Contents

Susan Daniels: The Secret
Kim Cheng Boey: The Year of the Horse
Molly Murn: Holes in the Skein
Dennis Wild: Nikolai
Christine Williams: Pearly Shells
If God sends you down a stony path, may he give you strong shoes. This is an old Irish proverb your husband liked to quote when times were tough. He was not religious. Neither are you. How could you be? However, the wisdom embodied in this little Gaelic saying takes you back to a time when a gift of shoes became a turning point in your life. Only you didn’t realise it then. Your stony path had climbed to its steepest point and you stood looking over a precipice. The only way forward was to step off the edge and hope someone below would hold out their arms and break your fall.

You grew up in England, in a large three-bedroomed house, which appeared, externally, like any other house. It was situated in a typical English middle-class street lined with huge oak trees, where people took pride in their homes and washed their cars on Sunday mornings. Neighbours said hello as they walked past front gardens in which small lawns were mowed or roses pruned. Your story begins in an average street in an average English neighbourhood on an average Sunday morning.

You wake and there is a moment which lasts for a few seconds – that comfortable, warm and drowsy feeling when coming round from a deep sleep. Then, suddenly and violently, a realisation of deep-rooted pain wakes you into consciousness. You have a secret. A dark secret, so intense, so monumental and heavy, it has a physical presence. It’s a huge weight lodged in your core, squashing and cramping, twisting and turning, curled up inside, controlling all your actions and thoughts.

However, this morning, just as reality begins to take hold and overwhelm you, a lighter thought seeps through into your conscious mind. It’s your birthday. You are no longer a child, you are sixteen. Sixteen is nearly an adult. You can leave home. You can do what you want. You can be free. It’s at that moment, that you contemplate freedom. That small taste is just enough to ease the pain a little and calm the cramping in your belly.

As you lift the duvet and come out of hiding, you go to the window and look out into the garden from behind the curtains. It has been raining and water is dripping from the trees. The wet leaves glisten in the English sunshine and everything looks clean and brighter, somehow. You can see your little brother in the garden, bending over, probably digging for worms in the soft muddy soil. Your dog is sniffing around the puddles, trying to assist in the exploration. The pungent aroma of bacon drifts from the kitchen, which is under your bedroom and you realise that your mother is cooking Sunday breakfast. You suddenly feel hungry.

You slowly enter the kitchen, relieved to find your mother alone. She smiles and gives you a hug. She has placed a large box wrapped in silver paper, on the kitchen table and several birthday cards are propped up against it. The previous week you had been shopping together, and she had bought you some shoes for your birthday. Black heels with little ankle straps. You can’t wait to try them on and show your friends. As you carefully unwrap the present, your mother lays out four plates and pours the tea.

Your brother comes in from the garden, rubbing his dirty hands against his jumper and your mother tells him off and shakes her head in despair, telling him to go and wash his hands. She asks you to go and give your father a shout and tell him that breakfast

‘The Secret.’ Susan Daniels.
Transnational Literature Vol. 4 no. 2, May 2012.
is ready. You go to the bottom of the stairs and shout *breakfast is ready*, to the landing upstairs. You listen and hope that he has not heard you, so that you can have a few more minutes in the sanctum of your family – your mother and brother. The three of you have a close relationship. After your mother divorced, she single-handedly raised the two of you in the small Warwickshire village of Henley in Arden, until you were ten. Then she married again. You have very little memory of your real father, your biological father. There is just a hazy vision of standing by the heat of a fire burning in a grate and a man yelling angrily at your mother from across the room. Your mother holds your baby brother in her arms. You remember feeling frightened and push closely against your mother’s legs, for protection. Her head is bent over the baby and she is weeping. Then the man is gone. That is your one and only memory of your real father.

Quickly you return to the warm comfort of the kitchen and your unwrapped present and unopened birthday cards. Your brother is being his usual idiot self, trying to poke a sausage up his nose and making you laugh, whilst your mother tries to be angry with him but then, she is laughing too. The dog wags his tail and seeks attention. He starts yapping and gently strokes his paw against your brother’s leg. It’s just like the old days, before you started to feel sick every day, when life was fun, before your brother was made to cry, before your mother had bruises, before things were smashed, before the shouting, before things changed.

He comes in. The laughing stops. He sits down heavily at the end of the table. Your mother chats away to him, unaware of the nasty smell his presence creates. He is unshaven, which emphasises his sagging cheeks and double chin. He turns his stony-grey eyes towards you and looks at your new shoes. He says, *very nice, put them on then, let’s have a look at you in them*, and your mother agrees, not realising what she’s saying. You start to feel sick. The walls are closing in. You feel dirty. You do not want his eyes on you, looking at your legs, leering at your walk. You start to panic and stand up. You are holding back hot tears but they are escaping and start to run down your face and you are picking up your shoes and the paper and your cards, and you want to run away, to be safe from the guilt and the shame. To be a little girl again. You run out of the kitchen and you can hear your mother shouting after you.

Later, you hear a knock on the bedroom door and it’s your mother asking if you’re alright now and would you stay in and look after your little brother, until she is back. She is going out to visit an aunt who has recently moved to the nearby town of Stratford upon Avon. You know that she will be out for a couple of hours and your heart sinks, until she tells you that he is going too. You sit on your bed, with the door closed. Alone in your room of memories. Trying not to think of those times when you were younger, when he would climb the stairs and walk along the landing to your room at bedtime, to say goodnight.

He would heave himself onto your bed and tell you to be a good girl. As he lowered his weight onto your body, you would lift yourself up and rise high above him, floating to the ceiling. You would look down at yourself, at him. If you stayed up there you could almost feel nothing, as if it wasn’t happening. You didn’t even have to think about it. You could see the bright purple and lilac walls and the crack in the ceiling above the doorway and the little fly trapped and suspended in a cobweb in a corner, waiting to be devoured by the big fat, hairy spider. Your mother never climbed those stairs at bedtime.

As you grew older, you tried to avoid him. You stayed away from the house as

‘The Secret.’ Susan Daniels.
*Transnational Literature* Vol. 4 no. 2, May 2012.
much as possible. You came home late. But he found other places, other times. Assignations. Ultimatums. If you were not a good girl he would hit your mother, kick the dog and bully your brother. Psychologically, he beat you into submission. So eventually, you would go in the car for a drive with him or to the workshop at the back of the garage. A little pawn. You feel ashamed, but how can you tell anyone what you have been doing. Do not tell your mother, it will destroy her. It will destroy her. He has said it so many times you believe it. He has been telling you that since you were ten. You know that you might lose your mother. She will hate you when she knows what you’ve been doing. You will lose your home, and your little brother. But you are an adult now and this is the sacrifice you will have to make. To get him away from you.

The following day you arrive home from school expecting to find your mother and brother at home. But they have gone to the shops and he is there alone, waiting for you. He is wearing an old pair of jeans which are too tight and his bulging stomach hangs over the waistband. He tells you he hasn’t been to work today. You want to go and change out of your school uniform, but not when you are alone in the house with him. You go into the kitchen to get a drink and he comes up behind you and puts his hand on your breast. His breath stinks of stale tobacco. He wants you to go upstairs with him. You shrug him off and he grabs at you. You move away and say No, I’m going out. His voice is soft and coaxing at first but because you are not compliant; he becomes aggressive, threatening. You scream at him NO and run to the door and make your escape. You go to a friend’s house and are invited to stay for dinner. Your friend’s mother phones your house to say that you will be back later, after you’ve eaten. Your friend’s father drops you off at the door, because it is dark outside. You go inside and it is quiet. Your mother is in the kitchen. She has been crying and her face is swollen and blotchy, as if a rash has spread across her cheeks and throat. She says she is alright. He is nowhere to be seen and there is an atmosphere of heavy, oppressive silence, like the aftermath of a ferocious storm which has left devastation in its wake. She is sweeping broken glass off the floor. You walk to the foot of the stairs. As you glance in the mirror on the wall, he comes out of the sitting room behind you. He stands just two feet away, staring back at you accusingly through the reflection. This is your fault. His hostility is almost tangible and a vein in his temple pulses angrily; sweat beads on his face. Not a word is spoken and you stare back at him, challenging him, until he releases his gaze and turns away. Your guilt weighs rock-heavy, but you are not going to give in this time. You look in on your little brother and he is sleeping. Then you go to your bedroom. There are no visitors to your room tonight.

