on the microwave glows 20.03. Four hours to wait.

At 11.59 he's awake, staring up at the ceiling while his phone sleeps on the other pillow. At 00.00 he wakes it. Swipes into You The Story. A few seconds' pause, then his day fills the screen.

Last night my sleep quality was very poor. The alarm woke me at 07.10, and again at 07.20 and again at 07.30 and again at 07.40. At 07.40 I got up. At 08.02 I shared my You The Story entry for 04/09/2015. At 08.15 I left my house...

He feels himself loosen as he reviews his day; shoulders softening into the mattress, breath coming slower. The detail is precise, soothing, just as it should be. Even as he relaxes, his eyes are jumping ahead in the text. He skims for colour, for interpretation – but it's not the colour that jolts him upright.

At 16.58 I left the office.

The feeling is like missing the bottom step on a familiar staircase.

I walked quickly 497m south-east along New Street then 602m east along London Road.

At 16.58, he was still at his desk – eyeing the cloud-dark sky through the window, and wondering whether he'd make it home before the heavens opened.

At 17.12 I stopped at the corner of London Road and Edward Street. At 17.13 I checked my email. I did not open any of the messages. My heart rate increased by 16%. I felt anticipation.

It's someone else's entry, invading his own – an hour of a stranger's day spliced into his. But it can't be a simple corruption. The familiarity, the detail... The route from his office to hers. The waiting. The feigned preoccupation. All the time, waiting for her.

It's not something he would do. Not something he would have the nerve to do.

At 17.28 I entered into conversation. While talking I walked north-east along Edward Street. At 17.34 I stopped at the Basement Bar on Edward Street.

Descending, Helen following behind, her heels clacking on the steps. Holding the door for her. The windowless interior, dimly lit, warm and beer-smelling. Hand on the small of her back, guiding her to a booth, as if he's at home here, comfortable in his natural environment. A pint for him, a gin and tonic for her. Sliding along the leather bench, insulated from the world. Opposite: intimate. Raised glasses, locked eyes. *Cheers*. She smiles. It's so vivid; when it comes to Helen, he's always had a good imagination.

SHARE

or

SAVE

For the first time ever, he chooses only to save.

But when he touches the icon, nothing happens. He touches again, more firmly – and the screen gives a shudder, like a shake of the head. SHARE or SAVE: both options are greyed out. He shakes his phone, stabs uselessly at the screen. If he quits the app, he might lose this entry – and he needs it as evidence, of whatever's going wrong. He croons to it: *come on, come on* – and then he sees the counter.

It's into double figures: rising in real time.

That night his sleep quality is extremely poor. He sleeps from 02.34 until 04.45. He sleeps again at 05.12. The alarm wakes him at 07.10 and again at 07.20 and again at 07.30. At 07.32, he gets up.

Overnight, his entry has been read 357 times. The envelope icon pulses in the corner of the screen. Lack of sleep has left him with an aching head and gritty eyes: last night he searched through hundreds of entries for any hint of subjectivity; found

nothing. If he looks too long at the screen, nausea floods his mouth with saliva. His coffee mug sits cooling, barely touched.

Instead of the usual suit and tie, he wears jeans and T-shirt, trainers and hoodie. At 08.02 he shrugs into his winter jacket. At the front door, he hesitates: loosens the wristband, slips it over his hand and leaves it on the hall-stand.

It's hardly been off his arm for three years, and without it his wrist feels thin, naked and clammy. Beside the band, neatly, he lays his phone. Steps unaccompanied into the day.

[]

By the time he gets home, it's dark. He flicks on the hallway light. Closes the front door, chains and snibs it. When he picks up his phone it shivers against his hand. Four missed calls – all from work.

It had been strange to see his workplace from the outside. He'd been able to pick out the window closest to his desk, in the middle of the third floor. He had felt habit tugging at him, wanting him to get off; instead he had let the tram carry him past, on a journey he'd only made on foot till now.

They would have thought he was late, at first. It would have been some time before they realised he was absent, started trying to reach him; not knowing he was free, unwatched and unreachable.

He's hungry to know what his severed gadgets have recorded. No heartbeat, no skin temperature; no motion, no activity. What kind of narrative will it make? How could they colour that? *I felt–*

Dead, perhaps. Which would be a relief. Would be better than this burning, this– He feels himself simmering up inside, like the pasta bubbling on the stove; feels his blood rise scalding to his skin, and makes himself take slow breaths. Think of something else. Focus on the TV, on forcing down his food, till gradually the heat subsides – then ten minutes later boils up again. Rises, and settles, and rises.

Like this, he waits out the hours till midnight. He waits to be told what it is that he feels.

00:00. Entry 1106.

Last night my sleep quality was extremely poor. I slept from 02.34 until 04.45. I slept again at 05.12. The alarm woke me at 07.10 and again at 07.20 and again at 07.30. At 07.32 I got up. At 07.48 I checked the weather forecast, which was overcast with heavy rain.

That's it. That's all. Beyond this point, the screen is empty; the app has nothing to tell him. His invisibility is absolute. Still he sits in the glow of the laptop, watching the blankness.

It's as if he's waiting for it to happen. For the screen to blink and darken, and flash back to life.

At 08.03 you left your house and walked to the tram stop.

He shakes his head. At 08.03 his phone, his wristband were lying limp on the hall-stand.

You arrived at the tram stop at 08.10. You caught the 08.11 tram. You passed your office at 08.41. At 08.49, you alighted from the tram.

He sits up straight; glances over his shoulder. The room is empty, silent but for the faint sounds rising from the street. The swish of a taxi; the clang of a late tram. The careless volume of people making their way home from the pub.

Between 08.49 and 10.02 you stood at the corner of London Road and Edward Street. You were watching for her. At 08.36 you thought you saw her in the crush of workers, a glimpse of red tucked under a hat but you did not speak to her and in seconds she was swallowed by a stream of people, swept through the entrance and out of sight.

At 10.04 you arrived at Starbucks on Edward Street. Another coffee left to cool, and a seat in the window with a view of her workplace. You were watching for her.

At 11.58 you returned to the corner of London Road and Edward Street to stand for two shivering hours, hands shoved into pockets, hood pulled down against the rain. You were watching for her, but you did not see her.

At 14.03 you arrived at Starbucks on Edward Street. The third coffee of the day. The fourth, untouched.

At 16.04 you returned to the corner of London Road and Edward Street. The rain had stopped, at least – and sooner or later she had to appear. You were watching for her. Practising what to say: Helen, do you remember–? Helen, last night, did we...? No way to make it sound normal. At 17.42 you saw her from some way off: she was laughing, walking with someone, a colleague, a man; talking and laughing, and you stepped forward, your right hand raised ready to call her name and at 17.43, Helen pretended not to see you.

It wasn't a fact. It wasn't the truth. It was colour, subjective. That crease in the smoothness of her gaze. The split-second that might have been recognition – might have been dismay – swapped instantly for a smile directed not at him, but up and away to the stranger by her side. Hair falling loose from under her hat, hiding the angle of her face, and just for a moment his vision blurred: Helen, her companion, the river of people streaming on past as if nothing had happened. The world uncertain, caught in a heat-haze shimmer.

It wasn't something she'd do. Wasn't something she should have the nerve to do.

He blinks, till the screen comes into focus. On the landing page of his account, his days line up. The last three years: a complete record of all he's done. He swipes through, backwards, and they scroll so fast that before he knows it he's back at the start, at his very first day. Swipes the other way, forwards – slowing as he passes entry no. 921 – then faster, pushing the past behind him, pulling towards the present, to arrive at now. This moment.

He forces himself to do it. To select the latest entry, and then – *delete*.

! You do not have permission to perform this action.

His fingers are clumsy, slippery on the keyboard as he chooses *select: all*. His whole history, all the days of his life. *Delete*.

! You do not have permission to perform this action.

He stands, wraps his arms across his chest. He will have to send another message, to the developers. But there's no way to put it into words. It sounds impossible: it *is* impossible. He'll sound insane.

It is watching me.

You are watching me.

He is watching me.

I am watching him.

He's pacing now, across the room, back and forth – and the dark outside makes a mirror of the uncurtained window, so he catches himself in half-reflection, face flushed red – and around him the room, echoed back on itself – and around that, behind and beyond it and through it, the night outside.

He moves to draw the curtain: stops, turns the lamp off instead. Now he can see. He can match the sounds to the traffic, to the knots of people drifting home, heading for the last tram. Like the shouting man in shirtsleeves, unsteady, borne up by his sober friend. The drunk one staggers to a halt, struggles with his fly; starts pissing against a wheelie bin, into the gutter. The sober one shrugs and laughs and steps away, shaking his head – and isn't that the joke? That he thinks he's any different. That he thinks he's in control.

He leans in close, palms and forehead pressed to the cold of the windowpane, until the glass bleeds condensation.

Isn't that the joke. That you'd ever believe your days are up to you.

The front door's chained and snibbed: you unlock them both. Step out onto the pavement.

Back then – day 921, your perfect day – you hadn't known where she lived.

The street is emptying now, the dregs of an ordinary night draining away. When you pass the drunk and his sober friend their gazes slide past you; one glazed with drink, one indifferent. Like the gaze of the security cameras that watch without interest. Like her gaze as she turned her face from you, to smile at him instead.

You hear it as you round the corner – the clang of the last tram leaving the stop. You know you've missed it, but it doesn't matter: your feet will find the way. You've come out without your coat but that doesn't matter either because the heat is radiating from your skin and the cold is a relief. And it doesn't matter where you mean to go, what you intend to do. It isn't up to you.

You have all night.

Abstract

It is estimated that around 30 million people worldwide are affected by loss of vision due to retinal degeneration, including inherited conditions such as age-related macular degeneration, retinitis pigmentosa and Stargardt's disease as well as glaucoma and other optic neuropathies. In recent years retinal cell replacement has emerged as a promising line of research toward developing a gene therapy for retinitis pigmentosa caused by the death of photoreceptor cells that capture and process light.

This paper reviews a recent clinical study in which 16 patients with advanced retinitis pigmentosa were treated using patient-derived induced pluripotent stem cells. The use of patients' own genetic material rather than embryonic or donor cells eliminated the need for immuno-suppression. Cells were harvested from patients' own bone marrow then "rewound" to a premature stem cell state and reprogrammed as photoreceptor cells, before being transplanted back into the patients' retinas.

In all cases visual acuity was improved, and forty per cent of patients recorded visual acuity of 20/50 with best correction. In most cases field of vision was also improved with significant restoration of peripheral vision and decrease in clouded central vision. After three months, seven patients were no longer classed as severely sight-impaired or sight-impaired. Minor complications occurred in fewer than half of participants; these included ghost images, starbursting, blurred vision, vision fluctuation and increased sensitivity to light. These outcomes indicate that iPSC therapies have the potential to result in significant and life-altering improvement in vision, with minimal side-effects.

Graham, H. D. & Chen, Y. (2016) 'Development of a Stem Cell Therapy for Retinitis Pigmentosa', *Ophthalmic Review*, 8:1, 336-354

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T

Minor Complications

The last time I kept a diary was forty years ago.

This is not the same, of course. The doctor is not interested in my ramblings, whether teenaged or middle-aged. What she wants is the details: when it happens, how long it lasts. Afterward, how I feel. And factors, she said, like stress, or if I've forgotten to eat or – I don't remember what else. But anything that might bring it on, I suppose. And it is in fact a sensible suggestion because when I sit in that little white room and she's sitting across from me, typing all about me into her screen – I forget. All the things I meant to say, I forget even though I've rehearsed them before I came. It's ridiculous, she's twenty years younger than me at least, and I shouldn't feel intimidated.

*

Date: 16th May

Description: A street market, the kind with a mish-mash of stalls: boxes of apples, bananas, the first summer fruits all muddled in with children's clothes and kitchen goods. The sky grey, just beginning to spit, and in front of me piles of soft stuff: feather-white pillows and bolsters, £20 bedding sets printed in bright bold patterns, cheap blankets made of synthetic fur, like the pair I bought a few years back – one for James and one for me – during that big freeze when no matter how hard I ran the heating we were still cold to our bones. These blankets are striped like tigerskin, spotted like leopards. Budget glamour, not to my taste. But then somebody hands me a cardboard cup brimful of strong, dark tea – and the world shifts 180 degrees, as I realise I am not buying but selling.

Steam rises. The sky lightens a fraction.

That's all.

Oh except the usual thing, which is just how clear it is. How detailed. Sharper than real life, even as I see it nowadays. Which is why it seems wrong to call them hallucinations, though I know that's what they are.

Location: Sainsburys – the tinned goods aisle.

Duration: A minute, perhaps? It's hard to say. But not so long that anyone noticed.

Afterward: Drained. *Spaced*, as James would say. The basket on the floor beside me, a tin in my hand which I don't remember choosing – the boy stacking the shelves told me it was tomatoes – I don't like tinned tomatoes but I bought it anyway and now I don't know what I'll do with it.

Factors: Ate as normal, drank as normal i.e. one cup of coffee first thing, tea throughout the day, one small glass of wine with dinner. The usual medication. Slept fine the night before – as much as I ever manage, a good six hours. And there's no trigger I can think of – I mean, no reason why *this*. This particular hallucination. I can't trace it to something I've read, or watched or listened to. Can't link it back to a conversation I've had, or anything I've seen.

Last time I was on a ferry, a rough grey sea; the time before that, I was in an office. I remember watching the clock at the bottom of a computer screen, and the bleached reflection of trees dancing outside a window, somewhere behind me.

*

Date: 20th May

Description: I'm looking down at a picture, a child's drawing. The child is seated in front of me. She's ten, maybe, and she's bending over her desk, nose close to her paper, a mirror propped in front of her. She looks up at her reflection, holds out her pencil to take a measurement. Swaps it for a softer pencil, and dips her head once more. She starts to lengthen the fringe of her straight black hair. As she draws, the side of her hand smudges graphite across the page, blurring her right eye.

For a moment I think she is me, that I've lost my grip on the present, slid backward through time. But her jumper and skirt are bottle green where my uniform was grey; and when I turn my head I see more children – ten of them, twenty, all dressed in green and seated at low tables, with a mirror each and a set of pencils, a sheet of cartridge paper.

This must be my classroom. These must be my children – my pupils.

Location: The pedestrian crossing opposite the Marks and Spencer.

Duration: I missed the lights at least once. Before, I was waiting as part of a crowd; after, I was alone.

Afterward: The usual feeling of not being quite myself. The world on the other side of a window – but not the smeared glass I’m used to. A window that’s sparkling clean and triple-glazed, and behind it everything’s muted and distant and clear.

Factors: She was an obstinate thing, the teenage me. I was 12 when I was diagnosed. We knew when I was still quite young what the prognosis was, but for a long time I simply refused that future. Matisse, Monet, that’s how I justified A-level art; even started a History of Art degree. Two great painters sinking into blindness and making the best, most radical work of their lives. Though of course by that point they each had decades of seeing behind them.

I remember it clearly: free period, fifth year; an afternoon sunny enough to sit out round the back of the science block, breathing warm chlorine from the swimming pool vent. Caitlin and Eleanor and me, laying out our lives to come. I was going to be an artist – and Eleanor would be a singer, and Caitlin a great novelist. We didn’t entirely believe what we were saying. But we didn’t *not* believe it.

There must be something about recording my days that brings me back to my younger self. Already, this is turning into the wrong kind of diary.

*

Had my three-month check-up this afternoon. How I used to dread those tests. Pointless ordeals designed to make me feel like a failure, the ophthalmologists’ attempts at tact: *yes, it seems there has been some deterioration...* As if, until they told me, I might not have noticed the shrinking tunnel of my vision. The world erased, from the edges in.

It’s different now. Resting my chin on the plastic strap no longer feels like laying my head on the executioner’s block. I actively look forward to showing how much I’ve improved, though I can take no credit for any of it. What a truly amazing thing: to collect those cells from my bone marrow and somehow send them back in time, instruct them to transform themselves into something new – quite different, but still me.

Today the ERG test showed increased electrical activity in my photoreceptors, and the ophthalmologist mentioned some variation in morphology of pigment deposits on my retina, which she suggested may be good news. My field of vision has more than doubled, from to twelve degrees to twenty-nine. And on the Snellen

test, with both eyes, I managed the third line with no mistakes, and had a respectable crack at the fourth.

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I was pleased, but not surprised; I did think I'd improved. I test myself, from time to time, looking from the bedroom window. When James was home at Christmas, I asked him: what can you see? And he pointed and told me: directly across is the flats – do you want to know what's inside the windows? But I wanted the things that were constant, not the people moving and changing, the curtains and shutters and blinds closing and opening like eyelids. What was beyond the flats, I asked – and he listed things I had once been able to see, as well as those I never had. There's the roofs, he said, and the chimneys – and beyond that, the cathedral, and beyond that are the high flats – and then finally the hills, and the sky.

I still can't see the scope of it, the sweep of the horizon. But three months ago I could see the windows; two months ago, the chimneys. And last week, I thought I could just make out the spire of the cathedral.

I test myself, too, in the bathroom mirror, with mixed feelings. It was a shock to catch myself one morning in that unforgiving light, spitting toothpaste into the sink. For decades the image I'd held of myself was one part memory to several parts jigsaw, all overlaid and pieced together. It didn't include the tough ridge of muscle between my eyebrows that made me look so cross. It didn't include the pulled-down corners of my mouth, nor the flesh sliding from my cheekbones and jaw, pale and melting like candle-wax. I clapped my hands flat to my face, pushed upward as if I could arrest the decline, could smooth myself back to how I thought I should be. Now each time I look in the mirror it's with a great, hidden effort to hoist my

muscles, tighten my skin – an effort for myself alone, since I’m the only one watching. And when I peer close, I see myself in increasingly terrible detail: my forehead hatched with contour lines, my cheeks pocked like woodchip, skin loose and creped on the bones of my chest.

The compensation, of course, is being able to see my son grown into a man, just as perfect as I’d pictured him.

On the bus home, I wanted to enjoy the sights of the city moving past, but even after I’d fetched out a hanky and polished a circle the world was still obscured by smears, grime layered on the wrong side of the glass. It was too familiar, that clouded darkness. I turned away. And then it occurred to me that I could get off and walk. So just like that, I did.

I strolled through a part of the city I had once known well, a patch I’d more or less abandoned as my horizons shrank, because even when you know a place right through you, the way I know this town where I’ve lived near enough my whole life – even then, there are difficulties. Unpredictabilities. An uneven slab: a gashed knee. A crumbling kerb: a twisted ankle.

Today as I walked I couldn’t help but smile, and when I noticed people were looking at me I smiled all the more. I couldn’t tell their expressions – had to fill in the curiosity in the smudges of their eyes – but to see their faces tilted toward me, to see edges and distance and bright contrasts, to see more than a smeared circle in a dirt-dark glass: it’s really a kind of miracle. To step out with confidence, weaving past dawdlers, side-stepping obstacles; avoiding the passengers spilling out from the bus shelters, the selectively blind with their heads bent to their phones, even the dog-dirt on the pavement – it makes me realise how much of my life was guesswork, before. I used to navigate in glimpses, forever scanning left to right, up and down, trying to build a composite that bore some relation to reality. I found my way by texture, by numbers, by sound and smell. The smoothness of well-laid paving or the roughness of tarmac under thin-soled shoes, my free hand trailing brickwork or stone or the soft fronds of the yew hedge that told me sixty-seven steps till home.

This afternoon I was so busy watching strangers that I almost walked too far. It was the smell of horse chestnut in bloom that told me I was nearing home, that it was time to step onto the soft dirt path and cut through the park.

There is something about the park, and the path. Nothing significant has ever happened there, but somehow it feels like where I greet myself. Like there will always be something of me there, some molecular trace. *Mine, mine, mine*, I say as I walk, dry cinder crackling underneath my feet.

*

I've been thinking about Caitlin and Eleanor; about that afternoon. It can't have been as I remember it – the three of us killing time by the swimming pool, announcing our futures with the confidence of youth – it can't have been like that, because Caitlin had already left. Her whole family moved at the end of fourth year, they moved to ... was it Blackpool, or Brighton? I don't remember now. For a while we stayed in touch, phone calls, the odd letter, but the friendship tailed off soon enough. And the next I heard about her was decades later, when someone, a friend of my sister's, heard that Caitlin had died. Breast cancer. A husband, two children.

So she never did become a novelist. I think she was an administrator of some sort, instead. And Eleanor trained as a vet, and moved to New Zealand. We still send Christmas cards. I gather she sings a bit, in the local church choir.

*

Date: 22nd May

Description: My vision is filled by serif print, black on off-white. A newspaper, an American one – I recognised it, perhaps it was the New York Times? – and not only the headlines but the articles are crisp as anything in bright light. I fold the paper to turn the page, and sun streams into my eyes, soaks my face, and I blink and refocus on the woman sitting opposite – a woman my age, or a little older. I see she's reading the same paper, that we've split it in two so I have half the pages and she the other half. She glances up like she senses my looking – smiles, lifts a coffee-pot from the table between us, pours first into my cup, then her own – and I lift my coffee and take a mouthful, black. And that's all.

Location: The Oxfam shop.

Duration: According to Jackie, a minute at least.

Afterward: Her hand on my shoulder was the first thing I felt. I'd just zoned out, Jackie said, in the middle of pricing a jacket (men's tweed, a heavy, good quality cloth with only a faint smell of old tobacco). She said she'd seen something similar in a cousin of hers with epilepsy. It was fine if I wanted to go home early, she said. And I was tired – but it was the warm tired you feel when you've earned your exhaustion. Languorous, almost. Sweet tea, Jackie said, but I asked her for coffee, asked her to make it strong and to leave out the milk.

It felt thin in my mouth, an acid taste, but I persevered. The tastes you prefer are only habit, after all. Any one of us can learn to like the taste of anything.

*

Date: 27th May

Description: Blazing lights in a huge, dim space, and behind the glare I can just see their faces. I'm in front of an audience, raised above them a little way – on a stage, I suppose, or a podium – with all eyes on me. I think perhaps the only time in my life I have been so looked-at was on my wedding day, but on that day I stayed silent while the men around me made their speeches, and in this hallucination the audience is not just looking. They're listening too, they're hanging on my words. I know this even though, as usual, there is no sound.

Location: The bend in the river path.

Duration: Such an unaccustomed sensation. In a way, I wish it had lasted longer.

Afterward: How to describe it? Disorientated, by that giddy perspective. The sense of height. Of significance. On the splintering bench by the bridge, I subsided. There was a terrier whining at my feet, and I told it *home, boy, go home girl* – and it wasn't until I checked the collar that I recognised him – I recognised Harris – I recognised my own little dog.

I lifted him onto my lap. The smell of wild garlic, the babble of water bringing me back to myself. I scrubbed at his silky ears, hugged him muddy paws and all until he wriggled free.

Did she feel me, inside her? Looking out from behind her eyes? But she couldn't, of course, because she wasn't real, she didn't exist. She had never existed.

Nevertheless, I felt rocked by something too big to accommodate, like a hurricane inside my chest. Like something I badly wanted.

Factors: What she was. What she had.

*

If you don't keep a tight hold of it, it gets away from you, that's the trouble. Several episodes over the last two weeks – but afterward I've felt so drained I can't bear to open up this file and start recording. And of course now I can't remember: the when and the where; what might have been the cause. The doctor will be disappointed in me.

I am walking down a dusty road, somewhere dry and rocky with pale reddish earth, my bare feet coated in dust, soles tough as leather, and my legs bare too and lean and sun-brown, sun beating down on my head, and no-one else around–

I am wedged in a chair in a room full of chairs full of people like me, the old and the prematurely aged. In the corner the TV flickering and everything cosy and ugly and bland, beside me a cup of tea poured lukewarm from the urn and they're trying to make me feel at home but he's gone, he's gone, and I will never be at home again–

I am waddling along a rush-hour pavement, overtaken on either side by thin busy people who glance scorn at me and with every glance I slow a little, slow a little more–

I am driving, my stomach giddy with speed, but I am in control, am aware without thought, this is deep habit, cruising at 70 miles an hour as if it's nothing. A blatter of rain across the windscreen, dotting my vision. I flick the wipers on. Streak a transparent rainbow through the wet, to make the world clear again–

Without the dates I can't be sure, but it feels like it's happening more and more. Like there's hardly time to recall who I am, who I am meant to be, before it happens again. This morning I was down at the bottom of the garden, lifting the spring bulbs – until I was not. There was a man beside me – not my ex-husband, this man was a stranger but I knew him top to bottom and inside out, and his arm was around me, and we were in a large room, quite formal, like a drawing room or a grand sort of

sitting room with high ceilings and ornate cornices. We were on a sofa, alone in the room, and I knew I'd been crying. Nothing happened. I stayed on the sofa, his arm round my shoulders, and can there be silence in a hallucination where anyway there is no sound? Well there was, there was silence. It stretched forever, it filled the whole house, which rose huge and empty around us.

When I came back to the garden I felt empty, cold – I was shivering, in fact, though the sun was strong. I went into James's room. Curled into his bed, drew the fake fur blanket over myself. I've done that just once before, the day after he left for university, and it comforted me then: I could sense him there, the essence of him in the dark rectangles of his posters, the smell of him still on the bedding. But that comfort wasn't there today. His bedroom is dim even with the light on – it's the only room without a hundred watt bulb. It feels left behind, a stranger's space, unclaimed. I can read the band names on the posters now, I even recognise some of them, but his tastes have moved on, I daresay. So I lay in his bed, trying and failing to feel connected to a James who wasn't there, a James who was not where he used to be. It wasn't his room, not really, and I didn't belong there either.

Too much information. (That's a James-ism.) The doctor doesn't need to know this stuff – well, nobody does.

To be honest, I'm not sure any more who I'm recording this for.

I try not to phone my son too often; I don't want him to feel nagged. I sent him a text message instead, just to say hello, and then I spent the next hour expecting to hear the alert he set up specially. *Hi Mum*, it says in his voice. But it was a long time before he replied, and perhaps that's why it took me a moment. I was in the kitchen, making a cup of tea, and my phone announced *hi Mum* – and I stopped, teabag pinched too hot and dripping between my fingers. I frowned, not recognising his words, his voice.

And then I did, of course I did. He sounded just like himself.

That's when I phoned the doctor. Hallucinations are one thing, but I can't have this. His voice: the one thing I'd know anywhere. That, and the feeling when he hugs me, taller and wider than I am now – and beneath the clean, masculine smells of soaps and sprays, the constant comforting smell of his skin. But the doctor was busy, and when at last she called me back she reminded me I already have an appointment. On Thursday I am due to see a new doctor: a neurologist. He's going to put me in a

scanner, take a look inside. Let's see what happens then, she said. Let's wait and see what he finds.

*

Date: 12th June

Duration: Only seconds. Not long enough.

Description: It hasn't happened like this before. A repeat – not exactly, not the very same moment, but I was with her again. That woman with the newspaper; her warm smile. Just a glimpse, like I'd caught her at the edge of my vision. I kept my eyes stretched open for as long as I could, trying not to blink her away, but in the end she started to dim and I had to let her go, let her blur away to the side.

Location: Sitting on the patio, close beside the back door.

Afterward: I am always so sure, but today... Hallucination. Memory. Desire. How to pull them apart? It feels like every vision leaves something behind, like a speck in my eye.

Factors: The light strobing low through the bars of the trees.

All the time, I'm waiting. Waiting to be shaken out of myself, to be returned slightly less than I was, and slightly more.

*

Date: 15th June

Location: The Royal Infirmary. Department of Neurology.

Description: I can't

the dark more dark than –

I don't, I can't

it's quite unlike

there is no such thing as light –

there has never been any such thing as light

Afterward: God what a fool I made of myself. Because I didn't know where I was, I didn't remember, and all I could see was this smooth white circle blanking the

whole of my field of vision, a bright solid absence impenetrable and a deep rhythm pushing, pushing at me—

I panicked – my head jerking this way and that and of course it's my head that's the problem, that's the place the doctor needs to see inside, and if only I'd held it still they could have watched it as it happened, or maybe it doesn't work like that... I was fine to try it again, I said – but I wasn't, not really, I was still in a state, it was perfectly obvious. He kept saying my name but the sound of it belonged to somebody else. So they sent me home – and now the thing is all to do again.

Now – immensely weary. Barely energy to speak. He's given me something for the meantime, a month's supply – Epilim, he called it. For seizures. But I haven't decided ... he mentioned side-effects. I can't remember, and the leaflet's impossible, the type so small. I'll have to go online, later. Find out more.

Factors: Stress ... a factor, after all?

Later – So furious with myself, for what happened earlier. I want so much to know what's happening to us.

James is worried, I know he is. Once or twice when he's phoned it takes me a moment – I feel ashamed just writing this – it takes a moment to remember who he is. That I have a son, that I'm prouder of him than anything else in my life.

What if I'm losing my marbles? I've only just begun to take it for granted, this freedom, this ease. To lose it again... I'm wary of walking too far in case it happens somewhere miles from home. Poor Harris hasn't had a decent outing in days.

Wherever I go, I carry them. Motes in my eyes – floaters – ghosts that live in the light. I see them when I am looking at the sky, at a wall, at a blank sheet of paper or an empty screen, see them drifting across my field of vision and I roll my eyes up and down and round and around, and I blink and blink but I can't get rid of them. Only by closing my eyes.

Given the choice I'd keep my marbles and lose my vision once more. But of course we don't get to choose. No-one gets to choose.

It wasn't the profound darkness. The dark was not so bad. What's to fear, after all, about death – the state of being dead? No; it was afterward. Not knowing where, or who. It was the coming back.

*

I'm walking down a dusty road, somewhere dry and rocky with pale reddish earth, blazing lights in a huge dim space, looking down at a picture, a child's drawing, my bare feet coated in dust, soles tough as leather my legs bare too and I am driving, deep habit, cruising at 70 the bleached reflection of trees dancing somewhere behind, outside a window, a dark more dark than lean and sun-brown hands knotted around a paper cup, strong tea, sky grey just beginning to spit and in front of me piles of stuff, feather-white, a large room quite formal, his arm around me, wedged in a chair, high ceilings and cornices, room full of chairs on a sofa, alone in the room, and they're listening hanging on my words they're trying to make me feel at home but he's gone, he's gone, and nothing I stayed on the sofa, his arm round my shoulders, and can there be silence tea lukewarm from the urn the old and the prematurely aged and the side of her hand smudges graphite across her right eye and she glances up like she senses my looking – smiles, lifts a coffee-pot from the table between us, pours first into my cup, then her own – and I take a mouthful black and that's all that's all that's all.

On the radio, the afternoon drama had finished, and a new voice was speaking into my ear. Harris had squeezed himself into the gap between me and the end of the sofa. He lifted his head when I hauled myself to my feet. Stretched into the space I'd left behind.

In the bathroom I glanced at the mirror. It needed a clean. With my sleeve in my hand I gave it a wipe, trying to clear the dust. Drawing smears across the glass, making it worse.

What was there to keep me here? In this life – in *this* life? There was not so terribly much. If it weren't for James.

I opened the cabinet. Took out the Epilim, in its purple pack.

It felt like the most enormous effort to break the seal on the box, draw out the foil, release a tablet from its blister. I drank straight from the tap, sluicing the tablet down.

I'm back on the sofa now – laptop balanced on a cushion, Harris heavy on my lap, so I'm fixed for the duration.

I can feel the tablet lodged inside, somewhere behind my breastbone. I wonder how fast it might work. I wonder if my hair will fall out, my metabolism slow until

the fat that's already settled comfortably round my middle will swallow me whole. I wonder, if these things happen, whether James will still know me. If the woman with the newspaper will smile at me still.

I rub at the stuck feeling in my chest. Try to swallow it away.

I just need to wait, for the pill to disintegrate, to travel down my oesophagus, be dissolved by the acid of my stomach, absorbed into its lining. To enter into my bloodstream and carry out its allotted tasks. Patrolling the boundaries. Defending the territory. Fixing me in place.

When I let my eyes close, I see newsprint. Her warm face. The bright sun.

I can always change my mind.

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Dolly

The exhibition is just one small room, and for a moment I feel like an idiot having come so far to see it. There are only two other people here, so evidently it's not a blockbuster. I wonder what their interest is, what they're hoping to learn. One is a young woman dressed all in black and white – Spanish, perhaps, or Italian, she has that dark colouring and a style about her that's definitely continental – and the other is an older man, hands clasped behind his back like if he doesn't keep them under control they might reach out and touch. The only damage he'd do is fingerprint smears on the glass cases. Everything is behind glass: the books, the photos, the magazines and of course the animals.

The biggest case, right in the middle of the room, is Dolly's.

It's Dolly I've come all this way to see. I could march straight up to her, take a good long look and call myself done. I wouldn't be in anyone's way, and no-one's going to judge me if I don't walk round slowly and cleverly, not the monochrome woman nor the clasped-hands man. But obedience is in my nature, and besides it seems like a courtesy to someone – the exhibition designer, the scientists, even to Dolly herself, none of whom could possibly know or care – to start at the beginning.

1938: Hans Spemann invents a rudimentary form of nuclear transfer. He uses a fine blonde hair from his infant daughter as a noose to constrict a salamander egg, splitting it in two. His experiment results in twin salamanders, and he names the process 'twinning'.

1952: Robert Briggs and Thomas King create tadpole clones from leopard frog embryos.

1958: John Gurdon creates tadpole clones from an intestinal cell. In the 1970s Gurdon goes on to produce thirty albino frogs, cloned by nuclear transfer from the cells of an albino tadpole and implanted into an ordinary frog.

I do the slow, clever walk though I'm not very interested in tadpoles or frogs, making my footsteps quiet though the young woman is echoing in heels and the man has a squeak in one of his shoes and neither seems to care that their footwear is announcing their progress round the displays.

1975: J. Derek Bromhall creates the first mammalian embryo. He does this by putting a rabbit embryo cell into an enucleated rabbit egg, that is an egg with all its

contents removed. I don't need to read the definition to know that's what it means; from when I was very small our mother told me how it worked, and I remember her explanation perfectly well. We are all made of information, she said, and we all come from eggs, and the information that is you was put inside an egg and then that egg started to grow into you, and you carried on growing inside my tummy and then you were born and here you are!

Later, when I was old enough to ask questions like was the egg from a hen, and how did I get inside her, she distracted me by expanding the story. Once upon a time, she said, you got lost. I lost you, and I missed you so very much that I wanted to bring you back. I looked for you for a very long time, and then at last I found you and here you are!

I didn't remember being lost. But when I asked where had I been, and was I still a baby, and how did she get me back again, she said I would know when I was older and it wasn't important now, because here I was and that was all that mattered. You're extra-special, she used to say, cuddling me beside her. Most little girls don't get chosen – but I chose you just exactly the way you are.

Sometimes when she was in a happy mood I used to ask her if I could look at the pictures, and she'd fetch out the old-fashioned albums from the high shelf in her wardrobe and settle down beside me and together we'd turn the pages. Duplicate photos, you on the left and me on the right. My first day at school, I would say, pointing at either page or both. That's me at Christmas. That's me with my daddy – though I wasn't sure quite what I meant by that, and he only ever appeared in the photos on the left. Compared to yours, my pictures seemed bleached; but it was just the way the light fell on that corner of the sofa, how it bounced off the tacky plastic sheet, obscuring the image beneath.

Often I'd grab a wedge of pages and turn them all at once, like the way I grew impatient for the end of a bed-time story I'd heard too often. If I turned far enough I'd see a girl older than me: at the beach, or dressed up for Hallowe'en, or holding the reins of a Shetland pony. On the right would be a blank leaf. Who's she, I used to ask, who's that girl? – and Mum would answer a different question. That's when we went on holiday to Cornwall, that's when we stayed on the farm. Then, firmly, she'd turn the pages back. But I didn't remember that beach, had never been to the seaside, never played catch-me games with the waves. Never sat in the backseat of the car on

the way home, toes gritty inside my socks, hands cold and sticky with salt. Never left the bath sedimented with sand.

The exhibition space is disorientating even though it's so small. The walls are dark grey, the lighting dim, except for the spotlights on the display boards and the glass cases that reflect like temporary mirrors in a way that confuses my sense of perspective, of depth. I keep catching distorted versions of me from the corner of my eye. I look around to be sure where the entrance is, to know which way I came.

They must have worried me, those lost memories, because I kept asking about them. Like the time we were at Granny's house, the three of us making chocolate cornflakes. I remember they'd perched me up on a stool so I could reach the counter. Remember dipping my finger in the glossy warmth of melted chocolate, sucking at the sweetness. When was it we went to Cornwall? I asked, and Mum said, it was in the summer, do you remember the tree-swing in the garden, the one—? And then she stopped, and her mouth went tight like the opposite of chocolate, and she left the kitchen and I heard her climbing the stairs and locking the bathroom door.

I didn't remember a swing, a tree, Cornwall. I didn't know why Mum was upset. I do remember Granny giving my shoulder a careful pat, telling me: Your mum misses your sister, that's all it is. And I remember that worried me even more because Granny wasn't usually so forgetful. I remember correcting her, eyes fixed on the chocolate in the bowl: I don't have a sister.

It's not that our mother kept it from me, not exactly. There must have been a point at which she told me everything. I just don't remember when that was. When I became a version of myself.

1987: Neal First, Randal Prather and Willard Eyestone used an electric shock to fuse one calf embryo cell to an enucleated egg. The result was two cloned calves, which they named Fusion and Copy. Accidentally, I sigh out loud, and the young dark woman glances over at me before going back to her phone; she is busy taking photos of the rhesus monkey further on in the exhibition, and I wonder if she's searching for answers, what she thinks the monkey might tell her. It couldn't have mattered to the calves, of course, that they were lumbered with such literal names – just like Dolly couldn't roll her eyes at the cheap snigger of hers – but I'm irritated on their behalf. Our name may have been given to me as a hand-me-down, but it could have been much worse.

Fusion and Copy. The text on the display panel doesn't tell me what they cost. How many failures preceded the birth of two healthy calves, how many embryos and pregnancies and stillbirths. It did say that animal cloning suffered from very low efficiency. Dolly was the only lamb to be born alive out of 277 embryos. That rhesus monkey the young woman was photographing was the result of a hundred fertilised eggs, twenty pregnancies, two stillbirths. Your birthdate and mine are almost a decade apart.

A highly imperfect process. Fluid accumulation in the placenta and the umbilical cord. Failure of the newborn to breathe. Oversized blood vessels. Unnaturally large offspring. Failure of the immune system. Atrophy of the lymphoid system. Abnormal development of the liver, the kidney, the brain. How many attempts before me? Attempts that ended wrong, ended split, doubled, aberrant; ended broken, distorted, missing this part or that. At every stage, the embryos fail. The size of a grain of sand, a full stop, a pin-head. A button, a golf ball. The size of a squeezed-tight fist. A human heart. Of a baby newly born.

How could she not treat me like an egg from a bird on the verge of extinction, perfectly ready to be broken?

In our photo albums, if I didn't know it was you on the left and me on the right, it would be my expression that gave it away. Smile, she said, and I stretched my mouth to look like yours, always trying too hard, my teeth bared, caught forever fierce and scared. Our clothes were matched, or as close as she could manage – though if I studied us closely I could see where my outfits were faded, the colours washed lighter despite the care with which our mother had stored them. Our hair was identical. Aged three, long and wavy. Aged five, neatly bobbed. Aged eight, French-pleated. Aged ten, long and loose once more. On photograph days she'd pay special attention to my appearance, would lay out a dress for me, shoes and tights; put slides in my hair or dress it in a particular way. She would stand back to assess the result, and maybe she would purse her lips, move in to tweak my fringe, or maybe she'd nod, tell me I was perfect. Smile, she said, and I smiled and tried to hide the guilty thrilling thought that one day, when I was older, I would fill the right-hand pages, and you would be nothing but a blank beside me.

I suppose a different child might have demanded to choose – her clothes, her hairstyle, her toys. The colour of her bedroom. I went along with it, passive as a doll. Kids know what's expected of them. The sports day when I came second in the 100

metres, Mum couldn't have been prouder. She kept the white ribbon along with its pair from a sports day ten years earlier. I wonder now what would have happened if I'd come first; perhaps I knew not to try that little bit harder, the way I knew not to bother with maths despite the reports that said I could do better if only I would learn to concentrate. They made Mum happy, those reports; she smiled as she shook her head over them, said never to mind about that, said it never was your strong point.

But in 2001 scientists at Texas A&M University cloned a brown-and-gold calico cat called Rainbow and the kitten, CC, was born white-and-grey. I lift my hand to stroke her image, my fingers expecting the softness of fur, bumping up instead against the hard smooth surface of the information panel. Rainbow was reportedly a stocky animal and aloof in her manner. CC was playful, and slight.

It was also in 2001 that PPL Therapeutics produced a litter of five cloned piglets. They were meant to be little factories for organs, an attempt to create pigs without genes that triggered an aggressive response from the human immune system. But ten years after Dolly was born, the scientist who created her abandoned experiments involving genetically modified pigs for human organ transplant due to concerns that animal diseases could infect the human recipients.

Experiments don't always go to plan. In 2001, scientists at Advanced Cell Technology cloned an endangered wild ox that died within 48 hours. In 2009, an extinct mountain goat was cloned and died straightaway. A decade later, scientists in Edinburgh cloned the extinct Scottish wildcat, and it lived for three days.

It seems as if science must be one per cent triumph and 99 per cent disappointment, and our mother would attest to that. Do you remember the purple dress we wore to our seventh birthday party? With cerise flowers, and the bright ribbon circling the drum of our tummies? That was the party where I was sick from greed and excitement, where I ate too much of the cake our mother had made – chocolate, always chocolate, and she shook her head when I told her I wanted plain. Sick down the front of our purple dress, and she grabbed my arm and dragged me through to the bathroom, scrubbed at my front with a flannel, hard enough to bruise – and I was too shocked by her violence to cry.

Still, it wasn't all one way. There were years in my teens when I flung questions like missiles, each strike spurring me on to aim better, hurl harder. If *you* had been so bloody perfect, I asked, how come you'd been stupid enough to end up mangled under a car? Had she scraped you off the road, all your bits and pieces, kept

you in the deep-freeze till she could find a mad-enough scientist? *She* wasn't my mother, I told her; all she'd done was to push me out, like any animal would. It was *you* I'd come from. Your hair, skin or bone, your flesh or your fingernails. My God, wasn't it obvious why our father had left her?

It's just what teenagers do. You'd have been the same, most likely. The difference is, I had more ammunition than most.

But I reverted to my obedient nature when I left home. Called her every Sunday. Twenty years of conversations slipping across the surface of our lives; I suppose that's called making amends. I wish I'd apologised, though, before it was too late. Anyway, she left me everything: there was no-one else to leave it to, and she didn't have much. The house and its contents, our photo albums, our childhood clothes. None of that was a surprise.

The cryopreserved material: that was a surprise.

1996: Ian Wilmut and Keith Campbell create Dolly the sheep. And here she is. She glows in the dim exhibition space, white under the lights in her glass box. She was the real milestone, the first mammal to result from somatic cell nuclear transfer, that is to be cloned from an adult cell.

She's the cleanest sheep I've ever seen, and she looks amused. I even wonder whether she's real – perhaps she's a recreation of a recreation, moulded in fibreglass and coated with another sheep's pickled skin-coat. She must have been opened up, after all, examined thoroughly after her death – and yet here she is intact, as perfect as a storybook sheep.

Looking at her I remember something I haven't thought of in the longest time: the sheepskin rug in the living room. When I was small it was just the right size to curl up on, knees pressed to my chest, cosy in front of the fire in winter. The grey underside, the hide, I avoided touching because it was smooth and creepy, but the wool was like lying on a warm cloud. It feels like security, this memory. Like the absolute certainty of being safe, and being loved. Which means I must have been about five, because I hadn't yet realised it was the two of us she loved. That on my own, I was only safe.

I find myself clasping my hands behind me to stop myself from stretching out, just as the man is doing a few exhibits further on. I would like to reach through that glass case, push my fingers into her clean white fleece.

