

AUTOMATIC TELLER
INTRODUCTION

IF ON THE STROKE OF MIDNIGHT you stand outside the bank in the High Street and feed some cash to the hole in the wall, then press your ear to the automatic teller, you will hear a story. The teller knows all the stories of all the people hereabouts, and many other stories besides. Forget the fact that midnight cannot be said to strike in these parts, these days or nights. And the bells in the convent have been silent since the nuns left and the Soil Conservation people moved in. (Church bells were melted down in Russia to be used for making guns.) The clock on the Town Hall is a huge digital affair, the old Swiss mechanism and face having been sold to a museum somewhere in Texas. So when I write and you read 'stroke of midnight' you take it as a figure of speech with a grain of salt, and you press your ear to the *Automatic Teller* and you get a story.

This book *Automatic Teller* is a collection of short pieces of prose, many of which have been published before. They have been fashioned from my observations, my imagination and my heart, and I see the stories and essays as something like parts of a whole body. To build this body for people who read the book, I have interleaved the parts with connective tissue called 'context'. I am writing this part of the book on a sunny autumn day in Melbourne. Beside me on the table is a white jug of irises; the perfume of some ginger lilies fills the air; Glenn Gould is playing 'The Moonlight Sonata'. I am writing with the same fountain pen I have used for thirty years; the ink is blue and I'm writing in a large notebook with a black and scarlet cover. I'm curled up on a heap of cushions on the sofa beside the table, and on the table, beside the irises, is a red plastic basket containing copies of all the stories in *Automatic Teller*.

A teller, broadly speaking, is someone who tells tales or who counts things out, and the word comes from a mighty old Old English word. There is great beauty in the notion of telling beads while saying prayers. The *Automatic*

Teller machine outside the bank is one of those very useful modern things that I use with pleasure, but that also give me pause for thought because they are kind of spooky in a clunky, mechanical way. An amusing television commercial showing people lurking inside the *Automatic Teller* eating chocolate bars underlines the fact that there is *nobody* in there. It's nice to be able to get some cash in the middle of the night, but I think it's also a lonely, cold and weird thing to do. Once I met a dog called Taurus (people have met worse things) at the teller in the early hours of the morning, and he followed me home and wouldn't go away. So I called his owner who turned out to be an astrologer who offered to tell my fortune.

You believe me, don't you? And clearly that is only the beginning of the story. My point here is that when a reader opens a book and begins to read, that reader enters into a contract with the writer or the teller, a contract to go along with the story. The reader is prepared to believe what is being told. The writer, on the other hand, must be prepared to be convincing; even if the story is one of wild fantasy it must contain within itself the structure of its own credibility. This is a much more complex question than a simple one of truth or falsehood. I suppose the writer is a kind of confidence trickster whose job it is to get the reader in. The more I write, the more interested I become in the position of the teller, in the nature of the narrator. Who is telling the story and why; and why should anybody listen.

Gabriel Garcia Marquez tells pretty wild stories, but such is the confidence and depth of the narrative voice (and that in translation) that I am hooked, convinced, delighted, transported. I would have to say I love his sentences, his turn of phrase, his cast of mind. I don't in fact care whether these things happened, or could happen—what I sense is that they are happening in his imagination, and his words have the power to carry them to my imagination as a matter of course. An intelligence, a voice is telling the story, and the reader should pay attention because it is all very, very interesting.

There's no shortage of stories that writers want to tell, no shortage of plots and characters, but until the writer discovers or develops the narrative voices in which to tell the stories, the stories may never be heard or read.

In each of the pieces in this collection, I hope I have got the voice that the story or the essay wants. Each piece is preceded by a reflection on some aspect of the writing, and the reflections make up the connective tissue. Stories don't just get written out of the blue, they have a context in the life and mind of the writer. Many of these pieces were commissioned for anthologies or newspapers. Somebody rings up and asks for a certain number of words—sometimes fiction, sometimes non-fiction—on some topic or other, and away

you go. Sometimes this call to write something is a good opportunity to tell some tale I have been wanting to tell. I heard someone in a gardening programme say that you can put bulbs in the fridge for a while and then when you take them out 'they imagine it's spring' and start sprouting. Sometimes my ideas are on ice until an editor opens the fridge and out they come, imagining it's spring. Sometimes the ideas are released by a small ordinary event—a friend sends me a postcard and suddenly I know how to fashion the story that appears in this collection as 'Major Butler's Kidneys'.

The narrative voice in 'Conservatory' comes from the *Automatic Teller* itself, although you may well ask whose is the voice that explains how it is that you are listening to the voice of the *Automatic Teller*. I imagine that the first voice is perhaps just mine, but is that ever possible? Some of the other stories—such as 'Reptile Girl' and 'A Telephone Call for Genevieve Snow'—are probably coming from the *Automatic Teller*, although in the Genevieve Snow story there is a kind of monstrous element called 'the voice'. But more of that later. I like to think of the reader not as somebody looking at the pages of a book, but as somebody who has their ear pressed at midnight to the *Automatic Teller* in the High Street. (And bear in mind the fact that if you keep your plastic cards in a wallet made from the skin of an eel, your cards won't work in the teller machine.) Here goes: