

Joan Makes History



Kate Grenville is one of Australia's most successful authors. Her fiction includes the international best-seller *The Secret River*, shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize, and the other novels in the 'Colonial Trilogy': *The Lieutenant* and *Sarah Thornhill*. Her non-fiction includes several popular how-to-write books and a memoir about writing *The Secret*

River. Writing *Joan Makes History* sparked her fascination with the untold stories of our past.

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Searching for the Secret River

KATE
GRENVILLE

*Joan Makes
History*



MODERN CLASSICS

For Bruce

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Prologue

In the beginning was nothing much. Vague things swirled and whirled, impulses grouped and dissolved, light came and went. It was a fluke, or a leap of faith: but there it was all at once, the first atom, and everything else was just a matter of time.

Imagine the stars burning their hearts out in brand new galaxies! Imagine the time when bundles of hot gas decided to draw together and be Mars or Earth! Imagine the first rain sizzling down on the first hot rocks, and starting the business of the land and the sea! What aeons of racket there were, of magma squirting up and lava gushing out: what tumult as the globe heated, froze, cracked, drowned: as rock wore away to sand that ebbed and flowed on the floors of warm seas. What convulsions there were, as the bottom of the sea became the top of a surprised mountain steaming in the sun and melting away again, until at last it formed the shapes of Africa and Iceland and the Great South Land!

Imagine dew forming, sun scorching, winds whipping: lichen grasping the side of a rock: grass sprouting and dying, small flowers holding their faces up to the sun. Imagine saplings thickening, putting forth leaves and dropping them off: imagine them swelling at last beyond the strength of the roots and crashing back down to the ground, and from their ruin new trees springing.

Consider the extravagant excess of nature, providing every

different bit of earth with its particular kind of life: with Pale Prickly Moses, with the Leafless Milkwort, with the Spoonleaf Sundew: with the Gregarious Stick Insect, with the Sugar Ant, with the Small Green-Banded Blue Butterfly, with the Pie-Dish Beetle, with the Yellow Monday Cicada and the Shining Swift Moth: with the Yellow-Bellied Black Snake, the Sulphur-Crested White Cockatoo, the Frill-Necked Lizard: with the Crest-Tailed Pouched Mouse as well as the Flat-Headed Pouched Mouse: what an unnecessary prodigality of supply!

Imagine, too, those formless jellies from which they say we come: something – what was it? – made them desire history, clustering together and becoming particular: *You be skin, I will be legs*. What a journey it was, from the trilobite, the graptolite, the pterygotus, to the pterodactyl, the brontosaurus, the tyrannosaurus rex! Things with teeth where their ears should have been, things with four mouths and seven feet, things with eggs the size of houses and tongues as long as tree-trunks!

They trundled and hopped, slithered and leaped, swam, flapped and waddled, and after them came the humans who left footprints in the dust. So many births: imagine them, born every second of every day, year after year: now, and now, and now, and now, just now there are three, four, five new humans in the world, I cannot speak quickly enough to outstrip them. They are pink, brown, or yellow, angry or solemn, arching in a midwife's hands or staring around in a knowing way: bursting forth with a roar, or being lifted astonished out of cut flesh. They suck blindly at nipples, they whimper or crow, they lie in possum skin rugs or a proud father's arms. Imagine them in their millions, all driven by the same few urgent promptings: to suck, to grasp, to kick, and at last to smile, and with that smile to begin their public life.

So many lives! Being explorers or prisoners of the Crown, hairdressers or tree-choppers, washerwomen or judges, ladies of leisure or bareback riders, photographers or mothers or mayoresses.

I, Joan, have been all these things. I am known to my unimaginative friends simply as Joan, born when this century was new, and now a wife, a mother, and a grandmother: Joan who has cooked dinners, washed socks and swept floors while history happened elsewhere. What my friends do not know is that I am also every woman who has ever drawn breath: there has been a Joan cooking, washing and sweeping through every event of history, although she has not been mentioned in the books until now.

Allow me to introduce myself: Joan, a woman as plain as a plate, and devoid of bust, a grandmother you would pass on the street without a glance. Allow me also to acquaint you with a small selection of those other Joans, those who made the history of this land.

I will begin in the beginning, with myself.

Joan

My conception: It was not night, no, Europeans have no shame and do not trouble to wait until dark for lust. It was the middle of a hot afternoon in the first year of the century, with the sun blazing down outside on planks steaming and adding their salt dampness to air that was already too thick to breathe. It was afternoon, and the rhythm of a thin woman and a thick balding man was attuned, after so many months, to the restless rocking and shifting of the boat under the mattress – oh, that mattress and its manifold rustlings! – on which they coupled.

This was a ship built for the transport of many in cheapness rather than of a few in luxury. It was a mean and cramped ship, a ship of tiny airless cabins with peeling walls, cracked ceilings, and dripping pipes in the corners that conveyed other people's plumbing with a rush and rattle late at night.

Those seedy cabins had occasionally heard the roiling and difficult syllables, the guttural hawkings and strange sibiliances of some of Europe's lesser-known languages, and had echoed even more to the ingenious obscenities and sly rude wit of many folk from Lambeth, Bow and Cheapside. They had echoed to the sighs of gentlewomen in reduced circumstances, weeping into embroidered lawn and hankering for home: weeping, but knowing that their chance of husband and hearth, livelihood and life worth living would not be found in the genteel squalor of some seedy out-of-season Brighton boarding house, but here,

in this savage new land that wanted everyone: carpenters, cooks, governesses, dentists and hopefuls of no defined skill.

In many languages, the voyagers squeezed into their cabins had spoken of hope, of futures, of the blank sheet of new possibilities waiting for them. They had left behind the squalor of cities so old the very cockroaches were descended from those that had been crushed beneath the buckled feet of Goethe and Shakespeare: they had come with a few plates or bits of embroidered garments, leather-bound books with silverfish in the endpapers, or an engraving or two of Tower Bridge or the Danube, with a pair of candlesticks or their grandfather's chased silver double hunter, with their love of dumplings and pale ale, with their heads full of things in dark forests and wolves on cold plains, or of the way the Thames looked on a spring morning at Wapping: with all this useless baggage they had come, bursting with hope, to the Antipodes for a new life in a new land.

And what a land! Here, they had been told, the sun rose on the wrong side of the sky, stones lay upside down and the trees grew so thick together you could walk for miles along their crests. Now, on this glassy afternoon, their tiresome ship was passing between the headlands that were the gates to that new life, and all those weary folk were gesticulating at the foreign gum trees and asking their hearts what the future held.

My coming into existence was the main thing that made that day so special, but I am a person of magnanimous turn of mind, not one to hog the stage of history. Up on deck those muddles of mixed people gaped at their first sight of their future, but down below in their cabin, my thin woman and her brown-eyed man celebrated their new life in the way they loved to celebrate anything at all, or nothing in particular.

That balding man whispered in an oily language to that thin woman under him: *Darling*, he whispered, and caressed the bit of cheek beside her mouth, that favourite bit of his wife's face. *Darling, we have arrived*, he said, and for the last time they heard

the mattress rustle and creak under them, and the pipes in the corner mocking them. It was an episode appropriate to such a significant moment: while my father groaned and my mother wept with the storms of pleasure he gave her, a vigorous questing tadpole was nosing into the skin of a ripe egg waiting to be courted, and in that moment's electric interchange, I, Joan, had my beginning.

Those two humans who had come together with lewd and effortful noises to conceive me, who were they, making history in a sound of sighs? Well, there was a thin woman, and a man chunky like a block of chopped wood, and balding so the dome of his cranium was egglike. The thin woman was thin by nature, not design, was in fact not in any way a woman of design, her long face, with its tanned-looking skin, having only its own features for adornment. She was a woman of narrow mobile lips with fine creases at their corners from years of finding things funny. When she smiled or laughed, gold glittered in that mouth, for back in the country they had left behind, that tiny country of werewolves and vampires, the father of the thin woman spent his days peering at molars, and loved nothing better than a bit of fine work on a gold inlay.

