



The Houses That Cried

Jo (Joan-Annette) Parnell

ABSTRACT

This essay revisits physically and metaphysically the houses of my childhood, in an attempt to discover and recover a sense of self from the architecture of my past. From suburban houses in the Eastern and South Western suburbs of Sydney, to the Gothic turrets of Dalwood Children's Home on the Northern Beaches (which, in the 1930s and 1940s was advertised as 'The House on Happiness Hill') and to a foster home now found to have a Child Safety House sign on the front veranda, the discrepancies of time and memory are conjured up in narrative, and hand-drawn image and photography.

Born in Sydney in 1940, I was abandoned at three years of age into a Children's Home and am now known as a "Forgotten Australian".

THE HOUSES THAT CRIED

One golden day in a late winter, I picked up my aunt in the car, bought two red "Poppa Mia" roses, and drove south to see my father. I wrapped my arms around the potted roses, and looked at his newly erected headstone. Engraved in gold on the dark green slab of polished granite, in Times New Roman, were my two siblings' names. Mine stood out in its absence. The roses slipped from my hands. My aunt, my father's sister, put her arms around me. *You're my niece, but ... there was something—about your mother. She searched her memory. I've forgotten a lot.* I drove her home to the Central Coast and drank tea while she looked in the family fruit box and wrote on perfumed note-paper. She handed me the folded paper. *Here you go. Names and places from your father's side. That's all I've got.*

During holidays, I travelled from Bathurst to Wellington, to Guyra, Geurie, Milparinka, Tibooburra, Dubbo, Broken Hill, and back to

Coogee in search of my paternal ancestors. I found nothing but ruins, and learnt nothing except that people are soon forgotten. I swallowed my disappointment and searched for my paper trail. There wasn't one. It left me feeling confused and angry. I rang my brother and said, *I've got a birth certificate, but I think I've dropped from the sky*. Later, we compared certificates. Same surname, but our mothers' Christian names differ; on his certificate, Mary Catherine, on mine, Kathlyne Mary. My father called my mother *Kate*. So was there only one Kate, or were there two?

My aunt died four years after my father. She left me the family fruit box. I rifled through it, looking for hard-copy memories. I had recently read an essay called *The Photographs: A Story* by the Sydney poet Adam Aitken; and as I searched through the fruit box the feeling grew inside me that I knew exactly what Aitken meant when he said his parents' old photographs were his "connective tissue to the past" (Aitken, 2000, p. 20). My aunt's fruit box yielded one photo of my brother, Al, as a beautiful wide-eyed baby. There were no other photos of any of us three children in our early years. The first was taken in black and white when I was seven. I don't bear any family resemblance. I look like I'm a ring-in. There were no photos of our mother, and none of the houses in which we lived.

I think we all return to every place we've ever lived. If we don't make the return journey in person we do it through memory or in spirit. As Frank Vanclay writes our sense of "place remains fundamentally important to our sense of identity, our sense of community, and our humanity", and without that sense we'd be lost (Vanclay, 2008, p. 5).



My mother's father, my English grandfather, said, *You can't marry him. He's nobody ... a bohemian*. After the hasty registry office wedding my father bought a milk-run at Randwick, and a smart Australian-style Californian ranch house with rustic Victorian gables. Georgian posts supported the bull-nosed verandah. Those memories aren't mine, they belonged to my aunt. Yet I can pick up a pencil and draw the house because it is physically imprinted on my senses ... no, not the whole house. I can only really remember its face.

The thought crosses my mind that drawing, like writing, is one of life's mysteries. Sketching is a solitary occupation, and a private act. I'm in charge of the pencil, and I'm making the lines on the page. I complete my drawing of my memory-house, and here it is. So now that it's on this page it's on display and it's become a public exercise. Criticise my drawing, however you will, but you won't see it as I do. Like reading, studying a drawing is an intensely private act—we all see things differently.

Whenever I think about the Randwick house, snippets and images slide across my mind. My brother arrived yesterday for one of his regular



three-day visits. He leans against my kitchen bench, one long leg crossed over the other, waiting for the kettle to boil. He looks up and says he remembers nothing about anything, and then he says, *Long ... the house was long. It ran backwards up a hill.* He says our artist father had a studio in the backyard. I remember. Or did I only dream the swirls of colour?

