

‘IRRELEVANT BODIES’

Volume 1: The Major Work

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Table of Contents

Volume 1: ‘Irrelevant Bodies’

Abstract.....	iv
Declaration of Originality	vi
Acknowledgements.....	vii
‘Irrelevant Bodies’	9

Volume 2: ‘Violent, Antagonistic, Morally Ambiguous: Anti-heroines and the Female Gothic’

Table of Contents.....	iii
Declaration of Originality	iv
Introduction	
‘Something Wicked this Way Comes’: Revisiting the Female Gothic.....	5
Chapter One	
‘Miss Wickedness’: Shirley Jackson’s Charming Mass-Murderess, Merricat	22
Chapter Two	
Monster-making: The Power Relationship between Mother and Child in Lionel Shriver’s We Need to Talk about Kevin.....	38
Chapter Three	
Self-Harm and Callous Behaviour in ‘Irrelevant Bodies’	54
Conclusion	
Unsettling Reflections.....	70
Bibliography	74

Abstract

This creative writing thesis comprises a creative work, the novel ‘Irrelevant Bodies’, and its accompanying exegesis ‘Violent, Antagonistic, Morally Ambiguous: Anti-heroines and the Female Gothic.’ Both the novel and the exegesis are concerned with female protagonists that challenge the traditional image of the Gothic heroine as either a passive, virtuous woman or an heroic figure by interrogating their use of violence, their callousness and morally ambiguous motivations.

‘Irrelevant Bodies’ is a Female Gothic novel that explores the impact of a traumatic event and its repercussions on the identity and behaviour of the protagonist, Vera. It is concerned with examining and disrupting narrative expectations connected with gender, traumatic victimisation and self-harm. Vera’s disturbed and disturbing ‘coming of age’ narrative is interwoven with the core or linear narrative on which the novel hinges, that of Vera and her partner Oswald’s holiday at the farmhouse of her childhood vacations. The sections depicting the past reveal that her early life has been punctuated by a personally experienced trauma and the loss of a friend through tragic circumstances. The novel explores the protagonist’s progression from victim to villain over the course of the narrative.

The exegesis analyses specific works of Female Gothic fiction that centre on a morally ambiguous female anti-heroine: Shirley Jackson’s *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962); Lionel Shriver’s *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2003); and my own creative work, ‘Irrelevant Bodies’, an original novel in the Female Gothic subgenre. As one of the key tenets of the mode, the Gothic heroine has shared a long and fraught relationship with the genre. Whether the text is male- or female-centred, the expectation in conventional texts is that the narrative will, in some sense, revolve around her suffering. The Female Gothic has been identified as a subgenre and critical area of study

that devotes itself to the trials, torments and anxieties of the Gothic heroine. As such, one of the main critical points raised in relation to these narratives is that the subgenre promotes ‘victim feminism’ and vilifies men particularly when narratives revolve around a blameless, victimised heroine being threatened by a villainous male figure. Alternatively, works such as Charlotte Dacre’s *Zofloya; or The Moor* (1806) and Gillian Flynn’s *Gone Girl* (2012) have been accused of being ‘more “misogynist” than feminist’ due to their villainous femme fatales (Davison, ‘Knickers in a Twist’ 34).

Following on from Carol Margaret Davison’s contestation that the Female Gothic should be determined by ‘the sex of the protagonist’ and her reading of *Zofloya; or The Moor* as a work of Female Gothic (‘Knickers in a Twist’ 34), the exegesis engages in close readings of each of the novels interrogating the choices made, motivations, feelings or actions exhibited by the ‘heroine’ of the narrative. It argues that the protagonists in these texts are corruptions of the traditional Gothic heroine and her female foil, the femme fatale, unsettling boundaries between ‘good’ and ‘bad’, victim and villain, ‘us’ and ‘them’. Through a close reading of the morally ambiguous figure of the anti-heroine the exegesis interrogates the fluidity and tenuous nature of such classifications as hero and heroine, victim and villain, within the contextualising and shifting nature of power.

Declaration of Originality

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint-award of this degree.

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Michelle Caroline Jager

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‘Irrelevant Bodies’

*I have tried to be honest with you, although I suppose that you would really have been more interested in my not being honest. Some of these things happened, and some were dreams. They are all true, as I understood truth. They are all real, as I understood reality. (Penelope Mortimer, *The Pumpkin Eater* 222)*

A lone car made its way along the highway: a white station wagon, weathered and worn, carrying two people inside. Above, a brilliant, blue sky stretched out, and alongside ran bone-white wheat paddocks bleached by the summer sun.

‘What a beautiful sky,’ Vera had said, when the journey began. But, hours later, looking out of her window, the sky seemed to her oppressive in its perfect monotony, its brilliance only intensifying the glare of the land.

Inside the car, the air-conditioner struggled, and Vera felt as if she were being slowly baked alive. She wanted to wind her window down but knew this would be met with resistance; a curt reminder from Oswald that the air-conditioner was on. And even though she knew that this was true, knew that should she open her window she would simply be greeted with a sickly warm wall of air that would take her breath away, still, she just wanted to check.

Vera moved her hand towards the button on the side of the door. Oswald, without a word, flicked the child-lock on. She sighed.

‘The air-conditioning is on,’ he said.

‘But it’s not *doing* anything.’

‘Well, you’ll make it worse if you open the window. Just leave it.’

‘But it’s *so* airless – and look,’ she moved forward to reveal a dress transparent with sweat, sticking to her back.

‘Not long now.’ Oswald drummed his fingers against the steering wheel.

They continued in silence.

Vera looked over at him, studying his profile while his gaze was fixed on the road. His nose and cheekbones were clear-cut; deft lines hewn into a face that she noticed with some satisfaction had become fleshier, almost bulbous in areas. His chin was beginning to consume his neck. Age, she thought, was beginning to catch up with

this golden boy. His fleece-like hair, flecked with grey, looked oily and limp. Like his skin, it had lost its youthful vitality.

Too much drink, she reflected, and smiled.

‘What are you smiling about?’

‘Nothing,’ she said, still smiling. ‘Just smiling.’

‘You must be smiling about something. It can’t be nothing.’

‘Happiness. I’m overjoyed to be spending this time with you, my dearest.’

Oswald frowned, his brow darkened.

‘Can we stop in Yorketown?’ Vera said, changing the subject. ‘There’s a bakery we used to go to as kids.’

‘We? We did not.’

‘You know what I mean – Emmeline and me.’

‘Emmeline and I.’

Vera took a deep breath, ‘Whatever. Can we?’

He shook his head, ‘We’re making good time.’

‘Good time for what?’

‘You know – for getting there.’

Vera threw up her hands, ‘And then what? What are we going to do with all the extra time we’ve accumulated?’

‘Unpack, relax,’ he shrugged. ‘Stuff.’

‘Stuff? What stuff? What stuff is going to be impeded by our getting there half an hour later?’

‘Jesus Christ! Does it matter? It’s too hot to go to the bakery, anyway. We can go tomorrow.’

Tomorrow was too late. It was tradition to go on the way and Vera wanted to see if it was still there, still the same. If it was just as she imagined. Would the butter-haired woman still be serving? Could she still order the chicken sandwich and Farmer’s Union

Classic Chocolate like she always had? Soft white bread, chopped chicken doused in salt and pepper – the occasional piece of gristle swallowed quickly, as what part of the chicken it may have come from didn't bear thinking about – finished off with crisp iceberg lettuce, squashed down, sliced, wrapped in white, greaseproof paper and slipped into a brown paper bag. Vera could almost taste it, almost feel a pair of ice-blue eye watching her, intently – 'C'mon Ver, give us a bite.'

But it was not to be. Why had she asked? She should simply have told Oswald, firmly – We are going to the bakery. That's what we're doing, no ifs or buts about it.

I hate you with a capital H, Vera thought, and picked at a cuticle.

'Don't do that.'

'Don't do what?'

'Pick at it like that.'

'Can if I want to.'

Vera picked harder. It began to bleed.

'See? Now it's bleeding.'

She glared at him.

'Thanks for the update.'

Oswald shook his head and laughed. The wound began to sting.

†

There are bags piled in the doorway; a blockade of toys, clothes, food, toiletries, wine and two cartons of Escort Red – the essentials – all barely contained on the drive over and now spilling across the floor. The pungent smell of vinegar – the only casualty – mixes with the smoke from the women's cigarettes.

Annie and Sue, friends since third grade, are the smokers. Both in long dresses, sergeant-like with their shoulder-pads, cutting edge with their matching perms and

frosted lipstick. Each has double trouble watching them attentively. Two girls stand rigid in the centre of the room, two boys slouch on the sidelines.

Of the girls, one is four, maybe five, the other is six or seven. One small and plump, soft and sweet; a marshmallow in a yellow dress. The other is thin and tall. Too tall, too thin, flame-haired; a burning match in a pink dress.

A matchstick and a marshmallow.

Vera and Emmeline. Annie's brood. Annie has the larger shoulder pads, her perm the more austere. The boys, Gary and Dave, have their eyes on the girls, watching the performance. Sue, their mother, smiling hard, smiling so it looks like it hurts, watches the boys, cigarette gripped firmly.

Two boys. Two girls. Two women – Here they go marching two by two, hurrah! Hurrah! – Everyone named and accounted for.

The girls cradle dolls. Babes in pink and yellow like their owners, bribes for good behaviour. Emmy's is her miniature – 'Look, Possum, I managed to find one just like you' – golden-haired and green-eyed, Cinderella in the making. But not Vera's. 'There were no red-haired dollies, Emu. But see how pretty she is with her dark curls?' No black-eyed gingers, baby Emu-girl. She's Snow White, see? Bow lips and sapphire eyes, she's a fairy-tale princess. Puff, puff on the cigarette.

The girls smile at their mother.

'Thank you,' they say.

One almost expects them to curtsy they are being so gracious. But they don't, they just stand and wait. The smaller boy, Gary, snorts. His mother slaps him across the head. Vera's dark eyes lock in on him and her mouth twitches. She feels tightly wound, a jack-in-the-box waiting to spring, waiting for Annie to give the word and set them free.

And, on cue, when Vera is fit to burst – 'Go play,' says Annie – they are released.

Off they go, jumping over the barricade, Vera fleet of foot in front, Emmeline at back and the boys between.

‘Stay out of trouble,’ says Sue.

‘Walk, don’t run!’ Annie yells. But it is too late, they are scattering, the game has begun.

Vera flies around the corner of the house and comes to an abrupt halt. There is Annie bent over, inspecting something on the ground. A wisp of smoke curls up out of the top of her head. Gary skids up behind Vera.

She puts a finger to her lips. ‘Dragon,’ she whispers.

Gary sniggers and Annie turns –

‘Vera! Look at the state of your clothes! What have you been doing?’

The hem is loose and there is a jagged tear in the floral print. Broken bouquets.

‘We were hiding in the bushes from Emmy and Dave, and Gary thought there was a spider on him so he started screaming and we had to run cos our cover was blown and they would get us so we ran and we had to climb the fence to get away but my dress got caught and ripped and there was nothin’ I could do and dresses are no good for climbing,’ it comes in a breath, powered by Annie’s raised eyebrow, and Vera finishes with ‘Gary lost his shirt.’

Gary shoves Vera.

‘Don’t push girls,’ snaps Annie. ‘And what’s this?’ she says, turning back to Vera. She points at something with her shoe.

Two sets of chubby legs stick out of the earth, two plastic bottoms, bare and shining in the sun; Snow White and Cinderella curls buried from sight, tiny clothes strewn across the ground. Vera chews her lip and looks at the ground.

‘Well?’ says Annie.

Smiling, Vera looks up at her mother, ‘They don’t have fannies.’