You cannot sleep. You toss and turn, the shadowy dark thoughts going over and over and there’s no escape. The night appears to go on forever, until the dawn light begins to drift slowly and grudgingly into the room. Eventually, you get up and quietly go into your brother’s room to see if he’s alright. As you enter, you can hear him crying in his sleep; his arms are thrashing around, and he is mumbling incoherently. You wrap your arms around him and he begins to quieten down, to be calmer, and he drifts back into a gentle sleep. You lie down next to him and listen to his breathing, until daylight enters the room and chases away the dark shadows. You get up feeling sick again. You go to school and listen to the teachers and make notes and talk to your friends in the break. You go through the routine of being normal. Not wanting to attract attention just in case someone sees something different about you, something dirty, a label saying

‘The Secret.’ Susan Daniels.
*Transnational Literature* Vol. 4 no. 2, May 2012.
unclean. You know you are not the same anymore and everyone is going to know and you will lose your friends. How will you be able to come back to school after everyone knows? After lunch, you ask to see the headmistress. The secretary raises an eyebrow at your request and asks the reason. You say, it’s personal and look down at the floor. The secretary says to come back after lessons at three o’clock and the headmistress will see you then.

You go to the toilets and vomit. Someone overhears you being sick and the next minute a teacher is banging on the toilet door asking if you’re alright. You open the door and see a teacher you do not recognise and burst into tears. She tells you to go home as clearly you are unwell. Younger girls stand around watching the floor-show and whispering and you need to get out, you need to get away. You tell the teacher your name and collect your bag and walk out the front door into the fresh air. It’s raining gently and you lift your face upwards, breathing in gulps of air and letting the cold raindrops trickle down your cheeks, to wash away the tears. You sit down against a wall out of sight. What to do? Who to talk to? You walk to the bus stop and wait for the next bus.

Being an adult is tough. Decisions are tough. You sit on the upper deck of the bus, letting the wind from the open window blow through your hair and your mind. You want it to blow you away into nothing. The bus reaches the city and as it turns a corner, you see a large solid looking building, stately, secure, firmly anchored to the ground, its large glass panes reflecting the vast northern sky with its dark and thunderous clouds building up before the next storm. Vehicles are lined up neatly outside in the car park, as if your brother has been playing with his Corgi cars. You get off the bus at the next stop, and walk back along the road. Crossing over the busy road and negotiating heavy traffic, you reason to yourself that if you are not supposed to tell, the next car will hit you, and silence you forever. But fate decides in your favour and you reach the other side of the road with limbs intact and only the sound of a car hooting at your irresponsible action.

The sky is growing dark and the ground is trembling. You reach the entrance of the glass-fronted building and climb the steps. The main door opens into a wide spacious area with white walls and a large desk up front. The room is empty and you walk up to the uniformed officer behind the desk. When the blue-shirted English police officer looks up from his paperwork, you quietly say, I need to talk to somebody please. I need help.

Some years later you move to Australia, to escape. Not from England, but from your memories. Your mother was not destroyed, but those dreadful years continue to haunt her. She remains angry and racked with guilt because she did not protect you. It was a long time ago, but fingers still point, voices drop, and whispers linger in the air. She was not destroyed, but the family was, and that was the price of your freedom.

Sometimes the available paths in life are difficult. Sometimes whichever choice you make continues to lead to an impasse. The only way to move forward in a new direction is to begin a new life in another country.
The scene looks too sanitised, the river now cleaned up, tame, tepid, no longer the thrumming mercantile artery that once fed the heart of the nation, but part of a massive freshwater reservoir created by an ambitious dam project. He had no inkling on his last visit ten years ago that this was on the cards. Typical of the country. Things just happen overnight, with little discussion. The sea is now kept at bay by the monstrous Marina Barrage, and the river no longer breathes the tidal rhythms that once bathed the steps of the quays. Apart from a few converted into tourist boats that ply the unnaturally clean water, the flotillas of tongkangs and bumboats had been brought out to sea and scuttled. On his last visit the entire stretch of Boat and Clarke Quays had already undergone a sea-change, their two and three-story shophouses and godowns transformed as if by a megalomaniac magician into an anonymous chain of upmarket pubs and restaurants that can be found in any globalising Asian city. The General Post Office was then being cordoned off and turned into the five-star Fullerton Hotel, which now along with the rest of the riverfront, is illuminated at night. Yet, behind these bright lights reflected in the river in splinters and ropes of colours that negate its darker past, behind all surviving historic buildings and the bridges decked out for tourist display, he can hear faint echoes: the whole harbour-front with its intimations of the open sea, and the ghost of the old river with its tidal whispers, its weave of smells, an underlay composed of old incarnations of the surviving buildings and those demolished. He could sense shadows lying listless between buildings and boats along the quay that by nightfall would be deserted, derelict. And behind the shadows hover the handsome faces of his father and Steve McGarrett.

Three months ago, Pat started belting out the *Hawaii Five-O* theme as part of his practice repertoire, his still small ten-year-old hands wielding sticks almost long as his arms, tapping the brisk rolls, a fast-paced cadence that started the show; a smart, catchy tune that sounded in many Singapore households on Sunday primetime TV at 7.55pm. It unleashed a tide of memories, waves of drum-rolls gathering in strength, cresting auditory waves releasing images that had been long buried: his aunt and two uncles, his sister and grandmother, and his neighbour and then best friend, Ah Huat, whose family was too poor to afford a TV, all congregated in the living room, waiting expectantly for Detective Steve McGarrett and his team to appear. The TV stood like an altar on its spindly tooled legs, its screen flickering to life and steady resolution. It had a varnished scroll door that he loved sliding to hear it rattle, and to see the almost secretive way the convex screen is revealed, like a deep jade pool reflecting his goggle-eyed distended face.

It was a show that had brought them together for an hour each week. It had a dramatic opening on all counts. The accelerando drum-roll accompanies an image of a foam-crested wave, succeeded by a fast train of images: aerial shots of islands and their foamy rollers and long curves of sandy beach, the coastal sprawl of the high-rise in Honolulu backed by volcanic mountains, then Steve McGarett pivoting around stylishly as the camera telescopes in on his handsome, well-chiselled face, strong-jawed with a slight chin-cleft, its features bordering on craggy, his deep-set steel-blue

‘The Year of the Horse.’ Kim Cheng Boey.

*Transnational Literature* Vol. 4 no. 2, May 2012.

eyes, his thick crop of hair sculpted back to the right in a long rolling wave, with a
loose few licks overhanging, and his lavish sideburns.

More images follow in rapid succession, creating a montage matching the
soundtrack’s tempo: shots of McGarrett’s gleaming black Mercury sedan, a tracking
shot of a Hawaiian beauty clad in pareo running on the beach, her hand in a
voluptuous gesture brushing her hair back, of undulating waves with dancing reflected
lights, staccato shots of a white standing Buddha, a close-up shot of a boy. Then the
exquisite face of the Hawaiian beauty turning to face the camera, followed by the
underbelly of a jumbo in lift-out, the blue strobes of a police siren, stabs of sunset
over the waves, a tantalising glimpse of grass-skirted hips swishing in a frenetic hula,
and a flashing blue siren. The boyish-faced Danno or James MacArthur appears
running, followed by the rotating loaded chamber of a revolver ushering in burly
Kono (played by Zulu) barrelling with a shotgun down on a baddie, and Kam Fong
turning to face the camera. The credits close with a shot of a blue siren against a street
at night and the producer’s name ‘Leonard Freeman.’ Everyone hummed as they
watched this fast-paced overture, waiting for Steve McGarrett and his team to hound
down the haole, local or Asian villains, and close each episode with ‘Book ‘em,
Danno,’ words repeated like a mantra by children and grown-ups alike.

For weeks Lee looked forward to his son’s drum practice. He had been fearful
that the racket would attract complaints in this serene suburb bordering on the Ku-
ring-gai National Park and had wished that Pat had instead chosen to learn to play the
violin or trumpet. But the neighbours had not come knocking; indeed, the drumming
was not as loud as he had thought. Since moving to Berowra he had tried to convince
himself that it was home, that the endless vistas of bushland and the hovering band of
the Blue Mountains would blot out the island-state he had left behind. They had tried
settling in Toronto, where his sister Debbie had emigrated but Fong, his wife, had
doubts about the weather and had put in a bid for Australia. After two years they were
defeated by the Toronto winter and joblessness, and when Australia called, they
decided quite readily to re-migrate.

Listening to his son he savoured being dragged by a long undertow of
memory, out beyond the shoals of middle age, beyond the reefs of the emigrant years,
to that strange day on the Singapore River, when he had his last walk with his father,
and happened on the film set of Hawaii Five-O. It was his father’s favourite route;
even before he walked out of their lives, his father would take him out on walks
around the river and the historic heart of the city. They would start with Change
Alley, tucked in between Winchester House and Clifford Building, drifting with
crowds browsing through its cool interior, its passage lined with stalls offering
souvenirs, bootleg tapes, watches, pens, toys, silks, anything that could be bought and
sold. He loved the babble of tongues, the barter, the friendly banter, the deft
transactions of the money-changers, and most of all the smell of the place, a slightly
musty odour tinged with a whiff of sea air, urine, dust and decay. The Alley decanted
shoppers into Raffles Place, the loud sunshine severing their reverie, and they would
either proceed to the Moorish Arcade, an upmarket version of Change Alley, with its
white stucco and arches and beautiful Italian floor tiles, or cross the lawns and pass
the fountain to Robinsons, with its white Palladian façade, pillars and pediments, and
take the grille-gate lift to the toy department on the top floor. Lee eyed the toys
longingly but knew his father could never afford them.