My first real memory is of the time my mother opened the front door. She stood talking to my father and someone else. I crawled down the wide hall, across the tiled veranda, and tumbled down the stairs. My parents rushed to pick me up. I saw the palms outside the arched façade of the Royal Alexandria Children's Hospital. It seems I had a tiny fracture of the skull. Later in my childhood, much to my distress, this skull fracture came back to haunt me. I began walking in my sleep and my step-mother informed me that I was cracked. She meant insane. My anguish lay in believing her.

My second memory also started at the front of the Randwick house. My father carried me down the steps and out the gate in his arms. Al closed the picket gate, as if to keep the house safe, and walked along beside us in his little boys' coat. There was a long tree-lined street, maybe two, and then we were in a line of men, slowly edging towards a row of trestle tables, uniformed soldiers, and papery stacks. My father once told me that the army had rejected him on medical grounds. When he was fifteen he'd been the victim of a hit-and-run. My brother carries his coffee over, and sits down opposite me in the family room. He tells me we left the Randwick house and moved to the bush some months before he turned four. So that would've made me not yet eighteen months old. Al says, *We*

moved because Dad hated being called the Randwick milk-man who didn't get into the army. Besides, the house started to weep. There was water. It ran down the walls in our bedrooms.

The address of the Randwick house is entered on my birth-certificate. Sixty-odd years after I left Randwick, I stand in front of the house I'd lived in as a baby. Not because I want to relive or recapture the feeling of security I think I'd experienced as a baby—I'm years too late for that—but because, if ever I'm to find out who I am and where I belong, I need to discover where I came from. There's the black-and-white tiled veranda of my memory-house. But nothing else is quite as I remember. This house has a second storey. A tall woman comes out the front door and crosses the street. *No photos.* The house is now a refuge, owned and run by the Anglican Church, for abused women and their children.



Back home, I look at my finished sketch and shiver. This house, this safe house, once sent me and Al away to a life of hardship and abuse. Why has this house taken the veil? Is it trying to make amends for not keeping us safe, all those years ago? Or didn't it have a choice back then? Did the fates decide that Al and I had to journey through hell to become the people we are now? Perhaps the house knew, all those years ago, what we were in for. Perhaps that's why it wept.

Al's been down to Sydney to look at the Randwick house. He calls in on his way home to Yamba. He looks at my sketches and says I've caught its essence. I compare the two and I'm filled with self-doubt and sadness and a sense of time gone past, of time that can never be regained. Al doesn't see what I see. He's standing on a different plane to me, and views things from a different eye-level. In a sketch, altering the relationship of figures to the horizon alters perspective, and changes the dynamic of a drawing.

I look deeply into my creations and suspect that, behind the front door, just through the threshold of my drawing, lay another world.

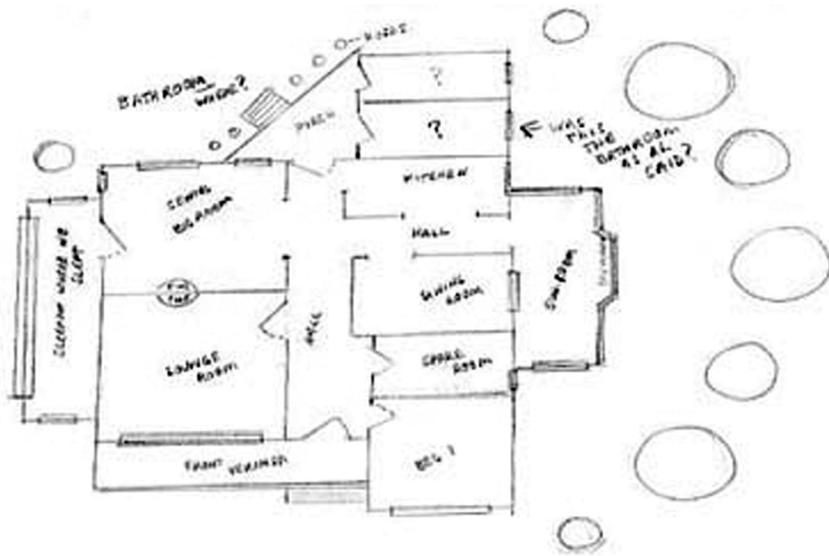
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My sketches remind me that when my father sold the Randwick house, we didn't move to the country as he said he would have liked. His new job as a Chief Sign-writer and Pictorial Artist to the NSW Government Railways, and my mother's tuberculosis dictated that we live closer to Sydney. Our rambling old 'Queenslander' house, an oddly beautiful Colonial/European mix of weather-board, Victorian-filigree iron lace and lattice-work, set in the tiny hamlet of East Bankstown, was surrounded by thick ti-tree bush.