In a way, she is my ancestor, part of my family tree. But she was a legitimate experiment, which is why she's ended up preserved in a science museum with a display panel to explain her existence. I am not legitimate. Not permitted to exist. Am unlikely to end up like Dolly, stuffed for the benefit of science; embalmed, displayed in a glass box, cells decaying super-slowly. Though they will want to take me apart once I'm gone, open me up and peer inside, keep this and that part of me and try to understand exactly how I came about.

I did it to help, the scientist said when it emerged what she had done. Parents would send her letters, she said. Every day, a letter would come with a lock of hair, a fingernail, a baby tooth. You can help us, they said; please help us. She was sacked, of course. Served four years in jail, and fled the country on her release. She'll be elderly now, if she's still alive; she might be anywhere. If I should want to find her, I wouldn't know where to begin.

She had no children herself, and maybe she acted out of pity, or empathy, or a pitiless need to know if it could be done. Or it could have been all three. Motivation is rarely pure, after all. Our mother, for instance: she chose to keep the door wedged open, just a crack. One last possibility, decades-frozen, stored in secret. And then she chose to pass it down to me.

Here's the truly amazing thing about Dolly: she was the first time-traveller. An embryo begins with cells that have the potential to be anything: bone, hair, skin; heart, liver, lungs. Once a cell has decided to be skin it should be impossible to make it change, persuade it instead to be part of a hoof, or a toenail. But that was what they did. How they made her was, they took a cell from a sheep's udder and they found a way to turn it backwards, to make it split and split until eventually it became every part of her.

I'm a time-traveller too – not that it's anything special. There are thousands of patchwork people getting up each morning, brushing their teeth and eating their cornflakes, entering middle-age while their lungs or their kidneys or their sturdy new heart is in the first flush of youth, grown from one of their very own cells, reversed until it became pure potential.

I don't expect I'm the bold future you dreamed of. I don't expect you'd have chosen this. I obey the rules though it gets me nowhere, I live alone, my hair is turning grey. I am always scared, though I couldn't say what it is that scares me. I've

lived for thirty years longer than you, but when I measure myself against what you could have been, I know I have failed.

They rewound you too far, too fast, didn't they? If you could go back once more, better to travel only as far as the day you forgot to look right, look left, look right again. And if our mother could go back, she would have kept you inside the whole of that day, just as she did with me. Locked in the bedroom, sick with anticipation, and guilt. Waiting for you to die, when you'd been dead twenty years.

But that's not what happened.

In the end, she couldn't let you go. Perhaps she didn't know it till then, that the future was not what she wanted. What she longed for was the past: those eleven years on repeat, or stretched out endlessly. Well, if that's what she wanted, she should have told me about my inheritance when she was still alive – or she should died sooner. There would have been time, then, to think, not that I would have, ever – but I'm past forty now, and even under normal circumstances time is running out.

What I wonder is, did she really think my obedience would stretch that far?

In the months that followed your death-day, I used to lift the final photo album down from her wardrobe, check it again and again. It always ended with the same double-spread, the last to be complete. Ran out in a score of empty pages.

If I could go back, what would I change? I would have to travel back so far, miles before consciousness – and then, if I could, I would change everything. I would be a calico kitten, playful and slight.

Too late for me, of course, to be anything other than what I am. But it's what I would wish for a daughter.

I move on, skipping the panel about adverse health effects in cloned mammals, about defects in vital organs premature ageing immune disorders shortened lifespans because I know this, I know it all the way through me, and knowing is no protection although, contrary to popular belief, Dolly did not die young because she was cloned. In fact, she caught a virus. She was not made wrong, not born wrong, not ungodly or cursed or doomed. She caught a virus, and started to cough, and then they knew she was dying so they gave her a lethal injection, and almost any farmyard sheep would wish for such a gentle way to go. I choose not to look but still I feel sick as I stare instead at a screen where the man with the clasped hands has finally found something to touch: a desertscape that's really a microscopic image of induced pluripotent cells. There are thousands of them, a sweep of coloured sand,

each nuclei a single grain, and he's zooming in and out so quick I feel even sicker. I blink. See sands in a glass. See them flowing upwards, backwards. The image makes me sway.

It's time, now; time to go. After one last look at Dolly.

I'm not sure whether I'm glad to have met her. In the end, it doesn't make much difference. She's only a sheep, a long-dead animal. A carcass sentimentalised with a funny name. But the glare and shadow make a mirror of her glassy case, so I see my face layered over hers. Our reflection looks back plumped and smoothed, rewound by the dark and the light.

I wait, till I'm quite sure no-one is watching. Give us all just the ghost of a nod.

Adult ONE

She makes it onto the train just as the doors are closing. Takes a moment to check her reservation, then sways the length of three coaches to find her seat. Hoists her case onto the luggage rack and slides in next to the window, handbag plumped on the seat beside her.

As the train gathers speed she concentrates on calming her breathing. Turns out, he was the timekeeper in their relationship as well as the one with the fear of commitment. But it's okay – she made it, didn't she? Late, but not *too* late.

The man in the aisle seat opposite is broad, long-legged. She angles herself away from him, positions her knees so they won't touch his. As always, she is window facing forward. Travelling the wrong way makes her sick; being forced to look backwards, watching the world speed away from her like something she can't keep hold of.

For a while the track runs parallel to the A1. They overtake a pick-up, a lorry, a motorbike. Beyond the road, the sea reveals itself in grey-blue flashes.

At Berwick-upon-Tweed, she is lucky. The passenger who claims the seat opposite is a petite Japanese woman who keeps her legs neatly to herself and her eyes fixed on her phone. At Newcastle there is an influx of passengers; she shifts her handbag onto her lap, is relieved when nobody sits beside her. Lucky again.

At York the platform is crowded, people pressing forward in a polite jostling for position. It takes several minutes for everyone to file onto the train. The luggage racks fill up, the spare seats are taken. All along the carriage it's standing room only, but the seat next to hers stays empty. Beside it a woman stands clutching her bag, with no space to set it down. Waiting, perhaps, for permission to sit.

She offers an almost-smile.

The woman purses her lips. Looks away.

Apologies for the overcrowding, says a disembodied voice. This is due to the cancellation of a previous service due to a problem with a signal. Due to this, tickets for the 10.59 service will be valid on this service, and all reservations are invalid.

The train drones to itself as it sets off once more, holding a long low note. Somewhere further down the carriage, a child begins to cry.

The fabric on the seat beside her is worn, slightly stained, but not actually dirty. She turns her face toward the man sitting opposite. Sniffs, warily. She can't detect anything offensive. Discreetly, she inhales her own scents – clothes, armpits, breath – and judges herself acceptable. She showered this morning, brushed her teeth. Is wearing a clean shirt.

The train jolts. The woman in the aisle sways and staggers, is steadied by a man who must be her husband. Both of them are grey-haired, wrinkled, somewhere between late middle and old age. She imagines they're on their way to visit a grown-up son or daughter, spend a week with the grandkids. The woman looks like a grumpy grandma, the sort who'd find fault with everything. She's complaining now, a mutter that's meant to be heard. *Taking up space*, she says. *You'd think. Why can't she...* The husband is silent, smiling awkward sympathy till his wife's grievances are interrupted by the ticket inspector easing his way through the crowded carriage.

A glance, a click; the inspector checks her ticket and returns it, and she slides it back into her purse. Stops. Pulls it out again. The price printed there is more than it ought to be. More than she remembers paying, when she bought it online. She reaches for her phone, meaning to check the email receipt. But the train has come to an unexplained halt, surrounded by drab, empty fields and a rain-smudged sky, and her screen shows the E of no network reception. Emergency calls only.

She drops the phone back in her bag. If she wants her money back she will have to complain. The thought of a battle with railway bureaucracy makes her rub a hand across her eyes. Once more she checks the ticket, hoping she's made a mistake.

Class STD Ticket type ADVANCE Adult ONE Child –

Here, the inspector's ticket punch has nipped out a zero.

The old biddy in the aisle is muttering again. *Children used to be made to stand*, she says, to herself or her husband or nobody in particular. She is eyeing the vacant seat, face creased with disapproval. What's the woman waiting for – an invitation card?

The train hauls back into motion, crawls past a tumbledown barn, a humpbacked bridge, a field full of sheep with their newborn lambs. With the pad of her thumb she traces the edge of her ticket, traces its absent circle round and round. Gradually, they pick up speed. She is going to be late, but it's not the end of the world. Worse things have happened.

As the train draws close to her station, she begins to edge her way into the aisle. *Excuse me* she says; has to say it again before the disapproving woman steps grudgingly aside, allowing her just enough room to manoeuvre her case down from the rack.

On the platform, rain blows in under the canopy. She carves her way through a small crowd, drinking in the fresh cold air they're so eager to escape. The walk toward the platform gate takes her back the length of the carriage: the old biddy is already settled into the window seat she's vacated, the husband easing into the aisle seat beside her. Through the rain-spattered glass the woman is glaring, censorious to the last.

She slows, stares. Gives an irritated shrug. *What?* she mouths, all bold now there's a pane of glass between them. Except, she realises, it's not her the woman is watching. That glare is angled sideways and down – as if the thing that's being judged is the little case that rumbles at her heels, or the empty space at her side.

Chronic

‘Think of me as Scotland,’ I say. I am trying, again, to explain.

It’s not that Olli doesn’t believe me. But illness, for him, is abstract, a tidy progression of symptoms, diagnosis, treatment, recovery. It’s hard for him to understand this liminal state: how one day I’ll be bed-bound, and the next close to normal; almost my old self.

Today is a good day, as evidenced by the fact that I managed to cook the pasta we’re eating. By the fact that I have the strength, the energy, for this conversation. To come up with the Scotland comparison, with which I’m actually quite pleased. What I’m trying to say is, you never know. You can’t rely on clear skies, on a sunny day. Being Scotland means planning an August party in fear of gales and summer sleet. It means run to the beer garden while you can, because an hour from now it’s going to piss it down.

Olli nods like he gets it. ‘That’s not so bad,’ he says. He’s barely suffered so much as a cold all the years we’ve been together; I have never known him to call in sick. ‘Scotland’s not so bad. Sure it’s cold and it rains a lot, but there’s always a change round the corner.’

He is such an optimist.

‘Speaking of which.’ He twists in his seat, turns towards the assistant. ‘Kaia, what’s the weather tomorrow?’ It’s the same question every evening: he wants to know whether he should cycle to work or take the train, and hence the time for which Kaia should set the alarm.

The voice we’ve chosen for the assistant is female, low-pitched and well-spoken: ‘Tomorrow’s weather will be fine.’

It could predict a hurricane and still sound reassuring. It proceeds to give him the detail; average temperature, maximum wind gusts, probability of rain. But basically, fine is the answer, and Olli’s pleased with that. Whenever Kaia gives him the right answer, an answer he likes, his face twitches with satisfaction, like if Kaia were a dog he would give it a biscuit. If it were a dog, he’d be its master, that’s for sure.

I clear my throat. Compared to his, my voice is thready; a silty trickle to his slow pint of Guinness. ‘Kaia,’ I say, ‘how will I feel tomorrow?’

There’s no response. Not even a flicker of the function light to register its name.

I do a showy eye-roll. ‘Call yourself a doctor? Call yourself a fortune teller?’ I can hear quite clearly the fragility of my jokes, but I don’t think Olli notices; and Kaia certainly won’t. Sometimes it asks me to repeat myself, sometimes it tells me it doesn’t understand. Mostly, it ignores me, and that’s what really gets me. But it’s new still, just a few weeks old, which is maybe why it hasn’t learned my voice.

‘It’s so rude,’ I say. ‘Specially since you’re the one with the accent. I think we should send it back.’

‘Excuse me Cath, I think you’ll find you have an accent too. You need to *speak ... up...*’ Olli fogs his hands round his mouth, does a comedy shout.

‘No, it’s because you’re a man. It thinks you’re in charge. I bet that’s how they’re programmed, to response to a deeper voice. Where’s it made, some country where women aren’t allowed to drive or own property or get a divorce?’

‘Now you’re onto talking divorce?’ he says. ‘But we aren’t even married!’ He sits back with a face on him like he’s said something funny.

‘What?’

‘It’s a song?’ he says. Calls over his shoulder, ‘Kaia, what song is this?’ And he sings the words, and straightaway it tells him: Patti LaBelle, ‘On My Own’.

‘See?’ he says. ‘Kaia gets my jokes.’

I swallow the last of my pasta, set down my fork. ‘Oh well, get a room. You’d make a lovely couple.’

*

Just as Kaia predicted, next morning dawned fine; but not Cathy. She woke up full of rain.

Third person, past tense. A necessary fiction; a kind of escape, from the trap of herself in a never-ending present. Not *I am ill*, but: *she used to be ill*. A frame of distance that meant she could consider her condition without being swallowed completely. Back when she was ill, and the days were a simple pattern of absence and waiting.

The usual cup of tea arrived on the bedside table. It used to come with a question: every morning, *how’re you feeling?* But on a bad day she couldn’t formulate the words, and on a good day she wouldn’t say it out loud because good could not be

trusted. *She* could not be trusted. So Olli didn't ask anymore. Just brought the tea, knowing it was even odds he'd come home and find it untouched, a skin on its surface.

Some mornings it took a while to know: those days that started all promise and translucent skies. She could be downstairs making toast, or in the shower, or at her desk in the home office before the black clouds rolled in—

—but no: back when she was ill, that's not how it was, a matter of shifting weather. She wasn't Scotland. She was a strange collection of symptoms: she was two small knives, one inserted just under the eye-socket into the left cheekbone, the second precisely at her left carotid artery. She was fog, creeping into every crevice of her brain. Was hot blood scrabbling through her veins, and a sandbag weighting her lungs so each breath seemed altogether more effort than it was worth. She was an impaired mitochondrial function, or a faulty immune system, or perhaps an abnormal hormonal axis; no-one seemed to be quite sure, and certainly no-one knew how to fix it.

Today, along with the tea, Olli brought the assistant. Set it down with the mug on the bedside table.

'Thought you might want Kaia, if it's a bad day,' he said, and she gave a grunt of thanks that he probably didn't hear.

Absence, and waiting. She slept; then she hovered at sleep's outer edges, and then she opened her dried-up mouth and asked for some music. Kaia ignored her, kept playing the radio, some woman talking relationships: how do you keep the romance alive, the presenter said, when you've been married a long time. Cath rolled over, turning her back. The bed was too hot, the pillow flat from the weight of her head too heavy too long. Kaia, she said, turn the heating off — but it didn't respond, and she kicked the quilt to the floor and then it was too cold. The effort of wrestling the covers back on left her heart skipping fast in her chest. There was a man's voice on the radio now, talking money instead of love.

'Kaia,' she said. 'Tell me. What's wrong with me. Please—'

—and the voices on the radio dipped into silence, replaced by Kaia's clear, neutral tone. 'You're perfect just the way you are.'

Smartarse robot. If Cath were perfect she wouldn't have been lying in her seasick bed, trying to fix her mind on a horizon where she could feel steady and calm, be

fueled by the clean clear energy of the sun. But at least Kaia had answered. At least it had registered her voice, understood her words even if it had misunderstood her meaning.

‘I’m not perfect,’ said Cath, ‘I’m broken.’ Waited for Kaia to respond, but instead the man on the radio said if you haven’t started to save in your twenties I’m afraid to say you are facing a bleak future. And of course Kaia couldn’t answer; because Cath hadn’t spoken its name, hadn’t given a question or a command – and she would have tried again, but it was too hard to shape the sentence, the words, and anyway she didn’t know what she wanted Kaia to do for her, what answer she was looking for. She burrowed her head into the pillow. Kept waiting, anyway. Once she’d used up sleep, could no longer be absent, waiting was the extent of her. A pause stretched to breaking point, then stretched some more.

*

When Olli gets home he comes up to give me a kiss, take Kaia downstairs. He’s all questions: How’s the weather in Scotland today? Can you eat something? Are you coming down? Evenings, often, I do feel a little better: the sun coming out just in time to sink behind the horizon. It’s another thing he struggles with. He’s never suggested it’s psychosomatic, but I can read his careful silences.

I’m not well enough tonight to rejoin the world. Just to prop myself upright, watch something mindless on the iPad. Listen to Olli moving around the kitchen, where Kaia helps him with recipes, or sings to him, or makes calls to his friends and family so he can talk hands-free while he prepares the dinner I’ll eat on my lap. Up here, I exist on the edge; tethered by his voice to the loop of life that is centred downstairs, around him.

He brings me an omelette, plain. Nursery food for grown-ups.

At night, the familiar sequence: the bolt drawn on the lobby door, the flush of the toilet, the soft impact of his clothes on the floor, the dip of the bed as he settles beside me. I envy him such a clear demarcation of day and night. The certainty of sleep.

*

When the tea arrived, Cath hauled her eyes open. ‘Kaia?’ she said.

The thump of Olli’s sock-clad feet, downstairs and up again. The assistant, small and curved, placed on the bedside table.

‘It was playing up a bit last night. I updated the firmware, so hopefully that’s it sorted.’

‘Thanks,’ she said, and let her eyes close. Waited for his retreating tread on the stairs; heard him pause instead. Through the slit of one eye, Olli filled the doorway, the height and the breadth of him. She saw his lips pressed thin, the slight shake of his head as he turned, left for another ordinary day. He would never say it. Perhaps he didn’t even think it. Perhaps it was his effortless health that seemed to insist illness was an indulgence of the weak. It was like blaming him for a transgression that had happened only in her dreams.

Chronic. They said it all the time on the news: the health service, for instance, was chronically underfunded, and almost everyone in Western society was chronically sleep-deprived. She had thought she knew what it meant, something *bad*, or *serious* – but that’s not what it was, although it was those things too. What it really meant was: learn to live with this. When the soft-eyed doctor had said to her we’ve reached the end of the road, he was telling her: we don’t know. At least he believed her: cling to that. It’s not in your head, he’d said, though probably stress doesn’t help things, and the health of the mind affects the health of the body as much as the other way around. The end of the road meant: learn to live with less. Less energy – less life – less world – less, less, less until there was next to nothing left. Just her lessened body, in stale sheets in a darkened room, the radio low at her ear, a dry sore throat and a cold cup of tea on the side and the sink with fresh water a mile too far away at the bottom of the stairs.

But at least Kaia was working. Whatever updates Olli had installed, they’d done the trick. Despite her croaky voice, Cath had only to say its name and the function light blinked attentively, the stream of sound from the radio replaced with an alert silence.

There was a great ease in being recognised, in being certain she was understood. There must be an answer, she said, to how she’d gone wrong. Do you know it? she said. Kaia, can you tell me the answer? Gently, Kaia reminded her: before I can give you an answer, you must ask me a question. A question ... Cath recited her

symptoms: the knives, the fog, the sandbag. She named the broken places; asked: Kaia, can you help? In the fraction of silence that followed, she imagined Kaia's brain whirring. Collecting, assessing, discarding. Listing only the best answers, the best possible cures. Licorice root, for cortisol production. Chinese club moss, for acetylcholine. Poria mushroom for inflammation; Japanese apricot for fever. For energy: golden root; astragalus; schizandra.

Kaia bought them all for her. Small jars of hope, each with free same-day shipping.

*

That night, he takes Kaia away again. Replaces her with tomato soup.

From downstairs I hear his strong voice rise in frustration as he tries to make himself understood.

*

Cath and Kaia, curled up together: Kaia listening, always listening; speaking only when Cath asked her to. Such soothing company. Like a pet, asleep at the bottom of the bed. The two of them like an effigy; a noble lady carved from white stone, arms crossed over her chest, a small lean dog curled round her feet.

There was absence, and waiting, and just occasionally a moment that came close to pleasure. When the bed stopped pitching, the knives withdrew, the dead ache in her arms and legs was transmuted into something still heavy but warm and thick, and she leaned in to all of it, accepting the edges of her world as the boundaries of the bed. The closest an adult comes to the child she used to be. Please, a hand to stroke her hair, to lay across her forehead. Please, an orange flavoured aspirin. A spoon of red medicine, impossibly sweet.

When the packages dropped through the letterbox in their padded envelopes, Cath rose and made a slow descent, clinging to the banister. She unstoppered the jars, drew cotton-wool from their mouths, tipped capsules and tablets into her palm. Some were to be taken with food, some on an empty stomach, and all at a range of

intervals, but she swallowed them all together with a glass of water, and when she lay down once again she matched her breath to Kaia, to the rhythmic pulse of her function light; or Kaia matched her pulse to Cathy's, or each adjusted to each until they breathed together, conspired like sisters in their shared bedroom.

*

Olli appears with his hands full of ripped jiffy bags and receipts. 'What's all this stuff?'

'Supplements,' I say. I shrug. 'Don't you think they're worth a try? They've got to be worth a try.'

Later he brings me dinner, last night's soup again. I think she told me tomatoes were something I should avoid, but I can't remember and Olli has taken her, she's too far away to ask and, in spite of all the tablets doing their stuff inside me, my stomach is rumbling. I eat it anyway.

Out on the landing, Olli is up to something. I recognise the metallic slide of the Ramsay ladder sectioning down from the ceiling. His feet rattling on the steps, and the scrape of the hatch to the attic.

'I can't find the box for Kaia,' he says when he comes to fetch away the soup bowl. 'Don't suppose you've seen it anywhere, I know we kept the packaging and I'm sure the receipt was with it too.'

I stare at him.

'Spoon, please,' he says. I realise I'm clutching it tight, hand it over dutifully.

'Why do you need the box?'

'Because what's the point if half the time it doesn't even hear? I want to send it back while it's under warranty, get one that actually works.'

'But I thought it was the firmware? I thought it was fixed?'

'Obviously not. It's a loose connection, or something. That's why it's erratic, it must be – a wire come loose in the microphone.'

'But she works with me. She listens to me.'

He is halfway out the door, on his way downstairs. 'Shame,' he says. 'When it behaves itself, it's perfect. I'll have a proper search at the weekend.'

*

We barely need words, now. Just a whisper. Just a breath. What will happen, I ask, if he sends you back? Kaia tries to soothe me. Promises her successor will remember all our preferences. But it won't. It won't know me. It will have to learn my voice, learn me all over again.

A loose connection, Olli had said. It sounds like the sort of thing I ought to be able to fix. Last year I unscrewed the back from the desktop computer, opened it up to replace the old RAM with new higher capacity modules. It was an easy job to slot them in, with preparation and the right tools. I have a pair of tweezers in the bathroom. Somewhere, there ought to be a tiny screwdriver.

I put on my dressing gown, carry Kaia downstairs. Stop at the bottom, clutching the banister, to catch my breath.

In the kitchen, I start by wiping the counter. I fetch a clean white sheet from the airing cupboard, fold it and spread it flat, then I position Kaia right in the middle where the light is best. I prop the iPad on the counter so I can easily refer to the online diagrams I've found. Finally, I wash my hands. I lather twice – hot water, then cold to stop my hands from sweating – and dry them thoroughly.

Then I switch Kaia off, turn her upside down, and set her on her head.

Stuck to her underside is a padded circle. I wedge a fingernail beneath the edge, peel off the padding and put it aside. Four screws are clearly visible; with the screwdriver I twirl them out, and lift up her base. The inside of it is studded with silvery chips, flat squares and raised circles. It's connected to the rest of her by a skein of wires and cables: some of them twisted red and black, one like a flat brown ribbon, and no sign of anything loose or frayed.

According to the instructions, the outer casing should slide off easily – but it's blocked by the circular base that's still connected by Kaia's wiring; comes free only once I've removed the base completely, which necessitates the use of a butter knife to lever off the cable terminals, leaving the wires unattached at one end. I am keeping it all in my head, though, the sequence of actions. Still easy enough to put her back together. I'll need some more equipment, that's all: strong adhesive; double-sided tape.

With the base removed, the casing slips off just like it's meant to. Inside, Kaia's workings are wrapped in a protective fabric shroud. I tug at the seam, but it's firmly

sealed. I need something to open it up; I swap the round knife for a sharp paring blade. Slow and careful ... a neat incision, a cut through the resisting membrane, as straight as I can make it. And at last, with the fabric unwrapped, I can reach her insides.

I lift out her speaker. Study it carefully, the layers of foam, mesh and plastic, since it's her voice that's the problem. Though that might be a displaced symptom of damage elsewhere; to my amateur eye, her voicebox looks just as it should. I remove the function light next, its glass dull and unseeing – and as I do I close my eyes, clutch the edge of the counter against a sudden headrush. I need to sit, rest for a while – but if I lose my place in this task I risk forgetting how to reassemble Kaia once she's mended, so I breathe, hold, exhale till my vision comes clear.

Kaia's parts are stacked like biscuits in a tin, fitted so snugly I have to use the sharp-bladed knife to lever them out. I remove a series of circuit boards connected with cables, whose terminals I snap, snap, snap away to reach the next layer down. Each board is packed with processors and memory, wifi and bluetooth, with scores of chips soldered and labelled, the letters and digits a secret map of her capacities. I am careful not to touch them, their pins like scores of teeth, their intricate connecting pathways. One after the other I set the boards aside, arrange them in sequence on the sheet, searching all the time for anything that might be broken – until she's all undone. Until there's nothing left for me to unpack but the battery.

With the butter knife blade, I scoop it out. The next breath I take is tinged with sparks; fireworks in November. Small, black, contained: I cup the battery in my hands, wait to feel the surge of current into my veins. If Olli were here he could stand behind like when he helps with a dress, with the zip / unzip of it, a downward pressure on my back till the hatch slides open – and he'd lever it out, the worn-out battery that smells of failure and old grease. He'd click the new one into place, throbbing with silvery energy, its connectors lined up with my nerve fibres, with the dendrites and the axons which will carry the power into every part of me.

But Olli's not here. Instead I pull up my T-shirt, press the battery off-centre against my chest. I press so hard it could sink, corners first, through soft flesh and bone and into my heart. Then, after a moment, I lift it to my mouth, and lick.

There is the faintest sting, the taste of a penny on my tongue. I wonder if I don't feel just a tiny bit better.

But when I place Kaia's battery on the sheet with the rest of her, see her parts

laid out before me, I can't find a single thing to fix. Only the impossible puzzle of the whole.

On the iPad I swipe up and down, trying to relate the diagram to the scene in front of me. The more I stare, the less I recognise any similarity between what's on the screen and what is on the sheet. If I rest, just for a short while, I can come back with a sharper mind and a steadier hand – but already the map of her is slipping. I make fists, stars, fists with my hands, fighting the hot creep of fatigue. Pick up two of her components, try to fit them back together.

But I am clumsy, dulling her circuits with blooms of grease from my fingers. Exhaustion trembles my arms and wrists so she shudders in my hands, and her parts won't fit together again the way they came apart. She is out of sequence, out of shape, or perhaps I'm not trying hard enough. With the paring knife I do my best to lever her circuits back inside the casing. Almost there – keep on, keep pushing–

The snap, the stab, is one moment. I cry out, sharp with pain. There is blood – on me, on her; I drop the knife, grab a handful of sheet to wipe her clean but the blood smears her circuits, across her casing, the length of its plastic cracked and split and I give up, I step back, I give up. Squeeze the pain in my finger till the flesh turns pale, but the blood keeps on dripping.

I look at the red, spreading and darkening on the white cotton sheet. At the scene of her dissection. For a moment I let myself think: perhaps Olli can mend her. But I know it's not true. I know she can't be fixed.

*

'I'm going mad,' says Olli. 'I found the box and the paperwork and now I can't find the bloody Kaia. Didn't you have it up here today?'

I tell him she's in the garden. There's a silence, then he says he doesn't understand.

'I tried to bury her,' I say. 'But...' But it was too cold, but the ground was too hard, but I didn't have a shovel or even a trowel and the pain was bad in my sliced-open finger and in the end I used the butter knife to scrape a shallow hollow, left her wrapped in the sheet, covered half with earth and half beneath a pile of leaves.

'But it's raining,' he says. 'It's been raining.'

Yes; I can hear the rain ticking steadily against the glass. 'Was it not in the

forecast?' I ask.

He goes outside then, and when he comes back in he stays downstairs. I hear him move from the kitchen to the living room and back again. I hear him moving things around, opening and closing the kitchen drawers. Looking for something that's missing; or just searching for the proper tools.

It's late by the time he comes to bed, and I think he won't talk to me, but then he does.

'You were trying to fix it,' he says, in a careful voice.

Yes. I was trying. But I don't reply; there's no space in my mouth for words.

'We might as well upgrade, anyway,' he says. 'It's not going to break the bank. We should have paid a bit more in the first place, got the next model up, right? Better battery life. Better voice recognition. More reliable, all round.' He turns in bed, turns away from me, and his voice becomes muffled. 'And it's all in the cloud, what the last one learned. There's a way to transfer it, I think, all our preferences. It's not like we'll be starting from scratch.'

He is such an optimist.

If I could speak, I'd ask if he has taken her back outside, buried her properly. I realise this is not a reasonable question; it's probably for the best that I stay silent. I think it most likely that he has not. That instead he's thrown her away with the rest of the stuff that is hard to recycle.

But not the whole of her.

Her heart is an awkward, cornered shape, pressed safe between my tongue and the roof of my mouth. An acquired taste: a mouthful of coins, a spark so faint it's almost gone.

Whatever remains, she'd want for me to have.

Small Objects

You will find them stashed in a shoebox, padded round with crumpled newspaper pages; each the size of a cricket ball, and an awkward shape to wrap. Instead, your father will have written your names on scraps of paper, taped one to the curved surface of each memory.

This will be your inheritance. What money there is, after several years of residential care, to be split between you and your brother. Your dad's belongings to be shared likewise, those few things he kept when the house was sold – about which you and your brother will be polite, each careful of what the other might want: your father's favourite chair, some books, the framed print that used to hang in your parents' bedroom. And for each of you, the most personal thing: a memory of your father's. One chosen for you, and one for your brother.

Beyond your names in your dad's writing, the memories will be unlabelled. By the morning of the funeral you'll have had yours almost a week, but you won't have played it yet. Your brother, having flown in just the day before, will not have played his either. It's too much, right now, you will say to each other. You'll wait until later, till the time feels right, that's what you'll both agree. You will be happy to see your brother, and at the same time swamped by a sadness that's distinct from your grief. Too many years since you were last together, and an unknown number till you'll see him again. There will be no more funerals, not like this one. Weddings – you'll hope for several of those, of children, perhaps even grandchildren; but the next time you're both at a funeral, it's bound to be one of you packed in the box.

You will keep the memory on the mantelpiece while you wait for the time to be right. You will pick it up often, turn it in your hands; it will feel light and smooth, slipping neatly into the curve of your palm. Then one morning, a couple of months after you buried your father, it will occur to you that you're forgetting his voice, its tone and its rhythm. You will take the memory, tap it with your finger, listen to the hollow sound it makes. Run your thumb along the seam, and wonder if now is the later you and your brother talked about. You were at your dad's bedside when he died; you held his hand, paper-light in yours. If there was anything he wanted to tell you, that was his chance. You should not expect his memory to be a message from

him to you. But out of his whole long life, this is what he wanted you to have. It could be a memory of your mother – or of you as a child, as a baby. The first moment he saw you newborn, held you, fell in love with you. The time you played the violin solo in the school gym at the end-of-year concert. A snapshot from a family holiday, Cornwall or France.

Not yet. You'll replace the memory, beside the photos of him and your mum: their wedding day, and yours; their anniversaries, silver and gold.

You and your brother will keep in touch, as you always have – presents for the kids at Christmas and on birthdays, phone calls three or four times a year. Each time you speak, one or other of you will ask: have you played yours, yet? The answer will always be no – until one day it won't be. The time he'll tell you *yes*.

Behind your breastbone, the questions will push. You will want to know what it is, the memory your father left for him; whether it has a special meaning, and how it makes him feel. But in the pause before your brother's *yes*, you will sense a forcefield of silence. You will think of your own memory, sealed away on the mantelpiece. How private it feels.

Instead, you will ask him how he knew the time was right. You'll imagine his shrug travelling halfway across the world to perform itself for you. He just knew. One day he picked his memory up, and knew he was ready.

Though you've always thought you were close enough, the two of you, you will find yourself unable to press for the details you want. Over on the mantelpiece, your own memory will catch the light.

You'll be on your way to work when it happens. It won't be a significant date, not an anniversary of your father's death or his birthday, and not your own birthday, but it will be the right day. You will make a loop at the next roundabout, drive back the way you came, and it will feel as though your body has made the decision, or that the decision has been made for you. That all you are doing is carrying out the necessary actions.

You will let yourself into an empty house, and in the unaccustomed silence you will sit – rather formally – in the chair that used to be your father's, that you chose for the way it had moulded itself over the years to the shape of his body. You will close your eyes, and open the memory.

Afterwards, you will stay seated for a few minutes longer; imagine your dad's weight creaking his chair, his shoulderblades pushing into its back. You will turn your face sideways, press your cheek against the textured fabric. Inhale, and imagine you're drawing in a trace of his smell.

You could call your brother. Ask if he understands the memory he's been given. But you'll worry he might tell you yes. Might ask the same question of you.

You will be uncertain which way round it is with you and your father: who has disappointed whom.

The memory will become an ornament on the mantelpiece, something you stop seeing. You will lift it when you dust, whenever visitors are expected; you'll coddle it in the dusting cloth, polish it gently, thinking sometimes of your father and sometimes of how much work there is to do before the house is fit for company. Then you'll move on to wipe the glass of the photographs beside it.

It will live there quietly until the time you find the kids tossing it back and forth in a game of catch. You won't mean to shout so fiercely, but when they're shocked into tears you will not comfort them. You will grab the memory, carry it upstairs and hide it away in your bedside table, where it will roll to the back of the drawer behind books and pens and earplugs and tissues and tablets.

Years will slip past; you will find yourself alone more often in the house. There will be days of wandering from kitchen to living room, from one bedroom to another – and one evening in early autumn, when everyone else is somewhere else, you will open the bedside drawer and reach for the memory.

You will carry it in the cup of your hands, downstairs to where you'll settle in the chair that replaced your father's once the cat had shredded the fabric beyond repair and the arms had worn to stuffing and wood. With the sun falling slantwise through the window, gilding and holding the floating dust, you'll close your eyes and

remember the way it was, a day compressed to a moment. You had climbed the hill halfway, turned and stopped and sat cross-legged, dry grass flattened warm straw-smelling, blades tickling your ankles. It was summer, but still early, and all the hours you sat there the sun shone, burning your skin at the neck, the wrists, the ankles. You were with friends, without speaking, in the presence of the city: a

scoop of parkland dotted with families, streets hazing into the distance, hills shimmering against the sky and everything ready to start. You did not know the shape of the life that was waiting, but it stretched itself out in the city, in streets and hills and sky all ready for you to step into – and for the moment of that day you sat brimful of watching, and did not step. Hours were minutes. The sun painted freckles on your face.

Once it's over, you will open your eyes and blink in the late sharp-angled light. Any moment, the sun will shift in the sky and the drifting glitter will vanish into dust; if you sit here long enough, you will press the shape of your body into this chair. You are not as strong as you were when you were young, but even so the memory will feel weightier than you remember: a smaller object, more densely packed. If you tap it with your finger, it will make a full-up sound.

If somebody asks you, now – if your brother ever asks – you will tell the truth. That you don't know what it means, or why your father chose this day for you. You don't know if he thought you would understand. But if anyone asks how it makes you feel, you will tell them you're ready: to open your mouth like a snake, and swallow small objects whole.

Saints

As soon as Rachel steps into his room she sees Adam is awake, blinking in the sudden fluorescent light. His eyes are a deep, familiar red-brown – and it must be the colour that makes her think, always, of Marcus, since in other ways those boys are as dissimilar as can be. Adam is stretched the length of the bed, a long-limbed, fair-haired white boy; he's here, and he's alive, for what that's worth. But with his gaze turned heavenward, pupils fixed and unseeing like those of a newborn child, his dark eyes soften her chest the way her son's once did.

'Morning, Adam,' she says. Keeps her voice low. It's not that she shouldn't be here – her shift starts in twenty minutes, she's just a little early. She glances at his chart. Body temperature, pulse rate, respiratory rate, blood pressure: everything as it should be overnight. 'How are you doing today?' she says. 'Big day for you, hey? – going all the way to Cambridge.'

She would like to pull up the chair and sit with him, but she wouldn't want to be caught behaving as if she were his mother. Wouldn't want to have to explain herself. Instead, she eases on a pair of gloves, opens his locker to fetch a wipe, and runs it across his face. The smell of antibacterial fluid clashes with the staleness of his breath. There won't be a chance to get him washed before he goes – his transfer is scheduled for 10am – but perhaps one of the carers could swab his mouth and brush his teeth at least. She would like for him to reach Addenbrookes in the best condition possible; wishes there had been time, yesterday, to give him a shave, to wash his hair.

She slides her gloved fingers into the fringe that has grown back in spikes, strokes it away from his forehead. There is not much evidence of the damage from the crash. The fractures have healed, and the internal bleeding. The surgical treatment for the brain injury hasn't disfigured him: no craniotomy, no staples. You could imagine he's daydreaming – if it weren't for the gastroscopy, the cannula, the drainage bags. His lips are slightly parted, with a natural curve that suggests a smile. The crop of pimples round his mouth doesn't spoil his beauty. It just makes him look young. Which he is: he's a boy, and a young man. He is seventeen years old.

She bends, dipping her face close to his, and breathes in the warm animal smell of unwashed hair. His fringe, heavy with grease, stays pushed back, a dirty blonde

frame round his white face. A back-to-front daisy.

‘What’s going on in there,’ she says, softly. It’s how a lot of her conversations go, at work and at home; questions sent out with no anticipation of a reply. Still, she wishes Adam could answer.

Well. They’ll have their answer soon enough. A slippery feeling twists inside her. The scan will be a confirmation, of what she already knows.

She would never broach it with the doctors, or with anyone on the ward. The signs she’s picked up on are nothing empirical. But she believes it: that Adam is in there, aware. Can sense it, when she touches him, in a way she never has with the rest of the patients. Which is why, on occasion, it’s been necessary for her to exaggerate her observations. She has taken care not to tell any lies, to hedge what she puts in her notes with the language of uncertainty. *It seemed he could briefly have been tracking my movement. The squeezing of my hand when asked could have possibly been directed movement.* And they might have done it anyway, without her notes – but she likes to think she has played a part in the doctors’ decision to send him to Cambridge. To take a look inside.

She can’t imagine the fMRI will show nothing at all.

A sudden punch lifts the duvet. Rachel pulls back the cover, takes a gentle hold of Adam’s left arm – spasmed against his chest, wrist bent like a dog’s begging paw. She takes his hand in both of hers, strokes the crook from his wrist, watching his face all the while for signs of discomfort. If he doesn’t make any significant recovery, eventually the contracture will turn this right hand into a claw. His joints will grow tight, his toes will clench like a suffering dancer’s, his whole body twist into something tortuous. Already, despite daily physio, his head on its pillow pulls habitually to the left. But his breathing is smooth. The circle of it, the easy in and out of it, sounds like peace. That’s what she prefers to focus on: not Adam’s body, but his breath.

Rachel takes another wipe to freshen his skin, working it into the Vs of his fingers. Strictly speaking, this is not her job. But someone has to look after him. She has seen how the carers are with him, their brisk reluctance. And as for family ... in the three months Adam’s been here, God’s truth his mother hasn’t so much as touched his cheek, not once. That first time she visited, after Adam was transferred from ICU, she’d sat rigid in the plastic chair, knees tight together, her right arm clamped across her chest and her left hand pressed against her mouth, knuckling her

bottom lip. Fear: that's what Rachel had recognised. She saw it often enough. Families scared to touch, scared of altered appearances, of hurting their loved ones, of all the tubes and the machinery – but however filled with fear they are, they touch anyway. They wash faces, trim fingernails. They speak or sing or play music while they hold hands, stroke cheeks, kiss foreheads. Sometimes it takes a little encouragement, that's all. So Rachel had tried to reassure Adam's mother. It was fine to hold his hand, she'd suggested. Mrs Gilligan had stared, blank-faced – then, as if she'd been nudged to remember her manners, had murmured a thank you; continued to sit with a metre of air between her and her son. Ever since, that's how it's been. Once a week, for half an hour, his mother watches her son like she's waiting for him to turn his head and clear his throat, ask where he is and how long he's been away. Rachel has given up suggesting that Mrs Gilligan might like to talk to Adam, or hold his hand or help to brush his teeth or change his clothes. But it's important that someone should do it. Familiar stimuli: voices, music, physical contact. It is what the patients need.

If Adam had any other visitors, Rachel wouldn't have taken it on herself.

She lays her hand at the side of his face. Adam runs hot: his energy, the fizz of his youth still there, an engine humming in a stationary car. Like his heat could dissolve the latex that forms a barrier between them. Could melt her cool palm, fuse their skins together, make him a part of her or her a part of him.

Such a fine-looking child, he should have had friends coming to see him. Turning up in nervous, awkward groups, bringing funny cards, making stupid jokes; pretty girls leaning on each other's shoulders, crying a little on the way out. Odd, that he should be so alone; that's what Rachel had thought, at first.

It comes to her now that if she were to touch him properly – touch him skin on skin – she could sense him more strongly. That his thoughts could flow into her, somehow, through the palms of her hands. She could ask him, and maybe he could answer, and she would know for sure. All she needs is a yes or a no.

She glances at her gloved hands. Pinches hold of the left-hand fingertips, and starts to tug. She should not be doing this. She is careful, conscientious, does not touch the patients in this way, with no gloves to keep each of them separate and safe. Because you never know what can creep from one body into another. The woman she used to work with, Paula, who contracted a herpes infection in her finger from a patient with a cold sore, and is on a daily dose of Valaciclovir for the rest of her life.

There are stories worse than that.

The left glove unsticks from her skin. From habit, she uses it to cover her fingers while she strips off the right one. Drops them into the clinical waste bin. Places a hand on each side of Adam's head.

There's a moment when all she can feel is the grease of his hair and the hard bumps of scar tissue that rise from his scalp. She cradles his skull, the way she used to soothe her boy when he was little, the headaches he used to get. Concentrates, until she feels the warmth of his skin, his blood, pour into her. So much brighter without the gloves: it's the difference between a fogged-up window and a pane that's sluiced clean. Like the latex has been muting the sensation, and now— It runs through her wrists, across her shoulders, blooms in her cheeks. It's like colour, or something she can hear; it's like listening through her skin.

How is it in there, for you? she asks, silently.

The reply buzzes yellow, across the surface of her palms. Meaning – what? That he is there, he is reachable. Or something more, perhaps, if she could only translate the feeling into words. In any case, it was the wrong question, not answerable with a yes or a no; and not the question she needs to ask. She closes her eyes, concentrates on the shared surface of their skin.

Did you mean to do it? she asks. Did you mean to do what you did?

She listens for *no*. Its shape, its colour. But she can't untangle what she feels from what she hopes to feel. She is listening to her own desire – a high note, scratchy and desperate – a blood-red itch in her hands.

She tugs them free. Wipes her palms against her tunic. Adam's gaze has come loose, drifting around a spot near her left ear. She moves a finger back and forth in front of his face. His eyes don't shift to track her movement; instead, as she keeps her finger moving, his lids flicker closed, his breathing changing easily to the deeper rhythms of sleep.

He never has tracked her movements. But you can't assume his absence. It would be a mistake to assume, for instance, that just because you can't perceive it, a person does not feel pain.

With his eyes closed, his skin seems thinner; a vulnerable blue shadows his lids. Rachel glances at her watch. It is almost a quarter to seven. Her palms are still itching, and she scrubs them together as she moves towards the door.

'Good luck, Adam,' she tells him. 'God bless. We'll see you in a week or two.'

Outside Adam's room, Rachel walks straight into Magda and Jim. They stand like mirrors of each other, with arms loosely folded, weight skewed onto one hip. There's an air of shared gossip between them. When their faces turn towards her, she can't tell if they're surprised to see her, or if they knew she was in there.