For a moment, it seems that Annie might just laugh, but then Gary sniggers and her head whips round like a cobra ready to strike. Vera knows Annie won't hit Gary. Gary's not hers. He's Sue's responsibility, Sue's darling. But Vera knows she'd like to. She can see Annie's hand twitch, her lip. Vera thinks one day Annie will just explode with this wanting, this need to exact punishment that pervades her every breath. Annie is anger. She must've been born that way, Vera thinks. It's the only way she's known her.

'Don't you reckon Gary looks like my doll?'

'Shut up, do not.'

'Watch your mouth, Gary. And no, Vera, he doesn't.'

'See,' says Gary.

'See nothing,' says Vera, 'It's Gary. Black curls and blue eyes – spitting image. You're Snow White, Gary,' She pokes her tongue out. 'You're so preeeeetty, Gary.'

Gary grins. A swift kick to Vera's shin and he's off. Vera tears after him with Annie's voice following – 'Shoes! Snakes! Where are your shoes?'

Vera stops. She's high, alive, with the excitement of the game, of the chase and seeing Annie standing there, a jagged silhouette against the dying light of day, Vera spins on one foot. A perfect pirouette, a graceful ballerina – eat your heart out, Snow-fucking-White – and her dress billows out. Vera's bottom is as bare as the dolls', but there is a cleft where they had none.

The jagged, angry shape that is her mother stamps her foot and yells: 'Vera! You come back here. You come back right *now*, you hear?'

But Vera is gone.

A flame-haired girl and a blue-eyed boy watch Annie from the long grass that hugs the fence. They hide like lions. They watch like hawks. The boy and girl curl in close to one another. They breathe together. His flesh is her flesh. Hers, his. In the sticky close of

day their smells mingle and Vera can taste it on her tongue. Yeasty, tangible, she savours it. The boy's cheek is close and the skin looks soft and vulnerable – later she will feel the sting of her mother's hand on the back of burnt legs, she will feel hunger from being sent to bed without dinner, and she will feel small because of the name Annie uses for girls who don't wear knickers. A word she has heard pass her parents' lips before but never been called – but for now all she can see is the boy and his cheek.

Vera leans in and kisses it. The skin is silk beneath her lips, it is salt on her tongue. He smells like burnt sugar. Gary smiles, and that smile and the blue of his eyes and the hum of bees in the hot, heavy air, fill her until she can barely breathe.

This is happiness.

†

Vera calls her Annie. Stopped calling her mother or mum like the other kids since she can't remember when.

Annie.

Annie get your gun.

Too jolly a song for Vera's Annie.

Janie's got a gun. This is far more fitting – the sentiment, the mood, an anthem for Annie. Vera tweaks it.

Annie's got a gun...everybody is on the run...

This resonates with Vera. Plays in her mind whenever she sees Annie stalking about, checking, taking inventory – her children, her husband, her home – looking to spill blood with her gun, with her tongue, her sharp crack-whip of a tongue.

Sometimes Vera sings it to her, she sings it on the run.

†

They never did see a snake at Corny Point. Never ever. Not even on the peninsula. Never saw a brown at Brown's Beach, not for all Annie's carry on. Hunted, searched for one, the four of them: Vera, Gary, Emmeline and Dave. Looked under rocks, in bushes, crept quietly through long grass, searched the outhouse and around the rusted farm equipment abandoned, colonised by shrubs and spiders. All they found were remnants: shed skins like old stockings, holes in the ground, the ghostly imprint of a body, slick and smooth in the dirt.

'They're here, see,' says Annie whipping up boundaries and borders, invisible walls and doors with words, before anyone can respond, before they can even take a breath. 'Put your shoes on and stay away from the scrub.'

Only once Vera saw a snake free of bars and glass, without an information plaque, without a warning. It was at Mannum along the Murray River, a family day, a picnic. Vera and Emmeline let loose to play, running on the bank in their bathers, in and out of the water squealing, oil and sand beneath their feet – 'Too many boats,' Father said, an explanation nobody asked for – it felt horribly slimy and deliciously cool at the same time.

Vera wiggles her toes, the sand sucks at her feet, swallowing her slowly, gently into the river-bed. Father and Annie are sitting up on the bank watching the water-skiers fly by. Emmeline is up to her knees, her tummy, encased in pink and white polka-dots, sticks out, at odds with the delicacy with which she makes her way in.

'Emmy,' Vera purrs, 'I think I can feel something.'

Her sister pauses, 'What can you feel, Emu?'

'I don't know,' Vera frowns.

'Emu?' Emmeline says cautiously, reaching out a small hand. 'Emu, you ok?'

'Emmy its –'

Emmeline's face is torn between a smile and a shriek, tense, waiting, anticipating what might come next. Another step closer, thinks Vera. Just one more step. The words – 'It's got me!' – on the tip of her tongue, her body ready to lunge and –

'You folks oughta watch where your kids play.'

The voice, deep, booming, comes from a man striding out of the bushes, striding with purpose, a hero come to save the day. But he's not at all like a prince, like a knight in shining armour: too fat, too old, face like a dried apricot, laugh like a donkey. Over to the riverbank he heads, to a spot near where the girls have been running in and out of the water. Stooping down, and then rising, with – to Annie's horror – a snake in hand. Long and brown, it hangs upside down, its head thrashing round angrily.

You're *supposed* to hold it by the neck, Vera wants to say. That's what they were told in school. That's what she learnt. If it bites him, it'll be his own fault. But she says nothing, only watches from the water, transfixed, barely aware of her sister's hand clutching her arm. One bite, she thinks. What would happen with just one bite?

And then the man's boot comes down, hard and heavy on the twitching head.

Ke-rack!

The skull shatters. One moment predator, the next, prey, and all without its knowing.

The man laughs – brays, in fact – and flings the body into the bushes, 'That'll give some poor bastard a scare!'

Annie and Father laugh, too. Predator, prey and now joke. How easy the transition.

Vera doesn't laugh. Vera doesn't find it funny. She stares at the man with the red face and big yellow teeth. He wears socks pulled up to his knees. His stomach is pushed out like Emmy's, but without the sweetness of youth.

'Say thank you to the nice man,' says Annie.

Emmeline, eyes wide, sing-songs the words. Vera just stares at him.

‘Well, you’re a right little madam, aren’t you?’ says the man and brays some more.

Vera says nothing. She thinks of the broken body lying in the grass, of how it will change, break-down, disappear. And she thinks of the sound the skull made – that crunch. Definite, final, and yet ordinary, mundane. Easily mistaken, if the listener were unaware, for a bite taken from an apple.

†

‘There!’

The car came to a sudden stop.

‘That’s it,’ Vera said. ‘I can’t believe she’s still got it up.’

A bull’s skull grinned at them from its perch on top of a beat-up old letterbox. Next to it, a dirt road wound its way into the distance, lined with pine trees either side.

Oswald laughed, ‘Aunt Faye has good taste. Whaddya reckon – shall we take it back with us?’

‘Let’s. It’d look great with the roses and white picket fence.’

Oswald started the engine up and turned down the road, driving slowly, carefully, with the *ping* of tiny stones ricocheting off the car every now and then. Vera listened with quiet satisfaction.

†

When Vera met Oswald for the very first time, she was drunk and stoned. Reflecting back, this seems important. Key, in fact, to the success, or, if not success, exactly, then the longevity of their relationship.

This first moment, first meeting of eyes and locking of lips that led to fumbling beneath clothes, to feeling flesh and warmth, sweat and semen, was in a pub in Melbourne. Only a month after she and Emmeline had escaped Adelaide and Annie, fled across the border and ended up in a shabby house in Oakleigh.

It was one of those pubs where the music is too loud because the acoustics are all wrong but nobody cares because they enjoy the way it blocks everything out. Here, people don't talk, they yell, and not at anyone directly, but everyone indirectly, just in case somebody, anybody, hears, or rarer still, understands. Fuelled by cheap booze and a sense of comfort, in the fact that everyone has purposely dressed down to give the impression that they really don't give a shit. And, if you stand still for long enough, chances are you will stick to the floor and that is where you live out the rest of your days. But that's ok, because the booze is cheap and you'll have plenty of company.

And that is where Vera met Oswald. When Vera and Oswald were young, or younger than they are now.

There she is, twenty-two years old, tall and broad and flame-haired, so that she moves like a burning branch through the crowd, lighting the way as she dances. Or perhaps convulses is a more apt description. 'Watch it, Peter Garret!' yells a long-haired man as she weaves in and out of the other dancers. And into them.

But it is what draws him to her. Oswald to Vera. Like a moth to an unwieldy flame.

'You're an anomaly, baby. And I dig anomalies,' he whispers to her in beer-soaked breath. How can she resist? And his face. That face! Surly until the smile breaks and his eyes, bottle-green eyes, glitter with warmth and suggestion. A face that says – I know you. Or maybe she knows it, for it has a familiarity which makes her feel comfortable, safe.

But then again, Vera is out of her mind, so perhaps it isn't like that all.

Oswald is part of the band and she laughs when he tells her his name.

‘Oswald? No. It can’t be. It’s all wrong. No one with a name like Oswald could be in a band. It’s impossible. You should be an academic or a poet or a financial planner.’

He laughs and buys her a drink. Winking as he passes it to her, ‘I’m the lead singer, baby. I am the band.’

Oswald speaks about himself for a while, naturally, for as Vera is to learn, this is his favourite topic. And Vera, bemused, simply watches his mouth, his lips, as they move continuously, effortlessly, without interruption.

How white your teeth are! How pink your tongue!

She is hungry, so hungry for everything, anything that she can get her hands on.

I love you, she thinks. I love you, I love you, I love you. It is not directed at him or anyone or anything in particular. It is just an overwhelming feeling towards everything and everyone. But especially that flash of pink, raw and wet, between his lips.

And with words pouring out from his mouth, a seemingly endless flow, Vera kisses Oswald for fear of being drowned in the verbal onslaught. And because she is hungry.

But the hunger is gone now. In its place, is a dull, gnawing ache, as if she is being consumed, slowly, painfully, from the inside.

†

The heat hit her when she stepped out of the car. The brown earth was etched with the shadows of trees, carved out by the sun. Pine cones lay about her feet like offerings.

In the pines, in the pines, where the sun don’t ever shine, I would shiver the whole night through...

The song echoed in Vera's head; Kurt Cobain's voice, his guitar, polite applause for a dead man. Well you wouldn't shiver here, she thought. And tried to remember why he was shivering in the pines in the first place.

'So this is it, hey?' said Oswald. 'Not much is it.'

'It's a holiday house, what did you expect?'

He shrugged.

Vera walked away from him towards the boundary fence. The car ticked over in the heat, exhausted by the journey. The paddocks surrounding the house were mottled with washed out browns and yellows. It was a parched land suffering from a long South Australian summer, dry and desolate and unforgiving. Last time she was here, standing in this spot or thereabouts, the landscape had been green and lush, the gentle patter of rain and the bleating of sheep from a neighbouring farm had filled the air. Icy nights and muddy days. But that was years ago. Aside from the seasonal difference, the place was much as she remembered.

The house looked as if it had grown up out of the ground, an organic thing. Its exterior gave the impression of camouflage; a creature trying, and nearly succeeding, to remain undetected. The veranda sat slightly askew and in certain unfortunate places the brickwork bulged hernia-like. The paint was faded, the woodwork chipped, the roof rusted. To one side stood the outhouse, aloof and secretive, and further afield there was the old metal windmill, useless in the breathless air. The Hills Hoist she had fond memories of swinging from, had been felled, finally succumbing to years of abuse.

In the summer-stillness, for even the birds were conserving energy, Vera heard the distant sound of the ocean. She could see from where she stood, a dark uneven line on the horizon, and knew those were tea-trees; a row of gnarled sentinels guarding the private beach. As children, she, Emmeline, Gary and Dave had, in single file, passed beneath their twisted arms to step out into an enchanted world

When she had told Oswald about the private beach he grinned and said, ‘Don’t bother with bathers, then.’