I mightn't have a photo, but the house is so clear in my mind that my pencils fly across the paper. Here's the weather-board exterior my proud father painted in white and blue-greys. Here are my mother's crisp white curtains at the open windows. Here are the climbing roses that dropped their petals onto our shady front veranda ... there were no climbing roses. A lead-light window set into the weather wall threw red and green reflections onto the wide veranda where only us children played.

I take a fresh sheet of paper. My brother hasn't gone home to Yamba yet. He glances down at my sketch. *The bathroom was next to the kitchen, and on the other side of the kitchen was a big room—that's where we both slept.* I stop drawing and say, *You're wrong. There was a big room, sure. But that's not where we slept at all, that's where our mother sewed on her treadle machine. It had acorns carved on its lid.* In fact, when I was very small, I used to sit in that room on my mother's sewing table, squinting at the acorns and howling loudly while she brushed my tangled curls. At such times she was all brisk movements and sharp words. At other times though, she was a mother with a soft lap and lilting Irish lullabies. In those days, she was a mother who taught me to read and scrubbed the house until it sparkled. Back then, she cooked exquisite cakes topped with tiny silver cachous and delicate golden clouds of spun sugar. Sometimes, she was someone I didn't know. At those times, she was an elegant lady who brushed her hair into a smooth chignon and wore high-heeled peep-toed shoes. My brother's in a huff over the big room in our old childhood house. He sighs, pushes his chair back, and says, *Look ... you have your memories and I have mine.*

Most middle-aged people have ghosts in their past. A past without at least some would be rather empty. There are ghosts living in my memory-house. While I'm sketching, they come to meet me. But it is I alone who conjure them up by drawing the house in which they live. I suspect my drawing allows me to think about the house more than if I was reading a photo which, had it existed, would've been taken by someone other



than myself. It's a long time ago, now. But when I think about it, my life in this house seems to be divided into two sections. In my mind, the first section is filled with the crowing of roosters, the scents of the bush, long summer evenings, and my father laughing and lifting me high onto his shoulder—all the better to read the stars in the night sky. In those war days, whenever he wasn't at work or on air-raided duty, my father fascinated me with tiny ships in bottles and bubble pipes fashioned from bamboo canes. Sometimes he'd stand before me on the Persian carpet in the lounge-room, regal in his purple cravat, dark suit and brown sandals, a cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth, reading Shakespeare aloud, and hamming it up for anyone who happened to come by—a neighbour perhaps, or even the leather-aproned man who delivered the great blocks of ice to put in the chest that kept our fresh food from going rotten. Not bad for someone who claimed he was shy. I wonder if our house would have stayed happy if our butcher, my father's mate, hadn't brought his female cousin to visit. But I suppose that even if the butcher's cousin hadn't come on the scene, our lives were bound to change sooner or later. My mother was very ill, and my father was an energetic lad.

The butcher's cousin came often. She hung around our back door. The house began to sigh and tremble. Al and I saw our mother sitting over the open fire in the lounge-room, crying silent tears into her knitting. At that time, we two children tried to keep out of our father's way. He was unpredictable and cranky. We felt glad, but sad, when he didn't come home some nights. Weeds took over our father's vegetable garden. My brother crawled

under the house with the hose to make mud and dig holes, practising for the day when he'd be tall enough to go away to fight the enemy and dig trenches in the war. He invented a game that took us to Africa. Big game-hunters armed with gum-stick guns, we sailed through a sea of waist-high grass, crept into the orchard on shaking legs, and went on the hunt for snakes.

The butcher's cousin's loud voice called through our back door. The knife and fork tossed carelessly into the mashed potatoes, the scraping of a chair, the banging of the back door, all were signs that my father had gone out into the dark with the butcher's cousin. The house shook itself. My big brother took me by the hand. *C'mon, it's bed-time. I'll tuck you up. Mummy's sick and Daddy's gone to watch for bombs.* I realise now that my brother tried to shoulder adult responsibilities. Is this what it means to be the eldest child in a family?