And the balding man, who was he? Just another stocky man in a lumpy cheap suit, with his father's signet ring on his little finger. He had always had a way of clutching at the handle of his heavy leather briefcase that had made the thin woman love him, there was such determination, and such innocent hope and purpose in that grip. In the briefcase, she had learned, was not much: a clean handkerchief, a notebook for great thoughts as they occurred, and a few bits of paper relating to enterprises that flickered and smouldered but never caught fire.

My love for you is hunger, he had whispered to the thin woman on the dentist's slippery couch, which during the day was the place where anxious folk squirmed and waited with their toothaches. *My love for you is hope. What is your thinking about a*

new life in a new land? The thin woman loved this man in his suit that bulged and buckled, had loved him for a year or more, and had long ago decided that this was the man she wished to spend her life with. She was impatient with dentists and their cautions, their painstaking days fiddling with the endless decaying molars of folk stiff with the apprehension of pain, and was even willing to undergo the rigours of being foreign, and go to a new land on the bottom of the earth, to be with this man. He was a man of wit, a man given in a mild way to the extravagant gesture, and he was a man of intense brown eyes and a mouth that made most things plausible, but it was for none of this that the thin woman loved him. It was for his adoration of her that she loved him, knowing she would never again meet with a love like his.

My pink-scalped father panted, then, and groaned with the pain of adoring his wife, that no amount of penetrating her flesh could assuage, and while he panted and history was being made in the interior of a thin woman, other kinds of history were also being made.

In the new land they were approaching, men with frock-coats and small knowing eyes spoke of the birth of a nation, and thought with satisfaction of their fertile acres and the cash in their strongboxes. These were starchier folk, not eaters of garlic or wearers of rustic embroidery, they were folk who had never had to confront jellied eel, or the bailiff on an empty stomach. They were folk made uneasy by gesticulation and suspicious of too much hope: they were men in frock-coats and side-whiskers that hid the shape of their faces, they were women with heavy cheeks made bland by privilege.

The birth of a nation, the men brayed, from their mouths concealed under heavy moustaches that smelled of mutton. *Our debt to the mother country*, they intoned, and turned up their small eyes piously. They thought, or said they thought, that this was the moment at which this barbarous land was entering into its glory after a long and squalid beginning. In their folly they

thought that was history. But the real history of that moment was known only to myself, where something as real as a human was being made.

No book has yet recorded that event, though whole forests have been sacrificed to all those men with their frock-coats and to princes burdened with frogging. The books are strangely silent on all that matters, so here I am to put them right: watch, and you will see history being made in front of your eyes.

Joan Makes History

Scene One

In the year 1770, the continent that would become known as Australia was claimed for Britain by James Cook in the *Endeavour*. This is history, and well known. Less well known is that I, Joan, was there in one of my many manifestations, alongside Cook. Here, told now for the first time, is the true and complete account of that famous event.

My husband the Captain, that famous man, has not had justice done to him in those portraits, and particularly not in those statues. He would never have stood in those grotesque postures, clutching a roll of bronze chart in front of his breeches in a somewhat suggestive way, as he is known to generations of sniggering children. He was a man of achievement, enough achievement to warrant moving his humble cottage stone by stone from the Old Country to the Antipodes. There are those who slyly hint that the cottage moved thus across the world was not the Captain's at all, but belonged to a pullet-breeding drunkard neighbour well known to him, and much disliked by him, and that the whole thing was a small joke at the expense of the colonials, but be that as it may. The Captain was a humble and agreeable man, his eyes mild and devoid of guile, and sharp enough to spot a man in a bush at fifty yards, although I knew, as most did not, that those fine eyes showed him only a world of variations on the colour grey.

There were those who thought that I, as his wife, should be languishing patiently in the Old Country for him. But I was there with him on his voyage, for we were inseparable in spite of every risk, a couple so attached we would rather sink together than swim alone.

I had long loved my Captain, and had proved several times previously that my love was willing to undergo the rigours of

ship life and harsh latitudes, and even to go to frightening far-off places to be near him. My father, a man of excessive deliberation, who measured out his words with the same care he took with the powders and poisons he kept in the forbidden jars in the dispensary: he had not hidden how much he doubted that lad of mine ever making good, no matter how many of his father's candles he squandered, hunching over books late into the night. But I had had faith, or perhaps I did not much care. Whether or not that lad of mine would ever make anything of himself, that lad was the one I wanted.