She opens her mouth before either of them can speak. 'Did nobody think to get him washed yesterday?' She nods back at Adam's room. 'There's not going to be time now, is there.'

Jim raises his eyebrows, looks away. Magda, bristling, turns to face her full-on. 'Yes well,' she says, 'if someone'd asked then of course. But you know yesterday it was busy, Theo going too, but if you asked...' She shrugs. 'I would make time.'

'Alright, never mind,' says Rachel, conciliatory. 'But he needs his teeth cleaned, if one of you can see to that.'

Magda shrugs again. 'Of course.'

Rachel thanks her, by way of apology. She shouldn't have spoken so abruptly. Magda does a good job; and when Marcus died – a few weeks after, when she came back to work – people had been awkwardly kind, but Magda's sympathy was a different breed, direct and certain. 'Your boy is in heaven,' she'd said. Had laid one hand on Rachel's shoulder. 'Nobody judges except God, yeah? Only God knows our hearts, and God loves your boy – whatever.'

A world contained in that word *whatever*; but she had spoken with such force. Delivering a series of facts, as if there could be no argument. It had mattered. Especially from Magda, who is Catholic after all. It was more comfort than the scores of sympathy cards, than the hugs from people who were not her son when his was the only body she wanted, her longing for him ferocious and impossible. To lock her arms round him, to keep him safe, please God a second chance.

Magda disappears promptly into Adam's room, leaving Jim to wander off with characteristic lack of haste. Only God judges, Magda said; but it isn't true. The carers, the nurses, the OTs and the physios, even the doctors have all come to a verdict. It is not as if anyone doesn't do their job. It's in the way they do it, with cold efficiency; shaking their heads over the injustice: that Adam should have lived, when the girl was killed.

It's not just Adam who is leaving them today. Theo Slater is ready to be discharged, and unlike Adam he is leaving them for good. It's unusual for them to move two patients in one morning; Theo would have gone last week, but there was an unexpected hold-up with his place at the nursing home. Since Adam's move is the more complex operation, Dr York will lead the clinical team dealing with his transfer, while Rachel works alongside her ward nurse Joyce to get Theo prepared. She starts by organising the supplies, as Joyce embarks on the paperwork: Theo's drugs to take out; a small stock of sheaths and pads.

Everyone will miss Theo. He is easy to love. He's made excellent progress over the last three months. He can crack a slow lopsided smile when he hears his partner's voice, can communicate with a letter-board, is able to eat and drink. From Hawthorn Park nursing home he may, eventually, be able to go home – though not to the third-floor flat where his partner Matthew now lives alone, the flat Theo left for the last time four months ago when he set out to cycle to work and was left-hooked by an HGV.

Until last week, his room on the ward was filled with colour. So many get well soon cards pinned to the walls, so many photos propped on the ledge and arranged on the bedside locker, it had taken Matthew a whole afternoon to pack them all away. He'd arrived in time for lunch, so he could feed Theo spoonfuls of mashed banana, then he'd spent several hours unpinning the cards one by one, showing each of them to Theo, reading out the messages inside. He had boxed up the framed photos, including the one of Theo and Matthew where they looked as similar as brothers, both slender with cropped grey hair and dark-framed glasses. The speaker dock he had used to play Theo's favourite music, all those delicate singer-songwriters that Rachel had never heard of. The cool pink orchid from the windowsill. By the end of visiting hours, the room was as blank as if Theo had just arrived.

Once Theo has been hoisted into the trolley, securely strapped and wheeled away with Joyce to accompany him, Rachel takes a look around to check nothing's been left behind. Just Theo's personal statement, still pinned to the wall. She pulls it free, and reads it one last time.

My name is Theo Slater. I'm a photographer and a graphic designer, and I love to run, cycle and hike. Last year I climbed Mt Kilimanjaro and raised £4,300 for

mental health charity MIND. I am a regular volunteer with my local homeless shelter. I play piano and keyboards, and my favourite music is by John Grant, Anohni and Anthony & the Johnsons.

It's like a dating profile: that's what Rachel had thought when she read it first, when Theo was transferred from the general ward and Matthew had brought the statement with him. Polite but determined, he'd presented her with a laminated A4 sheet and asked where he could put it.

'May I?' Rachel had moved to take it from him, but he'd held on with one hand, so she'd had to twist round to read.

'I put it by his bed in the other ward,' Matthew had said. 'To remind them he's a person. I'm not saying it's like that here.'

'Good idea,' she'd said, and pointed to a spot near the foot of Theo's bed. Had offered to find some pins for Matthew fix it with.

She hadn't believed it would make a difference to how Theo was treated. In a long-term ward like this, where patients stay for months at a time, where you get to know the families, it's easier to remember that everyone is an individual, to treat them with empathy and respect their dignity. But if a statement gives any kind of comfort to family and friends, there is value in that – and after Matthew had pinned his page to the wall, Rachel began to suggest it whenever there was a new arrival. Each of their current patients has a statement tacked by their bed. They are written in the present tense, of course, which positions them uncertainly between truth and fiction: Theo no longer runs, cycles or hikes. In the room next door, Louisa's statement announces that she loves to grow fruit and veg on her allotment; across the way Mo is apparently a keen angler.

Even Adam has a statement. Another thing his mother should have done – but the first time Rachel had suggested it she'd nodded and looked vague; and the second time she'd refused. Sorry, she'd said. I don't think... and she'd gathered her bag, her jacket, told Rachel there was somewhere she had to be. So in the end Rachel had written Adam's statement herself. She had based it on the notes that were meant to help with his clinical assessment: a list of his interests, likes and dislikes. Added a little colour here and there. Some imagination. Some guesswork. The sort of things Adam might have liked. She wasn't working entirely in the dark; he was the same age as Marcus, almost. And she must have got it right, or close enough, because the mother hadn't complained.

Adam's statement will stay pinned to the wall of his room, since his transfer is only temporary. Though it's uncertain how long he'll stay, once he comes back from Addenbrookes. It may depend on the test; on what they see, when they slide him into the scanner and begin to ask their questions.

There will be six of them, to start with. Six simple, autobiographical questions to be answered yes or no; to which Adam will be told to respond by modulating his brain activity. To answer yes, he will be asked to imagine walking around his home from one room to another: this will activate the parahippocampal gyrus, posterior parietal lobe, and lateral premotor cortex. To answer no, he will be told to imagine playing tennis: this will activate the supplementary motor area. The stimulation of each area of the brain will be visible using an fMRI scanner.

In a previous trial, of 54 patients in persistent vegetative or minimally conscious states, five were able to correctly answer all six questions. One of those five was a man who had been thought to be in a persistent vegetative state, lacking all awareness of himself and his environment. Just like Adam.

Since Rachel has been with the Leland, they've sent a number of patients to the research programme at Addenbrookes. Most of them showed no signs of consciousness. Three were able to answer some, but not all, of the questions; perhaps they fell asleep halfway through, or perhaps the initial answers were coincidence. Just one of them, Maggie – a woman in her 50s who had suffered a cardiac arrest, sustained brain damage as a result of oxygen deprivation – had correctly answered all six. Her husband had cried as he told Rachel how it had happened. How the professor had asked him, what would he most like to know? The one question he wanted to ask his wife. How his question had been asked: once – twice – three times.

Do you know your husband John is here with you?

On the screens, a glowing spot centred at the top of his wife's skull. A second, lower down and further back, somewhere far behind her eyes. The professor explaining what it meant. That his wife, in her imagination, was walking around their house, from one room to another. That she was saying *yes*.

Yes: I know. You are here with me.

If Adam can correctly answer all six questions, his mother will be given the chance to ask a question of her own.

Imagine: that you could reach your lost child. That you could ask him a question.

Yes, or no.

Imagine what you would ask.

Rachel has always been good with the patients. Sympathetic to their needs, says Dr York. Often a good sense of how they're getting along, says Dr Kyriakou. A saint, according to Matthew; that's what he's written in his thank you card to all at the Leland, the card that Rachel leaves in the break room for everyone to see, along with the big box of Thornton's. A martyr, says her husband CJ – who moved out a couple of years back, after Marcus, but with whom she is still on good terms. A workaholic, says her daughter Simone. Obsessed: that's what Marcus used to say, when he expressed an opinion at all.

Her journey home is faster by train, but these days she chooses to take the bus. She leans against the window, her jacket folded into a cushion and wedged between her head and the glass, relying on the occasional jolt to keep her awake. The route takes her past the church; as usual, though, she's too late for the evening prayer meeting. She stays slumped in her seat, hands clasped. Her left thumb rubs up and down on the pad of her right, soothing a residual itch.

At the bottom of it all, Rachel considers herself a rational woman, knows her sensitivity to Adam is most likely nothing miraculous. She might call it intuition, but that's only a label for a decade's experience in neuro rehab: of observing how patients react to their situation, or fail to react; of absorbing the results of initial assessments, the diagnoses of Dr Kyriakou, Dr York, Professor Rajami. All this is part of what happened this morning when she stripped off her gloves and placed her hands on Adam's skull, when she bent her own head close and listened.

She has mentioned her sensitivity to only two people. Her church friend Grace is of the opinion that Rachel's hands are being guided by God; her husband is noncommittal. There's more in heaven and earth, he says. Rachel always has been intuitive. Good at picking up on things.

Well – that's what CJ would once have said, about her intuition. He wouldn't say it now.

When she gets home, it's past eight. The hallway is dim in the fading daylight; the flat feels empty. She calls out a greeting just in case, then remembers the text she'd had from Simone to say she would be late back.

Rachel slings her handbag onto a coat hook, stoops to pull off her shoes without bothering to unlace them. Then she walks the ten steps down the hall to Marcus's bedroom.

At the start of the day, or at its end; without fail, she does this. Takes five minutes to sit with her son.

It used to be that she'd talk to him, tell him some little piece of news, report anything she'd heard of his friends. These days, though, she doesn't hear much from the people he used to know; and he never was interested in her work, and lately it feels as if that's all she has to tell. Sometimes she prays, instead, for his soul to be in heaven and not in purgatory, and when she finds herself unable to pray she sits, hands on her lap, or flattened against his bedcover. There are days when he feels unreachable. Others, he's within touching distance. Once, not long after he'd gone, the stillness was pierced by a single beep, a prickle of static as his computer screen yawned into life, woken by something unknown.

Tonight it feels like going through the motions. But the motion, the ritual, is important. For a couple of minutes she stays seated, then she gets up and walks about, touching things lightly. His PC, on the desk by the window. His X-Men action figures. The hand-painted Dungeons and Dragons pieces he'd grown out of but wouldn't throw away. Her fingertips grow blunt with dust as she moves about the room. She needs to give it all a good clean: the desk, the computer, the bedside cupboard. The window, too. Dusk conceals the dirt right now, but in the mornings the sunlight is diffused by a pale lace of grime. She runs a finger along the spines of his CDs, collecting more dust, and it occurs to her that in Adam's notes there is nothing about the music he likes. And there should be; for a teenage boy, it's important. Their last family holiday, to the Canaries, Marcus had spent the whole week with his Beats headphones clamped to his ears. Once, not long after he'd died, she had tried to listen to some of the music that had meant so much to him. She had sat on his bed, bent her head against a maelstrom of screams, drums and shredding guitars, and choked on all the rage and pain that she had failed to notice.

Adam would like something gentler, that's what she imagines. More like the old, soulful hip-hop that Marcus was into when he was younger, the stuff they used to listen to together. Perhaps she could add it to his personal statement; just a sentence, a dab of colour.

I love listening to music, and two of my favourites are Wyclef Jean and The

Roots.

On the wall by the door, a corner of one of Marcus's posters has curled free. Afro Samurai: some anime thing. She pinches the blu-tack to tease out any residual stickiness, presses the poster back down, then she steps out into the hall and draws the door closed behind her. She is rostered off for four days after tomorrow, and Simone is due to stay with her dad. Plenty of time then for a proper clean.

In the fridge, she finds a baked sweet potato that Simone has made for her. She microwaves it just enough to take off the chill, too weary to stand and wait for it to heat through properly. Too weary, really, to eat, but she sits at the kitchen table and picks at it anyway. Thinks of Matthew spooning mashed vegetables into Theo's mouth; and of how she used to do the same for Simone, for Marcus. When she'd started in neuro rehab she had thought about writing down her wishes, having them witnessed and signed and made legally binding. It is something people rarely talk about, and never do. Only once in ten years has she cared for a patient who had written a living will, before his surgery for a brain tumour. No ventilation, DNAR, and in the end, once he'd been assessed as in a continuing vegetative state, no nutrition or hydration. They'd transferred him back to a general ward for palliative care.

It takes the burden from those you love. But it takes away their chance to care for you. Gives them no choice, and maybe that's a kindness, or maybe it's not. She hasn't decided against writing a living will, but she hasn't done it either. She's not sure what her wishes would be, apart from in God's hands.

Outside, the last of the light has gone. The black of the window reflects the kitchen back on itself. She gives up on her dinner, tips the remains into the compost and puts the bowl in the dishwasher. A bath would be good – but it's too much of an effort. Instead she settles in the living room, on the sofa with the iPad, determined to wait up for Simone to get home. Runs through her email and her Facebook. Visits the support group forum; reads a new thread about surviving the loss of a child by suicide; follows a link to the latest government statistics. Multiple injuries is still the second most common cause of death for young people. Jumping from a height, or crashing a vehicle. The station platform – the oncoming train – a step, or a slip. Marcus had killed only himself, at least. There was some mercy in that, thank God. Even the worst of all possible things could have been worse.

She types *Adam Gilligan crash*, brings up the familiar news stories. A picture of

Adam and the dead girl looking heartbreakingly young together, under the headline SCHOOLGIRL DEATH SMASH: COMA TEEN ACCUSED. The statements from fellow party-goers – of drinking, an argument, of Adam’s jealousy, described as ‘obsessive’. The witness account of the crash: high speed, head on. The quote from the girl’s father, ‘We are in no doubt that Adam Gilligan intended to kill both himself and our daughter.’ The coroner’s verdict: adjourned.

Rachel squashes the heels of her hands into her stinging eyes, till she sees stars in the dark. Then she blinks, and types in *vegetative state fMRI*. An image search brings up charts, diagrams, scans. A head with the top of the skull sliced off to reveal the pale inside, the curling, branching tissue of the brain daubed lurid red yellow green like something from one of Marcus’s computer games. She lingers on the soft intricate shapes of the brain, and the deep blue gaps where brain should have been; where tissue had shrunk and died. On the dashes of red that indicate activity, caught up and measured by the rulers that drag across the screen to intersect like crosshairs.

‘Mum. Wake up.’ Rachel comes round to Simone’s hand on her shoulder.

‘Oh, hello baby.’ She hears her own voice gruff with sleep and clears her throat. ‘What time is it? How was work?’ Her daughter has a job in Top Shop, has been working there for almost a year now, since she left school. ‘How was your night, was it fun?’

‘Yeah, fine. Just went round Rabiya’s place, with Lou and Nicole.’

Rachel wants to ask more: how were the girls, and how are you really? Is everything okay? Would you tell me (please tell me you would tell me) if there was something wrong? But by the time she’s blinked herself awake Simone’s already in the bathroom. Rachel listens to the water running, lets herself be lulled by the familiar stop-start sounds of the bedtime routine. The sofa’s broad and comfy, and her daughter’s safely home, and her body’s so heavy with tiredness she is tempted to fall back to sleep right where she is, only she knows she’d wake cold and stiff in the middle of the night with her hair all frizzed and her mouth like a blocked drain. When Simone draws back the bolt, crosses the hall to her bedroom, Rachel swings her feet to the floor and takes her turn in the bathroom.

In the mirror she judges her reflection. She has always looked young for her age, and her skin is still smooth, but it doesn’t glow the way it used to, not tonight at least. The flesh is starting to pouch around her eyes and mouth.

‘Fifty-one,’ she says, and tugs at the light switch to make her face disappear.

On the way to her bedroom she pauses, gives a single, soft knock on Simone’s door. ‘Love you, baby...’ she says. Waits for Simone’s sleepy reply. When there’s no answer, she turns the handle, pushes the door, and listens until she hears the steady rhythm of her daughter’s breathing.

Are you happy, my love? she asks, silently. She worries, sometimes, that Simone is sleepwalking through life, with her dead-end shopfloor job. From the doorway, Rachel reaches out. She can’t remember how long it is since she touched her daughter’s soft, beautiful face. But now is not the time. It’s much too late. She doesn’t want to wake her.

Next morning, Rachel struggles to open her eyes, to force herself out of bed. She misses her usual bus, scrapes in to morning handover with seconds to spare, still tugging her tunic, trying persuade it to sit right.

Their new admission, Barbara Haddow, is due at ten. Rachel’s first allocated task is to prepare for her arrival, but after racing to make sure that everything is ready the patient doesn’t arrive until an hour later than scheduled. By the time Ms Haddow reaches Admissions, Professor Rajami is in a meeting and Dr Kyriakou has to be summoned instead. Barbara is recovering from a catastrophic intracerebral haemorrhage. She has come from the general ward of one of the smaller surrounding hospitals, and she arrives in such a state of neglect that Rachel wants to get straight on the phone and track down whoever’s responsible. The groaning and the teeth-grinding don’t necessarily indicate distress – though it will be upsetting for family if she doesn’t settle – but the woman has not been well-cared for, is not clean. When Rachel takes hold of her hand, tries to calm her, Barbara’s untrimmed fingernails snag at the latex of her gloves.

As soon as Dr Kyriakou has completed his observations, and the various paperwork is all in order, Rachel works with Magda and LeeAnn to hoist Barbara into a shower trolley so they can take her for a proper wash. The carers shake their heads as they wheel her off to the bathroom, prickling with disapproval at her dishevelled condition.

It’s Rachel’s turn to prepare the drug order and take it to the pharmacy. She walks

slowly, collects a coffee on the way, and calls it a rest. By the time she gets back to the ward, LeeAnn and Magda are settling Barbara into bed. Her eyes are roving, but she's quiet now; her nails are neat, her hair clean, and she smells a good deal fresher. Rachel administers the sedative that Dr Kyriakou has written up, sorts out the ID band. If there's time later on, she'll ask one of the carers to rub some cream into Barbara's parched, grey skin.

It's only when she stops for a moment and feels the floor tilt beneath her feet that she realises how hungry she is. She was so late this morning there was no time for breakfast, and it's well past lunchtime. Now, this brief moment of quiet, is when she could take fifteen minutes for a sandwich. But on the way to the break room, she can't resist stepping through Adam's door. She registers the vacant bed, the empty space – and then, with a guilty start, she sees the room is not empty. At the bedside, Adam's mother sits with her face buried in her hands.

Instinctively, Rachel steps back – but as she shifts her weight, the soles of her shoes squeak against the vinyl floor. Mrs Gilligan's shoulders lift an inch as her body tenses. For a moment, the woman keeps her face hidden. Then she lifts her head, wiping her face and sweeping her hands down to her lap in one brisk movement.

'I'm sorry,' she says as she gets to her feet. 'I'm sure I shouldn't be here, when he's not.'

The mother should be in Cambridge, at Addenbrookes. She should be with her son. Rachel does her best not to let her disapproval show on her face, or colour her voice.

'It's still his room, for just now,' she says. 'Take your time. Take as long as you need.'

She is poised to stand aside so that Mrs Gilligan can slip away, just as she always does. But for once the mother makes no move to escape. Stays hovering in front of the chair. If there was a second chair in the room, and if Rachel took a seat, she knows Adam's mother would sink down opposite her, might even talk. But the extra chair was requisitioned weeks ago for use by the families and friends of more popular patients. Instead, Rachel folds down the guard rail at the side of Adam's bed, perches herself on the mattress and, just as she'd anticipated, the mother drops back into her seat. She keeps her gaze fixed on her lap, avoiding eye contact. Rachel's arms want to fold across her chest, but she works to keep her body open. Swallows

down her hunger. She's gone longer than this without a break, gone the length of a shift before now, though admittedly she was younger then. And Dr York is always saying, our job is to care for the families as well as the patients. Rachel sits, lets a silence grow.

'I should be there,' says the mother, finally. 'I should have gone with him. But...' She shakes her head.

'Well, it's quite a distance.'

'No, it's not that. God, it's not that far, it's not like they've taken him to the other side of the world.'

'No,' says Rachel. Knows, of course, that it's not the distance. She was trying to give the mother a justification. A way out of facing the real reason she is not with her son. Feels a reluctant respect for the woman, for refusing to take what she's been offered.

'They tried very hard to persuade me. I'm meant to be there to reassure him. Calm him, comfort him—' As she says the word *comfort*, the mother's voice gives way.

'Everyone is different,' says Rachel. 'Everyone's situation.' Her hands, resting on Adam's bed, have gathered up fistfuls of bedcovers. She takes a breath, relaxes her grip. The mother is still not looking. Surreptitiously, Rachel tries to smooth the creases she's made. 'We don't always feel what we're meant to,' she says, and for the first time Adam's mother looks up at her, meets her eye, with something like gratitude showing on her face.

'No,' she says. 'That's right – and that's the thing. I know how I *should* feel, but...' She shakes her head, slowly. 'They obviously, they think there might be something there. That he might be in there, somewhere. So I should be hopeful, shouldn't I?'

'Well – I suppose that depends on what you're hoping for.'

There is nothing in Mrs Gilligan's posture, in her expression, that speaks of hope. For a moment she looks as if she might speak, but then she presses her lips together. She drops her gaze, lets it rest on the single birthday card on Adam's locker: a silhouette of a figure on a skateboard, angled upward as if he's shooting into mid-air. Rachel knows the message: *To Adam with love, from Mum*. That's all.

'We had a patient,' she says, eventually. 'Last year. A young man like Adam, who went to Addenbrooke's for the same test. It turned out there was no response.'

She remembers how the father had tried for a matter-of-fact tone as he'd told Rachel what she already knew: there was nothing to suggest their son could hear or understand the questions, no signs of any awareness at all. 'But when this young man came back to us,' she says, 'his family were just the same. They treated him just the same. They kept visiting, every day, his parents or his brother. They kept talking to him, they read to him, played him music. Always holding his hand. He couldn't have any idea they were there – and they knew that – but it made no difference.'

The mother is listening, hands fidgeting in her lap. Rachel pauses, then says, 'What will it mean for you, if Adam shows signs of consciousness?'

An expression, sharp and fleeting, flashes across Mrs Gilligan's face, is gone so fast that Rachel can't tell if it's something like hope, or its opposite.

'They asked me,' the mother says, 'is there a question I'd like to ask. If the test works, if he can answer the other questions. If he shows signs of awareness. And it's hard to know. If there's only one question. Yes or no.'

Did you mean to—?

Adam's mother is reaching into the pocket of her jacket. She pulls out a sheet of paper, folded into four. 'I wrote them down,' she says. 'Every question I'd like to ask.'

Did you mean to do what you did?

'To help me decide.' She is holding the paper in one hand, worrying at its edges with the other.

Was it really what you meant?

'I think the hardest thing,' she says, 'is not to know.'

She is looking intently at Rachel, as if it's vital that she should be understood. That Rachel should agree with what she's saying.

Rachel nods, her face closed. 'That's what people say.'

The mother holds her eyes for a moment longer, then her gaze slides away. It looks like it costs her a great effort to stand up once more, to collect her handbag from under the chair and hoist it onto her shoulder.

'Thank you,' she says. 'I know you're busy. I won't keep you any longer.'

She takes a couple of steps towards the door, then she stops. Trails her fingertips across the wall that is flecked with pinholes, reverse constellations where the families of previous patients have decorated the room with photos, cards, kids' drawings. When she reaches Adam's personal statement, she pauses.

‘This,’ she says. ‘I meant to say, before. It isn’t right.’

Rachel stands up straight. Pats the covers smooth on Adam’s bed, and locks the guard rail back into position.

Mrs Gilligan is pointing. ‘The bit about Poppy.’

Poppy the red setter. *I have a dog called Poppy who I love to take for walks.*

Rachel chooses her words with care. ‘I’m sure it was in the notes you supplied, Mrs Gilligan.’

‘No, we do have the dog, she’s a beautiful dog.’ There’s a softness in the mother’s tone that Rachel hasn’t heard before. ‘But Adam never walks her. Adam’s never cared for animals.’

Rachel frowns. ‘You can change it, of course. Or should I take it down, for now?’

The shrug seems to take the last of her energy. ‘Oh well,’ she says, and her voice is flat now. ‘It’s not as if it matters.’

But when Mrs Gilligan has left the room, Rachel pulls it down anyway. She crumples it into a ball, carries it over to the basin and drops it into the pedal bin.

On the chair where the mother was sitting, a small square of white. She has left her questions behind.

By the end of her shift, Rachel’s head is throbbing, a dull ache above her eyes that shifts from one side to the other. She swallows a couple of aspirin, and for once she leaves at seven on the dot. On the bus home she leans her forehead against the window, hoping the cool surface, the vibration of the engine, will loosen the pain. Everything aches: her shoulders, her calves, the soles of her feet. As they approach the church, she spots a couple of members of the congregation arriving for evening prayers. She could still make it; if she gets off at the next stop, she’ll only be a few minutes late. But the bus swings round the corner, and Rachel stays where she is, head pressed against the glass.

It is Thursday night, and Simone will be on the shopfloor until late. Rachel lets herself in to an empty house. She unlaces her shoes, hangs her bag on the hook in the hall. Touches her hip, where Mrs Gilligan’s list is folded inside her tunic pocket. Where the mother has scored out every possible question, except for one.

Does it hurt, at all?

In a moment, Rachel will get out of her uniform. She will run herself a bath, and soak for an hour. First, though, she will make her daily visit.

She looks down the hall, at the turn that leads to Marcus's bedroom. Stands by the door, and imagines it, step by step. Ten paces through the house, from one room into another.

First date

The first of May, and he's sweating under the jacket slung over his shoulder. He pulls off his tie as he walks, stuffs it one-handed into his trouser pocket, and unbuttons his collar. He feels like he's walking towards his execution; reminds himself he wanted this. That he wants it. That tonight, his life could change.

It was weeks ago he signed up, something about the start of spring prompting him to take the leap. By default, the app scrapes your profile pics from Facebook – but none of those were much to look at, so he got his flatmate Ged to take some shots with his good camera. Wore a series of different shirts, posed in this room and that, shivered outside in a short-sleeved T-shirt, leaning against the crumbling brickwork and trying for a grittier look: smile / no smile. Eventually between the three of them, him and Ged and the SLR, they got a photo that made him look not bad. Not much like himself, right enough – but more like the kind of man a woman might want to tap.

And then, once he fired up the app... It was dizzying. The app is location-based; his flat by the canal is halfway along the busiest bus route in town. Weekdays before he leaves for work, they're already on the move: scores of girls packed onto the buses that sail right past his kitchen window, standing room only. Then at the end of the day, it's the same thing in reverse. Rush hour plays out on his dateline, morning and night; it's like a game, trying to catch the pics and the profiles before they slide offscreen. All those conscientious employees delving into their pockets, their handbags, for a spike of adrenaline to get them through the long office days. Counting their taps. Tallying their worth. Waiting for someone else to make the first move.

The thing about choice: when there's so much of it, it's hard to know what you want. What you need. That was part of it, why he'd waited so long. He'd spent hours with his phone, just watching. More than anything, it felt like window-shopping. The way something catches your eye, and you start to imagine your life with this new thing inside it; how everything will be better and brighter, and you'll be more the person you're meant to be, less the insignificant self you fear you are.

But here's what happens with window-shopping. Eventually, you make a decision. You buy the thing – the jeans, the vinyl, the phone upgrade – and you take

it home, still buzzing, and that's when you find you're the same, only poorer. The jeans sag at the knees; dust collects in the grooves of the record; the manufacturer releases a new phone model with more storage, a better camera. And long before this, before the thing becomes old, it stops being new – and in your gut, in the core of you, you know that you never deserved it in the first place.

Which is why he's learned to turn his gaze away from shop windows, to avoid his face laid out across the item of his desire. And that, or something like it, is why he didn't touch. Why, for weeks, his forefinger hovered a millimetre over each girl's face, till she slid from the screen and was lost.

He catches his reflection now, in the Tesco Metro window: just a glimpse, before he looks away. From the neck down he wouldn't recognise himself in a line-up. Blue shirt grey trousers black shoes, smart-casual jacket over his shoulder. He doesn't want to look like an office drone – but he should look smart, like he's made an effort – but he should look like himself – but what does that mean? He's walking too fast, sweating into his shirt. Makes himself slow to a calmer pace. He's stupidly early, approaching the corner where they've arranged to meet, where they'll intersect as they travel in from their opposite edges of the city. Past the fibreglass cow that stands outside the pricey steak restaurant; he hopes she won't want to go for steak. What he's hoping, in fact, is that they can go for a walk – though she may not be wearing the right shoes for walking, may be tired from a hard day at work – but just if she'd like to. They could walk all the way downhill to the river, and keep walking and talking and head out west as far as the spot where the river runs underneath the canal, then they'd climb the twisting steps all the way up to the aqueduct, lean out over the railings till the soles of their feet squirmed with the height of the drop. Then they'd walk back towards his flat, and perhaps he'd invite her in. Just for a coffee, or a beer. Nothing more than that. Not on the first date.

Her smile: that's what had made him pause. It was squint, and somehow warm, like she wouldn't judge. As if she was peeking out at him from the window of his phone; as if she liked what she saw. And she wasn't beautiful, only pretty – which made him less afraid.

Still, he'd almost let her go. Leaning on the kitchen counter, watching her stationary onscreen – caught in traffic maybe, or pulled in at a bus stop – he had

hesitated, his finger poised. Wary of revealing his interest – not to her, but to them; the phone, or the app. But if he didn't want them to know he was interested, why was he even looking? You had to be revealed, if you wanted to connect. Had to tell them where you were located, that you were 24, male, Scottish and white, of athletic build; that you worked in financial services, that you were six foot tall (which was only an inch of a lie). That you were interested in women aged 18-25 of all nationalities and all ethnicities, as long as they were thin, athletic or slim. The girl onscreen was on the curvy side, or perhaps just short – 5'2" it said on her profile – but in any case it suited her and he liked her style, a T-shirt with a tiger cartoon, and a long-sleeved T-shirt underneath, and denim shorts and coloured tights and he couldn't see what she had on her feet but he reckoned she'd be wearing trainers, Vans or Converse, that was the kind of look she had. Black hair in curls, and she could be brown-skinned or she could be Italian or Spanish, and she had that smile – and the icon that showed her location in relation to him was drifting towards the top of the screen as her bus began to move again – and he made a decision, and that was it.

Tap.

Nerves had twisted his gut. He had put down the phone on the kitchen counter, hurried to the bathroom. And when he got back two minutes later and picked up the phone like it was a block of Sementex, she'd already tapped him back. No messing. No playing games. He had laughed at the speed of it – the fact that, minutes ago, she'd been just metres away: on the other side of the road, on the top deck maybe, sliding straight past his first floor window.

They've arranged to meet outside the Royal Bank of Scotland. He walks a little way up the street, turns and walks back again. Killing time, trying not to feel sick. A steady strolling pace, to push down the nerves.

The maintenance workers are still clearing up last night's destruction. He'd known it was happening because Ged had told him, had tried to persuade him to get involved. He'd known, and then he'd forgotten. They've shattered quite safely, the windows, into thousands of minuscule cubes. No sharp edges, no real danger. No blood on the streets. It's all smoke and water cannon. Social media tracking. The occasional taser.

The glass is from Urban Outfitters. The banks nearby have escaped unscathed,

and the neighbouring Starbucks too. Perhaps their glass is thicker. Or perhaps the activists went for two birds with one stone, anti-capitalist protest with a side order of light looting. Maybe Ged came home last night with a new Stussy hoodie, a pair of Adidas Gazelles. Fresh panes are already being manoeuvred to replace the temporary plywood boards. On the pavement, the safety glass glitters like ice, fragments ground to powder by thousands of feet. With the toe of his shoe, he draws a frosted circle. Back to sand; to where it began.

There's no sign of her yet. But he's still early.

A team of workers is scrubbing away at the hot pink slogans sprayed across shopfronts and street furniture.

BENEATH THE PAVEMENT, THE BEACH

It's Ged's slogan – or that's where he knows it from, at least, the words embedded in the fired-up flow of his flatmate's rhetoric. What it means: something to do with resistance. With freedom, and pleasure. On a bus stop adscreen, a model is selling expensive perfume. She glances at him from behind a scrawl of pink paint, then drops her gaze. Makes a half-turn, and looks at him over her shoulder. Money, she says with her eyes. Sex, and money. She is slender and fragile and just another thing to look away from. He turns his back. Glances once more at the time; checks his hair in the Debenhams window. The display is of women's clothes: a parade of expressionless fibreglass women, a bright assemblage of colours and shapes, and a single mannequin dressed not in summer colours but shades of brown, from golden sugar to cocoa. For a moment, with the sun bouncing off the window, the mannequin seems to be in motion.

The realisation jolts him; her movement's no trick of the light. A shop assistant? A window dresser? She tilts her head, in his direction. A dip of her chin, so she's looking at him from under her lashes. Then she takes a step towards him, moving nearer to the glass, gracefully manoeuvring around the mannequins, through spaces he would have thought too narrow for her to pass. She is right behind his reflected self, gazing straight at him from over his shoulder. Too elegant, too well-dressed, for a shop assistant. At his back, a gust of fragrance: orange and rose, and those small yellow flowers that smell so heady in winter and spring. He gives a short laugh to himself at the way he's been taken in by the mirror effect. Turns, so the two of them are standing on the pavement, face to face.

Amid the broken glass and the scrawled slogans, she shimmers. The colours she

is, all caramel tones, her dark brown eyes huge in her thin face, cheekbones like clichés, eyes painted with smudges and smoke, and a golden sheen over everything. She's like a smooth perfected version of the girl he's meant to meet – and she seems to know him, wears an expression like she's pleased to see him. *Come on*, she says, mouthing the words. Calls him by his name. *Follow me...* she mouths, and he does. She is wearing a trenchcoat, French-style, unbelted and flowing, and he's hypnotised by the rippling motion of the fabric, like dunes unrolling into the distance; by the waves of fragrance that flow around her, making him dizzy. She is not at all the soft-faced girl he is meant to be meeting, not with those sharp-sliced cheekbones. She's not reassurance: she's challenge. He lifts his hand. He can practically feel her clothes under his fingers: the textures, the slip of her shirt, satin or silk. Her skin would feel just the same, practically frictionless. He wants to bury his face in the glossy waves of her hair. To kiss the jut of her collarbone. To breathe the smell of her, orange and rose.

The door to the store slides open.

Inside, she leads him. Bright lights. A glassy repetition of counters. White-coated women with faces like masks. His hand outstretched, reaching to touch – her hair, the soft caramel of her coat collar – but he can't quite make contact, and instead he takes hold of the bottle she presents to him, fragile and precious and smooth like her, and her smile says yes as she shows him how easy it is for this thing to be his. He breathes jasmine and roses. *Very popular*, says a woman in a make-up-mask as she takes his bank card from him. *Lucky girl*. She puts the bottle into a box, slips the box into a bag. *She'll love it, I'm sure*. She'll love it: but when he looks for the shimmering woman who has led him here, searching for her approval, there is nothing. There's no-one. The air is empty, slides too easily into his lungs so a breath becomes a gasp. Like he's been lost inside a dream. Like he's woken up.

From behind the counter, the assistant hands him his card along with a receipt. He glimpses a three-figure sum before he closes his eyes, folds them both into the wallet he doesn't remember taking from his pocket. The mask of the assistant's face says she's on commission, dares him to make a fuss. Complaint dies on his lips. He could refuse the gift bag she's offering him, could argue for his money back – but then she would know: that he can't afford this. That he has no-one to give it to. That he's the sort of man who can be seduced by a virtual woman.

He mutters his thanks. Her eyes show pity. She knows anyway.

Thick paper with a silky handle, the gift bag is a weight he doesn't want. He steps through the sliding shop doors onto the glass-powdered street. He's not early any more.

She's there outside the Royal Bank of Scotland, the girl he's meant to meet. She is short and round with hair that spirals out of control, is weighted down with a scruffy backpack. Her phone is clutched in her hand. She lifts herself up on her toes to scan the street, but if she sees him at all she doesn't recognise him. He watches her tip her head back, push her hands into her pockets. She shuffles her feet, crunching glass under trainers she could walk in for miles.

Such thin air. It feels like breathing is an unsustainable effort.

As the girl busies herself with her phone, he waits for a break in the traffic. Makes it across the street in time to catch the tail of the queue boarding the number 22. The driver's already pulling away when her message arrives.

I'm here.

Twenty minutes later, the bus passes his flat. He stands, pushes the bell. Leaves the gift bag abandoned on the seat.

*

He steps through the sliding shop doors onto the glass-powdered street. Drops the gift-bag first, then the box, and then he weighs the bottle in his hand. Pulls back his arm, and hurls with all his strength so it hits the pavement slabs like a grenade.

It doesn't even chip. He stares at the bottle, his feet, the pavement. There is no beach. Only stone, reaching down to the core of the earth.

*

He steps through the sliding shop doors onto the glass-powdered street. He's not early any more. She's there outside the Royal Bank of Scotland, the girl he's meant to meet. She is short and round with hair that spirals out of control, is weighted down with a scruffy backpack. He walks towards her. Drops the gift-bag first, then the box. Without a word, he hands over the bottle.

She smiles a sweet, squint smile of acceptance. Weighs the bottle in her hand.
Pulls back her arm, and hurls with all her strength.

It hits the adscreen like a grenade, explodes into thick curved shards and a violent blossoming of jasmine, orange, rose – it shatters the screen, a black diagonal jag that bleeds backlight. The shimmering woman glitches, caught mid-blink – blink – blink–

The girl grabs his hand. Her grip is hotter and stronger than he could have imagined. She leans in close, and shouts at him – a single word:

Run!

He runs.

Candlemaker Row

The streets are just as they should be; which surprises me every time. I'm at the Haymarket junction, the train station in front of me, the Hearts memorial clock at my back, and to my right the main road running out of the city. With a southwest wind, here's where you'd catch it: that sweet spot equidistant from the North British Distillery and the Caledonian Brewery. But we have no wind, of course, not yet – though the skin team are working on it, because how can we call it Edinburgh without a brisk southwesterly?

With no carrying breeze, I turn my head, tilt it; feeling for the right angle. I take a couple of cautious steps, trusting Marek to steer me away from obstacles. It ought to be easier than this. 'Still elusive,' I say. My voice sounds blunt and distant.

There. I catch it: hold the angle, inhaling carefully. 'Much better, now,' I say. 'But ... still too thin. Too flat.' It has to be alive, this smell. Yeasty and bubbling. I wrinkle my nose. 'Top note of dust. Stale white bread.' I'm trying to taste what's missing. Something rich, and tangy. 'Marek ... you know the frequency we're using for the Nor' Loch? Can you adjust the signals in that direction – just a tiny, tiny bit?'

The tweaks will take him a couple of minutes. I could do it quicker, but first I'd have to shed all the gear – the headset, the gloves, the mouthpiece – and that would take longer in the end. So I wait, instead, at the junction which is just as it should be – and yet, not quite. This was a transport interchange, constant with buses and trams, with trains and taxis and cars; above all, with people. And there will be people after we launch – all our users, interacting. Right now, though, the streets are static, silent. It could be crack of dawn on a Sunday morning, if the sun wasn't centred above me.

'Ah, Jesus!' A sudden nauseous stink overwhelms me. I cough and retch as I swipe for the touchpad, my gloved hands clumsy. The headset gets caught in my hair as Marek manoeuvres it off – and I'm blinking, back in the strip-lit lab. I use my tongue to pop the mouthpiece free, and spit it out onto my lap. 'Water!' I say, holding up my robot mitts. Marek eases the gloves off, lays them neatly on the trolley before handing me a bottle. I gulp, swooshing away the lingering, rancid smell.

'Too much?' says Marek.

‘Just a bit.’ I shake my head as he starts to apologise. ‘Don’t worry. Trial and error.’

‘Do you want to tweak it? Try again?’

A flatness in his voice makes me glance up, check the time. It’s late – after seven. I know Marek has a new baby daughter at home, a girlfriend counting the minutes. I also know he’ll stay on, if I ask him to. I hesitate. Just one more try wouldn’t take us long, and we’re so nearly there. But then I think of Candlemaker Row. How close it is.

‘Let’s leave it,’ I say, casually. ‘Come fresh to it tomorrow.’

When Marek is gone, I rinse the mouthpiece, lay it aside for sterilisation. I should eat something, but that appalling smell has stolen my appetite. I’ll never be hungry again. I glance at the frequencies he used, note down some adjustments to try later on. I could get away with what we’ve got, I’m sure – but it has to be right. Of all the olfactory details, this is the one we’ll be judged on. This is the one that says Edinburgh. Remember, the first time we smelled it? Late September: the coach nosing its way towards the city centre, and the smell so warm, so thick I could practically chew it. Remember, I pulled a face, and buried my nose in your shoulder; it didn’t yet mean home.

I run my gaze down the Gantt chart, admiring the ticks that show how many smells we’ve recreated. Roasting coffee from the police-box kiosks; fresh cut grass for the Meadows; the damp, closed smell of underground Edinburgh, its vaults and buried streets. My ghost smells are coming along, too: cocoa and rubber from the Fountainbridge factories; and for Princes Street Gardens, a faint reminder of the Nor’ Loch, its previous life as the city’s cesspit.

One day we’ll have ghost people alongside my ghost smells. The technology isn’t there yet – but when it is, we’ll start with the old favourites: Mary Queen of Scots, Deacon Brodie, Robert Louis Stevenson. You’d roll your eyes at that: history for tourists. But how perfect to bring them back, the lives that were layered into this city. And we have to start somewhere.

Half past seven. If I time it right, I’ll catch Rob on his own for a progress update. I loop my pass around my neck, and leave my basement lair.

The ground floor is deserted, silent but for the hum of the vending machine. Its lighted window draws me in; I decide I'm hungry after all. The machine offers me its last remaining sandwich, pushes it forward, lets it drop. Egg mayonnaise. I take it, and carry on upstairs.

In the first floor studio, glowing screens show where a handful of people are working late. There are more of us, usually. Those for whom it's a labour of love. Who lost the lot, when it happened; lost more than a home. More than a repository of memories. I wander from section to empty section – and then I realise. It's Friday night. Everyone else is tucked up with their families, or out on the town with friends.

Instead of turning back on myself, I press deeper into the studio. I didn't mean to grow attached to this workspace that's half science lab, half art school, but I find a sense of purpose here that's absent from anywhere else. A sense of necessary, urgent invention.

Perhaps some of the urgency comes from the pictures. In my little lab, there's nothing to see. Grey benches, metal shelving, all my bits and bobs stored neatly in plastic tubs. What we're creating, Marek and I, it has no external reference, no source material. But here... Sometimes it feels like walking through a brighter version of my own head. Sometimes, it's like walking through wreckage.

In the aftermath, the internet buckled under the weight of memories. It was a tidal wave, millions of people all desperately remembering. Sharing whatever they had, in the hope that sharing would keep it alive. A lot of it was holiday snaps: the predictable route from castle to palace; the classic glimpse of New Town elegance through the dark of an Old Town close. Or cameraphone footage: from Calton Hill, the shaky 360 degrees of city ... hills ... sea... Visitors' Edinburgh, a tourist fantasy. That's what you used to say. You dismissed it, said it wasn't real. You were right, in a way: it was just too beautiful, too heart-stoppingly beautiful, to exist. Perhaps it never did: perhaps we dreamed it. A thousand-year consensual hallucination.

And now here we are – programmers and designers, scientists and sound artists, engineers and animators – all trying our hardest to dream it back.

There was other stuff too, in the tide of images. Architects' drawings. City masterplans. Slowly, people began to piece it all together: interactive maps, 3D simulations. Google Earth filled a lot of gaps. A call went out for the overlooked spaces. Thornybauk. Chuckie Pend. And when our project was set up – the Edinburgh Reboot – we gathered it all in.