She could not actually recall the last time she saw him naked. Oswald’s flesh exposed in its entirety. Gone were the days of lying around naked, exploring the other’s body intimately. Instead they might occasionally indulge in a lazy quickie beneath the sheets – wham bam but without the thank you. And Oswald might sleep naked but Vera made a point of not looking. She would close her eyes and turn away and dream of other things, other places, other faces.

Vera looked over at Oswald, this taint on her otherwise perfect memory of the place. He was bent over, and, with a dentist’s care and an incomprehensible sense of priority, he was carefully extracting items from the boot, examining them and placing them on the ground. She watched him pause to wipe his finger along the car, inspect it and then become distracted by his fingernail. While he stood there unaware, Vera mentally removed his clothing, revealing body parts, piece by piece. Like a surgeon or a butcher, Vera drew lines, made the appropriate cuts. A forearm revealed itself, and then a thigh, Oswald’s ear, the left one with the strange mole, his penis, deflated against his scrotum – no, that couldn’t be right. That was anatomically incorrect. For Oswald, it was a physiological impossibility. The penis corrected itself: arose, full bloom and ready to go – and then his pectorals, as he so referred to them, though to Vera they looked more like the blossoming breasts of an adolescent girl and finally, Oswald’s belly, hard and round from too much drink over the years.

Oswald with child. When his water broke, she thought, beer would pour forth. Oswald. A hunk of meat to be played with. And Vera wondered if the others ever looked at him in this way. If they dissected him, bit by bit. If they knew what he was.

†

There are Vera and Oswald, and then there are the others, the unseen others. The shadows in the background, faceless, nameless, they lurk on the periphery.

Mostly they are Oswald's.

They reveal themselves occasionally. Sometimes in the form of an ambiguous email or nameless text; sometimes corporeally: tanning lotion smeared on a shirt, a stray hair-clip, the faint trace of cunt on his mouth or penis when he is particularly lazy or drunk. These things Vera ignores, or rather, silently acknowledges and then folds up quietly to be placed deep within. Ammunition stored. But against who – Oswald or herself? – she cannot say.

Vera has secrets but she is careful with them. Vera is a diligent secret-keeper.

Enoch is a secret. Enoch was her sister's friend. *Is* her sister's friend. Vera has to remind herself of this. But Enoch is ill-informed on how secrets function. They should be buried. They should be forgotten. They should not beg to be heard and remembered. They should not hang around.

†

Vera meets Enoch at Emmeline's house one evening, at a party. There is music and booze and barbecued meat and at the end of the night one of the guests runs down the street naked – no one dares him to, no one suggests it, he just does it. And then he applauds himself. It's that sort of party.

Emmy, beer in hand, introduces them: 'Vera, this is Enoch. He's an Arts student. Ver's a writer, aren't you, babe?'

'Hardly. Or at least not professionally. There's no money in writing, no security' and these last are Oswald's and Annie's words, Vera parrots them prettily, someone has to in their absence. 'But Em tells me there's never-ending work available in human

misery so I've just finished my studies in social work,' she grins and winks at the boy standing before her – where did that wink come from, Vera? How lewd!

'But you still write,' and, Emmeline, without waiting for affirmation, 'Ver's been published. Twice,' a pre-emptive holding up of a hand to silence Vera's protest, 'Don't be like that – it's an accomplishment. How many people write and write and their work never sees the light of day?'

And for a moment Vera feels like crying. Partly because of the wink and partly because this other life, this dream, is drifting away, drifting out of reach. Everything that she was is dissipating.

'Enoch's doing creative writing at uni.'

The boy, shyly, explains that it is just a class, just part of his degree.

From here on, Enoch hangs on Vera's every word, follows her from room to room. Because she, so impressive, with two short stories published, past triumphs she has failed to follow up, is somehow worthy of his adulation. Drunk on wine, Oswald absent, Vera gives him her number. Just to catch up. Just to help him out with that story – the one you mentioned, yeah? – that's all. Perfectly innocent. Nothing to do with that lip. His lip, which seems a stolen thing, plucked from its owner and placed on this strange slouching boy, awkwardly holding a glass of red.

†

Recently, Vera had begun to retreat into books. She slipped into these other worlds, examined how they were constructed, words, lines, paragraphs, chapters, the unfolding of plots and creation of character, the use of tense and point of view, metaphor, symbols, themes, the formation of argument, introduction of topic, concluding remarks, the use of case studies, illustration, photographs, anecdotes and statistics. She read voraciously, hungrily. She was famished, having deprived herself of such nourishment

for so long, having only allowed herself sips of this or that, just as she wrote only scraps here and there – a line, a beginning, an end, a thought, a description, a conversation. For she felt that these activities belonged to another life, one she was no longer part of, one she should no longer torture herself with. When Oswald complained, when he called to her, when he drew her attention away, back to reality, back to him, she stirred irritably as a sleeper woken from a delicious dream, looking at him for a moment without recognition, as if they were strangers who happened to be sharing the same space, like passengers on a bus.

On holiday, Oswald brought booze, Vera, books.

Unpacking, he complained, ‘How many did you bring? You can’t just read the whole time, you know.’

Vera yawned, too hot to argue, and noticed, by the outhouse, a child. Odd, dark, scrawny. A boy or a girl, Vera wasn’t sure from where she stood. She wondered where it had come from, this small, watchful stranger. Even at a distance there was something about the stance, the intensity of the gaze; a familiar defiance.

‘Come on,’ said Oswald, impatient, a man jealous of another’s time when his is so dismally occupied. ‘Help me unpack.’

‘Ok, ok,’ Vera said, turning to find his angry face watching her.

When she looked back, the visitor was gone.

†

Vera does not remember when she met Gary. Gary has always been. One came into the world quiet, the other screaming. One bloody, one clean. One in the early morning just gone midnight, one in the evening, just before. Birthed from different wombs into different rooms of the same hospital. Gary and Vera. One year apart.

‘So,’ says Annie, ‘when are you going to have a baby?’

The traitor. Not that she is the only one asking, but Vera does not expect it of Annie as she does with the others. She should be satisfied with Emmeline’s offering, Vera thinks. With Marid. And Em has another on the way.

Here they sit in Annie’s house, a table between them. But how has this come about – Annie and Vera alone and in such close proximity?

A month ago, Annie rang to say that Aunt Faye was selling the farm house. That when she and Tom got back from Europe they were going to put it on the market. But in the meantime they were welcome to make use of it. Aunt Faye had left Annie with the keys. Aunt Faye who has no children of her own, who chose not to, who is retired, who had a career, who owned and ran a pharmacy, who owns a holiday house in addition to her home, who is generous, who smiles and is happy, who is not like Annie, and who Annie does not like, has granted Annie the grand position of keeper of the keys.

So Vera has dropped by to pick up the keys before she and Oswald drive to Corny Point. Oswald declined to come. Flying from Melbourne to Adelaide has exhausted him: mentally, physically, spiritually. He needs to recuperate and prepare for the drive. He is at the pub.

Annie does not ask after him. If he is not there then Oswald does not exist. Another subject for the pile of unsaid things that has accumulated between mother and daughter. But though not mentioned directly, his presence is there, felt in what Annie asks.

Annie drags on her cigarette with pursed lips, tight, wrinkled. Vera watches them feeding hungrily – suckle, suckle, pah! – Vera’s mouth transformed into a plum-coloured arsehole.

‘I’m not getting any younger and neither are you’, Annie says. Sharp eyes, an expectant face awaiting its due. Vera stiffens.

‘Well with the way you smoke it’s not like you’ll be around to see them grow up, anyway’ Vera counters, ‘Carry on like that and you’ll give yourself cancer.’

‘Wait any longer and you’ll end up with a retard.’

A slap in the face. Vera sits breathless, knocked by the sting of her words.

‘Emmy wouldn’t like to hear you talking like that. Wouldn’t like you using that word.’

‘Well, your bleeding-heart sister isn’t here, is she,’ Annie lowers her gaze, softens her tone; a change of tactic. ‘I’m just saying, Vera, it’s something you need to consider.’

Two coffee cups sit between them. One empty, one barely touched. Vera watches this woman she’s known since life began stub the end of her cigarette into an already overflowing pile of ash, watches as she picks up the cigarette packet, opens it and carefully selects a new one. On the box, an ice-blue eye, bloodshot and wrenched open by medical instruments, stares at Vera. SMOKING CAUSES BLINDNESS, it reads. Does it also cause DEAFNESS? AMNESIA? MUTENESS? New pictures form in Vera’s mind: an earless head; a brain lobotomised, stitched lips. All Annie.

Annie tosses the packet aside and looks at Vera. The stitches unravel, she speaks – ‘Cuppa?’

†

‘The place smells weird,’ Oswald screwed up his nose, ‘it smells like old people.’

‘It’s just because it’s been closed up.’

‘I thought Emmeline and Ramesh were just here?’

Oswald started to open up windows.

‘You’ll let in the hot air,’ Vera said and suppressed a smile.

He paused, ‘Air con?’

‘There isn’t any. It packed up while Em was here.’

Oswald scowled.

‘There are fans. You’ll live.’

Vera left him to scowl and hunt for fans and stock the fridge with beer. She walked around the house, gently touching objects as she passed them, a wall, the velour of the lounge, the rim of a lamp shade. She smiled. Hardly a thing had changed. Aunt Faye had preserved or neglected it depending on how you viewed such things. Either way, Vera was glad.

This was a house of leftovers and lost items. It was a warren, a shamble of additions and extensions and partially realised dreams. There was room upon room filled with bunk-beds and trundles, baths and toilets, mops and brooms and bar heaters and blankets and board games and bug sprays. There were DVDs and videotapes, CDs and cassettes and even a couple of records – *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*, *The Dark Side of the Moon*, *Madama Butterfly*, *Patsy Cline’s Golden Hits* – chipped mugs, mismatched plates, little porcelain figurines of sweet pink ladies with white poufs, coloured crystal glasses, an assortment of thimbles, a ship trapped in a bottle sitting on top of a DVD Player which sat on top of a video player which sat on top of black box of a television.

The fireplace was blackened brick and grey ash, ghostly remains from the last use. The imitation Persian rug sprawled in front, was scarred by stray embers. It reminded Vera of her father. The few times he had joined Annie and the children, he had appointed himself chief fire-maker and stood rubbing his hands together, pleased as anything with the fire cracking, popping, living, breathing, because of him. But Annie’s fires had burned just as brightly in his absence.

To Vera's delight, the embossed-copper picture of deer in flight still hung on the wall above. She noted with amused satisfaction that though their hue had dulled, the deer still looked terrified.

Vera made her way to the children's rooms. There were two of them, each with two sets of bunk-beds. One contained a garish blue dresser and a matching toy-box, now bereft of toys. This was the room they had played in most. The room they retreated to when Sue and Annie were occupied. After dinner, they would all – Sue, Annie, Vera, Emmeline, Gary, Dave – sit together and watch old movies: *Arsenic and Old Lace*, *Gone with the Wind*, *The Ladykillers*, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* And Sue and Annie would coo over Cary Grant, Robert Redford and Paul Newman. Annie liked Burton but not Gable, Sue, vice versa. Without exception, the children would complain at first and then watching spellbound, silence. Later, they would re-enact scenes out of sight, appropriate characters for their games or just whenever it took their fancy.

'Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn,' Gary and Vera would say to each other when in disagreement, when feeling polite.