For me, the Captain was the only man on board, but there were others: numberless grimy sailors, naturally, and the slightly less grimy officers, Stubbs and Devereux and the rest, with their sextants and charts and small anxieties over matters of discipline and dignity. And then there were the scientific gentlemen, come to observe the goings-on at the bottom of the world, and put things in bottles, and press things between paper. There was the pasty pudgy Swede, who seemed always a little out of breath even when sitting down, there were the artists, whose job it was to draw things and make a record of the oddities we hoped to encounter, and then there was the man of leisure, the dandy, the philanderer: the botanical gentleman.

On the day the ship sailed for parts unknown, he had come aboard lightly springing up the ladder. He had landed in front of me, pink in the cheeks, and stood before me with a pleased smile already in place. He was a small smooth man with a tight smile of some charm and tiny white teeth, and I could see that he thought himself irresistible to any creature in a skirt, and never missed the chance to charm whatever kind of female was at hand, in case she proved susceptible to later seduction.

I could see that the Captain felt no great love for this hummingbird of a man, with his quick eyes and brilliant waistcoat of silver brocade that shimmered in the sun, when good

honest broadcloth, and a smile that was as rare as gold, were good enough for my plain Captain.

When the botanist was presented to me he held my hand in both of his – and what small soft hands his were, so that my own felt ragged and gigantic – and bent over it murmuring for much longer than was necessary to pay his respects. I caught enough of his low tones to know that he thought it worth his while to flatter me, and when his hyperbole came to an end he gazed at me in a way that a more foolish woman might have allowed to make her heart flutter. But I, as well as being a woman of considerable Yorkshire shrewdness, was a woman of great plainness of feature. I knew that no dandy in brocade would ever languish after me, and certainly not at first sight, as the sighing botanist was pretending to, so I turned away from his posturing and watched as England slid away behind us.

The mystery of our voyage, the end we all wondered about, was the Great South Land, one last bit of the globe on which, if it existed, no flag had yet been raised to claim ownership. They tried to conceive of their Great South Land, all those men in the great cabin of the ship, serious in their jackets and braid. They showed me their spidery maps, tracing with their forefingers the ghostly fringe of something that the Dutch and others had stumbled on and not wanted. *They reported it the barrenest land they had ever seen*, Stubbs of the long face reminded us. *They did not want it, why should His Majesty?* Stubbs of the lugubrious dewlaps, a good man with an astrolabe but no smiler, imagined this land as a long thin piece of sand and rock, providing nothing more rewarding than cliffs for foolhardy Dutchmen to smash themselves upon.

The Captain was more sanguine, and stood spinning his globe for me, demonstrating how the world was unbalanced for lack of a continent in the Southern Ocean. He dealt with the world gently: it was not only that the globe swinging so silkily under his palm was not his own property, but was that of His

Majesty's Government: it was that the Captain handled the world with reverence, and his palm shaped itself around its comfortable curves as if warming it, coaxing it to bring forth its secrets and deliver to him the long-awaited Great South Land.

It may be nothing much, I warned him, not wanting him to suffer too great a disappointment. *It may be a scattering of islands, nothing more, or a land of desert and stones*. The Captain was a mild man, and not prone to saying *no*: rather he nodded in a vague sort of way, and said *That is possible* in a considering manner, so no one's feelings could be injured: but I knew that he was not discouraged, and that he hoped for great things from his Great South Land.

That land lay somewhere ahead of us, if it lay at all, steaming and swelling, growing humid and huge in our imaginings with its jungles and waterfalls, its waiting nuggets and tigers. Towards that patient land our tiny vessel bounced and leaped, rocked and surged through the ocean swells, straining at every bit of rope and every creaking block and tackle, bristling with beings.

I clung to a shroud, peering westward, for I was sick of sea breezes and strange ports now, and impatient to see that Great South Land. It was proving more elusive than anything so great should have been, so that we folk on the upper deck were coming to know each other rather better than we wished.