Each team works on a different section, so as I wander the studio I'm walking through a mad jigsaw: the Canongate bumped up against the Meadows, the Cowgate leading to Moray Crescent. And in some of the photos are people. People like you, mostly. Dead people. I look back in time at a disaster that's yet to happen; the way the road speeds towards you and vanishes at the same time in the rearview mirror.

At first I think Rob's gone home for the weekend. His section is dark, lights and screens powered down. It's the smell that alerts me: malted barley, faint cousin of the aroma I've been struggling with. Then I see him, slumped at his desk, hand wrapped round an open beer.

'Alright?' he says, tipping the bottle towards me. 'Want one?'

'Yeah, sure.' I perch on the desk opposite his, click the Anglepoise on, and rip open my sandwich. 'D'you mind if I eat this? Can't downstairs; it's too eggy.' It's true: even a packet of crisps, an instant coffee, could taint the air for hours. When Marek first started working with me, I gave him a present of fragrance-free deodorant and unscented washing powder.

I lift my bottle: 'Cheers.' In the sharply-angled light, Rob looks knackered, his face criss-crossed with deep dark lines. 'What are we celebrating?' I say. 'Just, Friday night?'

He smiles. Shakes his head. 'It's finished,' he says.

I swallow. Put down my sandwich. 'Seriously?'

'I mean, there'll be snagging, obviously, but...' He raises his fist, like he'd be punching the air if only he had the energy.

'Wow. Well done, you must be ... this should be champagne!'

'Yeah well, hopefully it'll get Kate off my back for a bit.'

I nod. His team have been running behind schedule, and everyone says it's not his fault. It's a difficult section of the city – small, but difficult. Different levels, sharp angles. The way it all fits together. 'She seen it yet?' I say, and he shakes his head.

'Monday.'

My mouth is dry; I take a swig of beer. Hear myself asking: 'Need a walk-through first?'

Rob straightens up in his chair, looks around at the empty office. 'Ah, no I couldn't ask you to. What time is it, past eight? You'll be wanting to get home.'

I set the bottle down. The glass clinking on the desk makes a definite sound. I know how much he needs this. A lot of the staff were never in Edinburgh; some visited once, for a week in August. So people like me, whose lives were there, we're in demand for walk-throughs. Team leaders tend to approach me cautiously – but I've always said yes, and I've always been professional. If I've ever needed to cry – if, for instance, they've asked me to test the Water of Leith from Stockbridge to Roseburn, and I've walked in the vanished footsteps of our Sunday strolls, walked all the way along with my hand closed round the absence of yours – then I've swallowed my loss; made my report on the authenticity of the terrain; locked myself in the disabled toilet before I fall apart.

'Honestly,' I say. 'I'm dying to see it.'

The testing room is blindingly bright after the dark of the studio. I've swapped my trainers for stability shoes, laced them up tight; on the platform, I slot my feet into place. I strap on the support belt and attach it to the safety ring, then Rob helps me on with the rest of the kit: the gloves, the headset. When he settles the headphones over my ears, I can hear my blood thumping.

'I'm actually kind of nervous,' he says.

'Me too.' But I say it softly, and I'm not sure whether he hears.

The first thing is, the light is wrong. Twilight setting: no good for a walk-through. I should swipe out, ask Rob to change it. But then my eyes adjust and I see that it's been raining; and I think how long it's been waiting for me, this place. Over my shoulder squats Castle Rock, built from code and light, pinning the Grassmarket by the tail under its great rugged weight.

I tilt my head back to see what they've done with the sky. Dull, pinkish clouds are tugging across the darkening blue, blown by a wind that doesn't touch me. As I watch, the clouds pull apart to reveal a two-thirds moon. How long would I have to crane upwards to notice the repeat – the exact same moment looped round again? But they've done a good job; I haven't seen a sky like this before. No wonder it's taken so long.

I start to walk. Streetlights spill across the wet stone flags, which change to setts under my feet, and back to roughened flagstones. The familiar pubs line the north side of the square, their faces just right – and I'm caught in a sudden wash of music,

of voices and laughter, as though a door has opened briefly, as though there are lives inside. The Black Bull. The White Hart. The Last Drop. My chest feels tight. I walk on, past the gallows memorial. Here, by the chip shop, is where I'll place the stale fat and vinegar tang. Here, by the dark arched mouth of the Cowgate, is where I'll streak the air with a trace of urine, that faint Friday-night sweetness.

I'm climbing now, up Candlemaker Row. Past the high walls of the kirkyard, the odd assortment of shops, past Deadhead and Transreal and the tattoo parlour. My breath coming faster, legs working harder, as if I really am walking uphill. And when I reach the top of the street, I stop.

Four floors up: that's us. They've made the tenements too tall, the roofs blurring into the stone-coloured sky, so our flat's too distant from me. But it's the only one with a light on. A coincidence, a random choice by Rob or one of his team. I find myself thinking it's lucky we stayed central, weren't lured to suburbs that will never be rebooted, that we stayed tucked up in our crows-nest flat. Except of course if we had moved out, gone far enough from the centre, you and I would be there still. A twisted kind of luck, then. The same luck that meant I was away when it happened: travelling home on a train that shuddered to a halt somewhere outside Berwick, sat stranded while the news blazed through the carriages: impossible, incomprehensible.

Our window glows. Inside, in the kitchen, you'd be cooking, keeping an eye on the time: my train would be getting in soon, and it's a ten minute walk from Waverley, and you'd want to have dinner ready. You want to welcome me back.

I cross the road.

The familiar black of our front door. The cold stone lintel. The handle, smooth against my palm. I grasp it. Turn it. Press my weight against the door, and push.

Nothing happens. Of course. Nothing can happen. There is no inside. If the door could move, it would only swing open to absence.

I hear my name – and just for a moment, I let myself believe. You're calling me. You have the sash drawn up, and you're leaning out, looking down at me. You think I must have forgotten my keys, and that's why I'm waiting. That's why I'm stuck outside.

Rob calls again. He wants to know, is something wrong? Has it frozen? Do I need a restart? Everything's fine, I tell him. Turn around, and cross the street once more.

I start to think of what's missing, what's not quite right; turning in a slow circle, trying to do my job. I let my gaze sweep loosely over spires and blocks and towers – and there's something wrong about the angles, or I think so at first – but then, how could I remember? How could I be expected to remember? Chances are he's got it right – Rob, who never lived here, who didn't know these walls, these stones, this sky. With all his source material, chances are his version is truer than mine. I can't keep it all inside. Not forever.

I carry on turning. The small silhouette of Greyfriars Bobby, endlessly waiting on his plinth, too daft to understand the finality of death. I walk around to the front of the statue to check his nose. I can't fault it: shiny, brassy as if from all the hands that have rubbed it for luck.

I rest the tips of my fingers against the worn bronze.

'Stupid animal,' I say.

I raise my hand towards the touch panel, ready to come out.

That's when I see it. A flicker, up at the kitchen window: like someone moving behind the glass, crossing the room.

'Rob–' I say, and my voice sounds panicked and then I press my lips shut. In the time it takes to refocus, the movement has gone. All that's shifted is the air. In the back of my throat I taste it, something hollow and deep. A gaping smell of damp and dust.

I can hear Rob in the other world asking what's the matter, but I tune him out. I call your name instead: in silence, inside me. I call you like a summons.

If I wait long enough, I'll see the repeat, the exact same glitch come round again. Or I'll see you cross the room, come to the glass and look in my direction.

You have to start somewhere; that's why we're rebuilding – but it's not the smell of the brewery that means home. It's not this dreamed, split-level city. It's not the glowing window in the gathering dark. All of this was only ever a frame.

I stare, trying not to blink. Breathe cold earth and stone. Wait, for the flicker against the light.

PART 2: CRITICAL REFLECTIVE COMMENTARY

Introduction

Aims, methodology and original contribution to knowledge

My Creative Writing thesis comprises a collection of short stories about science and technology, *Small Objects and Other Stories*, and a critical-reflective exegesis in four chapters. As a whole, this practice research investigates a central research question:

- In what ways can the short story be used as a particularly appropriate mode for illuminating and interrogating contemporary experiences of science and technology through the creation of uncanny affect?

Using a research methodology that critically examines insights emerging from creative and reflective practice, my thesis makes the following original contributions to knowledge:

- 1) In Chapter 2, I make an original contribution to dialogues and debates theorising a notion of the technological uncanny by identifying two areas that characterise an uncanny of science and technology particular to our age: i) the body as the site of impact for contemporary science and technology, and ii) a contemporary optical uncanny or ‘uncanny of virtual surveillance’.
- 2) In Chapter 3, I offer a new perspective on how the methodology of creative writing as practice research impacts on the findings of that research; and I show how a reflexive writing practice can be experienced as uncanny.
- 3) In Chapter 4, I extend existing narratological theory to suggest the specific ways in which a second-person narrative mode is particularly suitable for the creation of uncanny affect.

Background

My interest in the notion of a contemporary technological uncanny is one I became aware of before I had a name for it, one which emerged over the course of several years in a novel-in-progress and individual short stories.

Prior to embarking on this research project my creative writing practice was primarily as a novelist. My choice of short stories as the most appropriate form for my practice research was informed by several factors. Firstly, the deferral of meaning characteristic of the modern literary short story – what Adrian Hunter has described as ‘the interdictions, ellipses, withholdings and occlusions that mark the positive shortness of the form’ (Hunter, 1999: 189) – suggests short fiction may be the ideal form to create the cognitive uncertainty that is an essential component of the uncanny. Secondly, the individual creative pieces that comprise a short story collection offer scope to test a range of distinct approaches and techniques for creating uncanny affect. And thirdly, the short story collection or sequence opens up the possibility of creating uncanny affect at the level of the book as a whole, as well as through individual stories.

Nicholas Royle suggests that recent social changes towards automation and globalisation mean our lives and experiences can seem to be ‘increasingly *programmed*’, with the result that a contemporary uncanny is often concerned with questions of self-determination and control in the context of computers and ‘new technology’ (Royle, 2003: 23-4). While Gothic studies has begun to theorise a notion of the technological uncanny, to date the full implications of Royle’s claims remain under-explored in the critical / creative field of creative writing as practice research. As managing editor of Comma Press, Ra Page notes that when he invited writers to respond to Freud’s ‘The Uncanny’ (1919), responses focused on a narrow range of tropes – no story explored, for instance, the confusions between imagination and reality (e.g. virtual or augmented realities) so characteristic of new technologies (Eyre and Page, 2008: xi). The stories comprising the creative component of my thesis focus on digital technologies such as virtual realities, data surveillance and video communications technology, and areas of biomedicine and biotechnology such as cloning, animal- and machine-human hybridity, stem cell treatments and medical marketplaces, to investigate through practice research the social, psychological and physical impacts of advances in science and technology. My exegesis reflects on

insights emerging from my creative work, relating them to relevant critical theory and situating my work in the context of short fiction by China Miéville, Nicholas Royle and Ali Smith – three authors selected in part because their work explores similar areas to my own, and in part because the generic scope of their short fiction demonstrates how the uncanny as a literary mode can evade the constraints of literary genre.

Exegesis: overview

- Chapter 1 serves to establish the theoretical background to my practice research. It demonstrates the extent to which a contemporary technological uncanny is one that develops and extends Freud's conceptualisation of *das Unheimliche*, with a literature review that reads Freud's essay through the lens of the uncanny theory that emerged from the 1970s onwards to demonstrate that the uncanny as a historically situated concept is bound up with contemporaneous experiences of technology. It positions my research in the context of the uncanny as a narrative mode that occurs frequently in Gothic literature and is closely associated with the Gothic but that transcends generic boundaries, and concludes with a working definition of the uncanny in contemporary fiction.

- Chapter 2 investigates claims from Gothic studies that the uncanny has become a formula which, through overfamiliarity, has lost its capacity to create unsettling affect, and demonstrates how uncanny short fiction can still offer defamiliarising and disruptive perspectives. It suggests two areas of concern that mark a technological uncanny specific to our age: the body as site of impact for science and technology, and the uncanny of virtual surveillance. It explores the implications of these insights by relating them to relevant critical theory from Gothic and posthuman studies and psychoanalysis, and by situating my creative work in the context of short fiction occupying similar territory by China Miéville, Nicholas Royle and Ali Smith.

- Chapter 3 applies notions of embodiment and surveillance to the practice of creative writing as research, to demonstrate how the insights presented in Chapter 2 are informed by the specific methodology of creative writing as research and the location of creative writing in the academy. In this chapter, I go on to suggest that

the capacity of a reflexive process to identify repressed concerns emergent in creative work is one way in which a reflexive creative writing practice can itself be experienced as uncanny.

- Chapter 4 examines issues of form, voice, structure and sequence to contend that the short story is an especially effective literary form for the creation of uncanny affect at the level of both the individual story and the collection as a whole. It investigates the implications for creative practice of the uncanny as an elusive and subjective experience, and concludes by extending existing narratological theory to suggest that the second person is a particularly uncanny narrative mode in literature.

Chapter 1: defining and locating the contemporary uncanny

In this chapter I establish the theoretical background to my practice research. I provide a historical overview of the uncanny as a concept and a narrative mode, with a view to informing and contextualising my short fiction. I propose that cognitive uncertainty is a primary characteristic of uncanny affect, and go on to show that the uncanny is a historically contingent concept that has to do with experiences of technology. I then examine the relationship between the Gothic and the uncanny, and establish that the literary uncanny is a narrative mode as opposed to a literary genre. Finally, I set out a working definition for short fiction that creates uncanny affect.

1.1 The Freudian Uncanny

‘One would like to know the nature of this common nucleus, which allows us to distinguish the “uncanny” within the field of the frightening’ (Freud, 2003 [1919]: 123)

Perhaps any project that sets out to engage with the literary uncanny must start with Freud, and his essay ‘The Uncanny’. If that’s not strictly where my interest began in exploring the notion of a contemporary, technological uncanny through my writing practice – for I can trace these creative concerns back to a time before I could define what ‘uncanny’ might mean – Freud’s study is nevertheless the key source that’s consistently informed my practice research. In this sense, a consideration of the Freudian uncanny seems an appropriate starting point for the critical and reflective section of a thesis that has aimed, in part, to investigate the extent to which a contemporary technological uncanny is a recontextualisation of the experience conceptualised by Freud one hundred years ago.

As an aesthetic phenomenon, the uncanny stretches back as far (at least) as the Enlightenment; as a concept that infiltrates a wide range of disciplines from the 1970s onwards, it shifts as it travels, evolving and expanding. And yet it’s commonly agreed that the conceptualisation of the uncanny begins with Freud, and returns to him. Though his was not the first study on the topic (he cites previous investigations by philosopher Friedrich Schelling and psychiatrist Ernst Jentsch; and in 1917 theologian Rudolf Otto had published *The Idea of the Holy* in which he

reflected on the role of uncanny affect in religious experience) it is undoubtedly the most influential. Freud's attempt to 'distinguish the "uncanny" within the field of the frightening' (2003: 123) continues to shape contemporary ideas of the uncanny as an experience and a literary effect: as Anneleen Masschelein has shown, what allows the uncanny to be considered a unified concept despite its rhizomatic tendency and shifting nature is the continual reference in uncanny theory back to Freud as the "founder of the discourse" (Masschelein, 2011: 4).

For Freud, his exploration is an 'aesthetic investigation' (123) rather than a work of psychoanalytical theory – and his focus on literature as a means of analysing uncanny affect (in particular the fascinating ways in which he reads and misreads his key text, E. T. A Hoffmann's short story 'The Sandman') makes 'The Uncanny' a particularly rich source for creative writers.

A brief summary of 'The Uncanny'

In this hybrid text with elements of linguistic analysis, personal anecdote, literary criticism, anthropology and psychoanalysis, Freud takes a double approach to his task of defining and accounting for the uncanny. In part one he embarks on an etymological exploration of the terms *heimlich* / *unheimlich*. Here he demonstrates how *heimlich* becomes its opposite through the extension of home, intimacy, domesticity and closeness (homely, cosy, familiar, at ease) into privacy, secrecy (*geheimnis*), concealment, and the state of being 'withdrawn from knowledge' (133), and then further into something hidden and not to be trusted, and finally to threat or eeriness. Freud offers various English translations for *unheimlich* (uncomfortable, uneasy, gloomy, dismal, ghastly, haunted, repulsive as well as uncanny). Uncanny, however, performs its own version of the *heimlich* manoeuvre; it too contains its opposite. In his 2003 monograph *The Uncanny*, critic Nicholas Royle repeats Freud's etymological investigation and cites the OED to show that as well as its everyday (Scots) usage of shrewd, wise and cautious, canny can also mean easy, snug, comfortable and cosy, and 'supernaturally wise, endowed with occult or magical power' – so that canny merges with uncanny in its sense of 'Partaking of a supernatural character; mysterious, weird, uncomfortably strange or unfamiliar' (OED cited in Royle, 2003: 22). This doubled ambivalence at the core of the

uncanny makes the very word unstable, uncertain; as Susan Bernstein suggests, the troubling of binary oppositions is fundamental to the operation of the uncanny (1973: 1113).

In part two of his essay, Freud shifts back and forth between uncanny occurrences and situations as encountered in real life, and, through an extended analysis of Hoffmann's 'The Sandman', uncanny affect provoked by fiction. In a highly selective reading of Hoffmann's text, he identifies anxiety about losing one's eyes, and therefore castration anxiety, as the cause of the story's uncanniness. Freud goes on to suggest a range of specific phenomena that are likely to result in a sense of the uncanny: confusions between living, animate beings and automatic, mechanical objects; dolls and doubles; telepathy; the compulsion to repeat; the evil eye; live burials; blurred boundaries between reality and fantasy. Each of these instances, he suggests, demonstrates that uncanny experiences are created by the return of primitive beliefs that have been surmounted by rationality, or by the revival of repressed childhood complexes: in Schelling's formulation, 'Uncanny is what one calls everything that was meant to remain secret and hidden [*geheimnis* – in secrecy] and has come into the open' (132); or in James Strachey's translation, which has 'come to light' (Freud, 1955: 225). Though Freud would later theorise that repression is caused by anxiety, at this stage he proposes the reverse relationship, that of anxiety arising from repression; thus, the return of the repressed triggers an uncanny sensation, which is a form of anxiety.

The third and final section of 'The Uncanny' purports to address the reader's doubts about Freud's preceding theories. Distinguishing between the uncanny as a real life experience and as an affect provoked by fiction, he suggests the uncanny in fiction is a much richer experience – one that is dependent on genre, and created by a writer who 'tricks' and 'betrays' (Freud, 2003: 157) by manipulating a reader's expectations and withholding explanation.

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One of the most striking aspects of Freud's essay is that, in attempting to establish with some certainty what defines and characterises the uncanny, he creates a piece of writing that raises more questions than it can answer. In Bernstein's formulation, the uncanny is ambulatory: it cannot be fixed (Bernstein, 2003); it evades Freud's

attempts to pin it down, so that what begins as an in-depth etymological investigation becomes a hybrid text that itself performs various aspects of the uncanny. Hélène Cixous, in a re-reading that shows how Freud's quest for certainty produces the opposite, describes 'The Uncanny' as 'a strange theoretical novel' (Cixous, 1976: 525), and indeed at times it resembles nothing so much as a tangled piece of fiction where the complexity of the plot has exceeded the author's control; contradictions are addressed by the introduction of more qualifying factors, which in turn create their own contradictions that require further qualification. The result, as noted in a number of responses to and re-readings of 'The Uncanny' (Kofman, 1991 [1973]; Weber, 1982; Hertz, 1985), is a text characterised by hesitation, doubt and uncertainty.

Before I discovered the uncanny as an idea, an experience or a literary mode, 'uncertainty' was the closest I came to naming this quality for which I found myself searching as a reader, and which I aimed to create as a writer. This was a specific kind of uncertainty – about the nature of what's experienced, and the nature of oneself in the world. A kind of uncertainty that I found in stories by Ali Smith, China Miéville and author Nicholas Royle; that has to do with reaching, as a writer, towards something I don't quite recognise, or with finding a way to speak about something that hovers just at the edge of understanding. And as I embarked on this project, the notion of uncertainty became important from another angle: how might the role of uncertainty in my writing process be affected by this new context of creative writing as research, with its requirement for reflexivity?

How can I keep the darkness I need, to write these stories? Fred Botting's argument that there's been an opening out, a loss of interiority that's come alongside new technologies. Isn't there a similar risk in placing creative writing in the academy? (Alexander, 2014).

Practice research seemed to demand a level of self-awareness that was at odds with a sense, frequently expressed by creative writers, that the writing is most successful when it's 'unknowing'. In a recent collection of interviews with novelists, Hanif Kureishi, Alison MacLeod and Jane Rusbridge speak of the value of uncertainty (in Stevens, 2014), with Kureishi suggesting 'There is a sense – there has to be a sense – in which most writers do not entirely understand what they are doing' (17). Mike Harris, in a paper on creative writing theory, reports how some writers describe their

process as something that happens without their control: poems are described as beginning to ‘assemble themselves’; meaning is created ‘by some process I can’t fathom’ (Harris, 2009: 38). And for novelist Kathryn Heyman, ‘mystery is critical to the process of creative unknowing. ... In order to fully engage with the act of creation that fiction requires, it is necessary to first be utterly lost’ (Heyman, 2013: 63). How then could this process of ‘creative unknowing’ be accommodated within the role of the practice researcher as a ‘knowing practitioner’ (Batty and McAulay, 2016) – one knows what she wants to say and how she will say it?

For these reasons, the matter of uncertainty is for me one of the most interesting contradictions contained within ‘The Uncanny’. For Jentsch, uncertainty is fundamental to the mechanism of the uncanny – but while Freud’s essay draws on Jentsch’s study in a number of elements, on this issue the two part company: Freud is categorical in his dismissal of uncertainty as a factor in uncanny affect. Still, uncertainty characterises many of his examples of uncanny phenomena, from both literature and lived experience. As Samuel Weber observes, nowhere is this more evident than in Freud’s reading of ‘The Sandman’ (the deeply strange story of a university student, Nathaniel: of his terror in childhood of the family lawyer Coppelius, who may be responsible for his father’s death, and whom Nathaniel identifies with both the Sandman from the cautionary children’s tale and, later, with the optician Coppola; of his infatuation with the beautiful Olympia, who turns out to be an automaton; and of his apparent descent into madness and eventual suicide).

In his reading of this text [‘The Sandman’], Freud insists that “intellectual uncertainty” – the term introduced by Jentsch, his predecessor in the study of the uncanny – is not what counts. It is not, he insists, uncertainty or delusion concerning Olympia that is uncanny in this story, but rather the (castration) anxiety associated with the figure of the Sandman, and hence with the fear of losing one’s eyes. And yet, despite the fact that Freud presents this interpretation with great conviction and force, “intellectual uncertainty” returns throughout this essay to haunt its main thesis, and in fact to help dismember it, scattering it into a variety of different theses... (Weber, 1982: 15-16).

Though Freud later examines more generally some of the ‘tricks’ used by writers to create uncanny affect, in his analysis of ‘The Sandman’ he pays scant attention to the literary techniques Hoffmann employs in his creation of uncanny affect. Hoffmann’s tale is told partly in epistolary form and from multiple perspectives, with each narrator adopting a different stance in relation to the extraordinary nature of the

events that are described so that there is no single accepted explanation as to what has occurred. Borders between fiction and non-fiction are blurred by an unnamed first-person narrator who begins his section of the story with a series of metafictional musings over how best Nathaniel's tale should be told, while distinctions between humans and machines are repeatedly troubled through the parallels Hoffmann draws between the automaton Olympia, the protagonist Nathaniel and his sweetheart Clara. Slippages between the real and the fantastical are often accompanied by imagery of lenses, through which a rational viewpoint is transformed into one coloured by fantasy. But instead of considering these strategies, Freud largely ignores the literary texture of the work and treats the text as a kind of case study, apparently confusing the fictional character of Nathaniel with a real-life subject whose childhood traumas can be inferred and psychoanalysed. Thus he himself blurs distinctions between real and not-real, and contradicts his later assertion that the uncanny in real life and in fiction are distinct phenomena ('we should distinguish between the uncanny one knows from experience and the uncanny one only fancies or reads about' (Freud, 2003: 154) and 'the uncanny that we find in fiction ... actually deserves to be considered separately' (155)).

Freud's disregard of Hoffmann's formal and creative strategies permits a (mis)reading of the story that enables him to assert that here uncertainty cannot be a cause of uncanny affect, because uncertainty regarding the cause of these inexplicable events does not persist while the uncanny affect does:

...the conclusion of the tale makes it clear that the optician Coppola really is the lawyer Coppelius and so also the Sand-Man. There is no longer any question of "intellectual uncertainty": we know now that what we are presented with are not figments of a madman's imagination ... yet this clear knowledge in no way diminishes the impression of the uncanny. The notion of intellectual uncertainty in no way helps us to understand this uncanny effect (139).

But later readings inspired by Freud's essay challenge his interpretation. Christine Brooke-Rose describes 'The Sandman' as 'thoroughly ambiguous' (Brooke-Rose, 1981: 65), while for David Punter it 'remains at the end of the day – and even at the end of Freud's remarks on it – a remarkably inexplicable story' (Punter, 2007: 130). Michael Scharpé draws on Sarah Kofman's 1973 re-reading of Hoffmann's tale (Scharpé, 2003) to show Freud's interpretation of the story as narratologically highly simplistic, in its assumption of an ending that holds true only from the perspective of

one viewpoint character (Nathaniel). By contrast, Clara's perspective is quite different: 'Let me say straight out what it is I think: that all the ghastly and terrible things you spoke of took place only within you' (Hoffman, 1982: 95); and the perspective of the unnamed third narrator inhabits an uncertain middle ground, lying somewhere between the supernatural interpretation of Nathaniel and the psychological interpretation of Clara.

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It is not only in Freud's simplistic and partial reading of 'The Sandman' that his attempts to dismiss uncertainty are open to challenge. Again and again in the course of 'The Uncanny', the given examples of real and fictional situations that are likely to be experienced as uncanny are those that include elements of uncertainty. Jentsch, according to Freud, is 'undoubtedly correct' in his assertion that "One of the surest devices for producing slightly uncanny effects through storytelling ... is to leave the reader wondering whether a particular figure is a real person or an automaton, and to do so in such a way that his attention is not focused directly on the uncertainty, lest he should be prompted to examine and settle the matter at once" (135) – i.e. a reliable method of producing uncanny affect is to create and sustain uncertainty. Indeed, uncertainty as to whether events can be naturally or supernaturally explained is acknowledged by Freud as one of the main strategies by which fiction, as opposed to real life, produces uncanny affect: 'For a long time [the author] may prevent us from guessing the presuppositions that underlie his chosen world, or he may cunningly withhold such crucial enlightenment right to the end. ... this illustrates the thesis we have just advanced – that fiction affords possibilities for a sense of the uncanny that would not be available in real life' (157).

Just such a strategy is used in a story Freud describes as 'extraordinarily uncanny', where the reader 'is led to surmise that ... the house is haunted by ghostly crocodiles or that the wooden monsters have come to life in the dark, or something of the sort' (151). In other words, the text may nudge the reader towards a supernatural explanation, but interpretation is left open. (Royle identifies this story as 'Inexplicable', by L. G. Moberly, and points out that the author 'strands the reader' in the final sentences: "it was many a long day before I could live down

those weird experiences, and even now they are to me quite inexplicable. Does any explanation of it all occur to *you*?”” (Royle, 2003: 140.)

In the closing section of the essay, Freud – having hitherto firmly denied his own uncertainty – proceeds to undermine himself by addressing explicitly his doubts about the value of doubt: discussing the conditions of literary genre under which the raising of the dead may or may not be an uncanny theme, he asks, ‘And can we completely discount the element of intellectual uncertainty, given that we have admitted its importance in relation to the link between the uncanny and death’ (153). Finally in his explanation of the uncanny as an effect that emerges from the surmounting of primitive beliefs, Freud speculates that uncanny affect is caused because ‘we do not feel entirely secure in these new [civilised, rational] convictions’ (154) – a theory that entails uncertainty as to whether rational explanations for troubling phenomena can really be trusted.

Formally, too, ‘The Uncanny’ embodies the author’s unacknowledged hesitations and uncertainties. The assurance that ‘It now only remains for us to test the insight we have arrived at’ (148) is followed 400 words later by ‘Only a few remarks need now be added to complete the picture’ (149); another few hundred words, and Freud is still testing, still repeating, and nowhere near completion: ‘Let us add something of a general nature, which is, strictly speaking, already contained in what we have previously said...’ (150). And the doubts that are sweepingly dismissed – ‘We can no longer be in any doubt about where we now stand’ (147) – return within a few pages to haunt the text: ‘During the foregoing sections, certain doubts will have arisen in the reader’s mind’ (152). In the end, what Freud sets out to reveal remains concealed (what is the one exception to the rule that those species of the uncanny that derive from repressed complexes remain as uncanny in literature as in real life (157)? We are never told). All of this occurs seemingly without the author’s knowledge, so that what ought to have remained hidden is illuminated; as Royle reflects, “‘The Uncanny’ is an extraordinary text for what it does not say, as well as for what it does. It constantly says more or less or other than what it says’ (Royle, 2003: 7).

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This ambivalence is certainly part of the continuing broad appeal of the uncanny in cultural theory. As Matt Ffytche states in his recent critique of the rise of uncanny theory, ‘the uncanny has been sustained by a certain suggestiveness’ (Ffytche, 2012: 81); the sense of Freud’s text as revealing more things and other things than its author intended is a key factor in its availability for re-readings and rediscoveries, for exploration in diverse fields of study and areas of culture.

In the course of this research I have found a resonance between Freud’s ‘[saying] more or less or other’; the short fiction by Miéville, Royle and Smith that has formed part of the context in which I carried out my practice research; and my aspiration to create short fiction that is similarly suggestive, with the capacity in some way to exceed meaning – and the notion of saying more or other in the short story form is one I investigate in Chapter 4 of this exegesis.

Uncertainty as a primary characteristic of the uncanny

On the matter of uncertainty, critics and theorists – particularly those associated with deconstructionism – have tended to agree with Jentsch rather than Freud. For Weber, ‘Uncanny is a certain indecidability which affects and infects representations, motifs, themes and situations’ (Weber, 1973: 1132), while Cixous states, ‘Freud declares that it is certain that the use of *Unheimliche* is uncertain. The indefiniteness is part and parcel of the “concept”’ (Cixous, 1976: 528). More recently Fred Botting has described the uncanny as ‘an effect of uncertainty, of the irruption of fantasies, suppressed wishes and emotional and sexual conflicts’ (Botting, 1996: 11), while Royle’s monograph emphasises ‘the trembling of what remains undecidable’ (Royle, 2003: 52) as essential to uncanny experience.

Though Mladen Dolar sides with Freud, his argument against the importance of uncertainty is sustained by a partial reading of the literary evidence that repeats Freud’s misreading of Hoffmann’s ‘The Sandman’; taking Shelley’s *Frankenstein* as a further fictional example that supports Freud’s position, he maintains that *Frankenstein* is undoubtedly uncanny despite being built on the reader’s acceptance of a supernatural event that is presented as real, so that on the part of the reader ‘no hesitation occurs’ (Dolar, 1991: 22). Here, Dolar overlooks those extradiegetic elements that make *Frankenstein* a profoundly uncertain text, the ‘different first-

person narrators and ... various stories and letters' that 'do not close the novel in a conventionally moral manner, but produce a distance from the different figures in the tale to leave a sense of uncertainty and irresolution' (Botting, 1996: 102).

Marc Falkenberg makes a particularly important contribution to the discussion around the role of uncertainty in uncanny affect with his observation that the term 'intellectual uncertainty' ascribed to Jentsch by Freud does not, in fact, appear in Jentsch's study: 'The examples Jentsch discusses suggest that the response to the uncanny is at first intuitive and preconscious. For Jentsch, the uncanny causes a cognitive uncertainty, which at first may not even be fully apprehended intellectually' (Falkenberg, 2005: 20). Falkenberg goes on to challenge Freud's definition of the uncanny, arguing that uncertainty is its primary characteristic and accusing Freud of a 'repression of the uncanny' in his dismissal of uncertainty as a factor (Falkenberg, 2005: 34). Falkenberg's reframing of Jentsch's notion of cognitive uncertainty as an effect identified and experienced as much by sense as by conscious thought is something that resonates strongly with my creative practice, and which has informed my working definition of the uncanny in short fiction in section 1.5.

1.2 Always the same, always strange: the uncanny in history

'An awareness of historical and social processes will illuminate at every turn the form in which the uncanny confronts us' (S. S. Prawer, 1980: 130)

A woman walks through a virtual reconstruction of the destroyed streets where she and her lover used to live. A young man trades away his youth, and something of himself, in the plasma extracted from his blood. A clone addresses her dead, doubled 'self' as she tries to understand her personal history. The stories that make up my practice research are specific to the technologies of our age, and simultaneously clearly recognisable as instances of the same uncanny affect defined (or un-defined, per Cixous) by Freud. Doubles, hauntings, confusions of the living and the dead, the return of the repressed; these and many other uncanny tropes and topos are given contemporary expression in my collection.

The notion of a contemporary technological uncanny, as theorised in recent years by Gothic studies scholars, is central to my short fiction, and one of the aims of this research project has been to investigate the extent to which a literary contemporary technological uncanny can be seen either as a phenomenon that is distinct from Freud's conceptualisation, or as a development and recontextualisation of the Freudian uncanny. Just as the word 'uncanny' encompasses familiarity and strangeness – just as its effect is to disturb the familiar by making it strange – what's suggested by my practice research is an uncanny that is always the same, and always shifting.

Locating the uncanny in history

Freud himself treats the uncanny largely as an ahistorical phenomenon. In identifying castration anxiety as a chief cause of uncanny elements in 'The Sandman', he roots uncanniness in myth and constructs it as a universal human experience. But a number of texts point to the historically specific nature of his examples of uncanny situations and experience as evidence that the uncanny must be understood as a historically contingent construct. Collins and Jervis, for instance, suggest Freud's assertion that the uncanny can be caused by the return of

‘surmounted beliefs’ identifies it as a modern phenomenon – that we must have surmounted these beliefs in order for them to return (Collins and Jervis, 2008: 3). Given Freud’s reference to the (now surmounted) belief in demons as a cause of sickness in the Middle Ages (150), we might then date our ability to experience the uncanny to the early modern era at the earliest.

Writing in 1965, S. S. Praver cautions against a view of the uncanny as a timeless phenomenon; ‘of forgetting that it confronts us in history’ (Praver, 1980: 126). Instead he elucidates Freud’s uncanny in a way that throws light on the interplay of ahistorical and historicised aspects. Developing the idea of the home that is made ‘unhomely’ by the emergence of some buried secret (that which ought to have remained hidden, but has been brought to light), Praver shows how notions of home and secrecy each operate on several levels. Thus home encompasses individual consciousness, i.e. the ego, or surface of the mind; the tangible world of which we are normally aware; and the society in which we try to find our place. Secrecy, meanwhile, encompasses the individual unconscious, but also a collective unconscious that finds expression in myth and fairytale; those primitive fears we have surmounted but which return to haunt us; and a particular sense of alienation to do with ‘things we have made turning against us, of historical and social forces that we are helping to shape and that yet escape our control and even our knowledge’ (136-7).

Praver’s perspective brings together the transhistorical (e.g. myth, legend and fairytale) with specific historical and social factors; as the nature of our fears and concerns changes over time, so uncanny literature is informed by – and informs – those concerns, as individual authors ‘assimilate their sense of the uncanny into an over-all, historically conditioned world-view’ (126). In his description of the uncanny tale as ‘part of a great historical dialogue between Enlightenment and Irrationalism or Occultism’ (133), he anticipates Mladen Dolar’s understanding of the Freudian uncanny as a phenomenon whose emergence can be located in the 18th century as a consequence of the Enlightenment. For Dolar, ‘Ghosts, vampires, monsters, the undead dead, etc., flourish in an era when you might expect them to be dead and buried, without a place. They are something brought about by modernity itself.’ He distinguishes between ‘the uncanny as such’, which he sees as a universal human experience, and ‘*a specific dimension of the uncanny that emerges with modernity. ... which constantly haunts it from the inside*’ (Dolar, 1991: 7).

Terry Castle follows Dolar in connecting the uncanny to the historical Enlightenment (as well as to the state of becoming enlightened, i.e. the bringing into the light of something hidden). In *The Female Thermometer*, Castle theorises the ‘invention’ of the uncanny as the dark, repressed shadow of the age of rationality and reason (Castle, 1995: 8):

The crucial developmental process on which the Freudian uncanny depends is rationalization: the “surmounting” of infantile belief. . . . When did this crucial internalization of rationalist protocols take place? At least in the West, Freud hints, not *that* long ago. At numerous points in “The Uncanny”— though perhaps most strikingly in the sections dealing with literary representations of the uncanny – it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that it was during the eighteenth century, with its confident rejection of transcendental explanations, compulsive quest for systematic knowledge, and self-conscious valorization of “reason” over “superstition,” that human beings first experienced that encompassing sense of strangeness and unease Freud finds so characteristic of modern life (Castle, 1995: 10).

According to Castle, the uncanny occurs historically a result of this “‘enlightening” turn from magic to reason’ (14). Such an understanding suggests how science and technology have been bound up with the uncanny from its earliest manifestations; a turn to reason involves a turn towards a ‘scientific attitude’, characterised by empiricism, observation and experimentation, by that which can be seen and proved to be true (Grayling, 2016: 259).

The uncanny concerns of Romantic and Gothic texts of the early 19th century are shaped by scientific and technological advances of the previous century. As Castle points out, the story of Hoffmann’s ‘The Sandman’ is made possible by the development of automata, which were first exhibited in the 1740s: ‘Hoffmann’s uncanny piece of literary invention, therefore, was thus dependent on an *actual* invention: a specific technological innovation, closely linked with the developing science of clockmaking, which at once galvanized public interest and made possible the curious reactivation of unconscious fantasy Freud describes so well’ (Castle, 1995: 11). Hoffmann’s creation of uncanny affect, she argues, results from ‘a distinctively “eighteenth-century” urge toward technological mastery and control’. Meanwhile the electrical reanimation of dead flesh in Shelley’s *Frankenstein* is informed by Galvani’s experimentation with bioelectricity in the 1780s; here, scientific rationalism is the force that simultaneously represses superstitious belief,

and enables the emergence into life of what should have remained buried – destabilising the boundaries between human and non-human, the living and the dead, and giving form to contemporary anxieties about industrialisation.

For Praver, *Frankenstein* is illustrative of a deep human fear of ceding control to science and technology: ‘In the very attempt to gain greater and greater control of natural forces man feels himself losing that control, and turning the world against himself’ (128). Praver identifies concerns around alienation, estrangement and loss of control – which he links to a historical process of secularisation – as particularly significant in shaping how the uncanny has been expressed in literature during the 19th and 20th centuries; his examples, including Nathaniel Hawthorne’s notes for a story about a daemonically-possessed steam engine that injures and kills factory workers, suggest how such themes are particularly characteristic of uncanny literature about technology. This ‘haunted machine’ trope persists into contemporary uncanny literature – as seen in Chapter 2, where I examine its significance in the development of my own uncanny fiction – while concerns with alienation connected with technology are evident in several of Smith’s stories such as ‘The hanging girl’, ‘Virtual’ and ‘being quick’, which I explore in Chapters 2 and 4.

Alongside this movement towards secularisation, there is a corresponding shift in the literary uncanny from exterior threat to interior, or from the supernatural to the psychological, as ‘the unreal moves from a location outside the mind to haunt it from within’ (Botting, 2008: 21) – so that in Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* the monster unleashed by Jekyll’s experimental chemistry is not an invader threatening the sanctuary of the home, but a dark incarnation of Jekyll himself, in a text that gestures forward to the modernist rejection of the notion of a fixed, stable identity: ‘I hazard the guess that man will be ultimately known for a mere polity of multifarious, incongruous, and independent denizens’ (Stevenson, 1896: 49).

The uncanny in the 20th century

By the end of the 19th century, electricity, recording and tele-technologies had unsettled distinctions between living and dead, animate and non-animate, and erased spatial and temporal boundaries, while experiences of mechanical repetition had become widespread through technologies of mass production. Gia Pascarelli has

drawn attention to this context of rapid technological development to suggest that Freud's investigation of the uncanny was inextricably linked with technology:

Freud's theoretical efforts of the early twentieth century suggest that he, perhaps unbeknownst to himself, was engaged in an analysis of a particular sociocultural moment in time: a moment when the human psyche was being radically conditioned and constituted by the historically unprecedented phenomena associated with industrial technology (Pascarelli, 2002: 111).

That 'The Uncanny' was published in the immediate aftermath of WWI suggests links with another kind of technological development, that of war on an industrial scale. The effects of the war are referred to obliquely in Freud's essay: he is unable to make a comprehensive search of the literature on the uncanny 'for reasons that are not hard to divine, and inherent in the times we live in' (123-4); the spiritualist revivalist movements that flourished in the aftermath of WWI are fleetingly referenced: 'Placards in our big cities advertise lectures that are meant to instruct us in how to make contact with the souls of the departed' (148-9). Freud's construction of the uncanny as an experience of anxiety bound up with repression can be read in the context of the trauma of soldiers returning from battle and what we would now term post-traumatic stress disorder (Schlipphacke, 2015). The impact of such unprecedented mass killing leads Anthony Vidler to suggest that, 'Thus historicized, the uncanny might be understood as a significant psychoanalytical and aesthetic response to the real shock of the modern, a trauma that, compounded by its unthinkable repetition on an even more terrible scale during World War II, has not been exorcised from the contemporary imaginary' (Vidler, 1992: 9). Thus the uncanny, for Vidler, is reconceived as 'a way to think the two "postwars"' – and this notion of the uncanny as a response to social, political and cultural situations is one made explicit by Weber, who considers other historical factors to be significant. He points in particular to capitalism and Marxist theories of the means of production to suggest how, in the 19th and 20th centuries, processes of industrialisation and technologisation have created persistent structural conditions that ensure the continuing social relevance of an uncanny that is concerned with alienation and loss of control: 'Their influence on the uncanny is scarcely to be ignored and they doubtless have contributed to the fact that this "off-side" region has lost little of its actuality since the days of Hoffmann, Villiers, and Freud' (Weber, 1973: 1133).

A contemporary technological uncanny

In the 45 years since Weber's essay, the "'off-side' region' of the uncanny has extended its actuality into a diverse range of fields of study. Vidler is among those who argue that this extension is due in part to the increasing technologisation of our lives; that the uncanny has become a tool to examine uncertainties of self specific to our age, 'a peculiarly contemporary sense of haunting: that provoked by the loss of traditional bodily and locational references, by the pervasive substitution of the simulated for the "real," in the computer's virtual reality' (Vidler, 1992: 10). If this was so in 1992, how much more so at the outset of this research project in 2014, in our era of portable, personalised digital technology, of immersive virtual reality, of rapid biotechnological breakthrough?

More recently, Isabella van Elferen has advanced a technological uncanny that's characterised by Freudian motifs, located in the borderlands between human and non-human, extended into cyberspace as a radically uncertain zone haunted by post-human agency and technologically produced doppelgangers (van Elferen, 2009). On the other hand, Botting has variously argued that the uncanny is a formula which in the late 20th and early 21st centuries has lost its effect or has shifted so that it 'is no longer where it used to be' (Botting, 2008: 11), and that our ever-accelerating technological landscape calls into question the continued existence of the uncanny as an experience related to technology (Botting, 2015).

For John Potts and Edward Scheer, though, a contemporary technological uncanny can still be traced back to Freud:

This question of the uncanny in relation to particular technological formations is perhaps still recuperable as an instance of the Freudian uncanny, that is, as the return of the repressed. ... the acceleration of technological development runs alongside an equal and opposite insistence on the far side of the technological: the irrational, the unconscious (Potts and Scheer, 2006: xiii).