'What a dump!' Vera would say at dinner time, which was often followed by a slap across the back of the head as Annie sailed past to seat herself at the head of the table. And, at the end of the meal, when everything was eaten, plates scraped clean, Annie would smile, wipe her lips with a napkin, and with a wink at Sue, say 'I know. Let's play...' a pause, as she folded the napkin precisely, placed it down carefully, the children's eyes on her, 'Get the Guests!' The children screamed and ran from Annie and Sue, who if they caught them would tickle them with their strong, bony fingers until they begged for mercy. Once released, they would gasp like dying fish upon the floor.

On nights when Annie and Sue sat up drinking wine and listening to music, the four children would gather in this room, Vera at the centre, a torch beneath her face as she said in a high, breathless voice – 'No, no, Johnny. You cannot count him. You got

twelve, they got twelve. The old ladies is just as good as you are.’ Emmeline and Dave would be tied to chairs with skipping ropes, eyes bulging – part imitation of Cary Grant, part real terror – as Gary leered at them, while discussing their fate with his accomplice.

Accomplice.

Vera was always torn. She wanted to be Jonathan. Jonathan was in charge. Jonathan with his dead face, his dead eyes, his dead voice; commanding, eerie Jonathan. But she could not resist the opportunity to speak as Dr Einstein spoke. His whine, his accent, it seduced her. And Einstein got to shape Jonathan. To cut and slice and rearrange his face – ‘This time, I want the face of an absolute non-entity!’ And Vera would giggle, a soft, nervous little giggle.

Jonathan would say – ‘What face have you given me?’

‘I’ve given you a bum face.’

‘Vera –’

‘Dr Einstein.’

‘Whatever. You can’t do that,’ Jonathan-Gary or Gary-Jonathan complained. He clenched his fists, ‘Gimme a proper face.’

Dr Einstein stood calmly, which was not at all like Dr Einstein, usually he was bug-eyed and nervous. But Dr Einstein was in control that day.

‘I can’t understand you. Your words sound like farts.’

The two Cary Grants giggled, and then stopped when Jonathan glared at them.

‘Gimme another face.’

‘Stop trying to talk. You’re stinking up the place with your farty-bum breath.’

Gary raised his fists, but Vera wasn’t scared of being hit. Because who hit harder than Annie or Father? And there were worse things than physical pain, so they fought. Arms and legs blurred as fists hit flesh or feet kicked bone or fingers grasped hair and pulled down, down, down, punches to the belly, shoved to the floor, her knees on his chest, her hands around his neck, squeezing.

Vera remembered, vividly, squeezing – just that one time, afterwards Gary said he was too old for games, he was twelve after all – and Annie and Sue, prying her fingers, pulling her off and she was saying calmly, over and over – ‘I’m gonna kill him. Let go. I’m gonna kill him’ – her palms burned with the feeling of warm skin, her thumbs, the hard swell of his Adam’s apple.

Vera couldn’t remember why she had been so angry with Gary, that sudden rush of feeling, the intensity of it overwhelming her body, taking over. She had not cried. Instead she paced the room after the sting of Annie’s hand, back and forth until the lecture was over and she was released.

Behind the closed door, she and Gary compared slap marks. Silent, he traced his finger gently across her thigh, over the red handprint, freckled skin and fine gold hairs, his blue eyes, intent, serious, and she sat there, still, ever so still, as his finger traced up to the edge of her –

‘Everything’s covered in dust.’ Oswald stood in the doorway. ‘All the plates and glasses. The cutlery drawer is filthy. You’ll have to wash everything.’

Snap. Slap. Back.

Oswald. He was a blemish on her otherwise perfect memory. Honestly, Aunt Faye, do you just let *anyone* stay here?

‘Ver, I can’t eat off this stuff. I can’t even have a drink.’

He held a beer.

‘Looks like you’re managing well enough.’

‘Blame Aunt Faye. I would’ve had water, I swear. Chop, chop,’ Oswald winked, ‘there’s cleaning to be done.’

‘You’re capable.’

‘I’m a guest, babe. You can’t expect guests to clean. It’s just not the done thing.’

He smiled. Oswald. So dashing, so charming. Cary Grant, eat your heart out.

Vera meets Enoch at his house in the sober light of day. It's a place he shares with two other boys; peeling wallpaper, rust-stained bath, an odd mix of furniture: adopted, found, IKEA purchases. In Enoch's room there is a bed and Bukowski, Nietzsche, Sartre, Hemingway, Roth on the bookshelf – all the right people, all present and accounted for – George RR Martin hidden at the back, Dali's 'The Persistence of Memory' hangs on the wall, an ashtray and some incense sticks sit by a barely open window. The smell in there is tangible: feet, sweat and cigarettes.

Vera asks him to open the window wider. These are the first words spoken between them inside his room. And then – 'Hemingway,' Vera snorts.

She has never read Hemingway. Once upon a time she heard, or perhaps read, or even, and this is quite possible, imagined, that he enjoyed bullfighting, was a misogynist, and disliked semi-colons. Vera has avoided Hemingway ever since. Such overt likes and dislikes in a man make her uncomfortable, even if she herself distrusts the semi-colon.

Enoch smiles nervously. He offers no defence of the man sitting on his bookshelf and this, perhaps, is his first mistake. If he had, Vera would find herself on the back-foot, unable to adequately, or at least eloquently justify her snort. Instead – and to her relief, as she worries that age may not necessarily give her the intellectual advantage she assumes it should – he simply sits down. And there they are, sitting side by side on a lumpy mattress.

Vera smells laundry powder; sheets freshly washed in anticipation of a female visitor. She watches his Adam's apple bob up and down in quick succession – she resists the urge to take a bite, and then the urge to laugh – and then he hands her his story. The one he has been working on. A piece of himself given over to scrutiny. As she takes the sheets of paper from him, Vera notes that his hands are too big for his

body and wonders, momentarily, if this disproportion mirrors other parts of his anatomy, before beginning to read.

It is so quiet. They are alone in the house. Over and over she looks at the words, barely taking them in. She feels him watching her, hears him breathe, smells him, he is so close. Too close. Too warm. Cheap aftershave and menthol, and that lip; the combination is intoxicating.

She kisses him.

She has to. With skin that soft and inviting, Vera has to touch. She can't bear not knowing, can't bear this ending and finding herself lying in bed wondering what that lip felt like against her own.

And she kisses him because his writing is terrible, and she cannot bring herself to tell him.

†

Arm yourself with rubber gloves.

Armed, Vera washed a cup, a blue aluminium one; she washed and dried it until it sparkled. She had not seen a coloured aluminium cup since forever. Drinking out of them probably gave you Alzeimhers or cancer or scabies or some such thing. Or perhaps that was tinned tuna. It was hard keeping up with Annie's list of everyday items from inside a person's fridge or cupboard that could kill and those that merely maimed or incapacitated.

Vera filled it with water. She sat down in front of Oswald and drank it all in one go. And then, let out a moan of pleasure.

'Funny. Where's mine?'

'I'm all worn out from washing plates and bowls. This was all I could manage in the cup department,' she smiled and offered it to him, 'but feel free to use this one.'

He screwed up his nose, ‘Gross. I don’t want your floaties.’

For someone who was happy to sleep in his own special infusion of sweat and alcohol after a gig, Oswald could be peculiarly pedantic about certain bodily excretions. Those involved in sex were fine. Sweat in that context was a turn on. Even Vera’s period – and probably the period of any other woman he came into contact with – was not a deterrent.

However dirty feet, strands of hair in the bed – wait – strands of *Vera*’s hair in the bed, or an unidentified fingernail – possibly even his own – could trigger an explosion of disgust. An apoplectic fit. Bulging veins, spittle, objects thrown. All within reason, of course.

Of course.

After all, in the world of Oswald and Vera, reason knew no bounds.

†

Vera wandered around the house, restless, not knowing what to do with herself, or how to be still. Oswald had gone out to get dinner, left her with the washing of the cups.

‘Fish and chips,’ he had said, ‘I feel like fish and chips.’ And without waiting for an answer he had left, muttering something about checking out the local tavern on the way.

Vera did not feel like fish and chips and wondered, if the tavern was to his liking, whether he would ever return. Thinking of her pile of books, she wasn’t sure that was really a problem.

Vera sang as she walked through the house. Finding herself back in the kitchen, she slipped off her shoes and slid around on the dusty linoleum. Faded green-grass linoleum – let’s bring the outside in. She left clear trails behind her. She sang the ‘Green

green grass of home'. Her soles would be filthy. When Oswald returns, she thought, I'll rub my feet on his bare legs or wave them in his face when he gets comfortable.

Oswald hated dirty feet.

Dirt and feet were an unforgiveable combination. But this was not dirt. It was dust. It was the breaking down of life – its excrement, the shit left behind. It was dead skin cells, dust mite faecal matter, and the desiccation of tiny insect corpses. It was the outside coming in. Not a fabricated outside, not green-grass linoleum, but soil and sand from beneath shoes, pollen and dry leaves and earth blown down the chimney, creeping in through window cracks and slipping in open doors. But Oswald hated dust, too. Dirt, dust, he did not discriminate.

Dirty, dusty feet in Oswald's face – lick my toes, Babycakes. Fondle my fungus. Tickle my tinea. Caress my callous, loverboy.

Vera smiled to herself and picked up a tea-towel and began to dry the dishes. She slid and sang while she did. Outside, the sky burned. Sweat glistened on her forehead and she paused a moment to push her hair back from her face, push it up, tame it, teach it a lesson, so it stood to attention.

She swaggered about the kitchen and in a deep throaty voice – 'I'm your burning bush, baby,' she flicked the damp tea-towel.

Ke-rack

'My bush burns for you.'

Ke-rack

'Emu, baby,' she coos, 'Emu, baby-girl. You love me, dontcha? Dontcha, baby Emu-girl?

Ke-rack

'My anomaly. My ginga ninga.'

She flung the towel across the room. She did ten push-ups. On the last Vera lowered herself as slowly as possible and rested down on the ground. The floor was

cool against her cheek, against her ear. In one ear came the sound of the sea, steady, rhythmic, wave upon wave, gently calling her – Come. Come. Slip inside my cool, wide belly and swim, glide, be free. And in her other, it seemed that the house hummed, or throbbed, like a faint heartbeat.

†

Vera has long hair. She is a ginger-haired Rapunzel. It spills down her back in tight coils.

‘You have beautiful hair, Emu,’ says Annie often, to which her daughter simply nods and says, ‘Yes, I know.’ This is not from vanity, she is just agreeing with a fact. Just as one plus one does indeed equal two, her hair is indeed beautiful. Vera did not make it so, it just is.

‘Never cut it,’ says Annie, to which Vera says nothing for she finds her hair a nuisance; it tangles easily and is painful to comb out, it gets caught in things like car doors, the springs of bunk-beds, wire fences, and it’s no good in a fight. Occasionally, when she is not looking, children try to climb up it. This hurts like hell and makes her irritable.

When she is thirteen, Vera cuts her hair. Taking scissors, she sits in her room and hacks at it, until there is a sea of fire at her feet. Angry tufts stick out over her near bare skull. She lays the remnants to rest in her parents’ bed, on Annie’s side.

‘You look like a boy,’ says Father.

‘Good,’ says Vera. ‘Boys can’t have babies.’

‘You’ll change your mind,’ says Father the Almighty, as if it is ordained.

‘No I won’t,’ says Vera, ‘no baby’s going to fuck up my vagina.’ And Father smites her with his hand across the back of the head.

Annie says nothing, but stops calling her Emu.

Break of day, Vera hears Annie choking. At breakfast Annie coughs up a ginger hairball. Father complains about the mess. Annie throws a bowl of cereal at the wall and tells him to shut the hell up. It's Vera's cereal. Milk and Weet-bix slide down and come to rest behind the toaster. Everyone is very quiet. Everyone is very still. Emmeline begins to cry. Annie tells her to shut up, as well – A moment's silence, please. For we are in mourning over Australia's finest wholegrain cereal – Vera smiles. She doesn't like Weet-bix. Better on the wall than in her stomach.

Annie keeps the hairball. She saves it in an envelope, locks it away, and brings it out on special occasions. No she doesn't. There is no hairball. That never happened. That would be ridiculous. No. What Annie does, is keep a lock of Vera's hair and on Christmas Day or a birthday or a visit from Vera and Emmeline, when they're over together, Annie, without a word, brings out the hair and sits there stroking it, sighing, as if it is a beloved pet.

'Jesus Christ, Mum,' Emmeline says, 'give it a rest.'

But Vera says nothing. Instead she will book in with a hairdresser immediately and when she sits in the chair, she says, 'Make it short. Make it *real* short.'

†

Vera is a storyteller, a game-maker and a game-player. She likes nothing better.

The best times, the best games, the best stories, are when others are involved. When there is an audience and one willing to participate. She has a sister, which is handy, but there are others, too. Others who get entangled in her words, in her plans: friends, cousins, children Annie babysits. Gary and Dave.

Vera's favourite games and stories involve an element of danger. There has to be an enemy, something or someone to be afraid of or despise. Someone to fight. Fear is wonderful. Fear gets you caught up in the moment, in this other world. It binds you

together, it makes you believe, it makes you forget. You forget about school, about who is friends with who, about who you can sit with at lunch and recess, which is often no one. You forget about sitting in the library, behind a book, to hide from other girls, from other eyes, from those stupid, loud, boys, Spiro – whose name you will never forget – who pointed and asked if you were pregnant, because that second-hand dress you wore ballooned out from your non-existent breasts – you were seven, after all – like maternity wear, and Robbie who called you Carrots – ‘Ehhhh, What’s up doc?’ – whenever the teacher called on you. You forget about being seen alone, vulnerable, the object of fun, of fear, of pity, of stories, a mythology springing up around you that you have no control over. Forget it. Because this is a different world, a different place, where everyone wears a different face, and social hierarchies are forgotten and new ones made, and when it’s your game, it’s your rules, and you get to say who lives, you get to say who dies.

And sometimes people die and they don’t even know it.

Like the adults, who are unknowing participants, unaware that Vera has drawn them in and built a story around them. They are no longer Annie or Father or Sue. No longer guardians. They are the enemy.

Vera and the others scout around the house, creeping, softly, softly, careful little spies – don’t let them see you! Or else.

Or else what?

They eat little children. These adults. These monsters with their shining teeth and shining eyes and pretty manners. They break off bits like gingerbread and stuff them between their fat lips, into their fat cheeks, and crumbs – child crumbs, delectable, sweet little crumbs – catch on saliva and stick to their chins. And later, with great delicacy and the tip of a finger, they collect them one by one, tiny morsels, reminiscences of a meal sublime.

So hold your tongues, my dears, and tread lightly. Make not a sound and let's get in close and take a better look.

Here at the beach house with the silvery light, and the sound of the wind as their cover, the children slip along pathways and walls; they are shadows, whispers, sidling up to windowsills, and peering over. What do they see?

A witch.

Smoke pours from her mouth, from frosted fuchsia lips, her eyelids are a luminous blue, her hair electric. She is reading something, turning pages, a spell-book full of magic and potions and ways to lure men to their deaths. No one says a word, no one moves, all are intensely serious, watching the witch turn pages, breathe smoke.

The witch stops, turns her head, looks right at them, and raises an eyebrow. Without their making a sound, she knew they were there, such is her power. Under the spell of the eyebrow and smoke and Vera's words, words reminding them of the danger surrounding capture, they stand frozen.

And then the *Women's Weekly* is flung, Annie's hand slams down on the table, and she yells 'Get!' shoos them off with a violent wave. They squeal and scatter.

Run! Run! Hearts pounding in their chests they run. Run for your life!

Hidden, they breathe as one, sharp, urgent breaths; air, they can't get enough. And then a calm comes over them. Smiles all round. Whispers. Sue, where's Sue? Their attention turns. Hunting her out, wherever she is – the laundry, the bedroom, coming across the paddocks after a walk. And so it begins again – creeping, creeping, softly, softly...

†

There was no breeze and nothing moved except for the shadows, which grew in the waning light of day. Vera's own shadow was long and thin and very dark. Substantial in form, it moved with purpose, leading the way along the path to the beach. Barefoot, Vera followed. Snakes, a fleeting thought as she looked at the scrub, the dry grass along the fence. Sweat sat on her upper lip; she licked it and tasted salt. The back of her neck began to burn. Shadows don't feel the heat, she thought, they are impervious to snake bites. But the ocean was louder now, its voice more urgent.

'Don't go to the beach without me,' Oswald had said before leaving. 'Wait for me.' Nothing should happen to Vera without his overseeing. All the ways were Oswald's, she thought. If he returned and found Vera gone, he would stamp and pout and throw his little self on the floor – 'This is not how we play!'

But she could not resist the call of the sea, the golden light, the pull of her shadow or the thrill of the game – catch me if you can.

†

Vera is ten. She is allowed to stay at home alone. The family – minus Vera – have gone for a Sunday drive. Vera is doing a homework assignment, she is writing about steam engines. Except that she isn't.

Home alone, the house is very secret and very quiet. It feels like home and at the same time, it doesn't. Under the rug in the kitchen there is a door. Annie tells Vera and Emmeline – 'Do not go down there. That is your father's place for his things and those things are not for little girls.' Vera stands there looking at the rug, trying to be casual about it, trying to not look as if she is very interested in what's beneath. Which of course she is, and the very fact that she has a torch in one hand suggests this. Vera feels like a spy or Bluebeard's wife. She lifts the rug, just the edge, with her foot. There is the

corner of the trapdoor, yellow linoleum peeling up. Vera lowers the rug and looks around.

Sometimes she wonders if Annie is unscrupulous enough to have cameras about the place like in some of the movies she's seen. Just a normal camera, Annie has told her when explaining why she and Emmy must not touch the one they have, is very expensive, so Vera thinks not. But then Annie is clever so she may have managed it somehow.

Mind made up, Vera squats down and flings back the rug.

Hello, Vera.

Hello, door.

She feels a rush, her body tingles, and she opens the door. The cellar is warm and quiet and welcomes her inside – Come in, child, come in. Come see my treasures, child, come see. But hurry! Hurry before they all come back! – It is dark and musty down there and the wooden steps leading in disappear from sight. Treading carefully, with torch in hand, Vera makes her way down.

Once at the bottom she swings the torch from side to side to get an idea of her surroundings, the lay of the land. It is a small space, dusty, cobwebs hang from impossible places, and it is bare except for a stack of cardboard boxes piled up against the back wall and a dead blue tongue lizard on the floor – Poor, Bluey, how did you get stuck down here? – But Bluey doesn't answer. Bluey's dead.

Vera opens a box. Inside are magazines. What's so special about magazines? Little girls can look at magazines. Vera uses her pocket-money to buy second-hand Cosmos and Cleos when Annie takes them to the Central Market on a Friday night for a cheap feed. Vera will rummage through the old magazines and carefully select the ones with sealed sections. But the sealed sections are second-hand, too, so they're split open, paper teeth revealing another world inside: how to please your man; how to have an

orgasm; special stories about unbelievable rendezvous involving numerous characters and exotic places to get you in the mood...

Vera doesn't have a man, but if she did, pleasing him sounds important if how to do it is kept in a specially sealed section that Annie rips out as soon as she finds the magazines stashed under Vera's mattress.

But Father's magazines are much more instructive. Much more detailed in how to please a man or two or three. Or another woman. Or yourself. There are pictures showing what to put where and how things can go in different places – A can go in B but it can also go in C and maybe even D if you're flexible – how utterly charming to be so adaptable! Position yourself like this! Pose like that! Put your fingers there and mouth here and switch and when he does this part your lips – whichever ones are appropriate – and close your eyes and look just so, just so – *Ooooooh*

But maybe, just maybe, ever so slightly, a little – *Owww*.

And if you're not too sure what it's all about from the photos – some get in real close and you can't always tell what is what and which belongs to who, especially when you're ten and the bits in the magazine don't look quite the same as the bits you have – then there are articles and stories that in some respects reveal more than the pictures. They explain how he feels, what he likes, what you should say, and how to get friends and strangers involved or what to do when the pool boy comes around – and for once Vera is relieved that they don't own a pool – or when your boss or teacher calls you into the office and so on and so forth.

So much to learn.

Vera feels weird. She feels wrong. Different. Not herself. She feels *oooooh* reading these magazines down in the cellar, down at the bottom of the stairs, amongst the dust and the cobwebs, by the light of the torch next to Bluey, whose indifference unnerves her.

Vera checks the time, listens out – is it? Could it be? She jumps up and carefully, quickly, puts the magazine back in its box, beneath the right magazine, in-between its rightful brother and sister, in case Father knows, in case Father checks, in case he remembers what goes where and who with. Because they all have faces these magazines; with mouths in an O, and all fast asleep – what are they dreaming? – but there’s no time for that, no time for wondering, so jump over Bluey and run up the stairs – careful they wobble – and into the light! Quick – shut the trapdoor, pull the rug over and try to breathe easy, try not to look guilty, and get back to your steam engines like you never left them.

Vera holds her breath and listens. She’s paused. She’s poised. Breath trapped, heart thumping – let-me-out, let-me-out – listening. And then –

Nothing.

No one is here, no one is home. It’s just Vera and the lizard. But he’s in the cellar. So it’s just her. Just Vera. Alone in the house, alone with the faces, the sleeping faces, that rest in her head.

†

Halfway across the second paddock, Vera heard a car engine in the distance. Looking back, she saw the station wagon pulling up. From where she was it looked like a toy car next to a dollhouse. Inside it, she knew, would be a tiny toy man.

She laughed and quickened her pace. Dry grass, stones and prickles stabbed at her feet, but they were tough, her soles, tough from walking the hot concrete pavements back home in the wilderness of Melbourne’s suburbia. Not like Oswald’s. His were as soft and delicate as a newborn’s.

Vera felt tight, tense, her body filled with anticipation. A little fear. But fear from what, she was not sure. Of the car? Of Oswald? Of being caught before she made

it to the beach and saw it without him? Without his commentary, approval, derision – any of which would lessen the experience. Spoil it.

A car door slammed.

All Vera had to do was make it across this last paddock, this flat land which hid nothing, sacrificed all, into the gnarled arms of the tea-trees which would bury her from sight. Her legs seemed to slow down with that thought. Safety, freedom. It made walking an unnatural, an unfeasible feat. She was a figment in a dream world, a woman with lead limbs.

‘VERA!’

Her name was called.

She stopped and looked at the ground. There was her shadow, elongated, giant, it loomed monstrous over the earth. The shadow of a bird hovered nearby, wings spread. Looking up she saw a hawk, it dipped and rose on a pocket of air.

‘VERA!’

She turned. She couldn’t help it. The tiny toy man was waving furiously at her. Vera waved back – idiot! – and for a moment the shadow of the bird and the shadow of the woman met. Wings flapped and the shadow-woman tried to hold on.

Take me with you, she said.

But she was too heavy.

Fly with me, said the shadow-bird.

But the shadow-woman could not fly, and so, was left behind.

†

In the morning when you wake it is raining. It is November so it is also warm and from the bed, through the window, you see sunlight break through the dark cloud, so the world outside is a cross between a black and white movie and technicolour; the leaves

on the trees, the grass, the terracotta slats on the roofs all seem unreal, or too real, they are so bright.

You sit in bed a while. You feel peaceful, there is no rush. The day will run its course as it is meant to.

You watch the rain and it seems symbolic. In movies and books rain is often cleansing – it clears things away. Out with the old and in with the new. Beginnings and endings. Rebirth and all that jazz.

This rain doesn't feel like that, though.