Oh, that botanical gentleman! He became tiresome, finding me alone in sheltered corners of the deck, standing there blocking my sun while he flattered and invented and gave me many fine glances from under his immaculate eyebrows. *Ah*, he would sigh, *Ah my dear, if you only knew how I lie awake during these long nights!* The look he gave me was intended to cause my pulse to race and my head to fill with inflamed imaginings. But the simpering botanist buttered no parsnips with me. I knew my sturdy Yorkshire face gave him no encouragement, and did not bother to conceal that he was nothing more to me than an insect buzzing at my ear or a pup whining around my ankles.

I had not always been a woman so impervious to blandishment. It was all the easier to resist the botanist because on another occasion I had failed to resist a man of the same lying and wheedling nature. I had betrayed the Captain once, and been forgiven, and I had seen with fear how close I had been to losing him.

So the botanist got short shrift from me: such a fop was repugnant, but even if he had not been, I would have continued to spurn his advances. I gave him nothing: not a look, not a smile, not a single touch of flesh, only the back of my hard hand, when on some pretext he would seize it and press his lips on it. He got nothing from me, and I saw how the sluggish Swede watched, and provoked the botanist to further excesses with disparaging remarks on his entire lack of success.

Then the dandy turned. Being a coward as well as a dandy, he did not attack the woman who was spurning him, but her husband. Nothing this botanist could say, no amount of poetry panted out to me in the lee of the wheelhouse, could diminish my husband in my eyes: but this philanderer, cunning as one of the reptiles he pickled for posterity, knew that there was another way to punish the Captain for the fidelity of his wife.

This Great South Land of yours, the botanist said, and allowed his lip to curl. *My dear captain, I admire your earnestness of purpose in sailing to the end of the world for it, but between you and me, I had it from my cousin at the Admiralty that the whole thing is a small jest at your expense that had the rear-admiral amused for a morning or two.* There was no escaping him as we all sat glumly chewing through salt pork and peas. There were nights, in the glare of the swinging lantern, when I longed for tempest of the kind that would send our plates tipping to the floor, and make our scientific gentlemen go green as waves crashed over the poop.

But the Captain was not a man to be shaken by the gibes of any flighty gentleman in a brocade waistcoat, and he and I had

laughed in private at the way the botanist was courting me. *Just the same, sir*, he said in his calm way, that made people become very still, listening hard in case they missed the words: *Just the same, those are my instructions, and I intend to carry them out.* The botanist pushed at a bit of pork on his plate and smiled, a smile too engaging to be quite true, a smile of too many white teeth between which the tip of his tongue was suggestively pink. *But my dear captain*, he crowed, like a nasty tropical bird with his teeth and flashing waistcoat, *My dear sir, you cannot really expect to find this phantom of a Great South Land!* He went on staring at the Captain, who was taking refuge now in being punctilious about cutting a morsel of fat off his pork, and finally the botanist let out a laugh that was a cry of contempt, and exclaimed: *Is it possible that you are simple enough to believe you will find it?* The shrill spurned dandy was becoming hysterical in his inability to excite his phlegmatic Captain, and a line of inelegant spittle was forming in one corner of that mouth of his, a mouth that never stopped smiling, although the muscles on either side of it were visibly straining in the effort to remain amused and scornful. The Captain munched on without responding, and only a wife who had watched him toiling by candlelight to reach a position that this popinjay had attained by birth could have observed the way his large hands, which had come late to the finicky business of refined manners at table, strangled his knife and fork.

Each dawn lit up the banal horizon to the west and showed it as innocent as ever of any land, let alone a Great South Land. The Captain, never a man of many words, became more and more silent, and in the short warm nights he held me tightly against him and squeezed my hand in his large capable one, but was silent except for his sighs. When his eyes opened in the mornings, the Great South Land was his first thought: his second was that slimy triumphant botanist, sleeker as each day passed with nothing on the horizon. I lay watching the captain of my life, and saw the way his eyes flew open on hope with each dawn, and the

way he strode to the porthole in his nightshirt, straining out at the smug smooth sea.