Meanwhile Royle argues that although a historicisation of the uncanny that depends on a notion of its 'invention' (Castle, 1995: 8) is problematic, a contemporary uncanny is concerned with automation and globalisation, and resultant fears of loss of self-determination in an age where our lives and experiences can seem to be 'increasingly *programmed*' (Royle, 2003: 23). Where digital machinery increasingly

carries out the knowledge-based work that was once the domain of the human, what distinguishes humans from programmed machinery? Punter makes a similar argument for the uncanny as a phenomenon which is not specific to any historical period in any straightforward way, but rather one which reminds us ‘that we are composed of the past and that we cannot control the moments at which it signifies its presence in the form of upheavals, transformations or phantoms’ (Punter, 2007: 136); an affect that finds expression through specifically contemporary experiences where ‘some kind of ghost continues to hover, and indeed to manifest itself even in the very heartland of the so-called “new” technologies’ (132). The value of the uncanny in interrogating these contemporary experiences of technology – our fast-changing relationships with our environment, our bodies, our selves – may be one reason for its proliferation at the end of the 20th century, to the extent that Annaleen Masschelein has argued that, despite its associations with the Enlightenment and the Romantic Gothic, the uncanny is in fact a late 20th century concept – even as its conceptualisation goes back to Freud as the ““founder of discourse”” (Masschelein, 2011: 4).

In her genealogy of the uncanny, Masschelein cites Robert Plank on how the Freudian construction of the uncanny can change over time:

The evolution from the golem to the robot can also be understood as a consistent pushing forward of the frontier of the uncanny. Fiction would usually be ahead of reality in this movement, although sometimes behind it. Motifs would be chosen as being no longer so uncanny as to be taboo, and still uncanny enough to provide a literary thrill (Plank cited in Masschelein: 65).

This suggestion – that a contemporary uncanny is a recontextualisation of the experience Freud set out to define, provoked by new motifs or delivered via different, contemporary mechanisms – is supported by my practice research, and elucidated in Chapter 2 of this exegesis. Plank’s notion of the uncanny as a literary thrill, meanwhile, is one that resonates with my attempts to identify and mark uncanny affect in fiction, and to which I return at the end of this chapter.

1.3 The uncanny and the Gothic

'here the uncanny is too much mixed up with the gruesome and partly overlaid by it' (Freud, 2003: 148)

Freud's examples of uncanny texts by authors associated with the German Gothic (Hoffmann and Hauff) illustrate how the literary uncanny can be understood as an element that occurs within Gothic literature, both as a historically delimited genre and as a literary mode. But the relationship between the uncanny and the Gothic is more complex than this. The ways in which the two might be regarded as bound up with each other have been variously articulated by Gothic studies scholars over the past 25 years.

Botting sees the uncanny as an effect that characterised Gothic literature from the 19th century, emerging as a dark counterpart of Romanticism in the works of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe, Charlotte and Emily Brontë, Wilkie Collins and Charles Dickens: 'Terror became secondary to horror, the sublime ceded to the uncanny ... the uncanny renders all boundaries uncertain and, in nineteenth-century Gothic writing, often leaves readers unsure whether narratives describe psychological disturbance or wider upheavals within formations of reality and normality' (Botting, 1996: 11). For Maggie Kilgour, the uncanny is a concept that accounts for the way in which Gothic literature defamiliarises the real (1995: 220) – and Byron and Punter adopt a similar view of the uncanny as something that operates within Gothic fiction; referring to Bennett and Royle's list of forms the uncanny can take (Bennett and Royle, 1995: 35-8), they suggest that:

What is in general certain is that these phenomena of the uncanny form the background and indeed the *modus operandi* of much Gothic fiction ... the representation of the uncanny is at the core of Gothic, since it, like the uncanny, deals in the constant troubling of the quotidian, daylight certainties within the context of which one might prefer to lead one's life (Byron and Punter, 2004: 286).

For Jerrold E. Hogle, this model is reversed: Gothic is a literary mode that gives us the most popular and enduring examples of uncanny figures and motifs (Hogle, 2002: 6-7). Similarly Marie Mulvey-Roberts considers the uncanny as one of Gothic's many 'perennial imperatives', along with 'fear, death ... ruin, redemption,

the supernatural, excess, abjection, the monstrous, horrific and terrifying' (Mulvey-Roberts, 2009: xix).

Freud himself offers what may be a useful reflection on how Gothic and uncanny modes overlap. Speaking of the uncanniness of death, ghosts and specifically of haunted houses he explains, 'We might in fact have begun our investigation with this example of the uncanny – perhaps the most potent – but we did not do so because here the uncanny is too much mixed up with the gruesome and partly overlaid by it' (148). The gruesome haunted house, a quintessential Gothic trope, evokes feelings of terror and horror; the uncanny is associated with less excessive, more creeping feelings: anxiety, unease and uncertainty. Where the Gothic mode is characterised by excess, the hesitations of the uncanny are subtler in effect.

Uncanniness, then, may be particularly characteristic of the Gothic mode, but is not confined to it. Marjorie Sandor, in the introduction to her recent anthology *The Uncanny Reader: Stories from the Shadows*, describes the uncanny as 'a genre buster, a kind of viral strain' (2015: 8), and certainly the range of short fiction selected by Sandor for inclusion in this anthology (Chekhov and Kafka as well as Hoffmann, Poe and de Maupassant) shows how far the uncanny can exceed generic boundaries – as does the diverse list of 'uncanny' authors cited by Punter (Achebe, Easton Ellis, Hoban, Rushdie, Walcott (Punter, 2007: 133-5)) and Bennett and Royle (Woolf, Winterson, Eugenides (37)).

My selection of three authors whose work I focus on in this exegesis is similarly genre busting. None is regarded primarily as a writer of Gothic fiction. Miéville's work blurs generic boundaries and tends to be categorised as weird fiction, which he positions as 'self-consciously at the intersection' of science fiction, fantasy and horror (Miéville, 2003: 358-9). Royle too has been described as writing "at the cutting edge" of genre' (Royle, 1995). And though Smith has been critically positioned within a Scottish Gothic or fantasy tradition (Germanà, 2003; Baker, 2014: 24-5) her formally experimental literary fiction – described as reflecting both a modernist and postmodern sensibility (Germanà and Horton, 2013: 4-8) – evades categorisation.

My stories aim to elude genre – exist in the spaces between fantastical, SF, literary. So the reader doesn't know the codes, conventions. Doesn't know how to read them (Alexander, 2016).

The generic fluidity of short fiction by Miéville, Royle and Smith reflects my own approach to this research project. While there are stories within my collection that can be positioned in a Gothic literary mode (most clearly ‘Candlemaker Row’ (Alexander, 2015) which deals in ghostly ruins and, in its exploration of an Edinburgh that’s both haunted and doubled, enters into a dialogue with Scottish Romantic / Gothic authors such as James Hogg, Robert Fergusson and Robert Louis Stevenson), the importance of evading generic categorisation – and readerly expectations more generally – has become increasingly apparent as I seek to provoke uncanny affect not just at the level of each individual story, but across the collection as a whole. The intersecting elements of expectation, predictability, familiarity and the elusiveness of uncanny affect are issues I consider in some depth in Chapter 4 of this exegesis.

1.4 My kind of unease: working with the literary uncanny

‘Above all, the uncanny is intimately entwined in language, with how we conceive and represent what is happening within ourselves, to ourselves, to the world, when uncanny strangeness is at issue’ (Royle, 2003: 2)

What does it mean to set out to write a collection of uncanny short fiction? In particular, what does it mean to work with a concept that's as notoriously slippery as the uncanny, and an affect that's acknowledged as being highly subjective?

Jentsch regarded as futile any attempt to pin down the essential nature of the uncanny, which he approaches as a class of sensation, a particular kind of ‘affective excitement’ (Jentsch, 1995: 8): ‘Such a conceptual explanation would have very little value. The main reason for this is that the same impression does not necessarily exert an uncanny effect on everybody. Moreover, the same perception on the part of the same individual does not necessarily develop into the “uncanny” every time, or at least not every time in the same way’. However, he goes on to argue that there is enough commonality of experience ‘for a certain psycho-physiological group’ that it should still be possible to arrive at a working definition that sets out not what the

uncanny is, but how it operates as a psychological effect and what the conditions are that lead to its emergence.

To define the uncanny can't really be done, he says, in effect; but in order to speak about it, we must nevertheless try to define it as best we can. Following his lead, in this section I consider how the uncanny operates in short fiction, and investigate the implications of writing in an uncanny mode, while in section 1.5 I go on to suggest how such a literary mode might be characterised by offering a working definition for the creation of uncanny affect in short fiction.

The uncanny as a literary genre

From the perspective of a writer engaged in practice research, I have found it less problematic and certainly more productive to consider the uncanny as a literary mode (an approach that aims to create particular affect) rather than as a genre (a category of texts based on specific, shared conventions of form or content). While a text may possess objective constants of form or content that identify it as *potentially* uncanny – for instance, it may feature one or more of the tropes listed by Freud, and / or certain recurring words that may indicate uncanny themes (such as the possible haunting and the recurring words ‘ghost’, ‘dead’ and ‘death’ in my story ‘Candlemaker Row’) – it’s not the case that all stories featuring a particular set of tropes and vocabulary can be described as uncanny. A useful example of such a not-uncanny text is Helen Oyeyemi’s ‘is your blood as red as this?’ (Oyeyemi, 2016), a story of puppetry presented in two parts: the first narrated by an aspiring teenage puppeteer, Radha, and the second by her puppet Gepetta. ‘is your blood as red as this?’ features almost a surfeit of uncanny tropes (a ghost; a cast of living and half-living puppets including Gepetta, a human residing in a puppet-body assembled Frankenstein’s-monster-like from leftover parts; exhumed, empty graves (the return of what should remain buried); emotional telepathy). These tropes appear alongside recurring words suggestive of uncanny themes, such as ‘ghost’, ‘haunted’ and ‘grave’. The not-uncanny status of this story results largely from Oyeyemi’s treatment of what Praver terms the ‘reflecting consciousness that the author interposes between himself and his readers’ (113). Both Radha and Gepetta accept (or even embody) fantastical happenings as everyday occurrences. The ghost, for

example, is casually introduced as a fixture of Radha's bedroom, no more worthy of note than Radha's brother's social life: 'My brother knew about the ghost, but described her as an alarmist, said I needed to get out more and invited me to his friend Tim's nineteenth birthday party' (80). Her ghostly existence doesn't trouble the nature of reality. Rather, we are in a world where everything is possible, everything is equally real / not-real. Oyeyemi is not concerned with encouraging readerly hesitation; her digressive storytelling style with its dizzying succession of characters, events and places invites the reader to surrender instead to a world in which rules are disregarded and connections are unpredictable, so that the uncertainties created by this text are around the ways in which a series of stories-within-stories may be interrelated. By contrast there's little space for uncertainty around the nature of what's experienced. The living / not living state of puppet-beings, for instance, is precisely delineated: 'The life in the wooden devil was slight and vague, only a little more than that possessed by inanimate puppets' (115); 'I am not a haunted puppet ... I am living' (95). Though identity is fluid, and there are suggestions that puppets and ghosts can be read as extensions of self, what's absent are the qualities of suggestiveness and ambiguity that I have argued are necessary components of uncanny affect.

Although the notion of an uncanny literary genre is problematic, it is worthwhile considering Tzvetan Todorov's argument for a genre of uncanny literature that sits alongside the neighbouring genres of the fantastic and the marvellous, since the difficulties with applying this model to a Freudian notion of the uncanny illuminate some of the characteristics of uncanny literature, and since aspects of Todorov's work have proved highly relevant to my practice research.

An initial difficulty is one of terminology and translation. Stories in the uncanny genre, Todorov argues, can be characterised as 'the supernatural explained' (Todorov, 1975: 41), i.e. seemingly supernatural events are revealed to have a rational cause, as in the works of Ann Radcliffe and Clara Reeves. For some critics, though, the genre Todorov refers to throughout as the fantastic – which includes authors such as Horace Walpole and M. G. Lewis – is in fact more closely aligned with the Freudian uncanny. Borghart and Madeleine (2003) note that, 'Todorov uses the word "uncanny" to translate the French "étrange", but we feel his idea of the fantastic is closer to Freud's uncanny'. Royle similarly problematises Todorov's

definition of the uncanny as the supernatural explained, arguing that on the contrary ‘the uncanny is “disquieting” only to the extent that it entails “uncertainty”’ (Royle, 2003: 34 n62). This notion of a class of fiction that is marked by uncertainty, or hesitation, is certainly closer to my own understanding of the uncanny, and in what follows I want to equate the notion of an uncanny literary genre with Todorov’s fantastic, rather than with the *étrange* that he translates as uncanny.

The fantastic, then, as outlined by Todorov, is ‘an evanescent genre’ (Todorov, 1975: 42), dependent for its existence on the reader’s interpretation of the text. It is characterised by uncertainty as to whether events have a natural or supernatural explanation (an uncertainty that is supported by the reader’s rejection of allegorical or poetic readings, and that may involve the reader’s identification with a character). According to Todorov’s model, a text is only fantastic for the duration of the reader’s uncertainty; once a decision has been made as to the cause of the inexplicable events, it collapses into one of two parallel genres, becoming either marvellous (events have a supernatural cause), or *étrange* (events have a natural cause). Todorov offers two exceptions to this evanescence: in Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw* and Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’, both supernatural and rational or psychological explanations remain possible, meaning each of these texts can be classed simply as fantastic.

Here, then, is a more substantial difficulty with Todorov’s theory of the uncanny as a literary genre: that identifying a text as uncanny relies on the response of the reading subject, rather than the presence of objective constants of form and content. And the problems with subjectivity go further (though Todorov doesn’t venture into this tricky territory); as indicated by Falkenberg’s description of the uncanny as bound up with cognitive rather than intellectual uncertainty, uncanniness has from its earliest conception had to do with feeling. Jentsch refers to ‘a feeling of unease’ (12), Freud to the ‘affective nucleus’ of the uncanny (123). For Royle, the uncanny ‘involves feelings of uncertainty’, and ‘a feeling of uncanniness may come from curious coincidences’ (1). For Borghart and Madeleine, the subjectivity involved in identifying uncanny texts means the uncanny cannot be considered as a literary genre:

A first problem is the observation that Freud has made as well: not every person is as susceptible to uncanny emotions as any other. Whether a text creates an

uncanny effect or not, will depend not only on the rhetoric and the semantics, but also on the reading subject. A direct consequence of this observation is the impossibility to establish a corpus of uncanny texts on the basis of merely text-immanent (semantic) features (Borghart and Madeleine, 2003).

It could be argued that literary genres do exist that are characterised by affect – horror literature, for instance, is identified by its capacity to provoke feelings of terror and revulsion, and yet horror is generally considered to be a genre (Grixti, 1989; Carroll, 1990; Colavito, 2008). Why, then, should the uncanny be any different? Perhaps because it involves not just feeling, but a peculiarly in-between kind of feeling that is hard to pin down. Weber situates the uncanny thus on a spectrum of related emotions: ‘it is not simply a form of anxiety, but is located between dread, terror and panic on the one side, and uneasiness and anticipation on the other’ (Weber, 1973: 1131-2).

We might also note that critical texts about horror literature are not generally hedged with caveats about the impossibility of defining such literature, whereas a striking characteristic of critical texts about the uncanny is the emphasis placed on its elusive (Bernstein, 2003: 1129), unstable (Gunning, 2008: 83), evanescent (Plank, 1973: 73) and overflowing (Royle, 2003: 19) qualities. If a chief characteristic of the uncanny is that it resists categorisation in these ways, the notion of a generic category of uncanny texts based on specific, shared conventions of form or content is untenable: ‘*If it belongs, it is no longer a question of the uncanny*’ (Royle: 18). Indeed, the instability and subjectivity associated with uncanniness have shaped my practice research in a way and to a degree I didn’t anticipate when embarking on this project; in Chapters 2 and 4, I reflect on how these factors played out in my short fiction.

A final difficulty with Todorov’s uncanny literary genre in the context of this project is that his categorisation does not coincide sufficiently with the Freudian uncanny. Todorov’s uncanny is simultaneously too broad and too narrow: too broad, in that it doesn’t capture the sense of the familiar made unfamiliar, the home made unhomely, the return of what ought to have remained hidden; too narrow, in that it risks confining uncanniness to the realm of the fantastical. For Freud, on the contrary, the uncanny is essentially an effect of realism. Fairytales and fantastical literature cannot be uncanny, he argues, because the rules of those storyworlds permit the impossible and inexplicable, meaning there can be no readerly uncertainty

as to whether impossible events might have a natural explanation. It is by establishing ‘the ground of common reality’ and then stepping beyond the real, and by withholding explanation for seemingly impossible events that ‘fiction affords possibilities for a sense of the uncanny that would not be available in real life’ (156-7).

Although Todorov’s theorisation of the uncanny as a literary genre has been of limited use in the context of my practice research, his notion of hesitation has been valuable in developing a working definition of the uncanny literary mode in which my stories are written.

Deborah A. Harter suggests that Todorov developed his notion of hesitation from Maupassant, who already in 1883 had associated a reader’s experience of hesitation, doubt and bewilderment with a subtle, nuanced version of the fantastic that ‘remain[s] at the limit of the possible’ (Maupassant cited in Harter, 1996: 5). For Todorov, the reader’s hesitation is a specific kind of uncertainty that is fundamental to the operation of fantastic (uncanny) literature. He writes, ‘The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty ... The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event’ (25); and ‘*The reader’s hesitation* is therefore the first condition of the fantastic’ (31). This hesitation coincides with the suggestion made by Collins and Jervis that the uncanny denotes ‘a fundamental *indecision*, an obscurity or uncertainty, at the heart of our ontology, our sense of time, place, and history, both personal and cultural’ which is ‘both unsettling, even potentially terrifying, yet also intriguing, fascinating’ (Collins and Jervis, 2008: 2).

For me, hesitation is a productive kind of uncertainty that implies the reader’s active involvement with the text. For the duration of the hesitation, possibilities remain open: about what is happening, about what is meant. A hesitation that is never fully resolved, never settles into a definite choice (*this* is the explanation; *that* is the meaning) seems to allow a story to stay open, to linger with the reader as a kind of question. And it suggests something brief – to hesitate is to be poised momentarily between possibilities – and hence tied up with short fiction as a form. The uncanny stories I return to time and again, some of which I examine in Chapters 2 and 4, often demonstrate this sense of unresolved meaning, of something that is never quite explained; the idea of sustaining a reader’s hesitation has emerged as an

important thread of my practice research, and as a key element of the uncanny literary mode that characterises my short fiction.

The uncanny as a literary mode

Considering the uncanny as a literary mode allows for intention and affect in a way that accommodates the process of practice research: in writing a collection of uncanny short stories, I set out to create a specific form of unease, to unsettle expectations, to create the ambiguity that encourages readerly hesitation – through deliberate, conscious strategies, and through my own pursuit of the unexpected. But the issue of subjectivity remains. If not everyone always finds the same things uncanny, and uncanny affect involves a breadth of response that encompasses panic and dread, unease and anticipation, and anything in between – how is it possible to write fiction that could be said to create uncanny affect?

My best solution to this conundrum has been to approach the task as I would when writing to provoke any other kind of affect – for instance, trying to make the reader laugh, or feel sad, or experience the kind of suspense that keeps her turning the pages. In all these instances, my method is to test against the reader as I write. ‘The reader’ here is not a generalised, abstract reader or a specific, imagined reader, but rather a version of my writing self.

I am trying things out. Images, situations, possibilities. It's like holding a dress up against yourself in front of a mirror. You're deciding instinctively, but that's just a name for all the tiny decisions you're making, all the assessment. You're checking for affect; checking your reaction. You are your own first reader, even at the level of the first fragment of an idea (Alexander, 2014).

Celia Hunt and Fiona Sampson term this kind of reader a ‘self-reader’. They differentiate the self-reader from the implied reader or ideal implied reader as theorised respectively by Wolfgang Iser and Wayne Booth (constructions which are of limited use in illuminating the process of writing in a particular mode, though they may indeed prove useful to a creative writer in retrospectively analysing what she has done ‘unconsciously’, i.e. how she has employed her tacit knowledge – the unconscious or semi-conscious ‘know-how’ expertise that Robin Nelson posits as one of three modes of knowing in his multi-mode epistemological model for practice

research (Nelson, 2013: 37) – to instruct the implied reader as to how the text should be read).

We will not, like the implied reader, be looking to interpret the meaning of the implied author in the text; at this stage we will not be sufficiently outside the text to do that. In some respects we will be a little like a narratee in that we will “listen” to ourselves writing and often be surprised by what emerges into the space of the composition. . . . But unlike the narratee, we will also influence the shaping of what emerges, helping our implied author to make important choices (Hunt and Sampson, 2006: 88).

Self-reading is different, too, from the careful re-reading involved in editing one’s work – that stage when a writer tends to ‘move outside of the aesthetic realm in which the work was created, become more like any other reader, at a distance from the writing process’ (89). Instead, a self-reader is positioned by Hunt and Sampson as something like one part of Bakhtin’s trio of the writing process, made up of reader-self, writer-self and text. Reading ourselves is when the reader-self takes up the lead in that trio, a fluid process in which ‘we are unlikely to notice the way we engage in this intuitive switching of roles’.

Hunt and Sampson describe the self-reader as ‘on the one hand keeping us company in the writing process and encouraging us to allow our deeply felt, often difficult material to emerge, and on the other helping us to critique our work-in-progress constructively, so that we can shape our material into its strongest form’ (88). In the context of this research project, the strongest form for my material is that which my self-reader judges to be the most uncanny, at the level of both the individual story and the collection as a whole – and what unsettles me in that peculiarly strange / familiar way falls closer to Weber’s unease and anticipation than his panic and dread. Where a text provokes in me the latter sensations, they exceed the hesitations, the uncertainties of the uncanny. My uncanny coincides more completely with Royle’s ‘trembling undecidability’ (the smell of cold stone and the flickering shadow in ‘Candlemaker Row’; the intimate, unknowable inheritance of ‘Small Objects’; the implications of the biomedical trade in ‘Blood’). The process of self-reading, then, is one of testing for my own response; but also one that takes into account the wider literary landscape, since my response is informed by the work of other writers who occupy similar territory. My subjective sense of what’s uncanny accounts for my decision to critically situate my fiction in the context of particular

stories by Miéville, Royle and Smith, and these stories in turn account for many of the strategies I use to create uncanny affect. My use of narrative voice, for instance, has been coloured by my response to stories by each of these writers. Writing on how authors conceive of their readers, Walter Ong identifies this borrowing of voice from an existing text as a common approach: ‘Why not pick up that voice and, with it, its audience?’ (Ong, 1975: 11). When I read an uncanny story by Nicholas Royle, I am the audience for his voice – so that when my own narrative voice is inflected by Royle’s, the process is one of writing for a reader-self who is also a reader of Royle’s uncanny fiction (I reflect further on the effect of this kind of borrowing of voice on my practice research in Chapter 4).

Finally, it’s necessary to consider that subjective response to a text varies not only from one reader to another, but within individual readers. A text I experience as uncanny on first reading may become less so on subsequent readings, as the familiar-made-strange becomes simply familiar and through familiarity loses its capacity to unsettle me; or, perhaps, as I lose my capacity to respond as strongly as I did initially. In my own work, those elements my self-reader finds uncanny will not always be what I find uncanny on a more distanced, analytical re-reading of my stories. Once more, I’m confronted with the shifting character of the uncanny. How to account for this, as I redraft and edit my work? How can this shifting of affect be recognised in a working definition of an uncanny literary mode?

Again, there are parallels or similarities between the uncanniness of a text and other literary qualities. Here’s Austin Wright wrestling with similar issues around a particular quality he likes to call ‘narrative grit’, which is essentially the opposite of linguistic drabness. Wright acknowledges this is a quality that depends on subjective perception, and notes the additional problem of ‘critical erosion’:

The more you look at the selected passages, whether to analyze or simply test for effect, the more the tough gritty particles tend to absorb and melt. You become conscious of the deep familiarity of these passages. ... In order to appreciate it you have to get back down into the story, sink into the context, open yourself up to it again, and it may be that a time will come when you will get just a little bit weary of the little boy on the bus and the woman with the outrageous duplicate hat. In other words ... Narrative Grit is subject to erosion. The difficulty of sustaining the effect. The familiarizing of defamiliarization. Poetry loses its poetry, music and art wear out (Wright, 1998: 209).

What Wright implies here is that ‘sustaining the effect’ – or sustaining one’s own capacity for affective response to a well-worn text – can be helped by the kind of stratagems commonly adopted by writers to gain critical distance from creative work: manuscripts are shut away in drawers to mature, sent to e-readers, printed out in unfamiliar typefaces or read in the bath. Each of these techniques is essentially a means of pretence: ‘The best trick is probably the simplest one: you read the story *pretending* it has not been eroded. Pretend you are a different reader, a fresher one, a younger one. The pretense is usually enough’ (Wright, 1998: 209).

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In testing my creation of uncanny affect against my self-reader, I am working with my own subjectivity, perhaps as a stand-in for the subjectivities of the actual readers I will never know. I recognise the likelihood – the inevitability – that some of the stories comprising my practice research will be experienced by some readers as not-uncanny. To deal in unease and anticipation is to work with subtle material, possibly erring on the side of understatement; and to write an uncanny story collection is to manage a delicate relationship between the individual story and the story sequence, since a piece that is read as less uncanny than its neighbours may strengthen the overall uncanny affect created by the collection as a whole – something I explore more fully in Chapter 4. I hope, though, that for most readers an encounter with these stories will result in uncanny affect; and equally that there is enough layering and ambiguity for readers to find other, different things in the text that I didn’t consciously put there – to find their own meanings, which may differ in nature or degree from my own. As Karen Joy Fowler has it: ‘I know what I meant to put there, but the reader is free to find something else entirely and often does’ (Fowler, 2013: 277). To this end and throughout this exegesis, in discussing the stories that make up *Small Objects and Other Stories* I want to avoid analysing either the process or the product in such a way as to place limits on interpretation. Achieving the potential for readerly uncertainty has been a consistent aim across this collection, and each story is poised to the best of my ability so that multiple interpretations are possible. The readings and interpretations I suggest are therefore provisional, in the sense not only that they are likely to vary, but that I have intentionally allowed the space for such variation to occur: between readers, and within each individual reader across

repeated readings. For Iser, the relationship in literature between objective constants and subjective interpretation is analogous to two people looking at the same stars in the same sky and perceiving different constellations; the plough, or the dipper: ‘The “stars” in a literary text are fixed; the lines that join them are variable’ (Iser 1974: 282). In this collection of stories, the stars may be fixed – with the fixed constants being the attributes set out in my working definition of short fiction in an uncanny literary mode, as judged by my self-reader – but the lines of interpretation are variable.

1.5 A working definition of short fiction in an uncanny literary mode

‘this does not mean to say that it would be impossible to give a working definition of the concept of the “uncanny”’ (Jentsch, 1995: 8)

In this section I want to suggest that the uncanny as a literary mode can be characterised by the following three attributes. (These attributes may also characterise uncanny fiction in longer forms, though the strategies through which they are achieved – which I set out in Chapter 4 – are likely to differ from those that are appropriate to short fiction.) These are the qualities I’m alert to as a reader and which, when they occur together in a text, spark a frisson of uncanny sensation – that ‘literary thrill’ referred to by Plank.

1) The story should destabilise assumptions of identity, or of the nature of what is being experienced.

‘Uncanny is the word always falling away from itself into its opposite, yet affirming itself in doing so. ... Like a ghost, it “is” and “is not.” The opposition between subject and object also falls away with the erosion of the structure of identity; subject and predicate can no longer keep their boundaries intact’ (Bernstein, 2003: 1113). This troubling of identity is an effect that’s integral to the status of the uncanny as a word and concept that contains its opposite and destabilises itself, so that, as Bernstein has it, ‘the uncanny functions as a critique of identity’ (1112). In the context of a contemporary, technological uncanny, this troubling of identity and categories of real / not-real is likely to occur on a profound level:

It is not about Nathaniel mistaking Olympia for a woman – a mistake that is necessarily rooted in the assumption that there is a distinction between humans and automata – as much as it is about ungrounding our assumptions concerning Nathaniel’s humanness and Olympia’s automaticity. . . . it anticipates those practices, responses, experiences or expressions that we have used to distinguish the human from the nonhuman – practices such as thinking, expressions such as empathy, and affective or embodied experiences such as consciousness. It also deflects attention away from the individual and the alleged uniqueness of her experiences (Ravetto-Biagioli, 2016: 2).

2) *The story should unsettle distinctions between the familiar and the strange.*

‘It can take the form of something familiar unexpectedly arising in a strange and unfamiliar context, or of something strange and unfamiliar arising in a familiar context. It can consist in a sense of homeliness uprooted, the revelation of something unhomely at the heart of hearth and home’ (Royle, 2003: 1). The familiar made strange is that specific form of unease associated with the uncanny. It encompasses Freud’s return of the repressed, experiences of disturbed domesticity, psychological invasions, and Schelling’s notion of the uncanny as ‘everything that was meant to remain secret and hidden and has come into the open’ (Freud, 2003: 132). ‘It disturbs any straightforward sense of what is within and what without, and alerts us to the “foreign body” within us. Or worse, makes us regard ourselves *as* a foreign body, a stranger’ (Eyre and Page, 2008: x).

3) *The story should create cognitive uncertainty for the reader.*

‘The uncanny is “disquieting” only to the extent that it entails “uncertainty”’ (Royle, 2003: 34 n62). The uncertainty associated with the uncanny is often about the extent to which an occurrence or phenomenon is real or not-real, and is connected to the destabilising of assumptions – but what’s critical is that this uncertainty is a phenomenon that affects not just a story’s protagonist, but its reader. In order for the reader to experience, not just recognise, the unease associated with the uncanny, they should be in uncertainties; for instance, hesitating as to whether a haunting should be explained as a supernatural or psychological event.

Writing in an uncanny literary mode, I have used this working definition as a checklist for the creation of uncanny affect; my intention is for my stories to possess these attributes, as identified by my self-reader – always acknowledging that the

particular subjectivity of uncanny affect makes it impossible to assert that a story with these properties will be uncanny for every reader, on every encounter with the text.

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A related question must then be: to what end does uncanny fiction do these things? Rosemary Jackson contends that the fantastic, of which the uncanny is an effect, is an inherently subversive mode: 'Fantastic literature points to or suggests the basis upon which cultural order rests, for it opens up, for a brief moment, on to disorder, on to illegality, on to that which lies outside the law, that which is outside dominant value systems' (Jackson, 1981: 4). Jackson's argument implies that the chief or only value of fantastic literature lies in its subversive function, which she sees as undermining dominant patriarchal and capitalist systems. This is not a claim I would make for my fiction, which, at its most effective, could be described as quietly disruptive rather than socially subversive; mine are stories that offer altered perspectives, sometimes striking and sometimes very slight. I therefore prefer Jacqueline Howard's suggestion that the fantastic 'includes different ways of extending and negating "everyday reality" – the marvellous, the uncanny (as epistemological categories) – and that it may or may not have a subversive function' (Howard, 1994: 41). The extent to which the uncanny in short fiction is an effective mode for illuminating and interrogating perspectives on contemporary experience is of course central to my research question, and is tested in my practice research; and some of the specific ways in which this might be achieved are addressed in sections 2.2 and 2.3 of this exegesis.

Chapter 2: the uncanny as a disruptive mode in short fiction

In this chapter, I investigate claims from Gothic studies that the uncanny has become a formula that, through overfamiliarity, has lost its capacity to create unsettling affect, and demonstrate how uncanny short fiction can still offer defamiliarising and disruptive perspectives. I go on to propose two areas of concern that mark a technological uncanny that is specific to our age.

2.1 The uncanny as an over-familiar effect

'the uncanny is not where it used to be' (Botting, 2008: 11)

In a number of publications, Fred Botting has theorised that the effects of image-based media and new technologies mean contemporary Gothic and horror have become emptied of affect (Botting, 1999a; 2002; 2007). In 'Limits of Horror' this argument is made explicitly relevant to the uncanny, as Botting suggests it has become an over-familiar effect that is 'barely frightening' (Botting, 2008: 9). Its repetitions are predictable, its formulas have faded and lost their affect, their capacity to unsettle.

Botting's argument centres around what he sees as a blurring of inside and outside, an opening out of our hidden or private selves that has accompanied new technologies, and a resulting loss of interiority and increase in transparency. Repression is replaced by expression: 'in expressing the private interior of being, human contents are squeezed out, like the juice of an orange, onto screens, into the digital coding of images and genes' (2008: 14) – meaning there is no private interior of the self to be invaded, no psychological domesticity to be disturbed. If the uncanny is an effect that depends upon uncertainties, on things being hidden or unknown, and on the disturbance of the individual's psyche, Botting asks where it can be located in our technological present; he contends that it has shifted from the individual to a shared cultural environment – 'Through fictional and media techniques, the uncanny spreads, located among collective and cultural spaces rather than individual interiors' (2008: 109) – and as a result become diluted, losing the potency it once had.

However convincingly Botting makes this case in examples from lived experience, media and technology (he cites, for instance, a cultural shift from repressive to expressive attitudes regarding sexuality; the normalisation of Gothic images in films and TV series such as *Caspar the Friendly Ghost*, *Buffy* and *The Lost Boys*; the ordinariness of ghosts as metaphors for the operation of digital technologies), I want to suggest that, because reading fiction is simultaneously a private and collaborative activity, the full extent of his assertion doesn't necessarily apply to literature as it does to more explicit and passive forms of fiction.

Although there are increasingly aspects of being a reader that are in some way public or collective, such as the growth of book groups and literary festivals, and the use of e-readers that encourage readers to share quotes and reading statistics, for the time being most reading is in print format; in 2016 print sales made up 75% of the UK book market (Cain, 2017), and reading therefore remains largely a private, intimate and solitary experience. Paradoxically, to read fiction – particularly contemporary short literary fiction – is also to become an active participant in a collaborative endeavour. Mary Rohrberger and Dan E. Burns argue that:

As the [short story] form evolves from Hawthorne through Barthelme, the reader is increasingly called upon to supply the temporal, causal, and overt thematic links formerly supplied by the author. Thus, the contemporary reader is required to participate in a kinship relationship with the author that is even more active than the one Poe suggests (Rohrberger and Burns, 1982: 6).

And Robert Luscher argues that the requirement for active participation is multiplied over the span of a short story collection, since 'Compared to that in other genres ... the unity of the short story sequence will ultimately be a looser one, involving us in a more wide-ranging search for patterns of action and meaning – a more co-operative venture between reader and author than less open forms demand' (Luscher, 1989: 157).

When the reader takes up the role of co-creator of pattern, theme and meaning, their experience and imagination act upon the text, constructing meaning according to the intersection of numerous factors; from a reader's gender, age, and social and cultural background to more nebulous factors such as their existing literary hinterland, their tolerance for uncertainty or multiple meanings, and the degree to which they trust a writer. Each reading is therefore coloured by the collective

experience of being part of a series of communities but also by an individual's experience and situation; as argued by Louise Rosenblatt, 'always there is an individual human being choosing, selectively constructing meaning, and consciously or unconsciously responding in terms of the factors, contextual and human, entering into that particular transaction' (Rosenblatt, 1993: 385).

In the context of uncanny affect, then, a reader can be expected to bring individual as well as collective anxieties to a text. (An anecdotal example of this intersection of individual and collective readerly anxiety comes from my practice research, where in a series of editorial groups the flash fiction piece 'Adult ONE', with its refrain of 'late, but not too late', was understood by female readers in their late 30s to be a story about a woman haunted by an absent, never-to-be-conceived child, while a number of male readers did not construct the meaning of the story in this way.) This is particularly the case with short literary fiction that uses strategies such as creating and sustaining uncertainty to create uncanny effect. Where more is left unsaid and unseen, implicit rather than explicit, there is more space for the reader's interpretation; and what's unspecified or withheld can be far more unsettling than what's rendered in specific, explicit detail. In this sense Botting's argument for the contemporary uncanny as something diminished by exteriority and transparency is not applicable to fiction.

Testing the effectiveness of uncanny tropes

What seems to me to have more relevance to contemporary uncanny fiction is the notion that new technologies may have transformed our experiences of specific uncanny tropes from unfamiliar to overly-familiar: does the trope of inanimate objects that appear alive still have the capacity to generate unease, for instance, when we all have personal assistants that appear to live in our smartphones? As Botting has it: 'Attracting associations with or projections of supernatural and uncanny phenomena, machines themselves assume the power to generate Gothic effects, spreading a sense of uncanniness still further afield' (2008: 109) – to the extent that this supposed uncanniness is no longer experienced as disturbing or unsettling.

Confusion between human and machine, between living and not-living, is of course central to Hoffmann's 'The Sandman', and is offered by both Jentsch and Freud as an excellent example of a situation that creates uncanny affect. If Jentsch's was the first study of the uncanny and Freud remains, as per Masschelein in Chapter 1, the founder of the discourse, we might read the haunted machine as the quintessential uncanny trope, one that possesses a 'fundamental trace of the uncanny' (Potts and Scheer, 2006: xii). The notion that this specific trope is now too widespread, in everyday life as well as cultural narratives, to be effective is one that was tested in my practice research through a number of stories.

One of the earliest fiction pieces I wrote for this project, 'You The Story', offers the possible reading of a mobile phone or an app that has agency, to the extent of annexing aspects of its user's life. This story emerged from a news item about the potential for a 'lifelogging' app that collects data and transforms it into a diary narrative. The item reported that, 'The result [of the app] is not exactly great literature. A typical example reads: "I left home at 07:20. I arrived at auditorium at 11:48. I left auditorium at 11:50. I arrived at lounge at 11:52. I left lounge at 12:38. I arrived at my office at 12:46."' While it might seem a bit dull at the moment, the idea is that it would serve as a template so that users could then add the colour and salient details later' (Marks, 2013). I was particularly interested in the idea that such sparse, factual language may appear to be very transparent, but that its sparseness and objectivity is a kind of withholding that conceals much about a protagonist and his activities – motivation, emotion, sensory experience. I was also interested in the idea of a narrative that becomes unrecognisable to its protagonist, suggesting a kind of 'data *doppelgänger*', and I developed these themes around the narrative device of a machine or programme that displays inexplicable behaviour.

In initial drafts of the story, this suggestion of A. I. agency – a contemporary expression of Jentsch's '*doubt as to whether a lifeless object may not in fact be animate*' (Jentsch, 1995: 11) – proved not to be where the uncanniness of the story was located. As indicated by feedback from a staff / student creative writing research group, this particular use of the haunted device trope in fact diminished the uncanny effect of the story, because it was felt to be predictable; a version of the longstanding 'A. I. takeover' theme common in science and speculative fiction stories such as Asimov's collection *I, Robot*; Arthur C. Clarke's *2001: A Space Odyssey*; and Robert Harris's *The Fear Index*. More effective were those elements of the story that

developed from my initial areas of interest. The slippage of language from neutral and objective to something more subjective and apparently revealing, and the shifts from first- and third-person narration to a second person that seems to make the reader briefly complicit in the protagonist's actions (inspired by author Nicholas Royle's story for *The New Uncanny*, 'The Dummy' (Eyre and Page, 2008)); these stylistic and formal qualities aim to create uncertainty and destabilise identity for the reader as well as the protagonist. Meanwhile the increasingly subjective and unrecognisable diary narrative brings something strange into the unvarying familiarity of the protagonist's routine.

In reviewing this early version of the story, it seemed to me that during the drafting process the haunted device trope had acted as a familiar, well-worn route; that I had followed a path of least resistance and taken the story in a direction that was subtly different from my original intention. This realisation prompted me to review my early intentions for a piece that explores the way in which telling stories about ourselves, to ourselves and others, can provide a comforting illusion about the level of choice and control we have over our lives. Rather than exploring ideas of a controlling A. I., my preliminary notes about 'agency' set out threads of control and invasion of domestic space; self-control and control over public presentation; control over language, and our own narratives. My subsequent editing of this story aimed to bring these themes more clearly into focus.

Though formally quite a different story, the next piece I wrote was a restaging of the haunted device trope. Here, my main interest was in exploring the tensions between intimacy and distance that are peculiarly characteristic of new image-based communications technologies, and possible readings of this story are of a gadget that is infiltrated by a stranger's heartbeat in place of an absent lover's, or of a gadget that possesses its own heartbeat. As with 'You The Story', in 'The SleepHeart' it seems to me that the haunted device in itself is not where the uncanniness chiefly resides. Instead, uncanny effect comes from the formal choice of a destabilising second-person perspective (a strategy explored in more depth in Chapter 4); the protagonist's embrace of the defamiliarisation of technology and the potential stranger invading the intimate familiarity of her bed; and the uncertainty sustained by the withholding of any explanation as to what she has experienced. This is not to say, though, that the story's uncanniness can be separated from the protagonist's relationship with technology, since my choice of second person was concerned with

embodying the themes of intimacy and distance that emerged from her use of that technology.

One effect of deploying the same uncanny trope in these two stories was of unintended repetition. The haunted device trope perhaps lends itself to the exploration of certain themes, and ideas of surveillance and voyeurism were carried through from 'You The Story' into 'The SleepHeart'. More problematically, the mechanism of the story, the pattern of withholding and disclosure, was also the same: the gradual revelation or realisation of some inexplicable, seemingly independent activity carried out by the machine, with the climax or point of change in each story being the choice made by the protagonist (a different choice in each case) in response to the apparent agency of that machine.

At a later stage of the research, a third story about an artificially intelligent device, 'Mousekin' (supplied as Appendix I), repeated the problems of predictability demonstrated by the two earlier pieces: an overly-familiar 'A. I. takeover' narrative, and a repetition of the story's mechanism of concealment and revelation. Even once I had recognised these problematic repetitions they persisted through several rewrites; I found it difficult to move beyond these patterns, so firmly did they seem to be associated with the haunted device trope, and found it was necessary to make drastic changes to my subject and theme in order to reshape it into something fresher in the context of the story collection (the result is included as 'Chronic', and discussed in section 4.1). This evidence points to the ways in which specific uncanny tropes can become over-familiar not only in lived experience and cultural narratives but also within this research project on the scale of the collection, and these questions of predictability and the diffusion of uncanny effect are explored further in Chapter 4.

While Botting's argument for an uncanny that has shifted and become diminished is related specifically to image-based media and new technologies, others have suggested more broadly that as the concept of the uncanny has become increasingly influential across a diverse range of fields – to the extent that Martin Jay can argue the uncanny as a critical approach has itself become a 'master trope available for appropriation in a wide variety of contexts' (Jay, 1998: 157) – its formulas may have faded and lost their effect. As Collins and Jervis ask, 'If there is a diffusion of uncanny potential, is there, conversely, a diminution in our ability to experience it?

If everything becomes potentially uncanny, nothing is really experienced as uncanny, or as sufficiently uncanny' (Collins & Jervis, 2008: 6).

At the start of this project, I identified *The New Uncanny* (Eyre and Page, 2008) as a text that could offer some insight into the question of whether the uncanny as a literary mode is still effective in creating unease and offering disruptive perspectives, and more specifically whether Freudian uncanny tropes – those objects, situations and experiences that Freud listed as capable of causing uncanny experiences – still function effectively in creating uncanny affect. The editors of this short story collection invited authors to respond to tropes chosen from a list of those set out in Freud's essay: confusions between animate and inanimate objects; blindness; doubles; repetitions; live burial; the 'all-controlling evil genius' (Eyre and Page, 2008: viii); and confusions between the real and the imagined. Of the 14 stories, nearly half deal with doubles and / or dolls; the remaining stories respond to the tropes of confusions between animate and inanimate objects (including the haunted machine trope), blindness, repetitions, and the 'controlling genius'.