‘The Year of the Horse.’ Kim Cheng Boey.
Transnational Literature Vol. 4 no. 2, May 2012.
From Robinsons they walked back through Change Alley to Collyer Quay and crossed the pedestrian bridge to Clifford Pier, where his father would light up a cigarette as they watched the bobbing bumboats, and the freighters and ships anchored further out. Lee detected a mixture of pain and relief, lightness and heaviness on his father’s face. Then they would drift on past Cecil Street and D’Almeida Street, names redolent of distant, unknown places. Always they ended up at the river, before the struts of the elegant Cavanagh Bridge. They would have a sugar-cane drink at the hawker centre beside the bridge and then walk along the street of ship chandlers, shophouses and godowns that hugged the curve of the River, said to resemble the belly of the carp.

He was spellbound by the tongkangs berthed along the quay, ranks of them, ancient, mysterious, with eyes painted on their bows to see the danger ahead, their gunwales girdled with tyres to cushion knocks, and the sampans like minnows darting among them, rowed or motored by weathered old men. Tongkangs chugged in and out of the river, their helmsmen turning the large tillers; outbound boats with their empty cavernous hold, and inbound cargo-laden craft, sometimes towed by a smaller bumboat. Their passage scored the khaki flow of the river with a wake that spread across the river, nudging boats nestled at the quay’s steps. He would follow the path of one making for the mouth of the river into the swells of the harbour, to the waiting ships riding at anchor, and inhale a whiff of other worlds, a stir of the unknown. On the quay, trains of sweaty men in worn singlets or bare-chested, heaved gunny sacks of dried goods, rice, gambiar, copra, spices; their bare feet expertly negotiated the gangplank trembling under the combined weight of men and goods.

On this day, his seventeenth birthday, their walk was conducted mostly in awkward silence, punctuated by his father’s questions about his studies and his monosyllabic replies. He hadn’t seen his father for a few years, and was angry, yet curious about where he had been. They had met at The Alley and on the way his father had insisted on him picking a watch as a birthday present. They had not done their usual circuit, for Raffles Place was in the throes of yet another transformation. Robinsons had been gutted in a fire that had taken nine lives and some of the arcaded shops around it had been demolished. They failed to see the signs of change, that in a decade’s time the river would be cleaned up, all the tongkangs and barges removed, the streets, The Alley razed, and nothing would remain of what they had known. They did not foresee that he would one day be an emigrant, unhappy, lost and longing for this lost place, and his father dead at sixty, alone and unmourned.

They had gone straight to the river, where – this is something he could not forget – his father led him to a Toto booth beside the Post Office and got him to pick lottery numbers. His father said, ‘It’s your lucky day. Go on, pick the numbers.’ He remembers the cheap orange biro attached to the window of the booth, and being given the ticket to cross and circle the digits, and by some quirk of memory, he is certain he had picked 17. They had been walking along the river, he wanting to leave, wondering how they would part, whether his father would say anything about where he had been in the last few years, when they suddenly rounded Circular Road into Boat Quay and saw the shoot. Lighting and sound gear were posted along the stretch of the quay. ‘They are filming Hawaii Five-O. Look, Steve McGarrett,’ a scrawny Chinese youth was telling an elderly Sikh man. They stood in the five-foot-way outside a trading
company and watched.

The cameras were tracking McGarrett and a burly man as they measured their steps along the quay. McGarrett wore a long-sleeved, cream-coloured safari outfit and white leather shoes. Lee read later that this had been one of the few occasions when he would break from his habitual navy-blue suit and don flamboyant outfits. He remembered an episode in which McGarrett wears a flamingo-pink suit, another in which he is in a flowery silk-shirt; in an episode in which he has to go into hiding after being framed, he appears in a wide-brimmed straw-hat and a striking white suit.

The director’s intention must have been to interfere as little as possible with the natural setting. There was no cordon and the locals must have been instructed to carry on as usual. The camera dolly glided on its track, keeping abreast of the two men as they walked and conversed, passing onlookers loitering on the street and in the shadow of the five-foot-way. It paused as the pair slowed down, and one of the cameras seemed to peer over McGarrett’s shoulder at them. Then it moved on. A tall man in bell-bottoms tailed McGarrett, and was told by the crew with hand gestures to back off. Then, unscripted, an elderly Caucasian woman drew alongside McGarrett, peering at him before veering off. The director cried ‘cut’ as they reached the end of the street. There was no second take.

McGarrett thanked everyone and then lit up a Rothmans cigarette in the way that Lee’s father did, his lips pursed to tilt the cigarette up and his left hand shielding his right as it moved the lighter towards the cigarette. As if a Rothmans ad were being filmed, a truck advertising the brand was parked just a few paces behind the actor. McGarrett didn’t smoke but actor Jack Lord was a chain-smoker. Lord quit smoking long after the series had ended.

A few fans rushed forward to shake his hand. Lee’s father nudged him. ‘Go on and get his autograph. Here, get him to sign here.’ His father turned the Toto ticket round to its blank side. ‘No, Dad, you do it.’

His dad steered him towards the star. ‘Mr McGarrett, may we have your autograph please? It’s my son’s birthday.’

McGarrett’s piercing blue eyes turned to them; his familiar deep smile lines appeared as he took the ticket, laughed and signed. He was about to return it but added something else.

‘Happy birthday, young man. And good luck.’

Then he was gone, as swiftly and gracefully as he moved on TV, into a blue sedan half the size of his Mercury in Honolulu.

His father showed him the ticket.

Best wishes for the Year of the Horse, Jack Lord. And Happy Birthday. The letters were clearly spelled, neat and level, but the J was a wild cursive stroke, betraying the flamboyant streak in Lord’s character.

‘I’d better keep this, to check the numbers this weekend. You can have it after we collect our winnings.’

As they sipped sugar-cane juice at the Empress Place hawker centre, his dad said, ‘The camera must have caught us. Let’s look out for it. It should be on TV in the next season.’ Next season. How easy, seamless and neatly scripted televisual seasons are; a series’ life, with its circularity, its contained episodes and dramatic closure, eclipses and mocks real life and its rough edges and gaps, its inexplicable twists and turns and humdrum stretches.

‘The Year of the Horse.’ Kim Cheng Boey.

Transnational Literature Vol. 4 no. 2, May 2012.
‘It’s a good sign, son. We are going to appear on TV. Like stars. Maybe we’ll win the Toto.’

‘We are not even extras. The camera just happened to be aimed in our direction, Dad.’

‘Extra extras then. Extras are extra important. They make the show real.’

Then his dad said that he had to leave for his afternoon shift. From being an assistant manager at a local bank he had descended through a series of failed jobs, dogged by debts and loan sharks, to being a cab-driver.

They headed for the bus-stop at Clifford Pier, and as they arrived at the Post Office, they saw another film shoot across the road. The camera panned the harbour, then swivelled around slowly to take in Fullerton Road and the Post Office before completing the rotation back to its start point. It must have caught them in its sweep.

‘It’s our lucky day. I’ll find out the title of this movie.’

His dad never told him, never reappeared again in his life. The newspapers had tracked the vaunted visit of Five-O to Singapore, but hadn’t covered the other film. In a country with no film-making infrastructure in the 1970s, it was bizarre that it should host two productions in the same year and month, and that he and his dad should become incidental extras in one day.

In the months that followed he gave little thought to the two films as the World Cup fever took over. Then he enlisted in the army and underwent two and a half years of slavery, of quelling all the hate and frustration, of charging up and down hills, of crawling on belly and saying yes to everything, and of waiting for the day of discharge. In all that time he did not receive any news of his father. What had become of the Toto ticket? Did his father remember Lord’s words on it or did he throw it away after the draw? It was unlikely that he won anything; if he did, it must have been an insignificant amount that was squandered on the races and more Toto tickets.

As his son mastered the drumbeats of the Five-O theme, Lee started googling the show and found that it was the longest-running police drama in television history: twelve seasons in all, outlasting even M.A.S.H. His respect and admiration for Jack Lord grew as the facts painted the real man behind the screen image. He had a Master’s degree in art, and after the last season of Five-O lived a reclusive existence, devoting himself to painting. He was faithful to his wife, fifteen years his senior. He was a philanthropist, and his fortune was divided among charities after his wife’s death.

Danno, or James MacArthur, had starred in The Swiss Family Robinson; he recalled his father bringing him to the cinema in the Great World to watch the movie. The roof of the building on which McGarrett stands on in the opening sequence belonged to a local tycoon called Chin Ho Kelly, who also lent his name to the Chinese-Hawaiian member of the force, played by Kam Fong. Fong’s broad Chinese face and figure acquired more depth when Lee read about his disaster-stricken personal life: he had lost his wife and two children when two B-24 bombers collided above their family home in a freak accident.