Our English grandfather came to sit straight-backed on one of our mahogany chairs. He murmured with my mother about sailing timetables and private schools. That night the house echoed with my father's roar. *You're out of your flaming mind if you think I'd let him take them to England.*

Al's over his short-lived huff. He sprawls on my lounge and dreams about what our life would've been like if we'd gone to live in England with our English grandfather. I stand at the sink, scraping carrots for the stew we're having tonight, and tell him, *That's all hypothetical.* I look over at my sketch, and think back. After our English grandfather left, our house filled itself with rows. My mother cried and my brother pointed his cap-gun at my father and pulled the trigger. Bang! *You're dead.* As the row-filled days went on my brother became quieter. I carried a feeling of dread around in my stomach. No-one seemed to notice how we felt. Back in those days, children were expected to remain oblivious to the adult world around them. We knew it was our job to play happily, speak only when spoken to, and eat everything on our plate.

The sun-room in the old weather-board house was the hub of the house, and it epitomises my childhood. I think of it as being sacred—like a wedding ring. A wedding ring is a circle. Yet seen from any oblique angle it forms an ellipse. For an artist, the trick is to recognise the different angles and add toning and highlights to fool the viewer's eye into believing that the ring in the sketch is a circular object. In this aspect, drawing is not unlike writing. But unlike writing, a drawing is a two dimensional object. The viewer is always conscious that behind the visible illusion is the undeniable reality that a wedding band is a circle. This is how I see the sun-room. As a child I saw it from different angles, but behind the illusion was the reality of which I was partially conscious. Al won't talk about it, he never would, but in my drawing there are two pictures of the sun-room. The first is about white lace curtains, newspaper sailor hats, water-colour paints, my mother's apple blossom perfume, and soft boiled

eggs with smug, ink faces drawn by my father. The second is about confusion, a sense of unreality, and a white fruit bowl. When I think of this bowl I see my mother's pregnant belly rounded and full under her silky night-dress, her long black hair swirling wildly around her face as she picks up oranges, apples and pears and aims them at my father's stiff back. *You bastard . . . she's not going to have my babies.* I see my brother grab a green apple. He throws it with all his force at my father's head. This picture leads to a memory of a spring day in 1943. Our mother sat Al and me in the back of her friend's car. She put herself and our new baby sister in the front. The car rattled down the road. Al looked back over his shoulder. *The house's disappearing. Abracadabra.* The friend shot my mother's tight face a sideways look. *Don't worry your mother. It's a surprise . . . a special holiday.* The surprise was Dalwood Children's Home.

In Sydney, after I discover my memory house in Randwick has changed itself into a refuge, I turn to my husband and say, *We're here now, might as well go on.* We park the car in Rookwood Cemetery, and tramp along the public path amongst the crowded Catholic 'R's. We trudge up the hill to the office, and ask for directions to the magnificent shrine my father had once said he'd erected to my mother's memory. But there's no shrine. She's under the public footpath. A pauper's burial. My father, caught out. Does guilt sometimes cause people to lie? How else to explain my father's words? Guilt implies a conscience. I suppose he had to live with himself. Nevertheless, the red jelly at the emotional centre of my secret self tilts dangerously close to a state of melt down. I bite down on my bitterness and say I'd like to visit the house I lived in before I was put in Dalwood. Perhaps, back there, I might find my father as he used to be in the early days.

On the way we pass the old corner shop which is now the local hardware. After sixty-odd years the shop looks the same on the outside, but the inside of yesterday has gone. My mind-picture, taken when I was a child, is caught in the net of time long past. We travel away from the shop and wait for the traffic lights to change. I look around at the present. The eucalypts and honeyed wattles, the horses and carts, and the crowing of roosters that can't tell the time are now nothing but dim, silent ghosts flattened under the reality of rumbling traffic, exhaust fumes, and houses as far as the eye can see. It seems to me that time, when passing, loses as much as it gains. Progress is inevitable, and technology is wonderful—would you really want to be without it? Nowadays we have computers, televisions, mobile phones, and supermarkets—things that didn't exist back when I was a child. But where have the nightly board games and story-telling, the home-grown vegetables to be shared with some friendly neighbour, and the wonder of life lived at the slower pace of yesterday gone? As we go on