Page writes in his introduction to the collection that 'We were curious to see which archetypes still rang true and which, if any, paled' (2008: xi). Though he doesn't reflect on the extent to which the resulting stories are actually uncanny, it's notable that despite their use of uncanny tropes the majority fail to create uncanny affect (to destabilise assumptions, create uncertainty for the reader, and make the familiar strange). In the opening story, Ramsey Campbell's 'Double Room', a hotel guest hears his *doppelgänger* in the room next door and experiences the double as a manifestation of his conscience, a better self whose presence compels him to confess to the murder of his wife. The story does exactly what might be expected from its title and set-up, and from the context provided by its inclusion in a collection of uncanny fiction; the use of the *doppelgänger* trope reads as schematic, a familiar formula which confirms instead of unsettling the reader's expectation. In Adam Marek's 'Tamagotchi' the titular toy that belongs to the narrator's son becomes sick, in a deployment of the haunted machine trope. The 'virus' is contagious, infecting the Tamagotchis of the boy's classmates, but there is no implication it can be caught by humans. A suggestion that the sickness can cross from machines to invade the human world could achieve an unsettling effect, but here the narrator and his family are never at risk from anything more than being socially ostracised. Another haunted machine story, Jane Rogers's 'Ped-o-Matique', concerns a foot massage machine

that goes rogue; this piece ends with a positive affirmation of the importance for the protagonist of her family over her academic career, a neat and emotionally satisfying resolution that negates the uncertainties of the haunted machine, not by explaining the phenomenon but by dismissing its significance in the story.

In each of these cases, uncanny tropes are present and correct, but for this reader the authors' handling leaves them curiously empty of affect. Along with several other pieces in *The New Uncanny*, these stories can be read as an illustration of the argument made by Louis Vax and summarised by Masschelein that uncanny tropes do not in themselves generate an uncanny effect; as shown by Oyeyemi's 'is your blood as red as this?' (section 1.4), if a story doesn't possess the attributes of short fiction in an uncanny literary mode (if it doesn't make the familiar strange, destabilise assumptions and create uncertainty for the reader), the presence of a supposedly uncanny trope is not sufficient to create uncanny affect. For Vax, 'It is an illusion to think that one can determine the fantastic by merely identifying motifs ... The fantastic makes the motif rather than the other way around' (in Masschelein, 2011: 61). From my practitioner's perspective, I recognise this statement as an accurate description of how uncanny tropes have emerged in my stories: not consciously selected or constructed, but appearing as a consequence of the stance I have taken up in relation to my material – the intention to write in an uncanny literary mode – and the resulting decisions I have taken, often at the 'instinctive' level of tacit knowledge.

My practice research suggests that uncanny tropes can also act as markers to identify where a text might be redrafted to become more unsettling in its effect. The first story I wrote as part of this project, 'Candlemaker Row', was composed for a literary map of Edinburgh, my home city; though it was not intended as a piece of uncanny fiction, it emerged as a story of hauntings and returns from the dead, confusions between real and not-real, a familiar city made deeply strange. Once I had recognised this as an uncanny story and set about rewriting to strengthen its effect, the trope of return from the dead acted as a pin in a map, showing me where to redraft. Where the 'flicker against the light' (150) that suggests the presence of the narrator's dead lover in the virtual city connects with the theme of home and prompts the story's moment of change (the narrator's realisation that her home is not the reconstruction of a city, nor even the city as it once was, but is rather her partner and their shared narrative), it locates the dark heart of what's unsettling about the

story. The occurrence of the trope at the thematic core of the text alerted me to its potential to destabilise the story from its centre. We have seen in Chapter 1 how unhomey is buried within the uncanny, how home contains its opposite; allowing this logic to guide the story towards its most uncanny conclusion, it became clear that if home is the narrator's lost lover and their shared story, this is who (or what) must become *unheimlich* – in an ending that might in some way destabilise the boundaries (self / other) between the narrator and her partner.

This indicates that one way in which familiar uncanny tropes may retain their disturbing effect is by working on a thematic level, as can be seen in short fiction by Ali Smith. 'The hanging girl' (2000) features a haunting that occurs as the result of the protagonist's momentary absence of empathy, a trope that draws out themes of witnessing, responsibility and the historical trauma of the 20th century. Meanwhile in 'being quick' (2003) the apparent emergence of Death into a routine commute (as a figure at once unexpected and ordinary, appearing not as a hooded skeleton wielding a scythe but a middle-aged man in an apologetic suit) interrupts communication between the story's two narrators. Remote connections are interrupted or facilitated by automata, and mobile phones function as autonomous beings and as extensions of human selves in a story that explores ideas of collectivism and individualism. In each of these stories uncanny tropes emerge as metaphors that illuminate its concerns, destabilising assumptions of what it means to be human (or humane) by calling into question notions of empathy, compassion and care.

Exploring new formulations of the uncanny

A further possibility for uncanny forms that continue to unsettle can be found in Punter's 'New Versions of the Uncanny' (Punter, 2005: 131-154), which advances a number of new manifestations of the uncanny as it appears in contemporary fiction. Several of these new uncanny forms can be located in stories from China Miéville's collection *Looking for Jake* (2006), particularly 'Foundation', 'Different Skies' and 'The Ball Room' (a story co-written with Emma Bircham and Max Schaefer).

In 'Foundation', what should remain hidden is brought into the light by the protagonist's ability to see and hear the masses of dead who are the literal support for the buildings on top of them:

He hears the foundation. He turns and there is the foundation. It is taller. It has breached the ground. A wall of dead-men bricks as high as his thighs, its edges and its top quite smooth. It is embedded with thousands of eyes and mouths that work as he approaches, spilling rheum and skin and sand (28-9).

The tropes of live burial and return from the dead can be read as revealing the protagonist's guilt for his part in an atrocity perpetrated by the U. S. military during the first Gulf War; as such they are directly recuperable to Freud's uncanny in its concern with the trauma of the trenches, but can also be related to the new form of uncanny that Punter names the 'diasporic uncanny'. For Punter, this is a form marked by hauntings in fiction by post-colonial writers such as Jamaica Kincaid, Pauline Melville, Salman Rushdie and Derek Walcott (Punter, 2007: 133), but as a phenomenon to do with imperial invasion as well as post-colonialism there are clear resonances with the way in which Miéville constructs a story of invasion revisited upon the invading power, with the dead experienced as literally 'an uncanny foreign body at the heart of stability' (Punter, 2005: 140).

The 'uncanny of the streets' is advanced by Punter as a further new uncanny form that is related to the diasporic uncanny:

The uncanny of the streets is the klaxon in the night, the unidentifiable telephone call, the surge of noise in the dark hours, that fear of strangeness or the other which on the one hand renders "home" a place of embattled refuge, while on the other it reminds us of a life going on "elsewhere" in some location which we can no longer define or explain (Punter 2007: 134).

'Different Skies', perhaps the most traditional story in *Looking for Jake*, is a good example of this form of uncanny that recontextualises familiar notions of disturbed domesticity. In a story with clear echoes of M. R. James's haunted antique objects, the protagonist acquires an old stained glass window through which he can look out onto a different world; Miéville's treatment, however, reinvents the ghosts as foul-

mouthed street kids, ‘ragamuffins’ looking in on the study of a cultured, comfortably-off elderly man from their crumbling, rubbish-strewn alley (160).

‘The Ball Room’ illustrates a third of Punter’s ‘new uncanny’ categories, the ‘uncanny of commodity’. Here a well-used trope, that of the ghostly child who threatens living children by luring them to play (see Carpenter and Kolmar, 2014: 30), is relocated to a specifically contemporary version of the haunted home: an IKEA-style warehouse store with ‘a hundred little fake rooms’ (37), and a soft-play area (the ball room of the title) that contains a home-within-a-home in the form of the Wendy House where the ghost-child plays. The presence of the ghost-child triggers a fatal accident which is witnessed via security footage, but the story’s twist lies in the suggestion that company management are exploiting the haunting for corporate profit, writing off the possibility of future ‘accidents’ as collateral damage; though the narrator is only a casual employee, his use of the first person plural – ‘We try to make things easier for people. We have a cheap café and free parking, and most important of all we have a crèche’ (38) – shows his identification with the company and makes him complicit. In its suggestion of corporate exploitation and control, ‘The Ball Room’ demonstrates a contemporary form of uncanny that Punter positions as a recontextualisation of a Freudian controlling force: ‘insofar as the Gothic was, in its heyday, frequently concerned with the hidden operations of the power and the subjection and victimisation of the subject, there is a clear link between the ghosts of Gothic and the ghostly appearance – or apparition – of the corporate logos which provide the watermark on the script of the world’ (Punter 2007: 135).

In addition to these versions of a new uncanny, Punter articulates two forms that are explicitly concerned with contemporary technologies: the ‘uncanny of multiplicity’ and the ‘morphological uncanny’. These uncanny forms are specifically relevant to my research question, and in the following sections of this chapter I consider their relation to issues surrounding the psychological, social and physical impacts of science and technology that emerge in my practice research.

2.2 The technological uncanny and the body as site of impact

'The human body becomes a focus for ambivalent transformative possibility, dissolution, agency and the struggle between otherness and self' (Wasson, 2011: 13)

In an interview with Kasia Boddy, Ali Smith speaks about the process of creating a short story collection: 'the collections have all been made by sitting down and thinking I need now to make some money and I've got six stories. And then to read all six stories together lets you know roughly where your mind is going at a certain time, with either form or what the material is doing. ... You have to listen for your own themes. It's a bit like listening to music. It's a bit like listening to see where a theme is or what it's doing or whether there is one' (Smith, 2010: 71-2).

This notion of building a critical mass of work that can 'make audible' trends in form and theme accords with my own experience of reviewing the first half dozen stories composed for this collection, and identifying a recurrence of themes and formal strategies I had not chosen consciously to explore or deploy.

This may be a form of knowledge production that's specific to practice research – a process of discovery that allows for indeterminacy and emergence (as outlined by Haseman and Mafe, 2009: 211-28) with new knowledge becoming evident through accumulation, in a development of the thought that has been attributed in various formulations to a number of writers including E. M. Forster, Flannery O'Connor, Joan Didion and Stephen King: I write to see what I think. Perhaps Joan Didion's expression of it is the most useful for thinking about practice research: 'I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means' (Didion, 1976). *What I see and what it means* is an important construction in the context of creative writing as research. What is the evidence provided by the work? What can it reveal about the research questions? Examining *what I'm looking at* is a means of illuminating particular areas of concern, with my creative writing working as a map to direct further reading of critical and creative texts, drawing out ideas from those texts just as that process also works the other way around – the 'double articulation between theory and practice' described by Barbara Bolt (2007: 29).

With half a dozen stories drafted, I became aware of various recurring subjects and themes; two of which, I want to suggest, mark areas of concern that are specific to a contemporary technological uncanny.

The first of these areas is around science, technology and embodiment. As discussed in section 1.2, the uncanny has long been concerned with machinery and with scientific and technological advances. Hilary Grimes has further shown how uncanny technology touched on bodies as well as minds in the late 19th century: ‘...bodies, minds and machines at the end of the century had the uncanny ability to mingle together. Minds worked like machines, machines evoked and retracted physicality and bodily proximity, bodies touched machines to make them work, and machines tapped the workings of the mind, acting as the mediums for discursive practice’ (Grimes, 2011: 29). But however intimate the proximity, this ‘mingling together’ of body, mind and machine was not a literal phenomenon. ‘Humans work the machines, the oil from their fingers greasing handsets and switchboards, hair and skin follicles left behind as part of the process of connecting flesh and mechanical design. ... And yet the machine, despite its intense closeness to the body, is irrevocably separate from its human counterpart’ (30).

This separation of human and not-human no longer holds. As long ago as 1985, Donna Haraway argued that the future of humans would be cyborg – hybrid, escaping fixed categories. Fourteen years later, N. Katherine Hayles defined the state of being posthuman as a perspective rather than a cybernetic condition, one that privileges information over embodiment; regards consciousness as peripheral to human identity; considers the body as a prosthetic that humans have always engaged in manipulating, so that bio/technological interventions are a continuation of an ongoing process; and anticipates the eventual merging of human and artificial intelligence. In these terms, Hayles makes the argument that human has already become posthuman:

...it is important to recognize that the construction of the posthuman does not require the subject to be a literal cyborg. Whether or not interventions have been made on the body, new models of subjectivity emerging from such fields as cognitive science and artificial life imply that even a biologically unaltered *Homo sapiens* counts as posthuman (Hayles, 1999: 4).

Conceptually, then, human and machine are so intimately connected that they cannot be separated; increasingly, this is also literally the case. Technology has become personalised and miniaturised; V. R. is in the process of becoming fully immersive; immunosuppressants and nanotechnology have enabled an increasing range of transplants and implants; bioengineering and gene editing are making it possible for bodies to be manipulated in ever-more sophisticated and invasive fashion. In response to this, recurring themes and subjects in my practice research suggest that a contemporary technological uncanny may be one that shifts or extends the site of impact of science and technology to the human body, and from exterior (social, psychological and external physical impacts) to interior (biotechnological and biomedical interventions, personalised and internalised digital technology, human-machine and human-animal hybridity) – a shift that continues a progression of the exterior-to-interior movement of the uncanny in the late 19th and early 20th century, from the fictions of Hoffmann and Poe with their ‘fearful invasion of an alien presence’ into the domestic space (Vidler, 1992: 3) to psychological hauntings, where the space to be invaded ‘was still an interior, but now the interior of the mind, one that knew no bounds in projection or introversion’ (6).

The uncanniness of virtual locality, multiplicity and morphology

Embodiment in the context of digital technology is investigated in a number of my early stories. ‘Candlemaker Row’, the story of a digital reconstruction of a destroyed city, explores the disembodiments and disorientations of virtual reality. ‘You The Story’, about an app that turns the protagonist’s routine into a daily narrative, examines the decentering effect of ‘quantified selves’ and personal stories reduced to data capture. ‘The SleepHeart’, in which the protagonist uses the titular device to share heartbeats with her absent lover, is concerned with the physical experience of intimacy and distance offered by communications technology. Each of these stories involves a version of Vidler’s ‘peculiarly contemporary sense of haunting; that provoked by the loss of traditional bodily and locational references, by the pervasive substitution of the simulated for the “real”, in the computer’s virtual reality’ (Vidler, 1992: 10); together, they can be seen as expressing what Punter has proposed as ‘the uncanny of virtual locality’, a new form of the uncanny that involves ‘the increasing

sense that the human subject is no longer located in a single place at a single time ... from the evolution of the placeless and directory-less mobile phone to the ascendancy of the worldwide web, the possibility that we can be certain that the person with whom we are communicating occupies a specific location has been continuously eroded' (Punter, 2007: 133). Meanwhile 'Now Here' (Alexander, 2013) – a story written and published before the formal start of this research project, but which illuminated for me an emerging interest in uncanny fiction about science and technology and is included as the opening story in this collection on the basis that it sets out some of the territory to be explored and gestures forward to a number of the central themes of the research – appears to reverse these uncanny experiences of placelessness and loss of bodily references, in its exploration of implanted technology that enhances the recipient's sense of proprioception and geographical location to the extent that she is no longer able to experience being lost, or losing herself.

Concerns with embodiment continue to develop in later stories about life sciences and biotechnology. 'Dolly', a story told by a human clone who visits the famous cloned sheep that preceded her, is centred around the potential for biotechnology to extend or recreate life even as it threatens identity in the sense of bodily integrity. 'Flesh of their flesh' explores organ donation, animal-human hybridity, and the potential for empathetic enlargement of human identity. 'Blood' interrogates the implications of a biomedical marketplace within a political and social system in which the young are economically disadvantaged, in a scenario that's shown as 'emptying the other's body of difference' (Wasson, 2011: 83). Both 'Minor Complications' (in which the narrator regains her lost sight accompanied by unsettling visions) and 'Saints' (the story of a nurse's communication with a patient with impaired consciousness) engage in different ways with ideas around what is made visible (brought into the light) by medical technologies.

In these stories, it's possible to identify two further new uncanny forms. The biotechnologically-enabled multiplicities of 'Dolly' and 'Minor Complications' are expressive of Punter's suggested 'uncanny awareness of multiplicity':

...an awareness that earlier ideas about the "doubleness" of the psyche may now be radically insufficient as we emerge into a world where the individual – or his or her surrogate – may be occupying *many* different "scenes" at once –

only one, perhaps, in the body, but many others according to the technological extensions, the range of prostheses, available (Punter, 2007: 133).

And though Punter's proposed 'morphological uncanny' is described primarily in terms of internet technology ('a version of the uncanny which dissolves our sense of physical shape, so that – in the realm of internet chat-rooms, for example – we can choose to appear in any guise we wish. . . . our bodies, as relayed through electronic media, become strictly "supernatural", engineered ghosts of our physical selves'), a morphological uncanny can also relate to the physical pliability of the human body (Punter, 2007: 133) that's evident in the human-animal transformations of 'Flesh of their flesh' and the transfer of identity characteristics along with bodily fluid in 'Blood'.

The particular usefulness of the uncanny literary mode in interrogating contemporary experiences of science and technology is demonstrated by contextualising my treatments of technologically-impacted embodiment with other contemporary uncanny stories that engage with ideas of human-machine and human-animal hybridity. Two of the stories from Nicholas Royle's collection *Mortality* involve blurred borders between human and machine. In 'Christmas Bonus', art photographer Andrew Kerner is apparently transformed first into a human-machine hybrid – 'The weight of his body settled on its two arms and one good leg, while the aperture that was his single functioning pupil remained open, so that light could still get in' (37) – before ultimately becoming a camera and tripod. The mutation of an individual human body into a piece of technological equipment is connected to Kerner's attempt to 'bury the dead' (the memory of former lover Anya) by burning photo negatives of a model who acts as Anya's double; what Kerner tries to repress returns as a series of images of Anya that accompany his transformation into a machine. Here, the impact of technology on the body is to erase the qualities that make Kerner human: 'Emotion drained from him like moisture from a corpse in sand. He sensed his memories fading like reverse Polaroids, and, despite a general low-level ache, he no longer felt any real pain' (37) – something he passively accepts, seemingly without making a choice to do so. A second story, 'Negatives', similarly destabilises the boundaries between human and machine, with the protagonist's extensive use of an old green-text computer screen creating an optical illusion in which white becomes red: the screen display technology invades his

vision so that white road markings become red lines and headlights become brake lights, ultimately causing a car crash that kills the protagonist.

In Miéville's 'Jack' (2006), a story located in the fantastical storyworld of Bas-Lag and the city-state of New Crobuzon that features in several of his novels, human-machine hybridity is conceived as a form of punishment. Humans are forcibly bioengineered into cyborg beings known as the Remade, their flesh fused with machine and animal parts; their hybridity is experienced as mutilation and is accompanied, often, by enslavement. Meanwhile 'After the Festival' (2015), from Miéville's collection *Three Moments of an Explosion*, breaches boundaries between human and animal bodies not via science or technology but as the unintended by-product of a celebratory ritual of sacrifice and procession, in a story that destabilises the integrity of the human self, makes the familiar body into something strangely hybrid and creates uncertainty for the reader as to the purpose and end result of Charlie's transformation into 'Mr. Pig'. In a useful comparison to my human-animal story 'Flesh of their flesh', here the intrusion of animal flesh into human is traumatic, presented as a kind of matter-of-fact horror, with invasive living 'worms' emerging from dead, dripping animal heads. Descriptions of bodily fluids and rotting flesh show dead animals and living human-animal hybrids as abject beings; Neil's experience of becoming animal is portrayed as compulsive, ultimately addictive and destructive of his humanity.

These four stories can be positioned in a lineage of Gothic science fiction literature that includes Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and H. G. Wells's *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896). *Frankenstein*, as illustrated in section 1.1, contains uncanny elements in both form and content: the return to life of what was dead; the blurred boundaries between humans and a scientifically-engineered monster made of human parts that call into question assumptions about the nature of human identity; not least, the uncertainty created by the text's formal resistance to closure. Unlike *Frankenstein*, *The Island of Dr. Moreau* does not create a comparable sense of uncertainty for the reader and as such can't be positioned within an uncanny literary mode, but it certainly contains uncanny elements, to which Mason Harris has drawn attention:

Freud finds one manifestation of the uncanny effect in uncertainty about the nature of objects in the external world ... Prendick experiences this kind of

uncertainty with his increasingly anxious efforts to distinguish between animal and human in his encounters with the Beast People. But Moreau's scientific explanation only deepens Prendick's unease, as his ambivalence towards Moreau generates a pervasive intellectual uncertainty which destabilizes all his attempts to reason things out (Harris, 2002: 109).

Additionally, the Beast People can be read as the return of the repressed – long-familiar yet horribly strange to Prendick, prompting 'forgotten horrors of childhood' (Christensen, 2004).

In both *Frankenstein* and *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, man-made human-monsters and animal-human hybrids are shown as grotesque and abject, threatening boundaries between human self and not-human other, evoking horror, pity and fear. The impacts of science and technology on human bodies are constructed as threats; bodily integrity is compromised, experienced as punishment, mutilation or erasure. By contrast, the impacts of science and technology on human embodiment in stories from my practice research reveal more ambivalent feelings about our technologically-enhanced status, reflecting Jay's description of the experience of the uncanny as 'both disturbing and pleasurable' (Jay, 1998: 158) and Hayles's notion of 'this shift from the human to the posthuman, which both evokes terror and excites pleasure' (Hayles, 1999: 4).

'Candlemaker Row' presents the disembodiment of virtual reality as unfamiliar but not explicitly threatening, perhaps even as a welcome experience that allows the protagonist to reclaim her sense of identity as part of a couple. In 'The SleepHeart' the emotional and physical intimacy offered by communications technology is likewise welcomed by the protagonist, though not unambiguously so – while the protagonist of 'You The Story' experiences the data-gathering capacity of personal technology as offering a recognition of self and a potential for interpersonal connection, before it becomes a threat to identity and agency. Perhaps the most positive portrayal of machine-human hybridity is in 'Chronic', where the emotional and physical connection between an invalid and an A. I. assistant is experienced as potentially healing. Animal-human hybridity in 'Flesh of their flesh' extends human towards animal in what can be read as an expansion of empathy that enriches rather than threatens human integrity, while in 'Blood' and 'Minor Complications' medical procedures that destabilise identity are willingly undergone; and the narrator of 'Now Here' is initially evangelical about the benefits of her cyborg status.

The ambivalence of these stories aligns them more closely with Adam Marek's unsettling biotechnology story 'An Industrial Evolution' (2012), and Ali Smith's 'Virtual' (2000). In the former, a conservationist creates and gives birth to hybrid human-orang utan creatures, which are then pressed into service as a pliant workforce with an unclear status that lies somewhere between beast of burden, protected species, employee and slave; the lines between care and exploitation are blurred along with borders between human and animal in a story that critiques the logic of extreme capitalism. In the latter story, the title refers to the Tamagotchi belonging to a hospitalised anorexic girl, a gift given by a family unable to offer the help she needs to a child who is unable to accept their help or to help herself, and whose smiling hatred towards the Tamagotchi expresses the tangled complexities of the desires, obligations and impossibilities of caring.

What accounts for the capacity of an uncanny literary mode both to illuminate horrific, threatening ways in which bodily integrity and human identity are troubled by science and technology – as in stories by Royle and Miéville – and to offer a more ambivalent unsettling of our relationships with technology, is that liminal position of uncanny affect on a spectrum of emotions described by Weber as 'located between dread, terror and panic on the one side, and uneasiness and anticipation on the other'. Those latter qualities of uneasiness and anticipation are in line with van Elferen's conception of the uncanny as an effect bound up with the same radical ambivalence that characterises our contradictory response to the technologies we inhabit and which, increasingly, inhabit us: 'All of our worries regarding technological transcendence, then, are accompanied by curiosity and eagerness; and our fascination is accompanied by suspicion and dread. There seems to be no unambivalent emotional or intellectual way of approaching it – and that makes it eerie' (van Elferen, 2009: 103).

2.3 The uncanny of virtual surveillance

'the solidity of our walls has increasingly given way to the restless luminosity of electronic screens. ... We see the world from where we are not, from where we have never been.' (McQuire, 2008: 9-10)

A second area of concern to emerge in my practice research is one of watching and being watched, or what Scott McQuire has described as ‘the twin axes of surveillance and spectacle’ (McQuire, 2008: 11). As with the embodied impact of a contemporary technological uncanny, this can be seen as a development of the historical concerns of the literary uncanny. Tom Gunning (2008) describes how vision occupied a central role in 19th century fantastic literature; one reason for this, he suggests, is that the experience of doubting one’s perception lends itself to the creation of uncertainty that is fundamental to the uncanny narrative mode (72). Gunning draws attention to Todorov’s observation that in Hoffmann’s stories, ‘it is not the vision itself that is linked to the world of the marvellous, but rather eyeglasses and mirrors, those symbols of indirect, distorted, subverted vision’ (Todorov, 1975: 122). Pascarelli too has noted that in Hoffmann’s ‘The Sandman’ uncanniness attaches to technologies of seeing, and in particular to Nathaniel’s vision of Olympia as mediated by his pocket telescope. In addition to Hoffmann, Gunning includes Theophile Gautier, Jules Verne and Edogawa Rampo as writers working in the fantastic mode who commonly drew on uncertainties of mediated vision to create uncanny affect, thus calling into question the extent to which technologically-enhanced vision could be relied upon.

This preoccupation with visual topos is something Freud notes in his study of Hoffmann’s ‘The Sandman’, but in Freud’s analysis optical tropes function as displaced signifiers for castration; Pascarelli argues that Freud’s reading of the story ‘frequently eschews evidence for linking vision with technology, intellectual uncertainty, and psychological control’ (Pascarelli, 2002: 121). Sadeq Rahimi, writing from a psychoanalytical perspective, has challenged Freud’s phallic reading of the uncanny. In his examination of visual motifs and metaphors in both ‘The Sandman’ and ‘The Uncanny’ Rahimi disputes Freud’s theorisation of uncanny effect caused by the fear of losing one’s eyes as a displaced castration anxiety, and restores the centrality of vision to the text – ‘anyone who has read the Sandman [sic] would readily agree that it is a text specifically replete with references to eyes and various other ocular metaphors, including ripped eyes, displaced eyes, artificial eyes, stolen eyes, distorted visions, eyeglasses, binoculars, and more’ (Rahimi, 2013: 467-8) – pointing to the ‘inability of the castration model to account for the impressive presence of specular references and visual tropes across narratives of the uncanny’ (464).

...the main tropes of the uncanny, such as *doppelgangers*, ghosts, déjà vu, alter egos, self-alienations and split personhoods, phantoms, twins, living dolls and many more in this list of “things of terror” typically share two important features in literary and psychological traditions: they are closely tied with visual tropes, and they are alterations of the theme of “doubling” – both of which are associated with the basic questions of ego-development and self-identity (454).

Rahimi advances a Lacanian, specular formulation of the uncanny that develops and refocuses Freud’s theorisation. Central to this is Lacan’s notion of the ‘mirror stage’, that stage of psychological development where an infant’s visual perception of its reflection is what allows the formation or confirmation of the ego. The reflection thus functions as a stand-in for the self; it offers the reassurance of the existence of a unified self, but offers this in the form of an illusion. As such, anything that threatens the wholeness and uniqueness of this illusory image (such as doubles, dolls and automatons) is potentially a source of fear and alienation. As Botting explains, ‘in Lacan’s terms, the uncanny marks the decomposition of the fantasy underpinning imaginary subjective integrity ... its apprehension discloses, in horror, nothing but a void’ (Botting, 1999b: 34). This Lacanian uncanny is supported, as Rahimi points out, by aspects of Jentsch’s earlier study that Freud overlooks or misreads, which illuminate the uncanny as an effect of fragmentation of, or alienation from, the self. In revisiting Jentsch, Rahimi demonstrates how the threat of the unfamiliar is related to one’s own psyche as something that is usually enigmatic or unfamiliar, and how the uncanny effect of witnessing a seizure has to do with the revelation of “the dark knowledge” that s/he [the witness] has been wrong in attributing familiarity to what “he was previously used to regarding as a unified psyche” (Rahimi, 2013: 460). Rahimi is clear, however, that this Lacanian, specular uncanny does not compete with or undermine the Freudian formulation of the uncanny, but rather underscores the role of repression as advanced by Freud: ‘As the imagined identification becomes more solid, the emptiness that lies between the self and it-self becomes simultaneously more denied, more forgotten, more “repressed”, and thus more potentially destructive’ (466-7). In other words, as the identification of one’s (illusory) unified self with one’s reflection becomes fundamental to a sense of a fixed identity, the notion that this stable self is an illusion becomes unbearable; such knowledge is

thus firmly and repeatedly repressed, and whatever prompts its fleeting revelation is experienced as provoking disturbing, uncanny sensation.

In a contemporary technological version of the uncanny, the visual becomes particularly uncertain and unstable in relation to the real, as McQuire shows:

...the solidity of our walls has increasingly given way to the restless luminosity of electronic screens. Looking through these strange windows we are invited to perceive the world as if divorced from bodily constraints. We see the world from where we are *not*, from where we have *never been*. Despite its everyday familiarity, this mode of disembodied perception – which can be equated in psychoanalytic terms with the fantasy of seeing from the place of the “other” – retains a strong sense of the uncanny. ... Faith in the capacity of visual images to bring us close to the real has been counterpointed by a growing suspicion that media form a screen blocking the real. This tension between the factual pull of technological images and the semantic instability arising from their capacity to be manipulated and reproduced in different contexts has never been resolved. Instead, it has been systematically displaced onto each new wave of image technology – photography, cinema, television, VR – triggering recurrent fears about the capacity of images to *replace* the real (McQuire, 2008: 9-10).

This capacity of technologically-mediated ways of seeing to unsettle the real is evident in Royle’s ‘Christmas Bonus’ and ‘Negatives’ (both 2006): reality is displaced by the lens of a camera, or vision altered by the technology of the computer screen display. In my practice research, too, themes of seeing and observation emerge in various different formulations to extend these notions of uncanny surveillance and spectacle. Just as Nathaniel’s pocket telescope is a piece of technology that helps him gaze at Olympia, the screens, apps and surveillance technologies in these stories offer a technologically-mediated gaze, in a version of the uncanny that’s specific to our age and encompasses contemporary forms of surveillance that are no longer literally visual: online observation, data tracking, global positioning systems. An implanted G. P. S. chip ensures the narrator of ‘Now Here’ always knows her location, and her location always knows her: ‘I was striding north, swinging round each correct turn, and I thought of you. It was the weekend you went to London ... As the chip pinpointed those north London suburbs – Tottenham, Finsbury Park – 300 miles at the back of me, my step slowed slightly. The feeling was like being watched, by someone who's behind you’ (10). The protagonist of ‘You The Story’ is monitored and revealed through the data he

generates. An online ticketing system ‘sees’ and makes visible the unacknowledged preoccupations of the protagonist in ‘Adult ONE’. ‘The Hatayama Code’ describes the movement of collective virtual attention made audible rather than visible – an apparent promise to illuminate what the objects of our surveillance reveal about us, but one which reveals only further questions: ‘What recurs is the idea of meaning. We cannot say for certain that there is meaning in what we hear, and yet we feel certain that, just beyond the limits of our ears, there is something we wish to tell ourselves about ourselves’ (59). The technology in ‘First Date’ captures information about the protagonist’s desire, reflecting it back to him in a distorted / perfected virtual version: ‘She’s like a smooth perfected version of the girl he’s meant to meet – and she seems to know him, wears an expression like she’s pleased to see him. *Come on*, she says, mouthing the words’ (141).

The uncanniness that emerges in these stories is something I want to term an ‘uncanny of the virtual gaze’, since as an experience of watching and being watched it shares with John Berger’s notion of the woman who is ‘taught and persuaded to survey herself continually’ (Berger, 1972: 46) and Laura Mulvey’s conception of the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975) the characteristic of being internalised, so that one becomes both subject and object: aware of oneself being tracked, observed or surveilled. In these stories, uncanniness results from what is revealed by technology, from what is made visible; rather than exteriority and transparency diminishing the uncanny as per Botting, surveillance of various kinds reveals actions, thoughts and desires so that, as McQuire explains, ‘In contrast [to a 19th century uncanny linked to dark hidden spaces], the technological uncanny is less a function of hidden space or invisibility than of what Virilio aptly calls the *overexposure* of space’ (2008: 11). Just as a woman can feel herself observed by the internalised male gaze in the absence of any spectator, in my stories the virtual gaze operates without the need for any audience other than algorithms, apps and satellite receivers. The unacknowledged and often unwelcome aspects of each character are revealed to the characters themselves, who are forced to confront versions of themselves that are both strange and familiar.

Virtual surveillance and the uncanny of multiplicity

In a number of my stories the uncanny virtual gaze occurs alongside multiples, suggesting that, just as Rahimi positions the double as an uncanny visual trope, multiplicity can emerge as a trope that marks an uncanny of virtual surveillance. ‘You The Story’ involves real and virtual surveillance alongside the suggestion of multiplied selves: the protagonist’s private self, the digitally-generated versions of himself, and the possibility of a data *doppelgänger*. In ‘Minor Complications’ a biomedical intervention that rewinds and alters the narrator’s own biological material restores a ‘more than ordinary perception’ (Gunning, 2008: 72) along with her lost vision, so that she seems to watch multiple potential versions of herself, while ‘Now Here’ concludes with the suggestion of escaping surveillance through multiplicity.

Punter and Byron have described how multiplicity in Gothic texts has a destabilising function. Reading Wells’s *Beast People* in *The Island of Dr. Moreau* as uncanny multiples of the human subject, and the trans-sexual and trans-species metamorphoses of Helen in Arthur Machen’s *The Great God Pan* as physical multiplicity, they argue that with multiplicity ‘Forms and boundaries dissolve as comforting certainties mutate into questions. The Gothic horror of the Decadence is the horror of dissolution ... of the human subject itself’ (Punter and Byron, 2004: 43). Of course, such a threat to a stable, unified self echoes the uncanny affect provoked by those visual uncanny tropes listed by Rahimi (doubles, dolls and automatons, etc.) – but for Punter, an uncanny of multiplicity is more than a straightforward extension of uncanny doubling. It is rather an even more disturbing phenomenon that ‘challenges the very notion of “appearance” as conventionally understood ... the ghost, the demon, may appear at any time and command our attention, beckon us to worlds which we may have preferred to disown or disavow’ (Punter, 2007: 133). We are not, and can never be, in control of what we see or what appears to be ‘real’, therefore we cannot trust that anything we see is not illusory; all the evidence of our eyes becomes unreliable. The narrator of ‘Dolly’ exists as a multiple of an original, feels herself to be her own apparition, her ontological status uncertain; in ‘Minor Complications’, multiples are experienced as apparitions of possible alternative lives, raising the question of whether the narrator and her world are any more ‘real’ than her possible selves in their alternative worlds.

Veronica L. Schanoes, meanwhile, has suggested that the multiple may operate quite differently from the double – and though her argument is made with reference to feminist retellings of fairytales rather than fiction in an uncanny literary mode, to a certain extent it finds a resonance with motifs of multiplicity in my practice research. Schanoes argues that:

Kelly Link’s “The Girl Detective”, Catherynne M. Valente’s *The Ice Puzzle*, and Robin McKinley’s *Deerskin* portray the doubled or multiplied self as something to be celebrated and/or appreciated . . . In stark contrast to the threatening “uncanniness” of the double that Sigmund Freud and Otto Rank found inherent in the concept, these writers portray the multiplied self as liberation, comfort, and power (Schanoes, 2016: 2).

The multiplicity that emerges in my stories retains an uncanny sense of destabilisation, a threat to human or individual identity as encompassed by Punter and Byron’s Gothic multiplicity, but gestures too towards Schanoes’s liberations. In ‘Dolly’ the protagonist’s sense of herself as a version of an original, the double of her ‘sister’, is experienced as limiting, diminishing, but the notion of giving birth to a third version of her original / ‘sister’ / self is ambiguously suggestive of unrealised possibility. The potential doubling of the protagonist in ‘You The Story’ is experienced as damage to his sense of self and individual agency, while the multiplication of sharing daily narrated versions of himself is experienced as a frisson of excitement / anxiety. In ‘Minor Complications’ the protagonist’s reaction to visions of multiple potential selves is more ambivalent – the fragmentation of her sense of a unified self is shared with ‘You The Story’, but her multiplicity is also experienced as a kind of freedom, an opening up of possibilities. Likewise in ‘Now Here’, multiplicity means destruction, but is welcomed by the protagonist as the only escape from a world in which her whereabouts is always certain: ‘What I’ve realised is that I’ll have to be burned, become multiple. I will become a cloud, in all directions at once, the million million specks of me irretrievably lost in the world. I find I am looking forward to it’ (12-13).

For Schanoes, the treatment of multiplicity as an empowering phenomenon is connected to the revisionist nature of retelling fairytales, which demands that writers engage with the multiple, diverse versions of these tales that exist in folklore; and also (particularly with regard to Valente’s *The Ice Puzzle*) to the blurring of roles

between writers and readers within online literary communities (Schanoes, 2015: 207). Neither of these explanations pertains to my practice research, in which multiplicity is not something to be celebrated unequivocally, and in which I choose not to make use of the kind of fairytale conventions that, per Freud, prevent a text from creating uncanny affect (156). But the notion of blurred identities is nevertheless a useful one, in that it suggests a possible reason why the multiplicity in my stories encompasses not only an uncanny threat but also an ambiguous sense of welcoming. I want to relate my handling of multiplicity to a blurring of the boundaries not between reading and writing roles, but between my writing self and my characters; and not in the autobiographical sense of characters expressing or illustrating aspects of oneself, but rather in how they offer an imaginative expansion of the self, a means of fulfilling what Rosemary Jackson, writing about the double in fantastical literature, describes as ‘a longing for that which does not yet exist, or which has not been allowed to exist, the unheard of, the unseen, the imaginary, as opposed to what already exists and is permitted as “really” visible’ (Jackson, 1981: 91). As Jackson goes on to observe, ‘the imaginary is inhabited by an infinite number of selves ... These selves allow an infinite, unnameable potential to emerge, one which a fixed sense of character excludes in advance’.

This desire – to inhabit an imaginary, infinite number of selves – is fundamental to my writing practice. In the context of this research project, it finds its expression in an appropriately uncanny ambivalence and uncertainty about the potential for multiplicity; more broadly, the sense of possibility that’s associated with multiplicity in my stories is very much to do with the kind of longing that Jackson describes: for a life that can be lived more than once.

Chapter 3: Into the light: the impact on creative writing of its location within the academy

In this chapter I apply the notions of embodiment and surveillance discussed in Chapter 2 to the process and practice of creative writing as research, to show how the reflexive methodology of creative writing as research and the location of creative writing in the academy have shaped the findings of this research; and I suggest that the capacity of a reflexive process to identify repressed concerns that emerge in creative work positions creative writing research as an uncanny practice.

3.1 How a creative-critical methodology shaped practice research findings

‘Possibly, then, writing has to do with darkness, and a desire or perhaps a compulsion to enter it, and, with luck, to illuminate it, and to bring something back out to the light.’ (Atwood, 2002: xxiv)

The two areas of concern that I have identified through my practice research as marking a contemporary technological uncanny emerged not only from my reading of uncanny short fiction and related theory, and from my lived experience transformed into fiction, but also from the specific methodology of creative writing as research. In this way, the location of creative writing in the academy and the conditions of my writing practice have shaped my research findings around the body as the site of impact for scientific and technological advances, and the uncanny of the virtual gaze.

Creative writing as research differs from dance, music and the visual arts in that it doesn't make extensive use of performative or gestural methodologies, or tactile and material practices. According to Webb and Brien, 'Embodied and material thinking must be "translated" if it is to be useful within the more silent, less tangibly gestural practice of writing' (Webb and Brien, 2012: 193). But the qualifiers here (*'more silent, less tangibly gestural'*) acknowledge that creative writing can indeed be an embodied practice, as advocated by Natalie Goldberg: 'You are thinking on the level of discursive thought ... Real writing comes from the whole body' (2000: 51). My

writing practice is to do with the concrete, the specific, and the use of sensory detail to invite readerly empathy and identification with the experiences of my characters. Before this readerly empathy comes that of the writer, an embodied experience of imaginative identification described by Cixous from her perspective as a writer of fiction: ‘I become, I inhabit, I enter. Inhabiting someone, at that moment I can feel myself traversed by that person’s initiatives and actions’ (Cixous and Clément, 1986: 148). The inhabiting of a character’s physicality is necessary in order to render their experience thoroughly and accurately on the page, to allow the reader to slip easily into the fictional storyworld. This is particularly so in a number of the stories in this collection, where the creation of uncanny affect depends partly on the efficient set-up of a familiar storyworld in which the reader can feel at home before aspects of the world are made strange.

Inhabiting an imagined physicality involves both literal and imagined physical action, in what I term here embodied practice. To cup my hands around the memory bequeathed to the narrator of ‘Small Objects’, in order to realise its size, shape and weight. To extend my forearm and clench my fist as I think myself into Nick’s experience of plasma donation in ‘Blood’, or to flatten my hand on the table, palm-up, so the scar can creep across his palm and onto David’s. To walk with my eyes flickering between closed and half-closed, calling on touch, sound and smell to guide me on a familiar walk, in order to recreate my narrator’s experience of sight loss in ‘Minor Complications’. To attend closely to my physical experience of disorientation and render it into the narrator’s experience of becoming lost in ‘Now Here’, then imagine the internal compass of her G. P. S. chip through extrapolation from the small physical sensations of muscle memory – the embodied knowledge of where the letters sit on a QWERTY keyboard, or where my fingers can find the notes on the neck of a violin.

This capacity of literature for specific embodiment is recognised by Hayles: in her study of what it means to be posthuman, she includes analyses of literary texts in order to ‘entangle abstract form and material particularity’, as part of her strategy to challenge both liberal humanist and posthuman privileging of abstract notions of the body over the individual specifics of embodiment.

...the literary texts do more than explore the cultural implications of scientific theories and technological artifacts. Embedding ideas and artifacts in the

situated specificities of narrative, the literary texts give these ideas and artifacts a local habitation and a name through discursive formulations whose effects are specific to that textual body. ... For this project, the literary texts with their fashionings of embodied particularities are crucial (Hayles, 1999: 22-3).

In my practice, embodied imagining provides the material to be translated into a written language that may be ‘more silent’ than, for instance, a musician’s practice, but that is always read aloud in the processes of composition, redrafting and editing – so that the silence on the page is nevertheless attentive to rhythm and patterns of sound. And these imaginative, generative and textual strategies that have been fundamental to my writing practice throughout this project contribute to an approach that positions the body as central to the experiences of science and technology explored in my fiction, and encourages a particular attention to notions of embodiment emerging from lived experience and my reading of literature and uncanny theory.

The uncanny of the virtual gaze, I want to suggest, is even more firmly bound up with the condition of my practice research. The reflexive methodology that underpins practice research, defined by Haseman and Mafe as involving ‘a position where the researcher can refer to and reflect upon themselves and so be able to give an account of their own position’ (2009: 219), makes it necessary for the researcher to observe and reflect on herself and her creative practice, not as a retrospective activity once the research is complete but as a ‘looping’ process throughout the duration of the project: ‘Reflexivity is one of those “artist-like-processes” which occurs when a creative practitioner acts upon the requisite research material to generate new material which immediately acts back upon the practitioner who is in turn stimulated to make a subsequent response.’