From Amazon, he ordered all twelve seasons of the series, an extravagance that sparked a reprimand from Fong. After returning home from work he would hurry through dinner, ensure that Pat did his homework before going to bed and then put on double episodes. Fong watched some of them with him, curling up beside him on the
sofa. It too was part of her family ritual. Across the shifting sands of migrant time and space they were transported back to their respective childhoods.

They remembered the first episode, in which McGarrett appears in the opening, tied up and tortured by Wo Fat, a Chinese secret agent who is his nemesis, and who will finally be captured by McGarrett in the final episode of the last season. There was so much hype around it; maybe it was the nascent years of television broadcast in Singapore. It was magic, watching a show beamed from faraway Hawaii. Yet it wasn’t that foreign; in his innocent, unschooled eyes, the Hawaiians or the haoles were not dissimilar to the Malays in skin colour and dress, and in their relaxed, content, and happy disposition. Also, Hawaii’s multi-ethnic make-up, and the series’ pioneering use of a large pool of untrained non-white cast, made it look familiar. Besides, there were the beaches with coconut palms and shacks, resembling the coastal stretches along Pasir Panjang and Katong.

It is strange how a television series can date or serialise real lives, and provide indices to the past. Lee’s memories became embedded in the series, each season of his life intertwined with the scenes. He remembered when Singapore featured in Season Two. His father had suddenly appeared at his uncle’s flat and asked to stay for a few nights. He felt embarrassed by his dad’s desperate plea but was relieved that his uncle consented. It was a novel sensation to watch TV with his father. It had never happened before – they didn’t have a TV in the succession of rented places they lived in, as his father dragged them in flight from creditors. In this episode (‘The Singapore File’), McGarrett goes to Singapore to escort a lady eyewitness back to Honolulu, but the episode was shot entirely in the studio and in downtown Honolulu, and the footages meant to evoke the Oriental atmosphere were probably shot in Hong Kong rather than in Singapore. Nobody faulted the exoticising and typecasting of Asians in the episode, and indeed, in the entire series. The Chief Inspector in Singapore calls the island ‘Jewel of the Orient’ and adds that it is also ‘city of sinister entanglements.’

Just a few days before the episode in which McGarrett is framed for the murder of his girlfriend, Lee’s uncle had bought a car. He remembered his uncle taking them on a drive after the episode ended. Then halfway through a Wo Fat episode a violent quarrel broke out between his grandmother and her daughter-in-law, in which the latter threatened to kill herself. They had to turn the TV off.

Chin Ho Kelly dies towards the end of Season Ten. A week later Lee’s aunt and grandmother moved out of his uncle’s flat and he and Debbie were reclaimed by their mother. He stopped watching Hawaii Five-O after that.

At last they arrived at ‘The Year of the Horse’ episode, the last story in Season Eleven. In this penultimate season, McGarrett actually makes it to the real Singapore, to solve the murder of a drug mule and break a smuggling ring run by an American pilot who had gone MIA in Vietnam. Except for the opening, set in a plane and then in Honolulu, the film had been shot entirely in Singapore. It was the second time that Hawaii Five O was filmed overseas. The first was in Season Nine, in ‘Nine Dragons,’ when McGarrett wakes up to amnesia in Hong Kong.

He was enthralled, like a boy again, by the breathtaking aerial shots of the harbour and the ships, the clay-tiled roofs of the shophouses and godowns along the river, the Victoria Theatre and Memorial Hall, and views beyond the civic district to Fort Canning and further. So little high rise then. So much of what he loved still intact. Preserved.

‘The Year of the Horse.’ Kim Cheng Boey.
Transnational Literature Vol. 4 no. 2, May 2012.
After the panoramic opening, McGarrett and Danno walk through the customs at the old Paya Lebar Airport. Lee’s family had lived briefly in a flat near the airport. Even now he could hear the jumbos, the ear-splitting screech and rumble that sent reverberations through the walls and floor of the flat. He watched closely the scene in which McGarrett and a Singapore police inspector amble along Boat Quay. His heart raced as he strained to make out the figures in the background. He replayed the scene again just as the two men reach the end of the street. Fong was annoyed, but he was too excited to care. In the shadowy five-foot-way the shapes of a man and child were discernible.

‘That must be Dad and me. Outside that shop. See?’ He rewound it and froze the frame.

‘How can you be sure? You can’t see the faces.’

‘It’s us. I know it.’ Yet it looked unreal, and a flicker of doubt pricked his certainty, as though his watching it now in the present and in another country negated his being there in the past.

‘It’s terrible, this nostalgia. It’s time to go back. See for yourself what the place is now. How long has it been since you went back, ten years?’ Fong asked.

He had returned to settle his father’s funeral expenses; he had died alone and hadn’t been discovered till the stench alerted his neighbours. The funeral happened quickly, without any wake or ceremony, his aunt had said on the phone. The body had been brought straight from the morgue to the crematorium on the day that she had made the identification. During the flight he imagined his father’s corpse, bloated in the heat and riddled with maggots. He couldn’t reconcile that with his memory of his handsome father, whose smile was as charming as Lord’s.

As he stood in the columbarium with Debbie and her husband Gerry, he wept. Debbie held him as he shook uncontrollably. She had always been a good strong sister shielding him in the storm of their parents’ quarrels, and then steadying him as he struggled in the aftermath of the separation.

In the months following his father’s death, he had a series of uncannily vivid dreams in which his father would appear and take him on a circuit of the river. He couldn’t be sure of his age in the dreams; sometimes he was five or six, his small hand held loosely in his father’s large, callused, nicotine-stained hand; in another dream he sat on his dad’s firm shoulders, taking in the invigorating scent of his brilliantined hair, as they moved slowly through Change Alley.

After Fong had gone to bed, he played the Boat Quay scene again, as though the two marginal figures would resolve into more precise features with one more viewing. Then Lee remembered the other film. He had so immersed himself in Five-O that he had forgotten about it. Or perhaps he wanted to save it for the last.

The film was called Saint Jack. The story had been adapted from Paul Theroux’s eponymous novel. The novel had made Theroux persona non grata in autocratic Singapore, for it dealt with the taboo themes of prostitution and pimping. Its protagonist is Jack Flowers, a middle-aged Italian-American working as chandler-pimp in Singapore and aspiring to set up his own brothel. Peter Bogdanovich, the director, realising that the script would not receive the Ministry of Culture’s endorsement, had submitted a fake script entitled Jack of Hearts. It was the only American film to be shot entirely in Singapore, and the only film other than the Five-
episode to capture so vividly and unwittingly images of the river and the harbour. The film was banned by the Board of Film Censors for misrepresenting Singapore as a haven for pimps and whores, and chided in the papers for its skewed portrayal of a city lacking in ‘religious sensitivity,’ in a scene when two Bugis Street transvestites committed a ‘sordid act’ even as a Buddhist and a Christian funeral were taking place simultaneously. Then in 1999 the film finally made it to Singapore as part of the International Film Festival, in the period that saw the country trying to shed its repressive image, and reinvent itself as a tolerant global city after the country’s worst economic downturn in 1997.

His pulse raced to see the 360-degree panning shot tracking the harbour and its bumboats, and on the horizon dim outlines of the Marina reclamation, pivoting to Clifford Pier then shifting to Fullerton Road and its two-way traffic, and to the Post Office. In a fleeting traffic break, as an old bus cleared the frame, he caught a heart-stopping glimpse of a boy and a man in shadows of the Post Office portico. Then the traffic wiped them out and the camera moved on. For a moment, time erased, he appeared again, looking at the camera. He was buoyed by a sudden happiness. It was like finding a lost loved object; the brief image on the screen seemed to hold an unfinished story that could bring his father back to him.

He took in the scenes of Orchard Road and Bugis Street, greedily, trying to pin down the exact spots and the street names. It was coming together, the map of his longing and loss, and he realised that he had not emigrated at all; he was still wandering in the Singapore of 1978, the Year of the Horse. His old self was still there, waiting for his return. In the years in Toronto and Sydney he had never for a moment felt that deep love of place that is much more than fleeting attachment. Indeed he had felt a stubborn sense of not-belonging, a sense that all of his love had already been given and it was too late in the day to change. And it had taken him all these years, taken the rediscovery of *Hawaii Five-O* and this hard-to-like-or-dislike film called *Saint Jack* to come to the knowledge which also felt like lost or doomed love.

As he put on ‘The Year of the Horse’ again to compare the river scenes with those in *Saint Jack*, Fong said wearily, ‘Let’s get the tickets. Let’s go back.’ ‘Book ‘em, Danno,’ he said and laughed.