our forward journey, why couldn't we have kept the valuables of the past? I shrug off my mood of nostalgia and feel a sense of excited anticipation as the car whispers down the street. I shut my eyes and turn my head away. I want to feel the full impact of the happy years of my childhood when I turn around. Savouring the moment, I turn towards the house, open my eyes, and drop from a great height—no parachute—and slam into another dimension. My old house that holds my childhood safe in its bosom, the house that has lived for years in my memory, untouched by time, is gone. Spread across what used to be our house paddock and our orchard, stands the Church of Christ complex. My husband nods over at the church and says quietly, *There's the shrine to your mother.*

I look across at the church and feel as if there's a yawning hole in my world; and I realise that the home of my childhood is nothing more than a dream—a product of my imagination and unconscious yearning. Was it ever anything other than that? I reach for my camera and take a photo, and wonder if I do this simply because I can. But I know in my heart that a photo of my mother's strange shrine is as close as I can physically get to her; I could never make a drawing of anything as intangible as an eerie sense of sacredness—no artist could, it's beyond the scope of human ability.

In my photo everything leans in opposite directions. I think my picture is out of focus. But I'm glad the spirit of my house—the house that once lived where a house of God now stands, where Pastor James Hogan looks to his congregation, and well-cared-for little children play in their church pre-school—is alive and well, and happy. But inside, I cry for my mother, for having missed her, for my memory house, for the destruction of my dream, for the unreality of the thing. I cry even though I know it's a waste of time crying for what isn't, what never was, what wasn't to be.

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I'm looking at Dalwood Children's Home now. It's taken me sixty-odd years to find the courage. The trouble with suppressed memories is that they often surface in other ways. Dalwood came to me in my nightmares as tall, dark, twisted houses. I dreamt of rooms I hadn't known existed, and where my dream-mind warned me not to go. In my sleeping head I'd be compelled to climb a narrow wooden staircase to an attic with a sloping ceiling and bare floorboards. There, an aged lady in black, her hair pulled tightly into a bun, sat silently in a chair to bring me suddenly awake, screaming, and soaked in icy perspiration. A few years ago I told myself, *Enough.* I hunted through the fruit box. No Dalwood photos. Weeks later I picked up one of Aunt's books. Three photos fell from the leaves. Staring up at me, when I least expected, was Dalwood.

Dalwood, a great stone edifice originally called ‘Clavering’, is distinctly not Australian but something imported into Australia from Europe. Built on high land at Seaforth on Sydney’s Northern Beaches in the 1890s by Professor Theodore Thomas Gurney of Sydney University, a man of letters and a professor of science and mathematics who failed to publish, Dalwood was sold on to real estate magnet and philanthropist Albert Edwin Dalwood in 1918. Albert bought it for his wife, Julia, who said, *No. I won’t live there. It’s too spooky, too Gothic. It gives me the creeps.* Albert gave it to the Food for Babies Fund and Dalwood Children’s Home was born. The mansion was extended. It gained added wings and a new façade. Back when I was a child it reminded me of terrifying picture-book castles and, somehow, of Transylvania and vampires.

I’m rather glad I found these photos. Back when I found them I could not have picked up my pencil and drawn a picture of Dalwood; and I still can’t do it now. It’s not the angles and planes that frighten me—it’s the mediums. When you’re making a drawing you invest yourself in the act of creation. After you’ve completed it, you look at your drawing and see yourself inside the representation; you see your style, you own the drawing—it’s your interpretation of what you see that’s on the page in front of you. A photo is not an act of creation as such, it’s a recording—you capture an image. When you’re reading a photo, especially one taken by someone else a long time ago, you can only ever remain outside looking in; it’s not your personal creation so you can’t own it—you can only look and wonder, or marvel, or smile, or shudder. When I look at the photo of Dalwood I remember back, but my pencil refuses anything my heart rejects. The Home used its camera face to hide its evil heart from the world. But here’s a photo that reveals Dalwood’s chilling nature. Some clever photographer crept around the back and caught it unawares. The photo is dated 1920, but this section looked exactly the same in the 1940s.