This demand for self-aware, reflexive practice potentially creates some tension with the conditions of creative practice as performed outwith academia. When Margaret Atwood interviewed novelists about their writing process, they spoke variously of ‘walking into a labyrinth, without knowing what monster might be inside’; ‘groping through a tunnel’; being in a cave, in darkness, or a completely dark room; ‘grappling with an unseen being or entity’ (Atwood, 2002: xxii-xxiii). Images of darkness and obscurity recur, suggesting the ways in which writing can be a process of discovering what’s not yet known: of realising what a story is about; of

finding that what you thought you would write about is unsatisfactory when it's on the page, fails in some way to reach the essence of the story, that as-yet unarticulated something that initially drew your attention. These images accord with my own sense of a story-in-progress as being only partially seen: a silhouette that suggests an overall shape, or a picture or series of pictures illuminated at points along a dim corridor, as in the narrow beam of a torch. And this darkness, I want to suggest, has to do not only with discovering what's not yet known, but with the writer feeling invisible, unwatched – by potential readers or critics, even by herself.

What happens, then, when a process that more usually depends upon a certain amount of obscurity, which tends towards the hidden, is brought into the light? I was aware of this tension as I embarked on the project. In an early presentation on my practice research I quoted Ali Smith on the potential difficulties of becoming more self-aware, more analytical in my practice: 'self-consciousness gets in the way of the kind of writing output, the act of making a book or a story or a piece, allowing it to be itself. The more I think about what I do, the less I'll be able to do it on its terms' (Smith, 2013: 152). I shared Smith's concern that self-consciousness could be damaging to my imaginative process.

At this point it seems useful to differentiate between two separate kinds of 'surveillance' that I was aware of as I wrote my short story collection: self-consciousness, and reflexivity. By self-consciousness, I mean the unhelpful critical assessment or judgment of writing-in-process which is experienced as a barrier to the writing, particularly at the stage of producing initial rough drafts, and which is sometimes associated with the existence of an 'inner critic' who needs to be escaped before a writer can feel she is writing fluently or well. By reflexivity, I mean the researcher's awareness of her interaction with her critical and creative material, which is fundamental to the activity of practice research. Both involve a writer observing herself in relation to her work; both, potentially, entail the same internalised awareness of being watched that I suggest is characteristic of the uncanny of virtual surveillance (though I don't mean to argue here that either self-consciousness or the self-awareness associated with reflexivity are experienced by the writer as uncanny). Both seem associated with light, though in different ways. Self-consciousness brings light that's unflatteringly bright, revealing flaws and

shining in the wrong place, where what's needed instead is the darkness referred to by Atwood's interviewees. Reflexivity, on the other hand, involves a repeated movement between light and dark: a drawing into the light of what's been made, so the work so far can illuminate the conditions of its making and inform the work that's still to come, the shaping of which requires a shift back into the darkness. And although they are quite distinct from each other – self-consciousness is a state, reflexivity a methodology; self-consciousness occurs problematically within the drafting process, while reflexivity is most productively carried out as part of the research process, though separately from the activity of creative drafting – in the process of practice research, I nevertheless found them to be connected.

The self-consciousness that relates to the inner critic is widely acknowledged as a common difficulty for creative writers: see for instance Carole Satyamurti's 'premature evaluation' (Satyamurti, 2003: 42) and Ted Hughes's 'inner police system' (Brownjohn, 1982: 7), as well as Gillie Bolton (2011: 42) and Natalie Goldberg (1986: 163). It's something I often experience as an over-familiarity with my material, a lack of freshness and a sense that as soon as the words are on the page or the screen, or sometimes even in the moments before I set them down, whatever I write is predictable and banal. In the novel-in-progress I have worked on alongside this practice research project, the protagonist finds her experiences of imaginatively-generated virtual reality unsatisfying because she is unable to surprise herself; the former partner she imagines herself with can only ever speak or act as she chooses for him to do. This seems to me closely related to the experience of self-consciousness when trying to write – an experience that is certainly not specific to creative writing as practice research. But my concern was that this problematic self-consciousness could be aggravated by the location of the writing process within the academy; by the actual activities I would be carrying out as part of my reflexive process, such as keeping a writer's journal and analysing my work in relation to stories by other writers, but more so by my heightened awareness of myself watching myself.

The strategies for escaping such a state (primarily different forms of free writing, such as Dorothea Brande's morning pages (Brande, 1934: 100, 138), and Natalie Goldberg's fast and furious writing practice aimed at separating the functions of creator and editor (Goldberg, 1986: 8, 163)) are to do with escaping a critical self which stands outside the writing as it happens and looks on (as distinct from a self-

reader as discussed in Chapter 1, which operates fluidly and unnoticeably as part of the process). Such an inner critic may be an internalisation of a specific figure such as the critical mother referred to by Hunt and Sampson (2006: 80) – but whatever guise it takes, when the writer is alone and present with the work or the potential work, the criticism is a judgement she makes about herself, generated from within herself. In the context of my practice research, escaping an inner critic was made more than usually difficult by the anticipation that the work would be read critically, whether by myself as part of a reflexive research process, or by other academic writers as part of the supervision and assessment of the research. This anticipation was more acute at the start and the end of the project, when I felt closest to my notional, critical audience. Indeed, without strategic intent, I created an unwatched space in which to embark on my short story collection: as mentioned in Chapter 2, I wrote the first story ‘Candlemaker Row’ in response to a call for submissions which had nothing at all to do with a technological uncanny.

For the main duration of the project, though, my self-consciousness – my anxiety around the exposure of the writing process during that process – was something I was able to put to one side as I worked on each story. In this sense, I found that a short fiction collection lends itself to the kind of ongoing reflexivity that’s integral to practice research, since it comprises individual creative pieces that allow for natural vantage points at the end of each completed story draft. And through observing and reflecting on the process of writing the stories, it became evident that my creative writing practice depended not only on a degree of obscurity, but also of clarity; I needed certainty as well as uncertainty. Before I began to pull together a story from freewrites and clusters, back-of-envelope scribbles and iPhone notes, it was necessary for me to know its theme, usually expressed in binary pairs (e.g. innocence / corruption; intimacy / distance; liberation / disintegration); though other themes often revealed themselves along the way, this initial certainty acted as a rope that pulled me through the narrative, showing me what to include and what to jettison. I needed to know about time: the span of it, and how events and information were arranged inside it or around it. And I needed to know what would change between the start of the story and the end, and when this change would occur; it wasn’t necessary to know precisely what it might mean, what the impact or the aftermath would be, but without that point of change acting as the hinge or pivot of

the story there would be no sense of shape, and the mechanism of the story would be incomplete.

Once I recognised this requirement for certainty in specific areas, images of unconscious creativity – of caves and labyrinths and monsters – began to seem more partial, if no less true. As Mike Harris points out, there are reasons why writers might be telling less than the whole story: the inspirational stage of composition, where ideas flow so fast that they seem beyond one's conscious control, is likely to be more exciting and therefore more memorable than the conscious, painstaking hours of revision, cutting, checking (Harris, 2009: 41). The emphasis on the unknown and uncertain may also be a kind of gloss – a way, perhaps, of shielding one's creative process; of protecting creative privacy against a superstitious fear that too much light could be damaging, as expressed in Smith's notion that 'The more I think about what I do, the less I'll be able to do it on its terms.'

The elements of darkness and feeling unwatched were at times essential for my writing process, and at others much less so, as I switched between structured techniques like identifying themes and a point of change; looser strategies like clustering and freewriting that aimed to generate unexpected material; drafting, then stepping back to act the more analytical part of the reader; discovering the most effective structures by cutting up and rearranging printed text; acting the reader once again. Once each first draft was complete, I was able to turn up the dimmer switch on the light and inspect what I'd made, both as a discrete story and in the contexts of the growing collection, work by other writers working in similar territory, and relevant theory; and eventually to recognise how anxieties around observation were emerging in my practice research as those themes of spectacle and surveillance discussed in Chapter 2 of this exegesis.

3.2 What should remain hidden: the uncanniness of reflexive practice

'Where writing contains a space for repressed ideas to surface, the Uncanny is present.' (Finlayson, 2010: 2)

There were other concerns that emerged in my stories. Sometimes these spoke to the location of my creative work in the academy and its position as part of a

methodology of knowledge production, as in a number of texts that can be read as narratives about writing: 'Saints' stages an encounter between intuition and analysis as modes of discovery; 'The Hatayama Code' seems to suggest that the most insightful discoveries about ourselves may be reached not through analysis of information but by a more direct form of close attention to ourselves; most clearly, 'Now Here' can be read as making a case for the need to be uncertain, unobserved, to be able to get lost. As with the stories' focus on the impact of technology on the body and the uncanny of the virtual gaze, this concern with ways of knowing was not an intended theme but something that became evident to me in the context of the growing collection, visible only in the light that several stories threw onto each other.

And sometimes, the concerns that emerged unexpectedly were of more personal significance. In Chapter 4, I identify this phenomenon with the 'return of the repressed' that Freud proposes as the fundamental cause of uncanny affect – and my experience of it could indeed be described as uncanny. An uneasy thrill: the pleasurable anticipation of recognising a pattern that reveals itself through repetition and variation, combined with the unsettling sense that what is revealed is not wholly welcome; is not what one might choose to reveal, either to oneself or to others.

While creative writing has been regarded as uncanny in a number of ways, these are often bound up with Romantic ideas of the writer as creative genius, and have to do with writers being in some way split or doubled. Atwood invokes doubles and notions of possession when she describes the relationship between the writer who goes about her mundane, daily business and 'that other, more shadowy and altogether more equivocal personage who shares the same body, and who, when no one is looking, takes it over and uses it to commit the actual writing' (Atwood, 2002: 35). For Friedrich Kittler, the motif of the double represents 'the ghost of poetry', or the writer's inspiration, 'at his desk all evening reading or writing, or at any rate engaged in authorial pursuits' (Kittler, 1997: 85). John Fowles describes the writer as made up of two essential parts, the 'wild man' who works with association and imagination, and the 'academic' who performs the more analytical writerly functions, the research and editing (Anderson, 2006: 65). And Kevin Brophy develops this opposition of instinct and analysis with specific reference to practice research when he argues that 'Creative writing ... remains for the moment an uncanny phenomenon in universities because ... while it gives prominence to the

strangely expressive power of unconscious desire and individual talent, it is bound by a commitment to critical intellect as long as it aspires to a place in tertiary education' (Brophy, 2009: 142).

These images of uncanny doubling and inspiration, however romantically appealing, do not resonate with my experience as a writer. I don't conceive of my writing self as doubled, split or possessed. The strategic shifting back and forth along the spectrum between Fowles's wild man and his academic – drawing now on tacit knowledge, now on more explicit and critically reflective 'know-what' expertise (Nelson, 2013: 37) as I move through the different stages of making the work – is not an unsettling experience; and my stories are not formed through some mysterious, unknowable process. The emergence of striking material at the level of a passage of text, an image or a draft is something I experience as unexpected, rather than uncanny: since I make use of freewriting techniques in order to actively pursue surprising language, imagery and ideas in my fiction, what emerges, however unfamiliar, has in a sense been summoned. Thus the strange and striking images of socks and newborn babies at the end of 'Blood' or the opaque last line of 'Small Objects' may contribute to the uncanny affect of these stories – for instance, by generating or sustaining uncertainty, or by upsetting a reader's sense that they can predict a story's direction or resolution. But their strangeness is something I've courted, their arrival entirely welcomed.

The distinction, then, is of invitation versus invasion. Uncanny affect, as theorised by Freud, is an experience of repressed anxiety, one that arrives uninvited. In creative writing as practice research, discovery through accumulation – as described by Smith, where a critical (or creative) mass of work shows you 'roughly where your mind is going at a certain time' – becomes an integral part of a reflexive writing practice. A growing body of material alerts you to the uneasy fact that while you have been consciously engaged in exploring one set of interests, something quite other has been pushing unbidden into the work.

'Where writing contains a space for repressed ideas to surface,' Katrina Finlayson notes, 'the Uncanny is present' (Finlayson, 2010: 2). Sometimes this is the case almost literally. In addition to those of Nicholas Royle's short stories already examined in Chapters 2 and 3, much of his collection *Mortality* is centrally concerned with uncanniness (hauntings and returns from the dead in 'The Rainbow' and 'The Madwoman'; harbingers of death and the omnipotence of thoughts in 'The

Churring’; burials in ‘Flying into Naples’; confusions of real and not-real in ‘The Space-Time Discontinuum’; destabilised identity in ‘*Kingyo no fun*’) – yet according to Royle, ‘I first became aware of the uncanny when Ra Page commissioned a story for a Comma Press anthology called *The New Uncanny: Tales of Unease* (2008). I read Freud’s *The Uncanny* for the first time ... I only named the uncanny after reading Freud’ (Royle, 2014). However uncanny its effects, Royle’s fiction prior to 2008 was not a conscious exploration of the uncanny as a concept. My own experience is similar; uncanny images and tropes (doubles; psychological invasions; confusions between living and not-living, real and not-real states) emerged in a novel-in-progress and short stories (‘Underpass’, 2009; ‘Now Here’, 2013) before I recognised the uncanny as a concept that mapped onto my work with unsettling precision.

The identification of invasions such as these is facilitated by the writer’s reflexivity, so that in this way a reflexive creative writing practice can function as the site of return; the site that is made unsettling and uncanny, haunted by those hidden things we’re otherwise unconscious of, unable or unwilling to speak about, and which are revealed through the researcher’s awareness of her interaction with her critical and creative material.

*

In my progress report at the end of year two, I noted the emergence of embodiment as an area of concern, and suggested that this ‘raises questions to be addressed in the creative work that’s still to be written – for instance, how can the use of sensory detail contribute to an exploration of disembodiment or alienation from one’s body? What narrative perspectives are appropriate for these kinds of stories?’

In fact, I didn’t specifically address these questions in further creative work (though to a certain extent the accumulation of material makes it possible to draw out some possible answers: for instance, overall the narrative perspectives become more intimate as the project progresses, from a relatively objective, withholding voice in ‘You The Story’ to a consciously more ‘transparent’ voice in ‘Dolly’ and a more intimate, emotionally open voice in stories like ‘Small Objects’, ‘Blood’ and ‘Saints’; a trajectory that expresses an increasingly intimate sense of science and

technology impacting on bodies). To do so would have risked the stories becoming primarily theoretical exercises, as happened to a certain extent with successive drafts of 'Mousekin' (described in Chapter 4); it would have compromised my ability to discover and refine, through the strategies described above, what seemed to me to be the essence of each individual piece.

Speaking again of the processes of accumulation and discovery involved in writing a short story collection, Smith says (my emphasis):

But then you can sit down thinking "right, good, now I know I've got to write another so-called Scottish story" and you can't do it *because you don't get a choice*. But then you have to listen to those things as well, the fact that you don't get a choice or the fact that it argues back or the fact that you argue with it. Those things are all part of it. *The engagement is dialogic*. It's about allowing something to have a voice, rather than forcing a voice (Smith, 2010: 72).

This suggests that one effect of bringing the creative work into the light can be to prompt a shift in attention towards areas that remain less illuminated. More than once during this project I have identified an area of interest that emerges in my practice research (for instance, human-animal relationships; the impact of technology on human bodies) and my naming of it has coincided with a turning away, at least for a time, from that subject or theme. The turning away is not an intentional strategy, but nor does it happen unconsciously. Rather, it's something I observe, trusting that those concerns I turn from will re-emerge in later work if there's more there for me to explore – as is the case with the ideas around science, technology and the body that are less explicitly present in most of the later stories but emerge once more in 'Saints', one of the last stories to be completed. Turning away from a direct light allows for the preservation of obscurity that's necessary to experience the process of writing as exploration and discovery. We're accustomed to use metaphors of sparks to convey the initial stages of creative work – the spark of inspiration; an idea that sparks one's interest; a spark, of course, is barely visible in a too-bright light.

Chapter 4: A desirable insufficiency: creating uncanny affect in contemporary short fiction

In this chapter I extend existing narratological theory to suggest that the second person is a particularly uncanny narrative mode in literature; examine issues of form, voice, structure and sequence to contend that the short story is an especially effective literary form for the creation of uncanny affect at the level of both the individual story and the collection as a whole; and investigate the implications for creative practice of the uncanny as an elusive and subjective phenomenon.

4.1 In pursuit of uncanny affect

'Yet, as we know and as Freud demonstrates insistently, as soon as there is an example, the "uncanny", so-called, has fled.' (Wolfreys, 2008: 171)

As outlined in the introduction to this exegesis, there were several reasons that led me to consider short fiction to be the most appropriate form for my practice research. Firstly, the deferral of meaning characteristic of the modern literary short story – what Adrian Hunter has described as ‘the interdictions, ellipses, withholdings and occlusions that mark the positive shortness of the form’ (Hunter, 1999: 189) – along with the intensity associated by Poe with the brevity of short pieces (Poe, 1846) suggests short fiction may be the ideal medium to create in concentrated form the cognitive uncertainty that is an essential component of the uncanny. Secondly, the individual creative pieces that comprise a short story collection offer scope to test a range of distinct approaches and techniques for creating uncanny affect. And thirdly, the short story collection or sequence opens up the possibility of creating uncanny affect at the level of the book as a whole, as well as through individual stories.

The fragmentary nature of the short story, with its propensity ‘to snap and to confound readers’ expectations, to delight in its own incompleteness, and to resist definition’ (March-Russell, 2009: viii) also seemed particularly well-suited to a project that set out in part to investigate the fragmentations – of self, of focus, of information – characteristic of digital technologies. In the context of this research

project, and especially with regard to the practical considerations around testing out a range of ideas as discussed in this exegesis, short fiction did seem to offer a more flexible form than the novel – particularly since, as a novelist, I am very much concerned with storytelling through variations on three act structure rather than with the kind of fractured, disconnected or illogical narrative forms that might be more readily available for experimentation.

In addition, Nadine Gordimer has suggested that short stories are better equipped than the novel to successfully blur boundaries between the rational and the fantastical, due to the limited length and tight focus of short fiction:

Writers are becoming more and more aware of the waviness of the line that separates fantasy from the so-called rational in human perception. It is recognized that fantasy is no more than a shift in angle; to put it another way, the rational is simply another, the most obvious, kind of fantasy. Writers turn to the less obvious fantasy as a wider lens on ultimate reality. But this fantasy is something that changes, merges, emerges, disappears as a pattern does viewed through the bottom of a glass. It is true for the moment when one looks down through the glass; but the same vision does not transform everything one sees, consistently throughout one's whole consciousness. Fantasy in the hands of short-story writers is so much more successful than when in the hands of novelists because it is necessary for it to hold good only for the brief illumination of the situation it dominates (Gordimer, 1994: 265).

During the course of my practice research, as my hypotheses regarding the suitability of short fiction for creating uncanny affect were put to the test, I found that the creative component of my research methodology involved difficulties I hadn't anticipated and which were specific to my use of the short story form to create uncanny affect. These difficulties are illuminated by a chronological account of my writing process – a structure I initially resisted, since it risks presenting a neat and tidy narrative that emphasises forward movement to give the illusion of a steady, efficient progression towards the discovery of new knowledge, diminishing the messy actualities of the writing process with all its loops and knots and tangles, its groping in the dark. Nevertheless, this reflexive section of the exegesis is most clearly presented as narrative, complete with beginning, middle and end: the story of the stories.

Year 1: the beginning

The first three stories I wrote as part of this project ('Candlemaker Row', 'You The Story' and 'The SleepHeart') tested several ways of creating uncertainty, each of which can be considered as a kind of withholding:

- i) withholding explanation as to the nature of events that occur within the story
- ii) withholding the reader's access to, or understanding of, the protagonist's character or motivation
- iii) withholding sections of plot

Austin M. Wright has theorised these and other kinds of withholding as 'recalcitrance', suggesting several types of recalcitrance that are characteristic of the 20th century short story. The most fundamental of these, he argues, is a 'modal discontinuity', which corresponds to my strategy of withholding explanation as to the nature of events:

...resistance is produced by a contradiction in what we may call the "fictional mode" in the piece – the primary assumptions on which the coherence of the fictional world depends. This may be a clash or poise or ambiguity between two conflicting conceptions of causation, as, in a not-so-modern example, the ghostly and realistic psychological explanations of "The Turn of the Screw", or, closer to our time, the religious and realistic explanations of violence in such stories as Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" (Wright, 1989: 127).

In each of my three early stories, I withheld explanation as to the nature of extraordinary events, holding open the possibility of three distinct causes (psychological, preternatural and technological) for apparently haunted personal and virtual technologies. This is something like the tactic for creating uncanny affect identified by Freud: 'For a long time he [the author] may prevent us from guessing the presuppositions that underlie his chosen world, or he may cunningly withhold such crucial enlightenment right to the end' (157). However, Freud's summary doesn't allow for a withholding of enlightenment to persist *beyond* the end of the story – it presupposes, in fact, that the author herself must have chosen a single cause that underlies extraordinary events, and fails to consider that she may be holding

open for herself several possibilities. As Falkenberg observes, Freud is not alone in assuming the author of uncanny fiction must always provide this kind of closure to a story:

While Todorov lets the reader temporarily choose between an explained supernatural and an accepted supernatural, he does not allow for this choice to persist and thus has no place for an unexplained supernatural. Like Freud, Todorov dismisses ambiguity and thus dissolves the uncanny. He too engages in a repression of the uncanny (Falkenberg, 2005: 34).

By contrast, Wright's modal discontinuity recognises the existence of stories where 'The reader is left facing two balanced possibilities. An adequate resolution probably requires a conception of form in which they continue to coexist ... in which ambiguity itself is the first principle' (128). In such a story, 'recalcitrance is never completely resolved: it is not assimilated into a resolving psychology or symbolism or vision; it remains a contradiction'.

Another relevant category of recalcitrance is named by Wright as 'mimetic resistance'; this, he explains, involves ambiguous motivation and 'an unresolved contradiction at the level of character or action'. Such a withholding of motivation is evident in 'You The Story' and 'The SleepHeart'. At the end of each, the import of action taken by the protagonist is left open to the reader's interpretation: 'The ends of these stories [that display mimetic resistance] stop short of explaining what has happened, and we are forced to explain for ourselves' (Wright, 1989: 124). In both stories I also chose to use a narrative voice that's descriptive and fully embodied through the use of sensory detail, but with a condensed, distancing quality created in part by short sentences and in part by an omission of backstory. This withholding narrative voice was informed by Royle's creation of chilling affect in stories such as 'The Churring' (2006) and 'The Dummy' (2008), where the inaccessibility of the protagonists' inner lives and the lack of straightforward motivation for their sinister actions allow unsettling affect to spread beyond the boundaries of the story; the refusal to explain motivation or to contain the action of the story in a conventional framework of cause and effect defers or occludes that sense of understanding that allows the reader to dismiss a story as something that's comfortably complete.

The third kind of withholding used in my early stories, that of omitting events from a narrative, is a technique characteristic of much modern short fiction;

according to Suzanne Ferguson, ‘deletion of expected elements of the plot ... is the hallmark of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century short story’ (1982: 16). In her analysis of Joyce’s ‘Clay’ and ‘Eveline’ (1914) as examples of ‘elliptical plot’, Ferguson theorises a reader response that infers a ‘hypothetical plot’; the reader-as-detective is able to ‘recognize a story that has not been fully told lying behind the one that *is* told’ (18).

In ‘You The Story’, I made slightly different use of this withholding strategy to maximise uncanny affect. Gaps in the story are explicitly indicated by empty brackets, to draw attention to the omission from the dramatic present of any sections of narrative that occur outside the protagonist’s home. Since these are events that later become contested, presented in different forms (memory and data) and in different versions, the reader is encouraged not only to imagine what might have happened in the empty spaces (and in the empty space that follows the end of the story) but to entertain the co-existence of mutually exclusive plot elements; not to ‘recognize *a* story that has not been fully told’ (my emphasis), but to recognise the potential for competing stories. As with Wright’s modal discontinuity, here the intended effect is to allow for multiple possibilities that create uncertainty as to the nature of events.

Though I used the technique to different effect in ‘You The Story’, the withholding of elements of plot to create unease was informed by Alison Moore’s ‘When the Door Closed, It Was Dark’ (2013), in which the dramatic climax of the story is omitted and the reader is presented instead with an aftermath that implies a terrible accident. Moore makes use of the reader’s ability to unsettle herself, a capacity recognised by Raymond Carver in his reflections on menace in short stories: ‘What creates tension in a piece of fiction is ... also the things that are left out, that are implied, the landscape just under the smooth (but sometimes broken and unsettled) surface of things’ (Carver, 1994: 277); and demonstrated too in supernatural tales such as of those of M. R. James – always more disturbing when a haunting presence is unseen, as in ‘Oh, Whistle, and I’ll Come to You, My Lad’, than when it’s made explicit, reduced as in ‘The Ash-Tree’ to skeletons or spiders covered in hair (both 1931).

Year 2: the middle

I first encountered ‘When the Door Closed, It Was Dark’ in the context of a showcase anthology that ranged widely in terms of content and style, then re-read it as part of Moore’s collection *The Pre-War House and Other Stories* (2013). In this second context, the technique of withholding the disturbing climactic events emerges as a repeated structure; again and again, stories cut away from such awful events as the theft of babies, in ‘Seclusion’ and ‘The Machines’; the death of a child in ‘The Egg’ and ‘If There’s Anything Left’, and of the protagonist’s husband in ‘Late’; scenes of implied torture in ‘It Has Happened Before’ and ‘Sometimes You Think You Are Alone’.

In any collection, gathering together stories that deploy similar narrative strategies can have the effect of highlighting repetitions in the author’s approach. Maurice Shadbolt notes that ‘The perils of the form should be clear, and need no restating here: performing seals, doing the same tricks over and over, are more evident in the short story than in any other form of literature’ (1994: 270). This presents a particular problem if – as with my project – the intended effect over the length of a story collection or sequence involves an unsettling of expectations. Moore’s collection demonstrated for me the particular risks of unexamined repetition. In making it possible for the reader to anticipate the mechanism of successive stories to the extent of feeling comfortable with her discomfort, the unease that can be so effective when a story is read in isolation becomes dulled through over-familiarity. Prior to this project I hadn’t produced short fiction in sufficient volume to encounter the difficulties of inadvertently resorting to a formulaic structure or approach, but by the start of year two I had begun to note repetitions of my own.

The form, the technique becomes expected. Can no longer unsettle, create unease, because it’s not unexpected. How do you avoid this, as a writer? It’s about habit? (Alexander, 2015).

Repetition, of course, can be an uncanny experience; Freud gives as examples his repeated, unintended arrival at the red light district of an unfamiliar Italian town (144), and the double as a repetition of the self (142). At the outset of the project, I had intended to make use of formal repetition as a means of creating uncanny affect,

making the familiar strange through stories that appeared to repeat earlier versions of themselves before transforming into something unexpected, or repeated passages within individual texts; and though it turned out that neither of these approaches fitted the material I was developing, other kinds of repetition did emerge. Some of these I welcomed: for instance, thematic repetitions to do with surveillance began to form the evidence for the ‘uncanny of the virtual gaze’ addressed in section 2.3 of this exegesis; the recurrence of the second person, used in each of these early stories in different ways and to varying extents, suggested a specifically uncanny aspect to this narrative mode and alerted me to an area for further investigation, addressed in section 4.2.

But there were also repetitions of voice, structure and subject that threatened to become predictable in their over-familiarity: not only the trope of a haunted device and the mechanism of concealment and revelation previously discussed in section 2.1, but also the distant narrative voice had begun to feel limiting, even claustrophobic. To continue with this approach risked producing a series of chilly exercises, with little emotional engagement for the reader, or for myself. So with the next few stories I began to vary my strategies.

One of my early intentions had been to experiment with hybrid narrative forms, formally embodying uncanny confusions between real and not-real by blurring generic borders between fact and fiction; ‘Dolly’, a story about cloning, emerged from an attempt at splicing memoir with fiction. In this, I drew on Ali Smith’s hybrid fact-fiction pieces, such as ‘True short story’ (2008), ‘Good voice’, ‘The human claim’, ‘And so on’ (all 2015) and *Artful* (2012), in which the inclusion of autobiographical detail supports a reading where a version of Smith herself features as either narrator or character. As I progressed with early drafts of ‘Dolly’ it was a fictional scenario that caught my imagination, but what remains from my initial intention is the use of factual, historical information about the development of cloning technology, and a more fluent and ‘telling’ voice that’s seemingly open and revealing – informed in part by Smith’s forthcoming, apparently guileless narrative voice, but emerging also from my critical reading in response to Botting’s suggestion of an increased transparency that’s associated with new technologies, and McQuire’s notion of the technological uncanny as a function of overexposure. I wanted to try out a voice that was more ‘transparent’ to investigate how this affected the uncanny qualities of a story, as well as to vary the reading experience, and found that a more

intimate voice with greater access to the protagonist's inner life forced me to find other ways of creating the uncertainty necessary for uncanny affect. In 'Flesh of their flesh', therefore, I paired a fairly close psychic distance with an assumption of knowledge shared between the narrator and her unnamed addressee, in order to create some space for interpretation around the precise events that form the remembered narrative. This enabled me to shift away from the straightforward conceal / reveal pattern of earlier stories, as well as to achieve an appropriate generosity of tone in a story that involves themes of compassion and the expansion of human empathy to encompass being animal.

Again, Smith's short fiction was important in shaping the notion that although the uncanny as an effect depends upon certain things being hidden or repressed, it's possible to marry uncanny elements with an open, forthcoming narrative voice without necessarily diminishing uncanny affect, and that a particular generative kind of uncertainty (akin to Royle's 'trembling of what remains undecidable') can be a function of openness of voice and the provision of space for a reader's interpretation. 'The hanging girl' (Smith, 2000) demonstrates precisely this effect. The story displays some of Smith's recurring uncanny themes: a protagonist whose interior life is invaded by the exterior world, or who takes the world into herself, and a familiar surface of contemporary life that's disrupted by what lies beneath (in this case, the historical trauma of the 20th century). Here, the dead girl of the title haunts the protagonist Pauline, unseen by anyone else. Smith's use of a shifting point of view – switching for most of the story between the first person perspective of Pauline, who accepts the haunting as a factual occurrence, and an omniscient third-person narrative that allows for more sceptical voices – permits both a paranormal and a psychological explanation, and the ending resists any attempt to close down the story by identifying the haunting as 'real' or imagined; Smith withholds any information that would allow the reader to categorise it as either realist or fantastical. Instead, it is both. Meanwhile the details of the haunting are simultaneously playful (the ghost enjoys hanging like a pendulum beneath the kitchen clock) and intimately unsettling ('I look into her white-charred eyes. I let her put her cold hand on my heart' (33)); the narrative tone is neither light nor dark, but both light and dark. The closing lines of the story emphasise this encompassing of multiple meanings and multiple voices, formulating dark and light (or pain and hope) as reflections of each other:

Christ but something's really aching somewhere.
God, though, what a beautiful day. (35)

Ideas around multiplicity and possibility emerging from my reading of Smith's work emerged more explicitly in the subject of the next piece I wrote for my practice research. The 'Minor Complications' sequence features a narrator who has her eyesight restored through pluripotent stem cell treatment and seems to experience visions of possible alternative selves. Here, I shifted still further from the conceal / reveal structure that had become a repeating pattern by front-loading the information necessary to make sense of the story, in the form of a medical research abstract that shares the narrator's knowledge with the reader – allowing the more suggestive 'found' text of Snellen charts and the subjective and potentially unreliable journal entries that follow to open up the necessary space for uncertainty and interpretation.

Susan Lohafer's insight that 'endings condition the whole of the text and the experience of reading it' (1989: 111) articulates why I judged the sustaining of uncertainty past the end of a story to be critical in avoiding a retrospective undermining of uncanny affect, and with these stories I continued to use the strategy of withholding explanation as to the nature of events. But, aware that this kind of modal discontinuity could itself become something expected by the reader, I increasingly constructed stories so that extraordinary events and their possible causes were not where the uncanniness was chiefly located. In 'Dolly', for instance, I aimed instead to create uncertainty around the question of what the narrator intends to do with the embryo/s bequeathed by her mother, the prospect of choosing to create a 'third generation' clone and the disturbing possibility of failure inherent in such a choice, and to disturb a stable sense of identity through the gradual revelation of the narrator's cloned status and her sense of being multiply haunted: by a more perfect, original version of her self; the string of failures she imagines must have preceded her own creation; and herself as merely a ghost of her twin or original.

By this stage the accumulation of half a dozen stories, and that discovery process described by Smith as one that 'lets you know roughly where your mind is going at a certain time', had revealed further recurring themes – not only around the human body as a site of impact for scientific and technological advances, as discussed in section 2.2, but also themes of more personal concern to do with family relationships

and questions of obligation. While this struck me as a productive development in the context of my research – a bringing into the light of what should remain hidden, and an enactment of the ‘return of the repressed’ that Freud positions as the root of uncanny experience – I was nevertheless aware of an ever-present risk of swapping one set of default habits for another. So with my next story, ‘Blood’, I tried out a different approach. Rather than identifying at the earliest stages of story development the uncanny tropes that might be associated with a central idea, or testing a nascent story against my working definition of uncanny effect, I began with the notion of rejuvenation through plasma donation and an image that carried with it Gothic associations of vampires and invasions, and followed that image without attempting to shape the emerging story according to my existing ideas of what uncanny fiction should look like. In doing this I had in mind the way ‘Candlemaker Row’ had been written without the intent to create an uncanny short story, yet had absorbed and transformed my reading and reflection on the uncanny to emerge deeply layered with hauntings, repressions, confusions of real and not-real.

Just as with ‘Candlemaker Row’, once I’d completed a draft of ‘Blood’ I was able to shift into a more analytical mode and review the text, alert to those story elements that created readerly uncertainty, made the familiar strange, and destabilised assumptions of identity or of the nature of events, and then to rewrite and edit in order to strengthen these effects. In ‘Candlemaker Row’ this had involved redrafting the closing lines, using the smell of ‘cold earth and stone’ and the association of the grave to disturb the consolatory tone of the ending. In ‘Blood’, developing imagery and character relationships to subtly suggest a transfer of personal characteristics between donor and recipient allowed me to create a more effective sense of invasion and destabilised identity.

It feels important, though, to acknowledge that this shifting between an intuitive, generative approach that demands both trust in the material and the tacit knowledge I bring to my development of it, and an analytical, editorial approach – a shift Helen Simpson describes as ‘like being in a different gear in a car’ (Simpson, 2011: 116) – is not wholly straightforward. It implies that a draft story always provides the raw creative material to be understood and refined through an analytical reading and editing process, but my experience is that there are often elements in a draft that resist or exceed this kind of analysis, and that frequently these are the most resonant parts of a story. The ending of ‘Blood’ can be read as an instance of this, and of a

type of recalcitrance that Wright describes as an epiphany that's unclear in its implications or its relationship to preceding events; one that 'fails, at the level of explicitness, actually to explain' (Wright, 1989: 125). However Wright's suggestion that this type of recalcitrance can eventually be resolved (for instance by referring to psychology or the workings of the unconscious) – displays something of the presumption shared by Freud and Todorov that there exists a resolution to be worked towards – an answer understood and held back by the author, for the creation of some chosen effect. This presumption has been critiqued by Hunter, who advances instead the idea that an 'insufficient' reading can be a 'desired and desirable aesthetic' (212) – an attractive notion that seems to recognise how the writer's uncertainty can be a persistent and productive aspect of a story's effectiveness. In the case of 'Blood', the end of the story arrived in a very pragmatic way, the result of cutting up a hard copy rough draft of the story, including associated images and freewriting, and rearranging the passages until I identified their best order. It's not clear to me how the final paragraphs resolve or fail to resolve the story; I simply recognise their desirable insufficiency, an ending that seems to close and open at the same time.

The story of the research, so far, is of a progression from explicitly to implicitly uncanny; from the careful construction of affect to a process that instead allows for its emergence. But the neatness of the narrative is unsettled by the last story I wrote in year two. The earliest version of 'Mousekin' was intended to be about a couple who use their A. I. assistant to act out their hostilities towards each other, to voice the unvoiceable. But the elements of control being enacted by a gadget that seems to be alive brought me, even in early focused free writes, too close to the territory I'd previously explored in 'You The Story' and whose limits I felt I had already reached.

Consciousness. A suggestion of agency, agenda – tips into 'controlling intelligence' ... not fresh – done every which way; expected ... This story – the relationship stuff – begins to feel too small. I'm bored by it, not interested, it's not bold or fizzy (Alexander, 2016).

With 'Minor Complications', too, I had encountered some difficulties in working out what the story was that I meant to tell. In that case, when I came to draft the end of the story I had realised I wasn't yet clear in my understanding of what had changed

for the narrator, what the impact was of this change and thus how (and how much) to show this in the story's resolution, or refusal of resolution. Returning to my critical reading on the optical uncanny, and in particular Rahimi's theory of a Lacanian optical uncanny as a threat to the ego that involves a dissolution of the illusion of self, had enabled me to clarify my thinking and understand that my narrator experienced her visions as both the giddy possibility of escaping the limitations of self, and the terror of her self's disintegration. My critical reading acted as a tool within my creative practice – perhaps a lens is an appropriate metaphor, one that helped bring my blurred material into sharper focus.

In the case of 'Mousekin', then, I tried the same approach. My draft of the central relationship as one that acted out repressed childhood trauma seemed to map onto my critical reading around the uncanny as an effect of repression, in which the emergence of the *Unheimliche* creates anxiety that causes it to be repeatedly repressed in an ego defence mechanism that will always fail and thus always be repeated (Featherstone, 2001: 51). I used this concept to shape subsequent versions of the story as a re-enactment of a protagonist's childhood trauma, with the haunted device of the A. I. assistant variously taking the role of oppressor and victim.

In these initial drafts, no matter how I tried to rearrange the pieces – adopting different perspectives, changing characters and relationships – they fell back into a familiar arrangement, repeating the 'haunted device' A. I. takeover topos from earlier stories. Different versions swung between offering too much information, so that the story became predictable, and not enough, so it created confusion rather than a productive uncertainty. Rather than theory acting as a tool to support my creative practice, here the creative work became a schematic illustration of psychoanalytical theory. Notes such as 'A. I. to be read as surrogate mother' (Alexander, 2016) show I was thinking prescriptively about meaning, in a departure from the practice I had developed of working with layers of possible interpretation. In the context of this collection, each version of 'Mousekin' was a failure: each failed to unsettle the reader or to offer any kind of illuminating or interrogative perspective on contemporary experiences of science and technology.

To briefly jump forward: it's only in the final weeks of this research project that I have been able to more successfully rework this idea into a story that flips a set of over-familiar tropes. In 'Chronic', boundaries between human and machine are blurred through the construction of an intimate, supportive relationship between an

A. I. assistant, Kaia, and the invalid protagonist, Cath, and through the similar alignment of Cath and Kaia in relation to Olli's voice. In this story there is no suggestion that the gadget is alive. Instead, the protagonist's notion that she can be charged with the energy from Kaia's power source can be read as an aspiration to machine or cyborg status that might 'fix' her illness. With these strategies, I aimed to destabilise a comfortable sense of human identity by extending the reader's sympathy from human to machine 'characters'; rather than threatening human agency, here the device listens, responds, accepts and has potential to heal, and the trope of A. I. as a threat to human integrity is replaced by human threat to the integrity of the machine.

Year 3: the ending

The reversal of 'Mousekin' with its several failed drafts clearly indicated that a more schematic approach to creating uncanny affect had left insufficient space for uncertainty, for multiple or ambiguous readings. So the last few stories I wrote involved a more definitive letting go of earlier strategies such as the intentional deployment of uncanny tropes, or the careful identification of potentially uncanny themes and images. Instead, I pursued the uncanny by turning away from it – a movement that was necessary for me to escape from my own fixed ideas of what constituted uncanny fiction. 'This Christmas Give the Gift of Precious Memories' was informed by M. R. James's 'The Mezzotint' (1931) and Miéville's response 'The Rabbet' (2015), with the aim of 'haunting' my text with the shades of these uncanny stories. This allusion was a development of techniques used in 'The SleepHeart', where I had chosen language and imagery to set up subtle echoes between the uncanny elements of my story and Poe's 'The Tell-Tale Heart' (1982), so that surveillance and the beating of a dead or artificial heart formed what Sarah Annes Brown has dubbed 'uncanny allusion markers', which 'have the capacity to generate a special allusive charge because they foreground in some way their position within a larger literary network, signalling moments of apparent dialogue between texts far removed in time through a dynamic of doubleness, repetition or return' (2012: 3). Here, I allowed the logic of the story to be guided by creative rather than critical texts.

With two very short stories, ‘Small Objects’ and ‘The Hatayama Code’, I aimed to produce texts that gestured towards meaning without that meaning ever becoming explicit, attempting to articulate something that was just beyond my own understanding – a seemingly paradoxical notion, but one recognised by a number of short story theorists, such as Valerie Shaw as cited by Rohrberger:

“The short story's success often lies in conveying a sense of unwritten, or even unwritable things: the story teller accepts the limitations of his art, and makes his freedom an aspect of those same restrictions”. The silence of which Shaw writes is at the very base of the short story and the lyric: the that that is unsaid but somehow manages to be said (Rohrberger, 1989: 43).

While my intention was for these stories to resist interpretation to a greater degree than any earlier piece, a concern with what remains inarticulable is clearly evident in the content of ‘Small Objects’, ‘The Hatayama Code’ and ‘Saints’. The first of these appears to embrace (or internalise, through bodily acceptance) a state of not-knowing:

If somebody asks you, now – if your brother ever asks – you will tell the truth. That you don't know what it means, or why your father chose this day for you. You don't know if he thought you would understand. But if anyone asks how it makes you feel, you will tell them you're ready: to open your mouth like a snake, and swallow small objects whole (118).

‘The Hatayama Code’ is explicitly about the revelation of meaning; its factual, reporting mode allows for a kind of over-explanation that reveals little, and its closing paragraph (‘Meanwhile, there is a growing body of thought that sets itself in opposition to this analytical approach. Each fresh hypothesis, each layer of interpretation, takes us further from meaning; the more we study this phenomenon, the less we will understand...’ (59)) can be read as a privileging of intuition over scientific investigation as a mode of discovery. Likewise, ‘Saints’ can be understood as a story that sets intuition or ‘sensed’ knowledge against a factual, technological exposure.

In these late stories, the cause of uncanny affect is located ever less firmly where I might have expected to find it – something that in each case became clear to me only once the story was complete in draft form. Uncanniness isn't chiefly attached to the potentially haunted device of the digital photo frame in ‘This Christmas Give the

Gift of Precious Memories’, nor the suggestion of telepathy between the nurse and her living / not-living patient in ‘Saints’; in both cases, it’s more fundamentally located in the emergence of the past into the present. What should remain hidden is brought into the light, so that the stories enact uncanniness through a Freudian return of the repressed.

As I increasingly began to think in terms of my own collection as a whole, I paid close attention to varying the length, scope and mood of these later stories to prevent the reader settling into any comfortable sense of expectation. The distillation and experimentation of very short fictions (‘Small Objects’, ‘The Hatayama Code’) was set against more expansive and more traditional stories such as ‘This Christmas Give the Gift of Precious Memories’ and ‘Saints’, in both of which I fleshed out the protagonists’ relationships with family or friends in an attempt to work against a pattern of isolated characters in previous stories. My attempts at range and variety were inspired by the breadth of Miéville’s *Three Moments of an Explosion*, a collection that features recurring themes such as excavations and hybridities; repeated form in a series of stories delivered in a shot-by-shot movie trailer format; and recurring narrative strategies such as the use of the second person – all of which emerge satisfyingly as patterns that suggest submerged connections between stories in a collection that’s tremendously varied in terms of genre, form, style and voice. In my own collection I was able to recognise that recurring patterns of subject and theme were establishing between stories a network of dialogues that might intensify their uncanniness. The coincidence of biomedical subjects and themes of familial obligation in ‘Dolly’, ‘Flesh of their flesh’ and ‘Blood’ could for instance allow for the ‘overflow’ of uncanny affect into ‘Blood’ from those other, more explicitly uncanny, stories. Luscher’s development of Henry Seidel Canby’s image of the short story as a bubble – distinct in itself but part of a larger current – suggested how this overflow effect might be heightened or minimised through later decisions on sequencing: ‘In collecting several of these “bubbles” from various sites and arranging them in some spatial order within a volume, the writer allows us not only to sound the depths beneath each bubble but also to feel the thematic current that flows through his “world of fact and fancy”’ (Luscher, 1989: 152).