Lee acts reluctant, bored, as they board the tourist bumboat. In the entire week they have been here, he has avoided the river, until he yields to Fong’s suggestion that they take the cruise. Secretly, he feels a surge of expectancy and excitement akin to what he felt when his father took him on a bumboat out beyond the river to St John’s Island, which harboured a drug rehabilitation centre but which also had an unspoilt lagoon open to the public. It was a rare unsullied day, swimming in the clear, warm, weightless water and picking coconuts and breaking them for the juice. He wanted the day to last, to stay on the island longer with his dad. Someday he will tell Pat about the day on St John’s Island, the walks around the river, and the grandfather he has never met.

As the boat passes under the Cavanagh Bridge, he looks involuntarily at the spot where the Toto booth had stood and remembers the lottery ticket. He decries to Fong and Pat the conversion of the Post Office into a luxury hotel, the seafront developments, the Casino, the flavourless Bay, but the anger and dismay he had felt...
on the trip ten years ago seem hollow echoes now; they have metamorphosed into something akin to acceptance. For the rest of the cruise he has only one thing in mind: to ask his aunt for the bag of his dad’s belongings.

She has always held it against him for not keeping in touch but her eyes well up as they get to talking about his dad. Once, she had been vivacious and pretty, with long-lashed almond eyes and a svelte figure, courted by a string of suitors. His memory of her beauty is so vivid that it jars with the image of the tired woman sitting before him, her pert lips now solemn, dull, her once luscious hair limp and streaked with white, and her face worry-creased. She had made a bad marriage and is now alone, childless.

‘Your dad had a good heart. Just very bad luck all his life.’ His aunt always puts things down to luck. Either you have it or you don’t. And his dad lacked it altogether.

She has the folder ready and passes it to him. ‘Not much there, as I said years ago, but I’ve kept them just in case.’ His father’s last years must have been like a monk’s existence, to own nothing. No clutter. He feels burdened in contrast, possessed by all his worldly goods and the weight of his memories.

It is evening by the time he gets off the bus just after the Elgin Bridge. Turning into Circular Road, he is shocked to find the once quiet backstreet already before nightfall pulsating with dance clubs and their skimpy-clad Filipino and Thai girls posted enticingly at the door, calling out to him, ‘Hello, Sir, come buy me a drink.’ They make him feel irretrievably middle-aged, sickened by the mix of desire and impotence that stirs sordidly and uselessly in his gut.

He turns into Boat Quay and searches the brightly-lit bars and restaurants. He can’t square the scene with the old quay, the weathered shophouses and ship-chandlers with their embossed calligraphed names, weeds peeping between cracks, quiet at night except for the slap of tide water on the steps and the creaks of tongkangs secured to the quay. Now there isn’t a single café or bar that doesn’t blast the air with pop or whatever they call it these days.

Defeated, he sits on the top step of the quay away from crowds. Under the halogen streetlamp he takes the folder out of his bag. The yellowed sheaf of papers is creased, fraying, like ancient papyrus, and gives off a slightly mouldy smell. A school-leaving certificate from St Joseph’s Institution, a taxi license; even a traffic fine. Then between the papers, he finds a British Commonwealth passport, issued in 1956, when the country was still a colony. It is navy-blue with a gold crest. On the second recto page is a photograph of his father, a handsome young man with hair groomed back, his well-shaped dimpled face tilted like a 50s film star. He is surprised and disappointed to find the pages unprinted; there isn’t a single stamp to indicate that his father had travelled. Why had he applied for the passport? Why had he kept it to the end?

He turns to the last page and there, resting on the backing, is a recognisable slip of paper. It is creased where it has been folded, and bears yellow stains and watermarks, probably his dad’s perspiration. He touches it, holds it almost with reverence, like a charm, a talisman. He had picked 1 and 7, and not 17. Of course, 7 was his favourite number then. He turns it over and feels a slow wave of relief and happiness filling him, as he gazes at Lord’s signature and the words.

Then the scene before him is washed away – all the glitzy towers, the strip of
gaudily-lit bars and restaurants, like the scum and flotsam of the river during the clean-up in the 80s, the flavourless river displaced by its old incarnation with its rich textured breaths, its gentle voice on the quay steps, its flotillas of tongkangs and bumboats, silted again with freshwater mud, memories, presence. The lights before him dim and vanish before the memory of that sunny day on the quay, McGarrett smiling as he returns the ticket, his dad receiving it, the two men joined in this instant, and in this image he senses something resembling grace, forgiveness, the past still so alive in him he can see McGarrett’s eyes turning to him on that day in the Year of the Horse, the day of his last walk with his father.
Spring came late that year, and late, too, came the news that you were dying. We lit fires right through September, but in October when the air turned blood-warm, the fire in your bones never went out. Bone cancer, they said, and I could think only of termites gnawing through wood. Making you hollow. Like all good warriors you stared down your fate. While they radiated your bones, I fed you wheatgrass and quark, royal jelly and whole garlic cloves; we tried meditation, macrobiotics, spirulina, yoga, tantra and high dose vitamin C; we made love when we could and the more you disappeared the more I knew the shape of your bones. We planned your resistance down to the last organic vegetable, but you were already going. The news came too late – you were dying.

And my sister gave birth on the other side of the world. I was listening for the whispers of the universe, watching for holes in its skein that would swallow you whole. I was listening and I thought I heard my sister’s wild moan, thought I saw life slipping through the weave. It turns out I was more than two days wrong. Her baby came, slippery and perfect and I hadn’t heard. The moan was yours, though you made no sound. It came from your bones. I was listening for your going as I used to hear your body singing with mine. I was trying to prepare, but your hand lay warm on my chest, as if it would always be there.

– You didn’t prepare me, my sister said. It hurt so much I thought I was bursting. I thought I was dying.

I imagined the tiny hand of my sister’s child, skittering along her breast – a small bird dancing.

– How could I tell you, I said. It’s beyond words.

There’s no way to prepare. Beyond words, like the rhythm of your dying. I wasn’t prepared.

The sound of our days began to resonate at a lower, softer register. When I was with you, I moved slowly as if underwater. We spoke in murmurs, to soften the indignity. In between times, when food needed to be bought, and bills needed to be paid, it was as if I was too slow for the world. I was reminded of the moment years before, going to the supermarket, just days after giving birth. I stood in the aisles, staring at coconut milk and pappadams and couldn’t remember why I had come. Unmoored. It was the same with your dying. There were days I needed a sign to explain why I was adrift. I wanted to scream at a parking inspector, tweak his ridiculous caterpillar moustache and tear up the ticket, shouting – but don’t you know that he is dying? I didn’t. I even smiled and took the fine from him, slowly, treading water.

We came too late to this love. You were new to me still. Yet familiar as the smell of earth – rain-soaked. I remember the beginning. Elemental. There was no going back.
You washed my hair outside, cradling my head in your hands. I was ginger with you, like getting into a too hot bath. You could have burned me up, so I gave a little at a time. Enough to stoke the fire, while you prepared the water to pour for my hair and dissolve me in longing. It was late in the spring. Now, I wash you as if my slow strokes could make you well, fill in the outline you have become, and, still, your body is tuned to mine. There is nothing louder than this. And nothing quieter. I remember the beginning of us, and now, it seems, I will have to remember the end.

I went to visit my sister in Vienna. We walked along the Ringstrasse, and I carried the baby, shielding her from wind, her velvet head tucked under my chin. She was the exact size and weight of my grief. But more perfect. It was late in the spring. We stood beneath the Pallas-Athene-Brunnen, and I was reminded of owls. Once, I told you a dream: I was trying to write, but owls were wheeling and swooning and pecking me on the head. You said that it meant I knew things. Well I know of nothing, except surrender – the tender surrender of our coming and going. To give birth, we buck against pain until there is nothing more to do but yield. And dying was your bravest act. Under the stony gaze of Athena, my sister turned to me and whispered – you don’t have to let go, you can carry him always – and her baby’s downy crown caught my unruly tears. I won’t let go, but I will surrender. Because watching you die was my bravest act.

– We came too late to love, I said to Athena.

And too late came the news you were dying. And then came the rain and the rain and the rain. Everywhere, the smell of you. My niece nuzzled warm at my heart and I remembered e.e cummings: here is the deepest secret nobody knows. The holes in the skein. We ran for shelter, sloshing through puddles, with my rain-soaked feet and the sluice of water down my back and my tears and my niece jiggling against me and the street washed clean and my perfect sorrow: I shouted your name and hoped you’d hear.

4th September

Dear Mama,

You should know I had one of my attacks again. What Dr Feistelmann calls a seizure. Mama, I will explain how it happened but please understand before you become too anxious that everything has turned out just wonderfully, more so than anyone could ever, ever imagine.

My seizure happened three days after you were taken to hospital to die, Mama. Without you around to remind me, somehow I forgot to take my medications. It happened on the Monday, following my mathematics lecture. I had wandered down to the university duck pond, as a whole hour in that stuffy lecture theatre had made me feel quite dizzy. You know, Mama, how I love fresh air and open skies. It must have happened just as I reached the water’s edge. I returned to consciousness lying face down with blood dripping from my forehead. The strange thing, Mama – I couldn’t remember who I was. I became very agitated. To be a non-person – nameless, truly it is terrifying. I stood up and called out.

‘Who am I?’ The passing cockatoos screeched away as if I’d said nothing at all. I saw two ducks paddling by and called out to them.

‘Who am I? Who am I?’

Again, no reply.

I stooped down and picked up a stone. I threw it at those wretched ducks, shouting once more.

‘Who am I?’

No response. Not a single solitary quack. Ah! I felt so alone, Mama – a cosmic orphan – homeless, anonymous, lost. I bent down again to find another stone. It was then I saw him. A bright green frog. I grabbed him by the neck and questioned him, ‘Frog, tell me, who am I?’ No reply. I squeezed his neck tightly and screamed into his ugly bloated face.

‘Tell me, tell me, who am I?’

And Mama, his mouth opened and I heard him croaking ...

‘Goh-Goh-Goh!’

I squeezed harder.

‘Goh-Goh-Goh! L-L-L-L-L-L!’

And harder.


Mama, it was then I understood. This odious dying reptile was telling me I was – Gogol. Nikolai Gogol! The great Russian writer returned, reincarnated into MY very own flesh. Mama, your only son is Nikolai Gogol! A great honour for you. After so many disappointments, after all those humiliations and catastrophes at my schools and work.

‘Nikolai.’ Dennis Wild.

Transnational Literature Vol. 4 no. 2, May 2012.
places, at last you can rest, Mama. You can know your son is one of the greatest writers this world has ever known.

Read on, Mama. My story becomes even more interesting. I researched in the library and found that Gogol was born in the Ukraine, that he loved to eat borscht and would often entertain his family and friends at parties by dancing in the Cossack style.

Oh Mama, you know how I love beetroot soup. You remember how I danced like this as a child at our long ago family parties. Everyone would sing that old Russian ‘Tum bala, tum bala, tum balalaika’ song and I’d squat down and kick my little legs out so furiously – and once I heard Uncle Lavros say to you ‘Oy Oy, my sister, that little one, he make some crazy fool Cossack some day.’ And everybody laughed. Everybody. Ha Ha! Ha Ha!

Mama, I raised my hands to the heavens. I accepted this astounding revelation. ‘My name is Nikolai,’ I called out. ‘I am – Nikolai GOGOL – returned to planet Earth. Aaaaaa-men!’

So now, Mama, I am learning to see this world through different eyes. Everything is shifting. It feels like my old self is falling away. I am two people becoming one – a kind of miracle. Dr Feistelmann would have a name for it I’m sure, but how tired I am of names. I’ve been called so many names over these past forty years. Now they are ghosts, flimsy good riddance ghosts. Now I have one name only. It is – Nikolai.

I will write again soon, Mama.
I will. Very soon.

Your loving and only son ...

\[\text{Nikolai Gogol}\]

11\textsuperscript{th} September

Dear Mama,

Life is full of coincidences you would tell me. ‘Three is not a crowd,’ you’d say, ‘it is a coincidence’. Well, very soon after I last wrote to you something so startling happened that it was hard to believe. I had just walked across Kurrangoo Avenue on my way home from the library when I saw a large van with a trailer parked outside our house. Just before I crossed the road, who should climb out of the van but Uncle Lavros – Uncle Lavros who I’ve not seen for nearly THIRTY years – after mentioning him in my last letter to you only ONE week ago! He recognised me instantly.

‘Hey, you know me? Your Mama’s brother, Uncle Lavros. Remember?’ He looked at my book, ‘So, still reading are you, crazy boy?’

He pulled the book from me.
‘Old book this. Who was writer?’
‘I was,’ I told him. ‘I wrote this book.’
He screwed his eyes and peered at the book title, *Dead Souls*.

‘So, when you write this, crazy boy?’

I told him about one hundred and sixty years ago, when I had a different name, when I was called Nikolai.

‘Hoy,’ he said. ‘You still half-brain joker. You still have empty screw up here?’

He pointed to his head, Mama, and twisted his hair in a funny way. But not a funny way for laughing.

I never liked Uncle Lavros, Mama. When we were poor, after Father died, he never helped us, he never called round to see how we were. I decided in that moment I hated him. I hated his jokes about me being crazy boy and having half a brain. But I was polite, Mama. You always taught me to be polite. Even though I felt the anger rising from my belly, up to my chest and then to my throat, making me want to scream and scream. Instead, I took back my Nikolai Gogol book and curled my lips into a half smile.

It was then his two sons, my cousins Stefan and Theo, climbed out of the van. Uncle Lavros introduced me. I nodded towards them. They said nothing, just stood smirking at me as if I was something to be pitied – as if I was contemptible in some way. I could feel my fingers clenching with rage but I held my ground, Mama – nodded my head – curled my lips one more time.

‘We drive across from Geelong last night,’ Uncle Lavros said, ‘To see my sister before she to be taken.’

‘Before she dies,’ Stefan said.

‘Before she leaves us – forever,’ said Theo.

‘And now,’ Uncle Lavros said, ‘we’ve come to collect grandmother’s – my own mother’s – furniture.’ He shifted his feet. He coughed and spat on the ground. ‘You people had it from beginning. Your Mama was favourite. I get nothing. Not a chair. Not a pillow. Now it comes to me. I am second child. It’s right. It’s what happen in old Greece country.’

Theo moved towards me pulling a piece of paper out of his shirt pocket. ‘We’ve got a list. Your Mama couldn’t speak but she understood. We read it out to her in hospital. She blinked twice so we know she understands.’

I didn’t know what to say, Mama. For some reason the hospital is not allowing me to visit you. Not even to telephone you. Did two blinks mean you understood? If you understood, does this mean you agreed? It was three to one – Uncle Lavros, Stefan and Theo against only me. I took the list and read:

Six dining room chairs
Wardrobe with mirrored door
Marble topped hallstand
Japanese teapot
Mahogany desk
Great grandfather’s wheelbarrow
Rosewood display cabinet with china plates
Elephant’s foot umbrella stand
Ornaments (including brass horses)
Grandfather clock

There were more things listed but what could I do? I walked up the pathway and opened the door. Theo backed the trailer close to the veranda and they all crunched into our hallway with their big ugly boots. The first thing to go was our marble topped
hallstand, then the six dining room chairs. The dining room looked so empty. I sat in the old cane chair and watched as half of everything we owned was carried out of the house. When Theo came towards me and pointed to my chair and then to his list I shouted, ‘No! No!’ You remember how I used to play trains and buses on that chair, Mama? I couldn’t let it go. So many memories.

Uncle Lavros heard the noise and walked up to me. ‘That chair, it is my mother’s. She fed me from breast when she sit in this chair. Seventy two years ago.’

‘No. No,’ I shouted. He looked at me with so much anger. I wanted to tell him I didn’t care about his mother or his mother’s breast, but before I could say a word I heard a voice inside me – so clear – ‘I am Nikolai, Nikolai Gogol. A chair is nothing to Nikolai Gogol. It is nothing. Let it go, Nikolai. Let it go.’

I looked at Uncle Lavros. I looked him in the eye. ‘Damn the chair,’ I said, ‘you can take it to hell and back for all I care.’

Twenty minutes later, Mama, their list was complete, everything was packed. The house was like a museum – full of echoes – I could hear every breath, every footstep. Stefan and Theo were outside tying ropes around the furniture, making sure it would hold when they drove back to Geelong. Uncle Lavros stretched out his hand to say goodbye. I stood up slowly and turned away from him towards the wall. I felt tears in my eyes, Mama. I didn’t want him to see. I wanted to be strong. I wanted to be strong for you.

Then I heard him stop and turn. ‘Aah!’ he cried out. ‘The icon. This is family icon, from my home village, before Australia.’

You know that old icon, Mama – the one that Father screwed to the wall above the piano just before he died – the one I could see from my bedroom when I was a child? I remember the face of that old saint looking at me through the crack in the door – Saint Nektarios with his dark eyes. How he disturbed me Mama. I never told you. I wanted him to go away and leave me alone. I had many bad dreams.

‘That icon,’ said Uncle Lavros, ‘it is family, for my family.’

I turned towards him and oh, I was astonished. For a few seconds, everything around me looked so radiant, so bright and shining. And in that moment I saw, not Uncle Lavros, but an old man – an old man standing before that scary saint in his dusty silver frame. Sometimes I can see beyond seeing, Mama. It has happened since I was young. You called it my ‘special gift’. When I looked at him I saw someone lost in memories – your brother looking back towards his own beginnings – but not understanding. Mama, not understanding how his ending was only a whisper away. I felt this in my bones. Something told me his end was near but I said nothing. He would not have understood. In an instant my hatred turned to pity. ‘Uncle Lavros,’ I said, ‘take it. After these many years, my mother and me, we pass this holy icon on to you. For family. For your family.’