You think, this rain feels like a pause or a glitch or a bump in the road. The calm before the storm. The moment when shit gets real. It's a whole bunch of clichés and more.

Actually you're not really sure what it is, but something is going to happen. Something is going to change, and there is nothing you can do about it. And you wonder momentarily if on the day you die, you get an inkling, a feeling, that it's going to happen.

And whether this is it.

It rains and it shines and it rains and it shines; it's dark and it's light and it's dark and it's light. By the end of the day, the world is positively luminescent. Everything seems to be lush and glowing from all the sun and rain. Even the buildings, the roads, the trams running through the city seem organic and oddly nourished by the weather. The city is green and slick with rain.

All about you people are rushing around, busy, excited, the sound of shoes crisp and clear and quick on the pavement. Everyone is going somewhere, doing something, because it's Saturday and they all feel so very alive.

Walking along Russell Street you point to a sign in a window, a sign advertising pre-theatre meals – Any Two Courses for \$25 – and you say, remember how we did that

in Europe? Remember how they were everywhere? Remember how cheap it was? And we'd have the whole restaurant to ourselves as no one in Europe eats that early.

Remember that night in Paris when we had jetlag and we did just that and because we had jetlag and we were so tired, we got so drunk, and then we walked through the city at midnight and it was all slick and twinkly with the rain and the streetlights – a bit like today but at night – and everything glowed and we got lost but it didn't matter because it was all so pretty and when it really started to pour we stood in one of the doorways of the Musée d'Orsay and kissed until it subsided and then we ran all the way back to our hotel where the elevator didn't work and the woman who served us breakfast hated us because we couldn't speak French, or at least we assumed that's why she hated us, but maybe she didn't hate us at all but couldn't be bothered with all the bullshit niceties and fake smiles we're so accustomed to but I think she really did hate us and we really, really wanted her to like us but our French was terrible – all I can remember now is *déjeuner* and *petit déjeuner* and, of course, *oui* and *au revoir* – and she knew we wanted her to like us and thought we were pathetic because of this – which you have to admit we were – and by the end we hated her but we were also scared of her, too, and so we had breakfast - *petit déjeuner!* – out on the last morning and – oh! We should go back, we should go back.

And he nods, his arm is around you, and he kisses you on the head and says yes, that's exactly what we should do. But there are other places first. Other places he wants to see.

And you smile and agree and you think, this is nice, how well we're getting on. We're getting along perfectly. *Simpatico* – which is Italian or Spanish or something, but not French – and it feels like the beginning, but with history; the beginning, but with a past to draw on.

In the bar, you sit side by side, and go over the menu carefully together to work out who is going to get what so you can share and try two meals instead of one, because

eating just one gets boring, and you skip to the back to look at dessert because that will also influence what you get for a main – if it's a rich dessert then you don't want a rich main – and usually you might argue a little over this.

But not today. Today, you agree on everything.

And he goes to the bar and places the order and pays and you look around and the place is full and busy, but you don't really notice because it feels like just the two of you, and you think how good it is that even after two years it can be like this, even after all your doubts, this is right and is what it, life, is all about, and then he comes back and sits down and you lean in and push back his hair so you can whisper something in his ear, maybe something about the couple next to you who look like they're on their first date, you're going to whisper it close and soft so it tickles, and then everything slows down.

Everything stops.

Because there it is on his neck, beneath his hair where he can't see, and it is as real and luminescent as the leaves on the trees and the grass and the terracotta tiles this morning. It looks as permanent as a birthmark. Except you know it isn't, because of all the past and history you share, because you have looked at this neck, you have kissed this neck, you have licked and nuzzled and bitten and flicked and rubbed sunscreen on this neck for the past two years, and never before has a hickey like this stared back at you.

Sure you may have imparted a few of your own, but you knew about them. You expected to see them. This thing is like a little 'fuck you' note left by someone – a woman you assume, but considering, you realise suddenly, how little you know about this person sitting here, or certainly not as much as you thought, you can't be entirely sure – and you just sit there, staring, wracking your brain over when and how and where and who and all the obvious questions, and why did you not see this coming? Should you have seen it coming? Are people going to be like – Oh, we thought you *knew*. We

thought it was obvious. In the way that people do, in the way that people always know, always have prior knowledge, insight, of which they will only admit to once the thing itself is revealed.

And then you say – What the fuck is that?

Not because you actually want to know, not really. But because it seems like the appropriate thing *to* say. It's what you should say.

But the words come out all funny, all stiff and polite, and it's because you don't have the energy. You're too tired for everything connected with this small and, to the uninformed eye, seemingly insignificant mark.

And he just looks at you, slightly terrified, and says in an uncharacteristically meek voice – What the fuck is what?

You tell him. You just say the word and wait. You wait for him to tell you that it is some kind of joke – an accident with a vacuum cleaner, perhaps? Ho ho ho – some kind of misunderstanding. You want reassurance. You want everything to go back to the way it was before this smutty little revelation. You want your ignorance back.

But instead, he says – Maybe we should go home and talk about this?

Or some cowardly bullshit.

From this point everything starts to feel vague and far away. Just out of reach. Someone – it's you, you know it's you, even though it feels like someone else, something about the voice, even though it sounds a bit whiny, a bit unnatural – is saying all the usual stuff, saying all the lines you've heard from other people, from movies, from books, from the collagen plumped up lips of the actors from *The Bold and the Beautiful*, so familiar are they, that they lack conviction. You are unable to breathe new life into them. You actually wish *you* would shut up.

You are suddenly aware of the young couple sitting near you and that they have gone rather quiet. Too quiet. And you realise they are hanging on every word. You want

to turn around and say – What the fuck are you looking at? – or – Run while you still can and don't stop, don't look back, it's all going to end in tears – but you don't.

Instead you just feel embarrassed.

You can feel their pity. Feel their relief that this is happening to somebody else. And the weight of what has happened swamps you – telling people, or telling some people and others finding out through those people; trying to laugh it off, but just seeming all the more pathetic for doing so, for trying to put on a 'brave face'; or weeping and getting hideously drunk and making a spectacle for the barely suppressed amusement of others. None of this seems appealing. Particularly the idea that the whole fiasco will take on a life of its own, unravelling in ways you can't predict or control.

You get up.

He gets up.

You're walking along Russell Street again. You walk past the pre-theatre dinner sign again and remember that you forgot to cancel your meals. You go to say something and then you stop, because you don't want to say anything to him. Not now. Not yet. Speaking will initiate a conversation that you're not sure you're ready for. For details, for answers, that you're not sure you want to hear – ever. Because they can't be taken back. Can't be unsaid.

And all you really feel like doing is throwing up or falling asleep, because you feel that if you throw up enough or sleep long enough it will all just go away.

Sitting in the car, you close your eyes, and suddenly you have the urge to laugh. You have the urge to laugh because you remember how you wondered whether this was the day you were going to die. And not to be dramatic but you can't help thinking that death would be less exhausting.

At least you hope so.

Later that night, you lie in your sister's spare-room and you want to cry. But for some ungodly reason, you cannot.

Instead, you remember how one night in Paris after too much wine he became convinced the waiter kept looking at you and decided that if he didn't stop looking at you, he was going to punch him in the face, and so you had to abruptly leave your meal and take him outside, where you both screamed at each other in the laneways of the Latin Quarter as chicly dressed Parisians, walking between chicly decorated bars, paused momentarily to look disdainfully at you both until he told you to 'go fuck yourself' and walked towards the Seine with the intention, you hoped, of throwing himself in, and you went back to the hotel room to seethe and prepare yourself mentally so that upon his return at 4 am, you could hurl insults and a glass ashtray at him.

And you wonder why you forgot all of this in your earlier reminiscing, the twinkly lights of Paris catching on the shattered remains of the ashtray and the chip in the wall only centimetres from your beloved's head.

The romance of it all.

You lie there, wide-eyed in the dark, aware of your phone silently flashing as he tries to call for the fiftieth time, and you dread waking up in the morning – if you ever get to sleep in the first place – because you'll have to remember it all over again. This thing that happened to you, that is somehow a reflection of who you are, that you could let it happen.

And it is a thing that you can't even bear to think of in terms of 'I', so that when you think of it, it is only in terms of 'you', as if you are slowly and gently explaining it all to a small child.

†

Vera stood on the porch. Oswald was inside fixing drinks and she could hear the faint clatter and chink of glasses and cutlery. Night had fallen, and moths flitted around the porch light. She watched them for a moment and then turned to stare out into the

darkness; it felt vast, like the rest of the world had been swallowed up and all that was left was the house and the ground upon which the light fell.

Without looking she could feel him there, just behind, in the doorway.

‘No moon,’ she said.

‘Of course there’s a moon. Get the door, will you?’

Vera opened the flyscreen and Oswald came out setting down two glasses, a bottle of wine and a plate with cheese and crackers on a small table. He stepped back into the entrance and turned off the kitchen light.

‘Leave it on,’ she said, unable to bear the thought of the house in darkness and only the porch-light to keep them safe, keep them anchored.

He rolled his eyes, shook his head and sat down, ignoring the request.

A large moth dropped onto a piece of cheese, ripe and sweaty in the heat. The creature stuck to it, left a trail of fine orange dust as it tried to break free.

Vera watched transfixed. What was that? Was it part of the insect? Was it falling to pieces in front of them? Or, were those remnants like the hair she left scattered around, unaware, unperturbed by its loss, the moth’s size and their proximity to it, merely magnifying the process, the shedding. Dust, she thought. The house is full of moth dust. My feet are covered in moth dust.

Feeling a strange connection to the struggling insect, she moved to scoop it up and send it fluttering into the darkness, or back to the light.

With a sudden movement, Oswald flicked the moth to the ground and crushed it with his thong.

Vera gasped.

‘What?’ said Oswald.

‘What did you do that for?’

‘It was on the cheese,’ he peered at her in the yellow light. He looks bad, Vera thought, he looks old. ‘What do you care, anyway? You hate moths.’

‘No I don’t.’

‘Yeah. You do. You hate them. You’re scared of them – of that crap they leave all over the place.’

‘Nup,’ she said with a shake of her head.

‘Do we have to argue about this?’

Oswald was not in a good mood. The fish and chips were expensive and soggy. The tavern was closed. He jabbed a finger at the plate between them, ‘Just have some cheese and I’ll pour the wine. Chrissake.’

Don’t take the Lord’s name in vain, Vera thought. She wanted to say it. Not because she was religious, nor was Oswald, but because it would be funny. Or more accurately, Oswald’s reaction would be funny. He hadn’t been brought up a Catholic, but he had gone to a Catholic school and, as a result, had a complicated relationship with the Lord. Vera couldn’t quite predict what his reaction to such a statement would be – would he silently seethe? Or blow up and have a tantrum? The latter would make her laugh, but the former, though amusing, was also exhausting, and so she decided against it. You really had to have the energy and commitment for that kind of response, and it was far too hot for that.

Instead, Vera took up the knife and selected a cracker. Each motion was executed in a careful, deliberate manner. She cut a piece of moth-cheese and placed it on the cracker. There was a small black smear on it. Vera did not look at Oswald, not yet, although she knew she had his full attention – he did not move, he did not make a sound.

Vera raised the cracker, and, mouth open, she looked up and into Oswald’s eyes. He went to speak and she put the whole thing in. Put it in and chewed slowly, watching him. The cheese was a strong sharp blue, and that was all she could taste. If she thought about it too hard, what was in her mouth, she knew that it was likely to come back up; an undignified and wasted end to her effort. So she thought of it as a tribute, a solemn

act on behalf of the moth – Take, eat: this is my body – at the end of which, she would sprout soft brown wings and fly away into the star-filled, moonless night.

‘That’s disgusting,’ Oswald shook his head, ‘You’re disgusting you know that?’

Vera swallowed and laughed.