The Captain is amusingly earnest, I find, I overheard the botanist drawling to the lard-faced Swede, and laughing; then, the hypocrite, he pretended to realise of a sudden that I was behind him, and removed the laugh from his face. He bowed his vile small bow, and exclaimed in his most unctuous and fluid way, *Why bless my soul! I was only saying to the good doctor here how much we do admire your husband's persistence and what a great disappointment and what a shame for him it is indeed.*

I could not answer, though many words rose to my lips, some from surprising pithy Yorkshire recesses of my memory. I turned away from the wink I caught between him and the Swede, a wink I was intended to catch, and intended to be injured by, and had taken a step away from him when suddenly he seized my wrist hard and with his other hand tweaked painfully at my cheek in the way uncles do to little girls. I pulled away, but he kept his savage grip on my wrist, so I could feel some ring or other pressing deeply into my flesh, and he tweaked and tweaked at my cheek. In spite of all the Captain had warned me of, in the way of keeping things civil and if possible staying on his good side, I had drawn breath to shriek at the way he was assaulting me when he let me go and cried out *There! It is off! They leave a most terribly disfiguring sting, my dear lady, which would have altogether marred your loveliness.* Now he stood back and showed his teeth at me, while I stood flushed and furious.

But at last the day came when the doubters were forced to swallow their sneers. *Land ho,* the cry came down from the crow's nest, and everyone peered up into the bright sky at the speck of man flapping his hat towards the west. The Captain was not a man to become agitated in front of his minions, but I, who knew him better than anyone, saw how his hands were gripping the rail so hard the skin had gone pale. I saw he had to tell himself to remain upright and not strain forward over

the rail like someone at a bear pit, in his eagerness to see his dream become the reality of a low dark line on the horizon. He turned to Devereux and said in the most leisurely way, as if it did not matter in the least, *My telescope, if you please, Mr Devereux.* Devereux handed it to him and I saw how he paused before he lifted it to his eye, to make sure his hands would not shake and give anyone the chance to snigger. The botanist with his brocade and small sneering mouth was mercifully below, fiddling with flora in his cabin, and I was happy that this great moment for the Captain was unspoiled by that smooth contemptuous man.

He lifted the brass telescope to his eye, squinting at glare. He had always been a man who had loved to spy out the unseen and to guess at the half-known, and had always loved that telescope. Now he gazed through it while I imagined what it might be showing him; voids of sky, distant dark vegetation, perhaps thin blue smoke from fires lit by people as yet unknown. When at last he lowered the telescope, full of what he had seen, I thanked the Lord who had watched over us that the botanist was still below, for it seemed that Jack the cabin boy had failed to polish the brass properly, and the Captain stood with a black eye where he had pressed it against the eyepiece. I had to look away, and I saw Devereux, who was a good man, and Stubbs, who was a fool but knew better than to laugh at his captain, look away too, so none of us would be forced into a guffaw at the way the Captain stood solemn like a badger with a black eye.

My dour Captain smiled seldom, but when he looked around at Stubbs and Devereux, and at me, he was smiling in a way to dim the sun, his face creasing into those unaccustomed lines. *Make a note, Mr Devereux, for the log,* he said calmly, but his eyes were on me, and the words were made jubilant by that smile. *Make a note: at a quarter of three in the afternoon, the Great South Land was sighted.*

Joan

There were those who doubted my existence, women slack with childbearing who assured the thin woman that the rigours of the voyage were enough to explain the gap she was noticing in the cycles of her months, those who assured her that in this upside-down land such signs did not always mean anything. Perhaps, she told the bald man. *Or perhaps not.* There seemed a sort of hush over them, in spite of the clamour and anxieties of settling in the new land, of buying pots and pans and learning what to do with mutton, and having halting conversations in the new language with people who shouted at them.

But when the thin woman began to be sick, pale and peaky in the mornings, craving food and sickened by it at once, when she began to quaff jug after jug of water and still thirst, when she began to sleep longer and longer, and still need sleep: these paradoxes began to inform them that I was there. At last the thin woman became no longer thin, and when she could no longer make her buttons meet because I was lengthening within her, she and the balding man doubted no longer.