In this photo there are two types of windows—closed, and open. The panes in the closed windows reflect the sun away. The windows that stand open are deep, uninviting black holes where shadowy ghosts lurk. I can only bring these ghosts into the light by writing about the photo. Once I have placed them into words on the page in front of me, the ghosts are out on public view. A wise woman I knew once told me that spectral shadows can’t live in sunlight. But do they ever disappear completely? I suspect that they slink back into their eerie space, back into the deep gloom, and play a waiting game. When it’s late and it’s time to put down my pen and switch off the light, there they are once again, lurking just beyond the sills of the open windows in the photo.

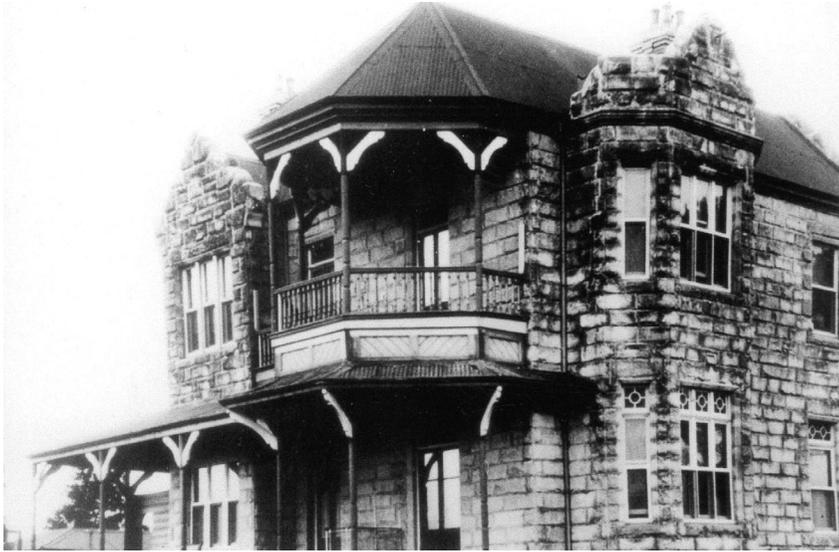


Photo: courtesy of the Manly Library.

When I look at this photo of Dalwood I think that this picture is one that will never bring anyone pleasure, except maybe an historian because it ended up being kept. So here's a part of Dalwood frozen in time. For me, it's a reminder that Al wasn't with me during those years. Nobody was, except a host of other shocked little girls—each wrapped in her own misery, each a number instead of a name. '23' is tattooed into my mind for all time.

Dalwood shone on our pain. We dusted furniture, scoured pans, and got down on our hands and knees to scrub and polish floors. Back then, our gaolers' canes swished down across our knuckles and criss-crossed the backs of our legs with welts, reminders that we had 'something' to cry for. Every morning a bell dragged us from our cots to wash in ice-cold water, to dry our cold hands and faces on a sopping wet corner of the grey communal towel, to brush our hair with the communal hairbrush, and to brush our teeth with the communal tooth-brush.

Those closed balcony doors in the photo remind me that there were nights when we messed the bed. Our noses were rubbed in the mess and the dirty sheets were draped over our heads. *No breakfast. Go wash your dirty sheets.* Afterwards, we went up the stairs to the Infirmary to be held down and given a hot soapy enema; and that night sent to sleep naked on a bare, rubber Macintosh. Back then we all knew, *Don't see, it might happen to you.* We all knew the cardinal rule, *Don't say . . . I feel bad if you see what happened.*

The photo speaks to me of the mournful sounds of childish weeping, of screams that seeped into the cold stones of which Dalwood is built. On windy nights the voices of children who'd suddenly disappeared moaned and screeched around the high chimneys, and their wraiths played a sad game of hide-and-go-seek with the clouded moon. Death played peek-a-boo with my mind and havoc with my feelings. My parents, my siblings—in my child mind all were dead. I took my terrible sadness out to the hydrangeas where I believed the fairies lived. Al's voice whispered from amongst the leaves. *I came up here from the Boys' Home to see if you're still alive.* Home Sister called me into the hall. *Come. Your baby sister's very ill.* I hadn't known my siblings were in Dalwood, in other sections. They were to come to life again when we stood together in Randwick Auxiliary Hospital beside our dying mother's bed. A skeleton lay propped against her pillows and offered a bag of lollies. My brother reached forward, Matron smacked his hand down. Black and white striped humbug sweets clattered onto the hospital floor and rolled under my mother's bed.