‘I’m not kissing that mouth,’ he said, ‘I’m not kissing your mothy mouth.’

‘Good,’ she said and picked up her glass – Drink ye all of it; for this is my blood of the covenant – and she drained the wine.

Vera could see Oswald, just on the edge of her line of vision, helping himself to something from the plate. She stared out in front, out into the darkness, into the pitch-black of a world without light, above there were stars, galaxies, endless, infinite sky, a barely visible sliver of moon that shed no light, a new moon, a new cycle beginning while they sat there, in darkness. Vera turned her glass round and round in her hands. The warmth of the wine had spread into her cheeks and legs.

Normally she turned her nose up at drinking. Drinking was something that Oswald did and for that reason she avoided it. Vera used to drink. She used to do it quite well, if getting blind drunk was the desired outcome. But after she met Oswald, he took over. Excelled at it. And Vera didn’t like being second best.

Tonight, however, Vera felt like drinking. It was this alone time that got her in the mood. Time together, without the interruption or distraction of television, friends, family, jobs, the daily grind. Just the two of them sitting together in the heat and silence and dark, unable to find words to start a conversation.

A piece of cheese flew through the air and landed at the edge of the pool of light which surrounded them. With the wine moving lazily around her body, Vera did not flinch. Did not show any indication of registering the flight of this tiny piece of matter. Although she could not see it properly she knew it was the remaining piece of moth cheese.

Vera turned to pour a glass of wine. Oswald was smiling at her. Vera smiled back and filled her glass. Then, still smiling, she motioned the bottle his way, an offer of a refill. And he, extending his glass, graciously accepted. They clinked glasses, a toast – a toast to Vera and Oswald, to alone time, to Vera’s fallen comrade, the moth.

Three cheers and for he’s a jolly good fellow. Or she is.

Vera looked back to the fallen cheese. Even from this distance she could see that ants had found it. They moved furiously over its surface, a black writhing mass, angry in the artificial light.

†

Her fingernails are always dirty and bitten, her cuticles torn. On the middle finger of her left hand there is a lump, a callous, from holding a pencil, from writing so much. From writing too much.

‘Look at your hands, Vera,’ Annie always says, shaking her head. ‘Just look at them.’

Vera writes alone. Vera writes with Gary. They fill notebooks together. Collaborating when they are on the Peninsula – ‘Staying at the Corn,’ as Gary likes to say – sometimes they write in the dark, one sneaking into the other’s room, sometimes at the beach in the abandoned, unfinished, husk of a beach-shack, sometimes sitting on the red rocks by the lighthouse.

Today they sit on the porch with the sound of the galahs in the trees. Gary is writing and Vera dictating. This happens more often than not. Vera likes to tell the story, shape it, with Gary interjecting occasionally, but mainly following her direction. Gary’s writing is neater than Vera’s. Because she is left-handed, Vera finds that the words smudge as the pencil moves across the page. She likes to check what is written at

the end, to make sure Gary got everything down just right, and she likes to read her words in such neat print.

Just as Vera is getting into full swing with her dictation a large, bright white cockatoo lands on the ground in front of them. It cocks its head, eying them off, these two small, dirty humans. They stare back. The cockatoo swivels its head to the other side to check if that is a better angle from which to view them, and then, seemingly bored with what their presence offers, it begins to walk back and forth on its big clown feet. Mesmerised, they watch. The cockatoo's head bobs up and down, it chatters to itself, a feathered madman.

Vera speaks and Gary writes the story of a very pale man with a golden mohawk and enormous feet who walks the streets of Marden, bobbing his head and muttering. If children stare too long, or get too close, he squawks loudly and pecks out their eyes.

His name is Squawky Mohawky.

Adelaide is filled with eyeless children, blind as bats. Who can hear but can't see, and like bats, have developed a sonar system for detecting objects, for making their way in the world. And so they listen for those heavy clomping feet, head cocked, deciphering the echo of sound waves, the direction from which they emanate.

And then they run the other way.

Because here comes Squawky Mohawky.

Clomp Clomp Clomp

The sound of his feet echoes in the perpetual darkness.

Clomp Clomp Clomp

No.

Gary interjects.

He doesn't steal the eyes of children. It's adult eyes he craves. And then he eats the children. Sometimes whole. Sometimes bit by bit.

‘This is nice, isn’t it?’ said Oswald, ‘Just the two of us, here.’

Vera nodded. She was half listening. There was a high whine close to her ear and she swatted at it. It disappeared, and then, seconds later, returned. Small lumps began to appear on her arms and legs. Itchy already from sweat, her body burned with tiny bites. She started to scratch one on her forearm, keeping an eye out for the culprit, or culprits.

‘Don’t scratch, you’ll make it worse.’

‘I can’t help it.’

‘Sure you can. It’s all in the power of the mind. You don’t see me scratching.’

‘That’s because I’m here. They never go for you when I’m around.’

Oswald smiled at her, a white, even smile, so white that his teeth didn’t appear to belong to him. They seemed to have a life of their own, carrying on in their perfection regardless of how the rest of his body fared. How it aged.

‘Must be because you’re tastier.’

She smiled back, tight-lipped, ‘Must be.’

One of the bites was bleeding, but scratching it felt too good, made her feel high with pleasure. So much blood came from one small bite and her arm was streaked with red. Vera started on her legs with long vigorous motions. She was half aware of the sound of something moving out in the darkness.

‘Did you hear that?’ said Oswald sitting up in his chair.

Vera stopped scratching and listened. Something heavy was shuffling around in the paddock as if its body was caught in a bush or fence. Back and forth it moved, twigs and dry leaves cracking with the effort.

Probably a sheep, she thought. Lost. Strayed from a neighbouring farm. Or maybe it hadn’t. Maybe this was exactly where it had headed.

‘What do you think it is?’ Oswald held his glass tightly, listening to the disembodied sound, wide-eyed, like the child that thinks the bump in the night is probably nothing, but what if?

‘Velociraptors,’ said Vera, ‘I hear they’re quite common on the Peninsula.’

‘Don’t be an idiot.’

‘You’re right. It sounds too slow for a Raptor. Maybe it’s a zombie.’

Oswald rolled his eyes and got up.

‘I’m going to have a look.’

The intrepid explorer.

‘Aren’t you scared?’ said Vera. And grinned at him.

Vera wasn’t scared, that’s why she didn’t have to look.

Oswald walked off into the darkness. She could hear his footsteps and the thing in the bush. A zombie, she thought, I hope it’s a zombie. She thought about it moving around out there, slack-jawed and vacant eyed, its face peeling away, dirty infected fingers reaching, groping in the darkness for food. For flesh. Maybe more were coming. Maybe they were surrounded, but they just didn’t know it because it was so very dark. Maybe Oswald would be torn to pieces.

Vera yawned. The wine and the heat were making her sleepy.

I’d smell them if they were here, she thought, smiling lazily and stretching. Ripe in the heat, worse than the cheese, which she was sure was turning. And there would be flies, more than there were now; a mountain of flies. The zombies would have flies spilling out of them, crawling out of their mouths and noses – or what was left of them – out of their shredded, rotting flesh.

Vera loved zombies. She would like to be a zombie extra in a movie. She’d like to bite someone’s face off.

There was a long, low moan. Oswald stopped and she heard his voice, a strange anxious version of his voice, ‘Hey, hey you.’ And he whistled as if whistling for a dog.

And then there was silence.

†

It was by her ear again. A faint buzz, it got louder until the sound filled her head. She sat very still, listening to that and the sound of her heart, of her blood pumping through her veins.

One of its brothers or sisters was on her arm, feeding. She watched its small black body throbbing as it gorged on her blood. It was getting fatter and fatter and fatter.

With a sudden movement she brought down her hand.

Her arm was smeared with red and black.

The porch light flickered.

A figure moved towards her, out of the shadows, out of the vacuum.

†

‘God,’ says Gary.

Vera screws up her nose, thinking about this. Such a short word, yet seemingly vast when articulated. It is rather like striking a gong, it resonates. She is, of course, familiar with God. Who isn’t? It’s a name that gets thrown around a lot and she’s seen him in cartoons shown on TV around Easter and Christmas. Or maybe it’s Jesus she’s thinking of? She gets them confused. They both have beards. Except at Christmas when Jesus is a baby. She knows this because at school they teach them about how Jesus was born in a manger. And she has read *The Worst Kids in the World*, which she liked until Imogene – her favourite – started being good. Became Mary in the school pageant. But, still, for her, this God stuff, it’s all a bit vague. Not like Gary and Dave who have to go

to Sunday school and are taught it all. Sue's friend Rod goes to church and now so does Sue.

'He's everywhere,' says Gary, 'like *everywhere*. He knows what you're doing *all* the time and what you're thinking. He's in your head and knows if you have bad thoughts.'

'Sounds like Father Christmas.' Another man with a beard, Vera thinks.

'A bit, I guess,' says Gary, 'except when you're bad he sends you to hell.'

Hell. Another word Vera is familiar with. Annie says it a lot, and again, there are cartoons with devils and pitchforks and fire. Like God, the word is short. But when spoken it is like a dog's bark; abrupt, final.

'But do you believe in God?' Vera asks.

Gary sits quiet for a bit and then shrugs and shakes his head, 'Nah, it's just Rod's dumb shit,' he says. 'He likes to scare us with it.'

†

'It's gone whatever it is,' said Oswald. He was trying to sound pleased but Vera could tell he wasn't. 'Some kind of animal, yeah? Maybe a wombat?' He looked at her hopefully.

'Probably,' she said, 'Do wombats moan like that?'

Oswald looked annoyed. He started to pack up the plates and glasses: 'Grab the wine, will you?'

Vera followed him inside, bottle in hand.

'Could've been a person,' she said. 'People moan like that.'

And she wasn't sure, but she thought Oswald faltered. Just the tiniest bit. And with his back to her, he said, 'I wish you wouldn't say shit like that,' and began to scrape cheese into the bin.

Vera smiled.

The smell of rank cheese filled the kitchen.

†

Vera climbs walls in her sleep. Not every night, but some. She did this as a child. She does it as an adult. She slips out of the window and runs up the outside of the house or apartment block, depending on where she is.

She is slower now, for age is catching up with her, outrunning her, it seems. She is often out of breath when she makes it to the roof. Here, she'll pause, and then eyes wide and bright, run along, banging down hard on the corrugated iron or terracotta tiles, hissing and growling. She howls at the moon.

Vera has a tail. When she's finished howling, she hangs by her tail and watches Oswald sleep.

As a child she watched Gary or Emmeline or Annie. Emmeline was a sweaty sleeper. She slept as if in fever. Flushed cheeks and arms flung over her head, lips moving, reciting silent incantations. Gary slept like the dead, breath deep and steady - and yes, the dead don't breathe, unless they forget they are dead - Later on, when they were older, Vera came and, on the occasion she saw no shadow by his side, Gary still slept like the dead. But he slept with eyes open, unseeing, body in a state of rigor mortis, stiff up against the wall. She longed to reach out and stroke his hair, to curl beside him, but she could not. She could only watch. Annie, like Gary, slept with eyes open. Nothing moved, except her lips - pah, pah, pah - suckling the cigarette that was not there; babe without dummy. Vera only visited when Father was absent.

Watching Oswald is not so interesting. Oswald is always there. Oswald snores. He sleeps through the night, his arm over Vera, sometimes his head on hers, his teeth grinding in her ear. On occasion he squeaks or lets out a small cry, dream noises. She no

longer wonders what he dreams. She doesn't care. The only time he wakes and remains unsettled is when Vera shakes him and says –

Oswald? Oswald? Are you awake? There's someone outside, someone watching. Can't you hear them? Can't you see – there! See? – A woman at the window...

†

Vera dreamt of their old apartment.