Would his creature be a female, the balding man speculated: a dazzling beauty with teasing copper curls and a smile that would make rocks crumble where they stood? His heart clenched with the foreshadowed pain of seeing his untouchable exquisite daughter become a woman, of seeing her eyes grow red, languishing after some unworthy oaf, of sitting up late at

night, waiting for her to be returned to him from some night of dancing, or worse, and of seeing in her swollen lips that she was no longer his pure girl, but was a woman, defiled by the lust of some man. That was pain: that she would no longer belong to her father, but to the world, to strangers who would not care as he did, for he would lay down his life a thousand times for her: strangers who would make her bored, make her weep, perhaps even raise a cad's hand against her and bruise her white skin. Were there worse pains? Yes, that of having not a peach-skinned copper-curl'd girl, but an angular hairy-faced lank dolt of a girl with no more sparkle or loveliness than a cold sausage.

If it was a boy! The bald man's mind leapt to two images: one of the limp body of his son, killed in a duel at dawn, a ridiculous fear but his picture of dread: the other of his son in a dark suit, unrecognisable to his father because of the grave look on his face, accepting the keys or crown of government, and himself bursting into tears from sheer fullness of proud heart.

Well, all this I guessed, and some I heard, as the bald man mused aloud to the thin woman, who smiled and nodded as she counted the stitches on the tiny garment she was knitting. I heard secrets, too, from my tight red hiding place. I heard that guttural man, who loved his wife like an addiction, groaning over her body and laughing at the way she swelled with me. He laid his hand over the curves of her belly, warming me inside, feeling my life stirring there: I could feel his hand reverent on the thin woman's skin, and tremulous with the possibilities he felt within. I felt him lowering his large head towards me, ear first, and sensed how he became congested, holding his breath, trying to listen to the quick flicker of my heartbeat. *My darling*, he whispered, *you are most precious, even when grotesque*. I felt the thin woman – not so thin now – shake with laughter and I laughed too, as she was doing, fondly, at this man who watched her with eyes soft with adoration.

I swelled and caused the thin woman to swell, I laughed and

cavorted in my warm room, for my job was simple: to wait and to grow. When I began to kick and jab at the thin woman with my elbow, they remembered that I was waiting to join them, and made ready. As well as the tiny knitted garments, and the others laboriously stitched and smocked, the thin woman obtained a cradle, and they both crowed and exclaimed over it, and planned how I would look, lying in it perfect and peach-like.

In the end I was impatient at the limitations of my space: my legs kicked out, longing to stretch, and I arched and thrashed against the muscle and bone that held me. Yet when they began to release me, I fought against the tide that was forcing me down and out. *Self!* I cried. *Thin woman! How can you turn against me like this?* Oh, I wept in my wetness, and struggled, and clawed at the slippery walls of my nest, but there was no resisting those muscles squeezing against me, no turning back from destiny now. I reminded myself that I was born to make history, so it was necessary for me to be born.

It was the greatest moment of my history, without which there would be no further moments, although to the hard-handed doctor and the Sister in her starch, I was nothing more great than yet another baby, wrinkled like a prune and as anonymous as a ham. Even the mother, lying back triumphant at last, and the bald father tremulous later with his bunch of flowers, did not relish the greatness of this moment. They turned away from me lying puckered in pink, and the man who had contributed his tadpole to the making of me took the hand of the woman who had done the rest: pale now, sunken into her pillows, full-eyed with our struggle. *My precious one*, he whispered, *I thought I would lose you for ever.* His voice shook with feeling, for he loved this thin woman of his, whom I had nearly done to death in our battle. His voice shook, his soft eyes filled with tears, and his hands warmed the bloodless dulled hands of his wife as if to infuse her with his own strength. She could not speak, the woman whose hand was being crushed, but did not mind the

pain of her husband's love around her hand, now the other pain was over, and she managed some sort of a smile that revealed the gold tooth teasing at the side of her mouth and showed him that, balding, egglike, trembling, fearful, uncertain though he was at this moment, she would never feel anything for him but the tenderest love.

There they were then, making their pacts of skin and soft looks together, and I lay unwrinkling like a beetle. I was preparing for great things, though they, myopic of vision, tiny of mind, feeble in their grasp of the largeness of life, knew none of it: they had no inkling that history lay in the room with them, quietly sucking at the air of the brand-new world.