I could see tears in his eyes. He was overwhelmed, Mama. Then he shook his head from side to side, as if returning from a trance, and I watched as he took a screwdriver from his pocket and tried to loosen those screws. They wouldn’t budge. Not even a quarter turn. Father must have done such a good job those many years ago.

‘You got power drill?’ Uncle Lavros asked me.

‘We’ve got one in the shed but Mama locked it away.’

He told me that you would never come back home and I should get the keys. I remembered the old blue cupboard in the shed, where you hid all the dangerous things from me – methylated spirits, weed killer, power drill. I went into your bedroom to find the key. Ah, your bedroom was so empty. Even your bed had been taken and Stefan and Theo had thrown your precious patchwork quilt on the dirty floor. I picked it up and put
it round my shoulders. I felt you were close by, Mama. I even have it around me as I write this letter.

Mama, I found the key and went out to the shed to unlock that old blue cupboard for the first time in my life. What a surprise! The mice had been there and eaten everything they could; even the green plastic sheet you protected the power drill with had been nibbled to shreds. And the rain had made everything damp and smelly like a public toilet, even worse. I pulled the drill from beneath the sodden boxes of weed killer and polished it up with my pullover sleeve. It shone up well but it still smelled so bad, like a thousand mice had left their droppings inside. I wondered what to do, whether to go next door and ask Mr Kronig if I could borrow his new drill. Too late, Uncle Lavros was in the garden shouting.


So I took it to him, Mama, and he climbed up on the piano stool whilst I plugged the cable into the socket by the fire. Uncle Lavros put an attachment into the drill and placed it into the screw just near Saint Nektarios’ halo. It was then he flicked the switch on the drill and, Mama, there was a huge orange and yellow flash, and such a crack, Mama, like a whip, and Uncle Lavros was thrown backwards and landed on the floor with such a horrible thud, the smouldering icon lying by his side.

Oh, Mama. Oh, Mama, he is kaput. Truly he is gone. Uncle Lavros was lying at my feet, kicking and twitching and then so very still – dead. There was a big panic, telephone calls and Theo and Stefan banging on his chest and blowing into his mouth, his lips all purple then blue. As the ambulance men wheeled him away I heard the police saying the power drill was a dynamite stick waiting to happen, that it was so corroded they wondered how it held together in one piece. Theo cried, Mama. He sobbed like a baby. Stefan walked up to me and put a fist in my face. He cursed me, Mama. He cursed me in the old language. The police had to pull him away. Theo joined in from the hallway, yelling and cursing: it was like a madhouse. Truly, our home, it was like a madhouse.

When they left I kicked the icon under the piano. Mama, I know I shouldn’t have done this. Saint Nektarios was a good man. I remember the stories you told about him, how he helped the poor and sick, but it had all gone so wrong, so very wrong. I slammed the icon with my foot. ‘Two’s a crowd,’ I said and watched it disappear beneath the piano.

Mama, don’t be shocked. He was only there for a day and a night. Yesterday I placed your icon back on top of the piano. The frame is melted along one side but besides this it is still recognisably your own special saint, though he’s more sombre now, there’s more sadness in his eyes, more sorrow.

This is my news. And now I will go to the kitchen and make a coffee the way you liked it – lots of sugar – dark and gritty. But no cakes. Our pantry is bare. How I miss your cooking my own sweet, sweet Mama.

Your only son

Nikolai.
16th September

Dear Mama,

I’m reading *Dead Souls*, a book I wrote many years ago. I must reread it now to discover how I used to think. I have forgotten so much. And what have I found in these precious pages? That I had such a mind, so imaginative he is, this Nikolai son of yours. My *Dead Souls*, truly it is an epic, a work of true and sublime genius. Oh, you must be proud, Mama. Even though you can’t speak as you read these words, you must feel a song of thankfulness deep inside, for truly I have aspired to greatness. And yet, and yet …

... today, as he sits beneath your beautiful quilt, Mama, your only son feels so lost and alone. At night he’s woken by bad dreams. Huge flashes he sees, Uncle Lavros falling to the floor moaning and choking, a smell of hideous burning. Your Nikolai, Mama—he feels Stefan’s fist pushed hard up against his face – your very own Nikolai. Such vivid and scary dreams.

So many tears, Mama. Why is this world so full of tears? When will life turn a corner? My life? A good corner? When will your Nikolai’s own dead soul spring to life once more? Please pray to your special saint, Mama. To the one who helped me those many times when everything seemed so impossible and beyond repair. Please pray for a turning – for a season of hope and new beginnings – without tears.

Your loving son

N.

P.S.

1:17 a.m. No stars tonight. Only the moon. Tonight she looks so distracted, almost desperate – as if she wants to tumble down from the sky and roll all the way to our front door – as if she wants to tell me something URGENT.

I remember your fairy tales, Mama, your wonderful fairy tales. ‘The moon is so high,’ you told me, ‘she can see EVERYTHING, even into the FUTURE.’

Tonight I hear her calling in her silvery voice, ‘Danger! Danger!’ Who is she speaking to? What is this DANGER? Or is it another word she’s calling? Moon language is never too easy to understand. It has such a long way to travel.

2:22 a.m. Why do we only have one moon? One is such a cruel number. Why only one moon, Mama? I can see her through the branches of our frangipani tree – alone – suspended in the deep, dark endlessness of night.

2:55 a.m. When you are gone, Mama, after you are buried, I’ll write to the moon. I’ll tell her everything. I’ll tell her more than I ever told Dr Feistelmann. I’ll explain to her my latest mathematical theories, I’ll write down my new equations concerning irrational numbers and with these I’ll prove to her that the planet Neptune sits at the very centre of our universe. Although I think she understands this already. She is so wise.

Oh and, Mama, I’ll ask the moon to look out for our cat, Yelena, who vanished a week ago. How thin she was, every day thinner and thinner until the day of my

‘Nikolai.’ Dennis Wild.

*Transnational Literature* Vol. 4 no. 2, May 2012.

birthday when she disappeared and never returned. No goodbye. No nod of the head. Not a tell-tale squint in her Siamese eyes.

3:17 a.m. My friends – only you and the moon, Mama. Only you and la luna, moona, moona.

3:74 a.mm. Sooooo tired. I want to sleep but canott. Quiet now – the moon. She nothing to say ...

44:95 a.moon. ... nothig morr. She nothig to say.

22nd September

Dear Mama,
The new beginning is come. Your prayers have been answered – in this little corner of the world – a season of miracles. Oh listen, Mama, listen.

I ran a computer search and discovered a blog site titled I wish I could go back in time so I could marry Nikolai Gogol and have his babies. Can you imagine this? I felt goose bumps all over. I sent an email. I told Svetlana, who writes this online diary, that I’m back – that I, Nikolai, am alive and writing and living in Australia. At first, Mama, she didn’t believe me but I persisted, sent many emails. Oh, such emails Mama. Such writerly and poetic emails. Eventually she started asking me questions. Most of these questions were about money but I realised a young Russian woman needs to be mindful of such things. She sent a photograph. Oh my, so beautiful – her hair, her eyes, her lips. In one message she wrote, ‘I am thirty years and still sexual virgin. If we to marry can this offend you?’ I said no. I told her that I’m a man of the world and understand how these things can happen, even to the most innocent and upstanding of Russian girls. You would have been proud of me, my own dying and virtuous Mama.

This is our plan. We will be married on the twenty sixth of October, the day of my final lecture. Svetlana’s flight arrives at midday, just enough time to climb into a taxi and be driven to my university.

She will fly into Adelaide wearing a Ukrainian peasant wedding dress studded with 947 Siberian diamonds. She says Nikolai Gogol’s wife deserves nothing less. Yesterday I transferred a bank loan of $160,000 to Svetlana against the estimated value of our family home, enough to allow her to buy such a costume.

Mama, please don’t worry about the money. Svetlana says this dress can be sold for three times the price in Australia. We’ll be married and we’ll be rich. Very stinking bourgeois rich, Svetlana says. And Mama, she says that her brother owns a little workshop outside St Petersburg which repairs broken icons. He was a monk but left his monastery to dedicate his life to painting and restoring church icons that were damaged by the Communists. She says we can post your icon to Dimitri after our honeymoon and he will repair it for free as a wedding gift. Oh, so much happiness, so many blessings. And, Mama, Svetlana says to keep all our plans secret, very secret. Not to tell a soul. But I must tell you. How can I not tell you? Please, Mama, please – not a whisper. This must be our final, final secret.
The twenty sixth of October falls on a Tuesday, Mama. Svetlana will arrive at lecture’s end – our very first meeting. She will walk into the lecture theatre wearing her magnificent dress. Imagine that, Mama. What a sight! It is then I will stand and confess to my lecturers and to all my fellow students that I have fooled them all along – that really I am the illustrious Russian writer, Nikolai Gogol, and that this majestically sparkling Svetlana is to become my wife. After this we will walk down to the lake together and scatter rose-petals on the waters in memory of that green frog I told you about in my first letter. This is Svetlana’s idea. Such a compassionate heart she has. So loving to all creatures, dead or alive.