On a spring day in 1947 my siblings arose from the dead for a third time. The photo was taken on that day, the only day we had visitors. In this photo I have blurred the faces of the subjects because they are ghosts from my past. Here, in this one photo, are the three small prisoners and their two large Beefeater Guards, and the Tower of London. My sister's on the right. Her thin little body seems hardly able to support her head. My brother's in the middle. Bow-legged, hands behind his back, his chin down, he looks like a boy who's been crushed. I'm standing on the left, in the straddle-legged pose of an abused child, my body and face bloated with Kwashiorkor's syndrome and malnutrition. We are dressed in the Dalwood uniform. The butcher's cousin, in a tweed jacket with a velvet collar, and her mother, dressed in black and a white lace collar, stand behind us. Dalwood crouches, watching and waiting in the background. My father's out of the picture. Or, rather, he's framing the picture. He's holding the camera.

Back in the 1930s and 1940s, the newspapers advertised Dalwood as *The House on Happiness Hill*. I sometimes wonder if that's why my mother put us in the Home. Did she really believe we'd be happy, and well-cared for there? Or was she trying to exert her powers from beyond her waiting grave, and keep us from our father and the butcher's cousin?

I don't go to Dalwood the day I'm in Sydney visiting my memory houses. I've already been back twice. Before the first of these visits I rang my brother, and said, *Al, come with me?* At first there was silence, and then he said, *Jo, go if you must, but I can't. For me, that way madness lies.* I suppose that



Photo: author's own collection, courtesy of her dead aunt.

when it comes to laying personal ghosts no-one can do it for you or with you. It's something you just have to do alone.

On the first of these visits I gazed at the high, stained glass windows and beautiful old woodwork. I looked around, and saw the bathroom with its twin baths where I'd once been forced to lift my faeces in my bare hands. I glanced into the dining-room where the children of the Palm Avenue Schools Literacy Program were eating lunch. I told myself I was glad Dalwood had turned over a new leaf, helping children with severe learning disorders. Those terrible Dalwood years belonged to another time. They belonged to a small innocent child who was tossed around by the fates. I stepped outside and caught sight of the old laundry where I'd been sexually assaulted at five years of age. The ghosts were hiding under a tangle of purple morning-glory vines.

On my second visit back to Dalwood, I walked near the purpling hydrangeas. Drifting rain chilled my skin. The grey ghosts rose up from the mist, and speared my soul with icy needles. I left Dalwood immediately and ran for the present day reality and the peace and comfort of my Australian ranch-style home in the Hunter Valley in NSW. My home is my ideal and the centre of my universe, made so by the presence of my husband, and my family and friends.

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In Sydney, after I discover the spirit of my childhood home is alive and well, I say to my husband, *There's one more. The foster house Dalwood sent us kids to.*



Back when I was a child, I hadn't known until I saw the foster house that houses could be so black.

I don't need a photo to remind me that the only glimmer of light about this Australian Inter-War Californian bungalow was the sour-mouthed grin of the front veranda's cement capping, and the small lead-light windows in the front wall of the house. The only other possible source of light was a bubble-glass front door, backed with yellow ruched silk. But in my sketch you can't see the door because it was set into a deep, dark side-porch. My black house is a cold Pandora's Box. It's filled with writhing demons waiting to spring from its grave-like darkness. I look at my drawing and my mind drifts off to another space and connects to dark confusion and a white fruit bowl. Once again, I see my mother, Kate. She's throwing apples and oranges at my father's stiff back, and screaming, *She's not going to have my babies, you bastard.* Even now I'm not exactly certain what she meant. She knew she was terminally ill, so it's possible that she thought that my father would take us children and join up with the butcher's cousin. But I now know what I didn't know back then. In those pre-Dalwood days while my dying mother was pregnant with my sister, the butcher's cousin kept an appointment with a knitting needle and

made certain that my father's love-child was never born. I suppose that, as a member of a middle-class family with a somewhat skewed Victorian morality, bearing an illegitimate child to a married man would have been too great a disgrace for her to carry.

When I look into my drawing of the black house I see my sister. Renamed '*The Baby*', she was petted and carried around in the butcher's cousin's arms, and taken into the family's inner-sanctum to be cured of tuberculosis in the days when there wasn't a cure. I see my brother, a farm-boy bent to his chores, as a mere speck in the distance. Out of my father's hearing, he was called '*You Lazy Sod*'. I see me as a child, a menial servant taught to remember her insignificance. I discovered that my new name was '*The Bastard*'. But for some reason, in my drawing I can't see my father clearly. In the black house he was remote, and had nothing to say to me. There's a saying: *Leopards don't change their spots*. Maybe not, but the distant man in the black house who claimed to be my father, wasn't the red-headed, Shakespeare-shouting father of my pre-Dalwood house. He didn't wear a dashing purple cravat. In the black house we three children were kept apart. We lived in separate worlds unknown to the others. Once, I asked Al about his life during those years. He looked up sharply and shutters seemed to come down over his eyes. *Not your business*.

Al's been in Sydney visiting a mate. He calls in to our house on his way back up north. I make him a ham sandwich and coffee. I show him my drawing of the black house. He turns his face away. I look at my drawing of the black house and see me, as a child, lying on the floor behind the door in the butcher's cousin's room and scratching my night away on a prickly, back-breaking, horse-hair mattress. Night after night, there I would lie, holding my breath and sleepless with fear that the butcher's cousin's physically and mentally handicapped brother, Jack, would leave his bed across the hall and come creeping like some monstrous crab to my pallet, and attack me while I slept. Children don't know what's happening to them when they're sexually abused. They feel guilty, dirty, ashamed, sinful, and very, very frightened of the consequences if anyone should find out.

Last year my brother sat on my back patio in the shade. He said he wanted to talk. He cleared his throat and fell silent. I began to talk about Jack. Al said he didn't like me talking about my experiences. *Why?* Because, he said, he was the big brother and he didn't protect me. I glanced at him and said, *But you were only a child . . . and that's another thing, are you certain you're my brother?* Al stood up and shook his legs. He stamped around the patio and came back to stand in front of me, and said, *Oh, not that birth certificate thing again.*

I looked up at Al and reminded him that just before she'd died our aunt had said she'd remembered something—our English grandfather had married more than once, and his first and second wives had been somehow related. She also remembered Katey had a younger half-sister whom our father had liked—perhaps a little too much. *Al, we might be sort of half-brother and sister, or cousins . . . I could be your aunt!* Al's humourless brows seemed to meet in the middle. He barked, *Don't say that . . .*

I can't help but wonder if Al refused to entertain the thought because he was afraid it would upset his own world. At the time though, I gave up arguing with him. I watched him brush his hand across his face and walk away into the paddock. I sat back in my chair and marvelled at the sheer immensity of the sky. The cloud pictures shifted and reformed then shifted again. I couldn't hold them long enough to grasp their meaning.

I leave the past, come back into the present. I look up and see we're almost outside the black house. I turn to my husband and say, *This is it, right here.*



It has an added storey now. But the downstairs section still shows the shape of the original house. I look, and wonder how a house that had seemed so big to me when I was a child could be so small now. A sudden southerly wind rises up, and moves a dark shrub. A flash of yellow on the wall under the leering veranda catches my eye. I can't believe that this

black house now calls itself a Child Safety House. Still, my black house life was a long time ago. I know nothing of the family who live here now.

At this stage, I'm not to know that the yellow triangle will be taken down. I'm not to know that the police sergeant, who was a main player in the Child Safety House Scheme of NSW, will tell me that the scheme was scrapped in this state because of problems in various communities.

People leave, families die out, but do houses that have cried ever stop, I wonder?

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THE AUTHOR

Jo Parnell: I am a Ph.D candidate in English and Writing at The University of Newcastle, Australia. Professor Hugh Craig is my supervisor. My former M.Phil Creative writing supervisor, Dr. Keri Glastonbury, continues to take great interest in my work.

Currently I am writing a docu-memoir, *See Saw Margery Daw*, based on oral interviews with Australians who were in care sometime in the 20th century. For my M.Phil at The University of Newcastle I wrote a memoir, *The Carpet Child*, and have published a book chapter "Translating and conveying the damaging childhood in Our Kate" in *Catherine Cookson Country: On the Borders of Legitimacy, Fiction and History*, edited by Julie Anne Taddeo (Ashgate 2012).