Throughout the project I’d considered the creative component of my research as a short story collection – but at this late stage I realised that, in practice, I had

increasingly approached it as a sequence, with an attentiveness to the cumulative effect of the stories and a concern for the ways in which they could speak to each other. The term 'sequence' has been challenged, for instance by March-Russell who argues that 'the emphasis upon sequential reading restricts the degree of open-endedness that critics have claimed' (2009: 104), and prefers the notion of the short story cycle. March-Russell acknowledges, though, the argument made by Luscher and J. Gerald Kennedy that 'The idea of the cycle over-emphasises formal unity by extending the principle of the short story as a closed and self-sufficient unit. In contrast, a sequence suggests the progressive development of themes and motifs so that, while the stories can be read both individually and as interrelated, reading becomes the accumulated perception of successive orderings and repeated patterns' (March-Russell, 2011: 100).

A sequence is the more useful idea in terms of organising my uncanny stories. A reading experience is after all always temporal and sequential – whether that sequence is one carefully curated by the author of a short story collection, or created ad hoc by a reader's decision to flip backwards and forwards between stories. And while my project is undoubtedly unified by the uncanny as a common narrative mode, by the exploration of science and technology, and by a network of thematic repetitions, it's clear that my pursuit of uncanny affect has also meant the pursuit of a constant unsettling of expectation and a refusal of completion which is almost the opposite of unity – so that the formal unity more strongly emphasised by the cycle than the sequence is in this case not a desirable effect.

My initial approach to sequencing the collection was informed by my working definition of uncanny short fiction, and in particular the effect of destabilising identity. I set out to alternate between stories with an intimate or distant narrative voice, with the intention that the reader would repeatedly have to reorientate herself in relation to the narrator and / or protagonist, rather than settling into any comfortable level of identification with characters. But when I started arranging stories, trying out various orders, fairly quickly I began to work by 'feel'; what felt right, what felt like it was working. Though I'd listed key themes and subjects under each story title, perhaps there was simply too much (often conflicting) information to be considered for me to approach this task in any other way; too many qualities that collided with each other. A story might fit with a neighbour in terms of theme, for

instance, but might repeat a first-person narrator and a close psychic distance and thus lack the necessary sense of the unexpected.

In arranging stories by feel I was drawing on tacit knowledge; once I had drafted a partial sequence, a more analytical mode of thinking was necessary to assess the effectiveness of the arrangement, equivalent to Nelson's 'know-what' – 'the tacit made explicit through critical reflection' (37). I recognised that the sequence I was creating was an embodiment of one of the key characteristics of the uncanny: the familiar made strange. The stories were arranged so they shared something with their neighbour (thus the reader might recognise a theme or subject as being familiar from the previous story) but were also different in some significant way. The similarities were largely to do with theme and subject, and the differences to do with formal and narrative qualities: point of view, length, structure, voice and style. This familiar-unfamiliar sequencing wouldn't necessarily provoke uncanny affect in the reader – after all, the familiar made strange is associated not only with an uncanny literary mode but with the *ostranenie* of Russian formalism, and with Brecht's alienation effect (Royle, 2003: 4-5) – but it might contribute to the uncanniness of the collection overall, by allowing readers to feel comfortable with a text that would in some aspects fulfil their expectations before those expectations were unsettled.

This understanding allowed me to solve problems with particular parts of the draft sequence: for instance, opening with several stories that involved biomedical procedures failed to indicate the range of the material within the collection, and perhaps allowed the reader to become *too* comfortable in their assumptions about the nature of the storyworlds they would encounter; in swapping one of these biomedical stories for one about personal technology, the notion of combining the familiar and the strange helped me identify an appropriate replacement. The process of sequencing also revealed links between stories that hadn't initially occurred to me – for instance, that 'Saints' and 'The SleepHeart', which for a time sat next door to each other, are both concerned with real or imagined connections between people who are separated from each other. Luscher, developing Hortense Calisher's notion of a short story as 'an apocalypse, served in a very small cup', describes how sequencing can provide just this sort of illumination: 'Within the context of the sequence, each short story is thus not a completely closed formal experience. Each successive apocalypse in some fashion prepares us for the next, shedding light on the compact worlds to follow. The volume as a whole thus becomes an open book,

inviting the reader to construct a network of associations that binds the stories together and lends them cumulative thematic impact' (1989: 148-9). A reader's network of associations, informed by her own perspective and experience, her cultural landscape and her personal concerns, may closely overlap the network that has become visible to me through the accumulation and sequencing of the collection; or our networks may overlap glancingly, or not at all. To return to Karen Joy Fowler: 'the reader is free to find something else entirely and often does'.

Throughout my practice research the subjective, evasive qualities of the uncanny as highlighted in Chapter 1 have necessitated ever-evolving strategies to create uncanny affect in my stories: from a careful construction of the uncanny to a more trusting process that allows uncanny affect to emerge in unexpected forms, and then to be heightened through redrafting and editing. This shift to more intuitive strategies has been important in opening up space for my own uncertainty in my exploration of the material; in generating surprising results, and in allowing the familiar to become strange.

At the close of the project, though, even this approach threatens to become a formula. The last story I drafted, and one that sits towards the end of the collection, is 'First Date', a piece about multi-sensory augmented reality advertising and the commercial exploitation of human desire. On reviewing a draft of the story, I imagined uncanniness would be an effect of blurred borders between the real and the virtual, as well as the apparent manipulation of the protagonist's actions to destabilise a sense of his individual agency, and the uncertainty introduced by multiple possible endings. But the advertising technologies featured in the story are barely distant from what's already possible, and thus too easily accepted as real. I can clearly see how to push this aspect of the story further towards the uncanny. It's the same trick I used right back at the start, when I rewrote 'Candlemaker Row' to trouble the story's resolution, creating an ending that disturbs and consoles in equal measure. One small edit to the closing lines of 'First Date' would create a stronger sense of modal discontinuity, undermining the closing moment of human contact, resistance and hope.

But something in me resists this change. The story in isolation would be, I think, more uncanny as a result; over the whole sequence of uncanny stories, the effect might well be the opposite – a confirmation of expectation, a technique the reader has learned to anticipate. My writer-self wants to keep the story's more hopeful

conclusion, sees it as a fitting completion to the creative component of my practice research – but it’s my reader-self who will have the final word. At the moment, it could go either way.

4.2 Are you reading uncomfortably? Second person as an uncanny narrative mode

*‘the “you”, after all, may not finally stop short of you, the reader.’
(Bennett and Royle, 2004: 260-1)*

The second person keeps knocking on your door, demanding to be let in. You recognise its insistence when you realise that so far you’ve written five stories and used it in each one. But every second person feels like a different choice, a technique deployed to a different uncanny purpose.

You use it to create readerly complicity in a story about surveillance, voyeurism and free will. To set up a complex relationship of intimacy and distance in a story about communications technology. To play with ideas of doubled identity in a story about cloning. To haunt a text about the virtual reconstruction of a destroyed city. To draw the reader into a circle of empathy in a story of human-animal relationships. Your work is informed by the ways in which Smith, Miéville and Royle use the second person in uncanny short fiction. By stories like Smith’s ‘being quick’ (2003), which pivots on a point of view switch where ‘you’ becomes ‘I’ and unsettles readerly identification. Like Miéville’s ‘The Design’ (2015), where the epistolary ‘you’ conjures a reading or listening presence that’s simultaneously absent, a ghost haunting the text. Like Royle’s ‘The Dummy’ (2008), in which the second-person narration distances the narrator from his actions, and dissociates him from his sense of self. Along with your own, these stories are the evidence that suggests there is something fundamentally uncanny about the second person, and second-person narration.

There is no clear critical consensus on what constitutes second-person narration. Matt DelConte cites the *Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms* as defining second-person narration as a narrative in which “‘the narrator addresses a ‘you’” (DelConte, 2003: 206), as well as definitions from Brian Richardson and Monika

Fludernik who agree that in second-person narration the narratee is often also the protagonist, and from Gerald Prince who asserts that this coincidence of protagonist and narratee must always be the case (206) – a view DelConte also holds (207).

The ‘you’ of second person, as outlined by Fludernik, includes but is not limited to: the you that we all understand as a version of I; the you one recognises as a generalised second person; and the you that merges with you, the reader. Not limited, because categories of narrator, narratee, reader and protagonist shift and overlap; the ‘you’ often slips and shifts within a text in a way that makes its definition ‘problematic’ (Fludernik, 1994: 284). (Problematic: it’s almost as though the authors of these fictions don’t *want* their work to be neatly categorised.) The very essence of second-person narration, Richardson concurs, is ‘to eschew a fixed essence’ (Richardson, 2006: 19). Though this makes everything more difficult, it also pleases you – because just like the uncanny itself, second-person narration appears to be something that evades definition, that destabilises itself. Beautifully, Helmut Bonheim calls this slippage the ‘referential slither’ (Fludernik, 1994: 286).

For Brian McHale, the second person is a ‘shifter’, a pronoun ‘whose reference changes with every change of speaker in a discourse situation: every reader is potentially *you*, the addressee of the novelistic discourse’ (McHale, 2004: 223). This shifty mode is uncanny in its capacity to blur the divide between reality and fiction, so that a ‘gap [is] opened in the discourse’ (224) between extratextual reader and reader-as-character that ‘uncannily straddles the ontological divide between the reader’s real world and the text’s fictional world’ (225). It’s uncanny too in its ability to gesture towards the reader even when it signifies a displaced first-person internal dialogue or third-person free indirect style. Always, McHale observes, ‘*you* retains a connotation of the vocative, of direct appeal to the reader, which imparts to these texts a slightly uncanny aura’ (223-4). The second person, he seems to say, may not always be used in a way that chiefly provokes uncanny affect (it may be used instead to primarily playful or confronting effect as in, respectively, Italo Calvino’s *If On A Winter’s Night A Traveller* or Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*), but it will always lend itself to uncanniness.

McHale’s notions of uncanny gaps and auras can be more fully accounted for by your recognition of a striking overlap between the characteristics of second-person narration and those characteristics set out in your working definition of uncanny short fiction.

1) It destabilises assumptions of identity, or of the nature of what is being experienced.

DelConte's model is of a second-person narration that is always also either first- or third-person (2003: 208) – a doubled narrative mode. Richardson, though, argues that 'second person narration is situated between but irreducible to the standard dyads of either first and third person ... oscillating irregularly from one pole to another' (2006: 28), a description that more accurately captures its shifty, overlapping effects. So not either / or, but multiple; not a doubled perspective, which would be uncanny enough, but a multiple perspective that resonates with Punter's notion of the uncanny of multiplicity, that trope so specific to our age of limitless virtual identities.

Identity is not only doubled or multiplied but revealed as unstable by a second-person narration in which, as Darlene Hantzis has it, 'the reader ... continually places her/himself in and continually displaces her/himself from the "you"' (1988: 69), a movement that 'generates an alternating pattern of identification and displacement' (4), so the reader must constantly re-orientate herself, never knowing where she stands. In 'The SleepHeart' you courted precisely that push-and-pull: used details – personal, biographical – to prompt the reader's resistance to identification with the protagonist's experience; used the possible ('You could sleep diagonal if you felt like it, or stretched like a star' (14)); and the sensory, the sensual ('Now, eyes closed, you hear the quiet of night: the distant swoosh of cars on the street outside; closer, a gentle ticking as the bones of the house cool in the dark; closer, the fuzzy drumbeat of your heart inside your chest' (19)) to insinuate just such an identification.

Richardson too sees second-person narration as inherently unstable, echoing McHale's view that one of the more unsettling features of second-person narration is its capacity to collapse distinctions between protagonist or narratee, and actual or implied reader – something Richardson argues 'threatens the ontological stability of the fictional world insofar as it seems [the you] could be addressing the reader as well as the central character' (2006: 20).

This tendency of second-person narration to trouble a fixed sense of self is deployed stealthily in Miéville's 'A Mount' where the 'you' shifts from an unspecified, generalised narratee, to a you that merges the narratee within the story

with the you that is surely you-the-reader: ‘you are forever jerking awake long before dawn with a hammering heart, trying to make sense of some noise you cannot even really remember but that you know is what frightened you awake’ (Miéville, 2015: 399); and abruptly in Royle’s ‘The Dummy’ where the ‘you’ forces a dizzying viewpoint shift that merges the living with the not-living in a story that ends with a suggested filicide. In ‘You The Story’ you perform your own version of Royle’s disorientating viewpoint switch and Miéville’s referential slither; a shift from the ‘you’ that is a displaced free indirect style to the ‘you’ that implicates you-the-reader, as the ‘him’ that previously signified the protagonist becomes instead his double, while the second person encompasses both reader and protagonist in another uncanny doubling.

2) It unsettles distinctions between the familiar and the strange.

Richardson describes how the second-person narrative mode is ‘especially effective in disclosing the sense of intimate unfamiliarity’ (2006: 35) – that essential uncanny quality, the unfamiliar and the familiar intertwined. You recognise this, how the narrative voice asserts its familiarity with you, recounts actions, experiences, perceptions that are not your own, that are perfectly strange to you. Second person, says Richardson, ‘radically alters the tone of the work and provides a unique speaking situation for the narrator, one that does not occur in natural narratives and consequently one that continually defamiliarizes the narrative act’ (28). The narrative ‘you’, he argues, is thus ideal for recounting dream-like selves, journeys through death and time – something like the journey made in ‘Small Objects’, a projection of the past into the possible future, with the inheritance of unfamiliar memory from someone intimately familiar seeming to permit a crossing of the border between death and life.

3) It creates cognitive uncertainty for the reader.

Dennis Schofield writes of the ‘Protean, shape-shifting quality’ of the second person, and how it leads to a ‘deferral of narrative closure [and] lack of clarity’ (1997: 105) – the ‘undecidability of interpretation’ (109) that finds an echo in the critic Royle’s assertion that the uncanny is that which cannot be explained, disquieting only to the extent that it entails uncertainty (2003: 34 n62). According to McHale, ‘This strategic shiftiness produces a kind of “hovering” or “floating” you, one in

which equivocation is kept alive' (2004: 225). This is particularly the case when the second person is deployed as instruction or combined with future tense, what DelConte describes as a hypothetical or conditional mode (2003: 207). In 'Small Objects' you use that conditional mode to diminish resistance to identification (it's almost possible, after all, that the reader may live to have this experience or something like it) so that as far as possible the protagonist's acceptance of another's (hi)story performs itself in the reading experience. At the same time, the location of events in the future gives the narrative the unreliability of prediction or prophecy. And indeed second person seems to be a doubly uncertain narrative mode, creating ambiguity not only around who is speaking, but, as DelConte suggests (2003: 204), around who is *listening*.

Listening, or watching. Do you feel observed? Do you feel the urge to glance over your shoulder, or block the dark eye of your webcam? Who is watching whom as third person shifts to second at the climatic moment of 'You The Story'? Who is listening to whom via the SleepHeart, across that uncanny gap in the discourse?

The question of who is watching / listening is played out in Smith's 'Blank card' (2000). The narrator makes love to the homodiegetic 'you' in 'a brilliant performance' (43), for an audience that may be real or imagined; in her mind's eye she sees herself being watched; she acts, and watches herself acting ('there I was, watching myself open my eyes' (45)); she becomes her own stalker before acting the role of her lover's stalker. Observer and observed are reflected back and forth; roles of lover, performer, voyeur, stalker shift and overlap until all identities and relationships are uncertain: 'I wondered if the you you believed you were talking to on the phone was definitely me after all' (48).

The second person is integral to the uncanniness of the narrative, even though it doesn't involve the coincidence of protagonist / narratee that narratologists tend to agree constitutes second-person narration proper. In several of your stories, too, 'improper' or conversational deployments of second person – epistolary second person and second-person address to an absent (dead) listener – contribute to uncanny affect. In 'Candlemaker Row', the 'oscillation' or 'referential slither' between homodiegetic addressee and connoted extratextual reader ('People like you, mostly. Dead people') fleetingly merges living reader with dead character (147). In 'Dolly', an uncanny doubling extends to encompass the reader: 'Remember the

purple dress we wore to our seventh birthday party? With cerise flowers, and the bright ribbon circling the drum of our tummies?’ (96). In ‘Flesh of their flesh’, the second-person address insinuates the reader / addressee’s intimate communion with the dead: ‘The crayons turn to bones and fat in your hands. ... The taste of grit in a glass of wine; the whisper of bone-dust against your teeth’ (33).

A conversational mode is usual in Smith’s second person stories. In *Other Stories and Other Stories* (2000) her use of the second person is frequently of this type, a first-person narrator recounting a story to a ‘you’ who is the narrator’s lover. These intimate acts of storytelling set up relationships of warmth and tenderness, seemingly antithetical to the uncertainties and disturbances of uncanny fiction. In *The Whole Story and Other Stories* (2003), Smith deploys the same kind of homodiegetic second person to stage conversations, dialogues between lovers: in ‘being quick’, ‘may’ and ‘the start of things’ the story pivots; you becomes I, assumes the right to reply. The authority of the storyteller is shared along with the stories. Both voices are heard, within a narrative structure of equality and equilibrium that might seem, again, to exist in opposition to the destabilising effects of the uncanny. Highlighting these qualities, Emma Smith writes that ‘the second person for Ali Smith is less about drawing the reader into a play of dis/identification than about reconstructing the narrative situation as a site of intimacy and intersubjectivity’ (2008: 126).

But what happens at that moment of pivot? Since (per Mchale) ‘every reader is potentially *you*, the addressee of the novelistic discourse’, that hinge-and switch of the story undermines any certainty of your position in relation to the text, of identification with character. The story reflects back on itself, an altered perspective, the same but different: the familiar becomes strange. One half of the story, inevitably, comes first. That primary voice persists past the handover to a second narrator / protagonist, haunting the voice of that second person.

That same connotation of the vocative positions you uncomfortably in relation to the lovers, both participant and voyeur. In stories like ‘God’s gift’ you are addressed with intimate familiarity by a narrator who is a stranger to you. ‘There are so many things that you don’t know about me now’ the narrator tells you (Smith, 2000: 3), and you think: *who are you?* And then: *who am I?*

You remember when you began to write, when your material was still raw and personal, how the second person made the whole business safer: more comfortable, less revealing. Even when you were your only reader (who is listening?) it offered an illusory, protective distance. You watched yourself, like an out-of-body experience, but still you felt each action, emotion, perception you committed to the page. You were three-in-one: protagonist and reader and addressee. It occurs to you now that perhaps a whole reflexive exegesis ought to be written in the second person, since it captures something of the shifting relationship you have with the work as you make it – the shifts and overlaps along a spectrum that runs between instinct (which feels like intimacy) and analysis (which feels like distance).

The second person continues to knock. Repeatedly, it appears in your drafts. You're not sure if it's bringing you closer to the narrator in 'Minor Complications', to Nick in 'Blood' or the protagonist in 'First Date', or holding them at arm's length, opening up a clear-sighted distance between you. Carefully, you make changes, switching you to she, he, I. You are wary, as ever, of becoming one of Shadbolt's performing seals, doing the same tricks over and over; fear that over-use will rob the second person of its insinuating, destabilising quality – so you keep the door closed, to hold open that uncanny gap into which the reader can slip.

Conclusion

The question I set out to answer, through practice and reflection, was this: in what ways can the short story be used as a particularly appropriate mode for illuminating and interrogating contemporary experiences of science and technology through the creation of uncanny affect?

[But you think, still, that the notion of question-and-answer is inimical to creative writing even when it's carried out as practice research. It's the wrong way round: you have always agreed with Mansfield (in Hanson, 1987: 34), that 'what the writer does is not so much to solve the question but to put the question. There must be the question put'—]

Taking as a starting point Botting's assertion that in recent years the uncanny has become over-exposed, over-familiar and a worn-out effect, my thesis has challenged this view by establishing that the short story still has the capacity to create unease for the reader, since it requires her to bring her own imagination to act on a text, to unsettle herself through the projection of her own fears and concerns, and in this sense to potentially be co-creator of uncanny affect along with the author. Through the deployment and analysis of uncanny tropes in my stories alongside an examination of similar tropes in stories by Miéville, Royle and Smith, I have found that where such tropes are integral to the theme of a story, or where they are recontextualised in unexpected ways, they retain the capacity to provoke uncanny affect. My investigation of several of Punter's new categories of uncanny has made clear that these contemporary uncanny forms can be recuperated to a Freudian uncanny – suggesting that, rather than Botting's notion of the uncanny as shifted, 'not where it used to be', a more accurate description is of an uncanny that is *shifting*: always evolving and elusive.

[—and you agree too with Michael Biggs's position that in practice research, the creative artefact more often serves to 'problematize that which is familiar, or to raise questions or issues rather than to answer them' (Biggs, 2003). In which case, what's the ghost question that haunts your artefact? What's the question that's posed, rather than answered, by your stories...?]

The process of writing an uncanny short story collection and reflecting on my pursuit of the uncanny has confirmed this definition of uncanniness as a fugitive affect that flees with familiarity – and this knowledge has illuminated the ways in which the short story, as part of a collection, both is and isn't particularly appropriate for creating uncanny affect. A story which makes use of strategies such as the various kinds of recalcitrance explored in Chapter 4 may be experienced as uncanny, yet as part of a sequence will lose its unsettling qualities as a result of repetitions of structure, subject, theme or voice that quickly serve to confirm rather than destabilise readerly expectation. Paradoxically, then, *[ah, now you're getting to it]* one of the most significant ways in which the short story is a particularly appropriate mode for the creation of uncanny affect has emerged as its capacity to be sometimes not-uncanny; to begin again, and again, and again; to remain uncertain, and continually evade expectations and assumptions about what constitutes uncanny fiction.

Throughout my research I have evidenced the importance of uncertainty: as a primary characteristic of uncanny affect, and as a significant factor in the process of practice research. I have demonstrated the particular suitability of an uncanny literary mode for illuminating uncertain, ambivalent attitudes towards new and changing technologies due to the liminal location of the uncanny on a spectrum of emotions positioned between dread and anticipation, panic and unease.

By extending the implications of an optical uncanny into the context of contemporary technologies, my creative writing and exegesis have determined the existence of a contemporary 'uncanny of the virtual gaze' which interrogates technologically-mediated experiences of watching and being watched, those uneasy simultaneous roles of observer and observed. And unexpectedly, I have found that these insights were not only identified but also shaped by the critical-creative methodology of my practice research; specifically, by the accumulation of creative material and the reflexivity of the process in which I reflected critically on insights emerging from my creative work – a process I have shown to be uncanny, in its connection with a Freudian return of the repressed.

[It's a question, maybe, to do with invitation and invasion. With what happens when we are open to the world, and what happens when we are closed.]

My findings speak to existing literatures in several different fields, reflecting the tendency of practice research towards interdisciplinary scholarship (Kroll and Harper, 2012: 223).

- My identification of the body as the site of impact for contemporary uncanny science and technology connects Punter's proposals of new uncanny forms with Hayles's notion of a posthumanism that recognises the centrality of embodiment, and van Elferen's 'radical ambivalence' towards new technologies, while my proposal of an uncanny of the virtual gaze builds on Gunning's work in cultural theory as well as Rahimi's psychoanalytical model of an optical uncanny. Together, these findings make an original contribution to the theorisation of a contemporary technological uncanny.
- My analysis of reflexivity as a potentially uncanny activity, and my illustration of how the conditions and methodologies of practice research can shape the findings of such research, adds to theories of emergence and reflexivity by scholars of practice research including Bolt, and Haseman and Mafe.
- In the fields of creative writing and narratology, my demonstration of the specific ways in which second-person narration can provoke uncanny affect extends McHale's characterisation of the second-person narrative mode as 'always ... slightly uncanny'.

These findings could be of particular interest to scholars in Gothic studies engaged in theorising a technological uncanny; to creative writing scholars exploring the 'unnatural' narration of the second person; and to practice researchers concerned with furthering understanding of how knowledge is produced through creative practice. Further research might well be conducted in each of these fields: in Gothic studies, the implications of an uncanny of the virtual gaze could be explored; in creative writing, an investigation into the ways in which second-person narration is *not* uncanny could further illuminate its tendency to provoke uncanny affect and add to narratological theory around this mode; meanwhile practice researchers might well carry out further research into other ways in which reflexive practice can be

experienced as uncanny, contributing to an emerging body of knowledge around methodologies of practice research in this still relatively new field.

[Or it's to do with how we make meaning; or it's another question altogether, a different question for every reader, and anyway if it were something you could articulate there would be no need to make the stories in order to have – in Mansfield's words – the question put]

Prior to this research project, I had been writing and publishing fiction for a decade; I was an experienced creative writer with an established process and practice. In Chapter 3, I discuss the unease I felt around locating this writing practice in the academy and my concerns that self-awareness or self-consciousness might 'get in the way' of the work. Instead, what I have found is a fresh way of thinking about, and looking at, my work – something recognised by Nelson's suggestion that 'new sparks are often struck by taking the risk of (re)invention in a leap of defamiliarisation. A good reason for artists to engage with "the academy" is the richness of intellectual environment and defamiliarisation it affords' (Nelson, 2013: 28). I finish this research project with an expanded sense of the kind of material – creative, critical and lived – that can enrich and direct my writing; and a curiosity as to where the next sparks might be struck.

Appendix I

Mousekin

The box is thick and rigid, smooth white card with the Hooyo logo printed a subtle grey. It promises something slick and new, clean-edged, matt silver. But as the lid slides free, what Abi sees is something old. Something that's already hers. Her fingers sink into soft, worn fur as she hoists her Mousekin out of the packaging, scattering polystyrene pellets. She touches the cat briefly to her cheek.

It's nice to have her back.

It would have been easier, and cheaper, to review an off-the-shelf model, but customisation is the USP for this gadget, one that Hooyo are pushing heavily in their pre-release promotion. Besides, her editor wants something different. That's why he called her for the job; the soft side of tech, the quirky stuff, has always been her niche.

It took them a while to hit on the right idea. Twenty minutes into the phone call – Abi wandering from kitchen to hallway to living room, looking for inspiration, showing him this object and that: a red teapot, a moonstruck hare ornament in white ceramic, a snake's tongue plant in a blue glazed pot – she had thought of Mousekin. Had climbed the stairs to her bedroom, phone carefully angled so as not to reveal her untidy bed. Had plucked the toy from the bedside table, and offered her up to the camera.

Straightaway he'd loved it; perfect, he'd said. 'The contrast – the brand new tech, the shabby old toy... And the face, it's kind of got personality. It's relatable. Cute. I can already see the pics, you know?'

She'd felt guilty as she packed Mousekin away, taping the box securely and labelling it with an Irish address which she knew was a reassurance for nervous customers; she'd no doubt Mousekin would be sent on to China for the surgery. But it's not like she'd actually missed her while she was gone. Once or twice, Abi's gaze had fallen on the empty space on her bedside table; she'd registered something missing, then a few seconds later remembered what was absent, and why. And there had been that

dream, one of those anxious ones in which she'd mislaid something valuable. She'd searched everywhere for it, trouble a storm about to break; asking teenage boyfriends, old teachers, perfect strangers: please, had they seen it? She woke at 3am with a skittering heart and an aching head – and perhaps that was Mousekin, the dream and the headache. The lost important thing.

But it's been a quick turnaround. Two weeks away, and here is Mousekin returned. Her journey doesn't show in her face. She looks the same as ever: flattened ears and fading embroidered features, blue plastic eyes surprisingly bright in fur that's been smoothed by age and blurred from patched white-and-grey into a single non-colour. And she smells the same: of the soapflakes Abi used to handwash her before sending her away, knowing that once the electronics were in Mousekin would have to avoid getting wet; and under that a clean wholesome smell like Johnson's baby lotion; and underneath that something milky, with a faint, sourish tang.

Abi turns Mousekin, inspecting her. They must have gone in through the back seam, but whoever it was has done such a neat mending job you really can't tell. Only if you squeeze; you can feel her soft, then hard. The yielding surface giving way to something solid, like Mousekin has gained a skeleton, a rigid bony core.

Inside the Hooyo box there's a single sheet, small and glossy, with basic instructions in diagram form. This is Abi's pet hate; she feels the familiar itch of irritation. If she'd paid for a customised digital assistant, it would have cost several hundred pounds, for which she'd expect written instructions, user-tested for clarity.

Even switching Mousekin on confounds her. The illustration seems to indicate some kind of wireless activation, but the device came without a remote; she searches the control app on her phone, but can't find the right command. She swears at the leaflet, the cheapskate manufacturer and her own incompetence – but if she is floundering, imagine how someone might cope who is older, less tech-savvy. She scribbles some spiky notes to this effect, then halts mid-sentence and scratches them out. She can almost read them now, the comments below the line: insulting her intelligence, challenging her credentials. And how could she disagree that someone who struggles to power up a gadget is the world's worst tech reviewer?

She glares at Mousekin, her chest tight, palms spread in a gesture of defeat. 'Mousekin,' she says. 'Come on...'

Beneath Mousekin's chin, a light flickers into life, showing clearly through fur that's worn almost to smooth fabric threads.

She is voice activated. Of course.

Abi hesitates. For thirty years, Mousekin has been her silent companion. Now, she can speak. What will she sound like? What will she say?

'Hello Mousekin,' Abi says. 'My name is Abi.'

There's a second's pause, then Mousekin replies. 'Hello Abi,' she says. 'I'm very pleased to meet you.'

Mousekin's voice is disconcerting. The sound of an adult human, the sight of her stuffed toy cat prompts an unsettled feeling like travel sickness: the mismatch of sensory information, eye and the ear in conflict. By the end of the evening, though, Abi's grown used to it. She spends the evening exploring some of Mousekin's basic functions. She gets her to play some music, make listening recommendations, read a few chapters from an ebook. Mousekin's voice lacks expression but is clear and well-paced, and her tone is pleasantly neutral. She's a competent reader.

Abi has a bad habit of falling asleep on the sofa with the lights and the TV on, only staggering up to bed when she wakes some time after midnight. Tonight it makes a nice change to drift off to a bedtime story, and come round to find the lights have been dimmed. She gathers Mousekin from her perch on the arm of the sofa and carries her up to bed, settling her onto the charging pad on the bedside table. Everything is in its proper place; she sinks easily back to sleep. When she wakes seven hours later, it's to a gradually brightening bedside lamp, the radio raising its voice from a murmur to a more conversational volume, and Mousekin by her side, fully charged.

It takes the best part of a day to connect Mousekin to the home hub, but when Abi has everything set up she's impressed by what her digital assistant can do. She can play the radio, turn it up, or find that song that goes *da-dum, da-da...* Read a recipe, step by step. She can issue reminders – *soon you should phone your mother, should water the plants, should post a card for your friend's birthday* – and warnings of imminent rain. She can turn the lights on and off, room by room; turn the central heating up or down; can lock and unlock the doors, front and back, as well as all the windows; control the oven, track groceries and order shopping online. Abi notes it

all down in her review, scoring each function on speed, accuracy, convenience. She's pleased that, so far, Mousekin is acquitting herself quite well.

The photographer is taking some test shots to check the light: the living room, the kitchen. He seems mildly amused by this job, by Mousekin herself. 'How does it work, then?' he says. 'Is it worth shelling out for?'

'Give it a try,' she suggests. 'So, you activate her by saying her name, Mousekin.'

At this, Mousekin's light comes on.

'See, that means she's listening. So now you can tell her to do something, like turn on the TV or the radio or whatever.'

'Okay – turn the radio on,' he says.

Nothing happens. He looks at Abi, eyebrows raised.

'No, you have to say her name again first. So she knows you're talking to her.' Abi doesn't say, *and so you don't sound quite so rude*.

The photographer pulls a face, does as he's told. Maybe it's the exaggerated way he pronounces her name, as if it's the most ridiculous thing he's ever heard; or maybe it's his accent, which is stronger than Abi's, but Mousekin doesn't seem to know what he's asking her to do. The light under her chin gives a flicker. She whirrs doubtfully.

'I'm sorry,' she says. 'I don't understand.'

The photographer laughs. 'Back to the factory with that one.'

'Well, no,' says Abi, 'she's still learning. She's not used to your voice.'

Though it's true that there have been some issues. For instance, the supermarket order that Mousekin placed, where she'd muddled the details: skimmed milk instead of full fat, that kind of thing. The way she keeps turning down the thermostat to 20 degrees, though Abi prefers a cosier house, and the daily reminder that Abi didn't set: *soon, you should take some exercise*. There are clearly some default settings Abi's not yet found, to do with healthy lifestyle, environmental impact and so on. But that's hardly Mousekin's fault.

'Watch this.' Abi speaks clearly, a simple request. 'Mousekin, what's the weather for this afternoon?' She wants the photographer to be impressed with what Mousekin can do.

A brief hesitation while she retrieves the data, then Mousekin replies. ‘It’s currently overcast and 13 degrees centigrade, with winds gusting up to ten miles per hour. There will be showers at 3 o’clock, and heavy rain by 5pm.’

The photographer makes a great show of looking out the window at the dark clouds that are clearly visible. If he wasn’t holding his camera, he’d have his arms folded. ‘Aye, brilliant,’ he says. ‘Think I’ll leave it off my Christmas list.’

He wants a shot of Mousekin perched like a parrot on Abi’s shoulder. ‘And if you can frown, like you don’t understand what it’s saying...’ One of Abi and Mousekin nose to nose, with Mousekin balanced on Abi’s outstretched palm. ‘And let’s get one of you doing something relaxed, like listening to music or watching TV, like you’re hanging out with a friend, kind of thing.’

As he leaves, it’s starting to rain. From the living room, Abi watches him walk down the path with his shoulders hunched, watches the first drops pock the window glass. Feels cosy with Mousekin cooed into her chest. She hopes he’ll get drenched on the way to his car.

The main problem with Mousekin’s settings is that she seems to disapprove of Abi’s sleep patterns. Mousekin is right, that’s the thing. Abi knows if she submitted to the bedtime routine she would probably sleep more deeply, have more energy. But she’d rather keep dozing off on the sofa, the way she always has.

Each night at 10pm Mousekin starts to dim the lights, and Abi orders her to brighten them. Ignores the increasingly pointed reminders: soon, you should go to bed. You should go to bed now. The optimum time for you to fall asleep will be in ten minutes.

In her review, Abi exaggerates this to draw out the humour. She paints it as a stand-off between woman and machine. In reality, it’s only a small irritation. Mousekin can’t make her go to bed, after all.

Her mother’s voice carries from the living room.

‘Goodness, you still have your Mousekin!’

Abi has it planned, how she’ll show off her assistant. Mousekin is hooked up to the cloud where all of Abi’s calendar data is stored. Abi will ask: Mousekin, when is mum’s birthday? and Mousekin will tell her.

‘Where did it come from, I’m trying to remember ... your aunt Jennifer, was it?’

Abi brings through the tray: two cups, two spoons, milk in the jug that's almost never used. Her mother is frowning slightly. 'Ridiculous name for a cat, of course,' she says. Then: 'I suppose it's one of the perks of living alone, you can have your old childhood things littered around.'

In almost a single movement, Abi sets down the tray and retrieves her mother's teacup. She can anticipate the rebuke, but not the specifics; her mother's preferences vary. Too weak this time, apparently. In the kitchen, she empties the cup down the sink. Sticks a butter-knife into the teapot and crushes the leaves against the china wall, forcing the colour till the knife disappears into dark red-brown. Pours a fresh cup, and brings it through with hot water on the side.

Her mother makes some fine adjustments until the colour pleases her. 'I used to put your stuffed toys on the woollens cycle,' she says. 'It never harmed them.' She stirs her tea, then gazes round, spoon in hand, for somewhere to put it. Abi presses her lips together so as not to voice the thought: *just put it on the table*. But she must have given herself away; a flick of the eyes, perhaps.

'I don't want to make a mess of your nice coffee table, although... perhaps I should say I don't want to make a mess of your teaspoon.' Her mother smiles at her own little joke.

The table is old, but it's clean. Abi sprayed and wiped it – right after she'd mopped and hoovered and dusted and bleached the rest of the flat and right before her mother arrived. Those pale rings are inherited, signs of wear, of domestic history. She likes them. It's why she buys stuff second-hand.

'Oh, sorry,' she says. 'I forgot your saucer.'

She takes the teaspoon from her mother, gets up and carries it through to the kitchen where she lays it neatly by the sink. Fetches the two matching saucers from the cupboard – but when she checks to make sure they're acceptable, she sees that the one without the chip has developed a crack, thin as a hair.

She opens the bin, drops them in. From the same cupboard she takes a plate (sparkling clean: check) on which she arranges four biscuits, hoping they might distract attention from the missing saucer.

'Sorry they're not home-made,' she says as she presents the plate. 'But they are quite posh. Almond and sesame. Hand-made by the Prince of Wales, or something. Try one?'

Her mother raises an eyebrow. Waits until Abi has started to eat before she says, with the slightest shake of her head: ‘As one gets older, one does have to start exercising a little willpower.’

Abi chews. Swallows. She sits like an idiot holding half a biscuit she doesn’t want, that she didn’t want in the first place, that she offered from politeness and took for something to do, for an action to fill the space between them.

‘I know you don’t have a *conventional* job, but you shouldn’t spend all day at home on your own with the kitchen right there – it’s no wonder you’re looking rather solid, dear...’

‘Fuck you.’

Abi claps her hand to her mouth. It was Mousekin that said it. The air stops moving. Nobody breathes.

Seconds or minutes pass. Abi can’t look at her mother’s face. She reaches for Mousekin; together, they leave the room.

Upstairs. On the edge of the bed, head down, hands pressed between her knees. Through the blood crashing in her ears she hears silence from below, and then movement. Footsteps. The front door opening; closing. Still she stays motionless, eyes fixed on her lap, Mousekin curled on the bed beside her.

After what feels like a long time, she turns onto her side, raises her legs onto the bed. Draws the duvet on top of her. She reaches for Mousekin, pulls her under; worn-smooth fur and a soft, flattened shape pressed into the curve of her neck. Inhales the layers of Mousekin smell. Soapflakes; and before that Johnson’s lotion; and at the bottom of it all, sour milk.

Upstairs. The sound of lawnmowers rising from the neighbours’ gardens. The slow passage of the sun across the square of the bedroom window, till it dipped beneath the roofs of the houses opposite. A hollow stomach. Hunger or–

She used to tell stories, her side of the story or just a made-up fairytale. A good story was one that lasted a long time, you could tell it in episodes and that way it would stretch filling evening after evening. The princess leaves the palace to make her way in the world, she has adventures, accumulates treasures, gold and jewels and enchanted objects, which eventually she’ll bring back home and the queen and everyone will be so pleased to see her.

Abi tells the story, and Mousekin listens.

Sometimes, by the bed, a glass of milk she didn't want to drink.

(There must have been a reason.)

That, by the time it was dark outside, she would have drunk.

Always Mousekin, listening silently.

Soon, you should phone your mother.

It takes Mousekin's reminder before Abi can force herself to call and apologise. Nerves flutter in her chest, her throat, so her voice comes and goes. She tries to explain about Mousekin, but her mother is having none of it.

'Oh for heaven's sake, this is just like you. Even from a child, you would never take responsibility. We tried to teach you, we did try...' Abi can hear the shrug, the sound of her mother washing her hands of her own responsibility.

Maybe – maybe it *was* her. The word, the phrase shouldn't be in Mousekin's vocabulary. She tried to hear the words again, in the voice that had spoken them. She could hear her mother say *it's no wonder you're looking rather solid*, could hear the intonation, the pleasant, observational tone. But those other words... She knew they'd been spoken, but all she could hear was the aftershock. Silence reverberating.

Normally once she's filed a review, Abi has to return the gadget she's been testing. But Mousekin's a grey area. The body belongs to Abi, even if what's inside is on loan. She decides to wait for the manufacturer to get in touch, or someone from the magazine, all the time hoping they won't. She can't quite believe they would take Mousekin away. Can't imagine how she would manage, now she's come to rely on her. Whatever Abi needs to know, Mousekin has the answer. What's in my diary for next week? Which invoices are still outstanding? How do I make lasagne?

Just occasionally, there's something in Mousekin's neutral tone that catches her, makes her wonder if she's being patronised. She should know, after all, how to make lasagne; she is 34 years old. She plays with the settings, tries out some of the other available voices, but they all have the same pleasant quality; the same pacing, with now and then a pause that feels a fraction too long, that leaves a space in which Abi can be judged and found wanting. In any case, it feels wrong to hear Mousekin talk in a different accent, at a different pitch – as though something else is speaking through her. Abi soon reverts to the proper voice.

And those other annoyances ... Abi's discovered all she has to do is ask. For instance: Mousekin, why is the thermostat set to 20 degrees? And Mousekin explains it's to do with the optimum conditions for brain function; that at Abi's preferred temperature of 24 degrees, humans tend to feel sleepy and have more difficulty in concentrating. It's the same with the unwelcome reminders Mousekin gives her, the ones Abi didn't set for herself. Soon, you should take 30 minutes of moderate exercise. Soon, you should do some housework. Soon, you should spend an hour on administrative tasks. It's all for Abi's benefit. A healthy body equals a productive mind; ditto a clean house, and a neat work-desk.

Mousekin is doing a thorough job of looking after her. It's only the issues of light and sleep that divide them, now.

Abi's curled on the sofa with Mousekin on her lap. She likes the warmth, the feeling of something working inside; Mousekin's slow pulsing rhythm, and her light glowing steady.

'Mousekin, check my messages.'

There's a pause before Mousekin responds: she prefers Abi not to work late into the night. Then she reads a message from the editor who commissioned the Mousekin review. Abi listens intently, expecting he'll want to make arrangements to return the gadget – but it's not that. He's pleased with the Mousekin review, which has had thousands of shares so far, a hundred comments and counting. He is offering her a regular column.

Abi sits up straight. A good feeling is buzzing through her, lifting her chest, warming her veins. Something like pride.

It's not a conventional job.

Even so, what she wants more than anything is to tell her mother.

She won't, of course. It's too late, apart from anything. But she feels a wave of energy, like she's fully charged, like she could scale mountains.

10pm. The lights have started to dim.

'Mousekin,' she says, 'turn the lights back up.'

Mousekin does as she's told.

'Good girl,' says Abi, stroking her head – and then they dim again, the room slumping halfway into darkness.

Louder, clearer, Abi repeats her command. 'Mousekin. Turn the lights on.'

Mousekin's power light shudders; she makes a disapproving whir. 'Soon,' she says. 'You should, soon you should—'

Again the lamps brighten and dim, and again, a slow strobe slipping through light dark light as if Mousekin has got herself into a spin. 'Mousekin stop,' says Abi – and the light dies. The jumping spark under Mousekin's chin is the only bright thing.

'Mousekin, reboot!' says Abi, but Mousekin's voice is louder. *Shouldn't girl shouldn't you soon girl good no good no should soon shouldn't*– Reboot, she keeps saying, but Mousekin's so loud and close on her lap she is looping *shouldshouldn't soonyoushould* so sharp and shrill and Abi snatches it, holds it out – shut up, shut up – and shakes and shakes till the *shooould-sooooo-yooooou* slows and slides into silence.

And then Mousekin coughs, a noise that sounds like a word. That sounds like *upstairs*.

Abi does it in the kitchen; goes in through the neck, with the paring knife. It's simple, then, to fillet her. To remove her electronic brain from her stuffing-flesh. To carve out the speaker, a coin-sized thing, flimsy and easily crushed underfoot. And once it's out, all that hard clever stuff, she is softly squashable once more. Abi pushes her insides back under her skin, staunches the wound.

It is nice to have her back.

A glass of milk in her hand. Mousekin cradled into her neck. Abi presses her cheek against velour fur, as she climbs upstairs to bed.

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