So now, my dearest Mama, in these your final days, you can rest peacefully knowing your son will be alone no longer. He is to be married to a very clever and oh so beautiful Russian woman called Svetlana Nataliya Zuprachenko.

To you, Mama – gigantic (Russian) hugs

From your favourite and only (and medication-free) loving son

‘Nikolai.’ Dennis Wild.
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At my parents’ grave last week, standing above their buried bodies – corpses, really they are, but I still think of them in vital visceral form – I asked them a question about love, asked from deep in my heart. Immediately, I saw in my mind an image of a shell, a spiralled conch shell. I was puzzled. The image was clear and strongly imprinted on my mind.

Today I view a documentary on numbers and their central role in describing the universe. I realise that as a consequence of humans gaining this descriptive knowledge comes an understanding that numbers must be central to its very construction.

I’m currently reading a fictional account of Galileo Galilei’s life, hearing him exclaim again and again that God is a mathematician. The documentary program bears this out, showing illustrations of the exact geometric shapes on which Chartres Cathedral was built, guided by St Augustine’s mathematical studies. The number $\pi$, for instance, plays a central role not only in the formation of circles but in other formulae, such as determining the normative in a range of statistical situations. A nautilus shell is displayed to illustrate the 1.08 progression, small to large, of the rooms or segments of its shell. In other words, as the sea creature grows, each chamber of its shell’s growth is 1.08 times larger than the last chamber, creating a logarithmic spiral within the exterior of soft pink stripes on a cream background. A thing of beauty. As I watch the screen, I struggle to remember when it was that I’d received the image of a conch shell, a sea spiral, as an intriguing answer to my query about love ... and I recall my brief conversation with my parents, and then a silence, into which an image arose, almost in an instant, as if it was their personal response to my question and prayer. An image which overtook my thoughts, thrown up from the depths of a great well of knowledge.

So I go to my friend Google and find that shells are symbolic of the protective quality of love because they provide a strong armour of defence. They protect life and even shelter pearls. In Roman mythology, Venus, the goddess of love, was said to have been created from the foam carried onshore on the top of a scallop shell. The Hindu goddess Lakshmi was also thought to have been formed from the grit that creates a pearl within a shell. More generally, in Hinduism the conch shell is symbolic of an awakening of the heart of the faithful because it is heard by those who live with love in their hearts.

My mother used to say that her name, Marjorie, carries the meaning *The Pearl of Great Price*, an idea she must have picked up as a child and delighted in ever after. It’s certainly an appealing catch-phrase. The name does mean ‘pearl’, but someone must have endowed it with even greater value for her alone. So that as a girl, and a pearl of great value, she felt safely cocooned within a craggy oyster shell – a rare artefact in a mining village, Beaconsfield, in northern Tasmania in the early 20th century. And in turn, as a woman, she nurtured her own children, the last, the seventh, named Christine after one of the greatest protective avatars of all time. Back in their day, she and my father swam the tides of life, just as conches, alive in the sea, are swept along with their eyes, feelers and suction caps their only sense organs for
navigation and security, save their strong, vortex-spiralled outer shells, pointed at both ends. Now buried in dry land, my parents can only offer me a memory, a shell of the protective love they gave me when they were alive. Or is it more than just a memory from the past they offer me now?

In Prakrit indigenous poetry in India, the conch, or shankha, often has an erotic connotation:

Look,
a still quiet crane
shines on a lotus leaf
like a conch shell lying
on a flawless emerald plate.¹

The erotic effect is evoked through the contrasting image of the creamy quality of a conch shell set against a starkly green precious stone, the emerald, said to vibrate with love in perfect tune with one’s heart chakra. The emerald symbolises wisdom, hope and success in love through the fidelity of one’s lover.

I’ve read about this language of precious stones, the age-old myths of their powers beyond the scientific known; I feel I am swept along by these swirling unconquerable currents of nature let loose to bestow good fortune, extending further than anything our conscious minds will ever comprehend or control.

Like a conch, the crane – a bird which symbolises long life, even immortality – is able to trumpet the future using its distinctive call. Since the meaning of Shankha is beneficence and bliss-giving, in Hinduism the sacred Shankha shell is used in ritual as a ceremonial trumpet sounded to begin worship. The warriors of ancient India also blew ‘divine’ conch shells to announce battle, hoping for a cleansing auspicious beginning to drive away evil spirits, as described in the famous epic, Mahabharata.

Hindus depict the preserving aspect of God, or Vishnu, holding a conch, a Panchajanya, to represent life, in the belief that it emerged from an ancient churning of the ocean, which produced the nectar of immortality. This divine shell, Shankha, is praised in Hindu scriptures for bestowing fame, longevity and prosperity, and as the home of Lakshmi – the goddess of wealth – who is Vishnu’s consort. His very own pearl. The legend is an acknowledgement of the power of female sexuality. Remembering that each human life originates within the body of a woman, arising from the secret of erotic desire.

And I learn that the Shank, symbolising water, has always been linked with women’s fertility and serpents or nagas. Without any embarrassment about such symbolism, the southern Indian state of Kerala has taken this shell as its emblem, perpetuating the former emblems of the Indian Princely state of Travancore and the Kingdom of Kochi.

Finally, I find that a Shankha shell crushed into powder is used in Indian Ayurvedic medicine, for stomach pains and also to enhance beauty and strength, it’s

¹ Hāla’s gāhā sattasaś 1.4, tr. M. Selby. From a collection of 700 single-verse poems by more than two hundred poets translated from Mahahashtri Prakit dating from the time of King Hala (c. 200 BCE to 200 CE)
said. Who would dare doubt these reputed powers? Surely, only a miserly unromantic sceptic. I’m a willing believer.

I discover that, in fact, many different kinds of molluscs can produce pearls. Even the conch. So my mother’s message is gaining more and more credence. Pearls from the Queen Conch, *Strombus gigas*, are rare, having been collectors’ items since the Victorian age. Conch pearls range from white to orange or even a pale brown, but pink is their signature colour. They have a unique attraction, a silvery, iridescent effect known as ‘flame structure’, caused when light rays interact with infinitesimal crystals on the pearl’s surface, also said to resemble French *moiré* silk, or the quality of the surface of running water.

Now, skimming through my precious, still scant research, this time in sacred Western annals, I find that *The Pearl of Great Price* is a significant story in the scriptures followed by devout Christians the world over. In the New Testament book of Matthew, Jesus is said to have told his followers a parable titled, ‘The Pearl of Great Price’, about a merchant who is searching for beautiful pearls. Finding one pearl ‘of great price’, he sells everything he owns so that he can afford to buy it. That pearl is ‘the kingdom of heaven’, a great treasure indeed. The reason the pearl is considered to be symbolic of the kingdom of heaven is that the story follows on from another parable, through the use of the word, ‘again’, about the conversion of St Paul, who was said to have unintentionally found the hidden treasure of the kingdom of heaven and given up everything for it.

My mother must have felt the thrill of the pearl, as she even identified herself through two mother-pearl brooches, one the shape of an ‘M’, the other its reverse, a ‘W’ – her initials – that she used to wear, set against a black suit jacket for dramatic effect. Aligning oneself with such an irresistible, universally-acknowledged romantic image as the pearl would be a deeply-satisfying pleasure, I can see. And now I feel sure that this message of love and protection has come from her to me, as if a whisper from the sea heard through a shell held to the ear.

My mind floating in a world of creative reverie, I too feel an urge to consciously identify my love with the symbolism of the conch shell, since that was the exact image I saw in my mind’s eye as a message from both my parents – whose inner shells, the bones making up their skeletons, lay buried beneath my feet.

After all, I’ve dived deep into the known facts of marine science, able to describe the conch and its almost priceless pearl, as well as plumbed the mystery of the shell’s universal symbolism and as metaphor. What need is there for me to quest further? I’ll go with the flow. Bob along on the waves. Yes, in a conch that might carry a passenger safely, traversing an entire ocean before reaching her destination.

This is a sacred message my mother and father have bequeathed me as a comfort in my distress, settled as they are in a single grave after more than eighty years of husbanded fidelity. A signal to bide my time. So that I, like St Paul, may give up everything – outworn material dependence, cramped emotional attachment – once the time is ripe. At *Vishu*, perhaps, the first equinox of the zodiac year, as a golden cassia showers her petals in a downpour, like tiny canaries swooping to carpet the earth in colour.

A sign that I will find a treasure, and dwell within a spiral of perfect symmetry, a kingdom of love. Perhaps a living conch – there must be some male shells, surely – may even wash up on my foamy scalloped shoreline one day.