Their first place, with the pale green carpet they both detested, christened with red wine and nail polish. They had loved it in the beginning. Loved it for its Art Deco doors and its Art Nouveau ceilings, for the unusable fireplace and the tree that stood outside their bedroom and scratched on the window. Loved it because it was part of such a small block, that they shared with so few. Middle-class professionals, single men, single mothers, couples, respectable, normal people. Long-term residents, no fly-by-nighters.

Then as time went on, Vera began to loathe it. She loathed it for its wooden doors and brick walls that somehow failed to keep in the warmth in winter and yet managed to retain the heat of summer, loathed it for the lack of windows and the perpetual darkness that inhabited every room, for the feeling that with every day it grew that much smaller, that she became that much more claustrophobic when she entered, and she loathed it because they shared with so few people, with permanent residents, who owned their apartments, and didn't rent like Vera and Oswald, and thereby knew everything which went on within their walls, every time a voice was raised, every broken glass, every infidelity.

The others watched and listened and knew.

And Vera and Oswald stayed for as long as she could bear it. Until she felt no longer welcome, for they were no longer respectable. They had been found out. She sensed the resentment in the others, resentment that they had not been careful. Their scandalous lives were no longer to be enjoyed and were instead, to be feared. Feared because they touched a nerve, reminded others of their own secrets, their own flaws which they had managed to conceal under a veneer of Sunday walks and smiles. How could you? Their eyes seemed to say when on occasion they met her own: How could you be so careless?

In Vera's dream she could still feel them there as she stood in the foyer at the top of the stairs. Feel them behind the closed doors, their ears pressed against the walls, bated breath as they waited for something to happen.

She stood outside their old door. Number seven. It was now somebody else's home, someone she had never met, but when she tried the door it was unlocked, it opened easily. Inside, there was strange furniture, alien in a place filled with such familiarity, such memory. It belonged to an old woman and a baby. There was no reason that Vera should know that, but she did.

Perhaps because it was her dream.

She walked through the apartment, looking from room to room. The occupants were not there but she felt, suddenly, that they would soon be back.

He was there, too. He had followed her. Unable to leave her alone in this place. He was behind her, close enough that she could feel his breath on her neck. And then, without wanting to, without her even knowing how it started, they were kissing. They were taking off each other's clothes, each with a sense of urgency. A shared agenda: the act of sex. It must be consummated before the child and woman return. It was blurred, yet strangely intimate; dream sex. She could not make his face out properly. Just pieces: eyes, nose, mouth, became clear momentarily and then disappeared before she could hold on to them and make a whole.

When they were finished she felt dirty. She turned to say something to him, to ask him something, but he was gone. And so was the question.

Vera was alone on the floor in the bedroom.

It was cold, much colder than she remembered it ever being. Looking around she could see that there were two suitcases: one large and one so very tiny her heart broke to see it. Clothes were neatly packed inside. And a doll. A doll with black curls and sapphire eyes. A doll that was polished plastic, hard, cold, naked. Like Vera. Passports sat on the dresser. They were going away. The woman was taking the child away and Vera could not bear to think of that. To think that they were going away, going on with their lives and leaving her behind. Cold and alone. These people she did not know. These people who must not find her sitting on the floor of their apartment.

A light went on. There were voices in the stairwell. A key at the door. They were home. They must not see her. Vera was naked and they must not see her. Vera was naked but torn. They must not see her but the old woman must not take the child. She must not. She *mustn't*.

Someone pushed a letter under the door –

†

Vera woke.

It was raining. Or at least this was her first impression. After a moment or two she realised it was the fan. She was hung-over with sleep, with leftover dreams and the strange sensation of waking up in a bed that was not her own.

I am in the house, she thought. I am back in the house.

She tried to orient the room in her mind – the door is to my left, there is a window in front and Oswald to my right. Her eyes were open but it was too dark to see, so dark that she felt as if she'd lost herself. Vera stretched out a hand and found

Oswald's face, or at least what felt like Oswald's face. Yes, presuming that was Oswald – and she was fairly certain that it was – then she had found herself.

Oswald groaned, and it was definitely an Oswald groan. Almost certainly. Which meant that she, Vera, *was* in the house, the house was in Corny Point, Corny Point was on the Yorke Peninsula, the Yorke Peninsula was in South Australia and so on and so forth. She had pinpointed her location to an exact point in space, and very probably time. Or she could if there was a clock. And then of course this would be assuming the clock was right, not faulty or tampered with or for some reason or other had the time for London, England or Beirut, Lebanon or Colombo, Sri Lanka instead of the time for this point in space. Some people liked to know what the time was in those places even when they weren't there.

But what she did know was that this was the time in which Vera and Oswald were on holiday. They were holidaying together so they could have some alone time. Time without others. Alone time together. Together in their loneliness. And not in the presence of the loneliness of others.

Yes, all was present and accounted for.

She wished she had woken up in a different room. In a different point in time and space. For one thing, it was very, very hot. The heat was something she thought about a lot when it was there. She wasn't sure if this was a throwback from her English heritage but the weather in general seemed to be a point of great contention for her. But this heat was something else. It was a never-ending heat. It had sucked the air out of the room. The fan, try as it might, was simply moving hot air from one spot to another. It shifted like dry sand when one was trying to dig a hole, slipping smoothly back in to place. There was no relief.

And for another reason, she was next to Oswald.

Sometimes Vera wanted to skip forward to a time and place without Oswald. Where his absence was not really felt. A happier time, a happier place. The problem

with that was that she was not sure such a place existed. No. What she was not sure of was whether she could exist without Oswald.

Flagellation.

This word came to mind when she thought of Oswald. When she thought of her need. But who was doing the flogging? Who was punishing who? Perhaps what they were both guilty of was self-flagellation.

Oswald wanted children. Oswald wanted his own children. They would be like him. Look like him.

‘Why don’t you want my children?’ he would say to Vera. ‘Just imagine how beautiful they would be. Your hair, my eyes and skin, your height.’

We cut ourselves to pieces, thought Vera, selecting what we believe are our finest attributes and put them together to make the desired offspring. But children had minds of their own. A will of their own. They would come together any which way. And sometimes not at all.

Vera had created children in her writing; warm, wonderful children. Children that didn’t grow up. Children that didn’t surprise, that said all the things she wanted, were inquisitive about the right things. The things she liked. The things she knew about. She liked these children. Her children. The reality might disappoint, like the lovers she’s had.

The lovers in her writing were nothing like the ones she had encountered in reality. She mourned the ones she had created. Mourned that she would never know them in the flesh. That they would never be realised. Never be hers.

And so with children, the whip cracked. The flogging began.

No. Vera enjoyed saying no. Denying Oswald what he wanted. No, I do not want your children. Babies, meh. Especially yours.

Crack

Oswald laughed and dipped his dick elsewhere.

Crack

The places Vera and Oswald inhabited accumulated so many women, so many babies, they had to keep moving. Problem was Vera was not sure Oswald even noticed them.

Crack

Enoch asked Vera, just the once, if she wanted children. She shrugged and said – ‘Do you?’ – as it seemed as if he wanted to be asked more than wanting an answer. Because his was the answer that mattered. For he was so very young and in his mind she was a woman and therefore it was a given, regardless of whether she said yes or no, that she would want children.

‘Yes, of course.’

Of course.

And then, ‘What if *we* had a baby –’ Vera’s eyes opened wide and he faltered ‘not that we would, I mean, say just for fun – what do you think it would look like?’

For fun? But for fun is all that you are, Boy.

And Vera saw him now, as she lay there in the moist darkness, saw him in his nakedness, his fine bones, moving beneath his soft, smooth skin. Delicate ribs would reveal themselves as he stretched out beneath her – she wanted to lick them one by one, right up to his nipple half hidden by downy hair. She wanted to bite into him and chew on his tender bones, on the cartilage and sweet marrow. Sup on his insides. Gnaw on the hip bone which jutted out so invitingly above jet-black curls of hair. She wanted to devour him.

Figuratively speaking, of course.

Of course.

†

Vera has not been fair. Not at all fair to her and Oswald and this thing that they refer to as ‘a relationship’. No, Vera, you haven’t. You may not like each other much, but there’s always love. Love for each other, love for others, love for the façade...

You are not trying hard enough, Vera. You and Oswald have accumulated so much together. A pair of hoarders, you collect and hold on to things, to possessions, to people, to dreams. This is what makes ending something so hard, there are so many loose ends to tie up, to resolve. For there is the furniture – why, you’ve only just bought a brand new couch, a plush charcoal grey modular. You can’t break up when you’ve just bought a modular! When you finally have something comfortable to sit on and fully appreciate the wide-screen TV from – and then there is the lease and your friends and the dog you’ve thought about getting – or dogs, just so you could name them Chuck and Norris – and the children which haunt you.

Except that the children which haunt Oswald – those ghostly miniatures of himself that play in the back of his mind and set the clock ticking – are not the same ones that haunt Vera.

†

The room grew light as night was replaced by a pale grey dawn. The child sat at the end of the bed. Vera and the child regarded each other in silence. Had it been hours since the child appeared, or only minutes? Time was a sneaky thing, and the older Vera got, the more aware she was of just how sneaky time could be.

Vera wondered when the child was last bathed or washed. His hair – she thought of the child as a boy even though it was at that sexless age and could be either, but she did not want to think of it as *it* and so she dubbed it he. Him. She named him Child – and so, *his* hair was long and matted and greasy looking, and *his* feet were dirty. He smelt of the sea and wore nothing but shorts, threadbare and barely hanging on, and

Vera could see his birdlike ribs expand and contract beneath the skin. Shadows bloomed under chipped-ice eyes.

Child gave her the tiniest of smiles, just one corner of his mouth, the slightest twitch, uneasy, unsure, like his whole countenance, as he was perched like a sparrow, ready to take flight. Vera was torn between wanting to gather him in her arms, to fold herself around him and keep him close, and a feeling of repulsion, of disgust, of wanting to strike him, to thrust him out of the window she presumed he came in.

Vera opened her mouth to speak but Child shook his head and looked at the sleeping Oswald. Vera followed his gaze and they watched him together, that man, lying there, oblivious to the presence of either, on his back snoring softly, his mouth open, chin resting unflatteringly against his neck. Two chins, Vera thought unkindly, maybe three. A mouth to drop dead flies into.

Or moths.

And immediately she wanted to laugh. Looking over she saw that Child's eyes were bright and his lips were pursed tightly together. His body shook ever so slightly. Vera snorted and Child's finger flew up to his mouth – *Shhhh!* His eyes said. Don't wake the sleeping ogre.

Vera looked away, looked at the wall, anything but at Child or Oswald, and breathed evenly, deeply, biting her lip: Do. Not. Laugh. Do. Not. Laugh. She felt a movement on the bed. Child was up on the window ledge, squatting, fingers clutching the edge. An overgrown pygmy possum, she thought and found herself searching for the flick of a tail. Eyes wide, he stared at her – bright, unblinking, nocturnal eyes, too big for his face. He studied her, waiting for her to say or do something, beseeching her, but for what?

Vera could not hold his gaze and closed her eyes. She could feel Oswald's body next to hers. Feel the heat coming off of it. Vera wore knickers and that was all. Oswald

was naked. Oswald would like Vera to sleep naked, but she refused. She must have something, even just the thinnest fabric, between them.

Oswald moved, he rolled onto his side and put his arm across her, across her stomach, just below her breasts. His arm was heavy, it weighed her down, pushed her so far into the mattress she felt she would pass through the fabric and become entangled in the springs. From the open window Vera could hear birds, seagulls. There was something about their cry which took her breath away.

When she opened her eyes, she was alone with Oswald.

†

Sometimes when they go to Corny Point they leave Father at home. He's not working but he needs a break. This is what Annie tells them.

They don't leave Gary's dad behind. Gary's dad doesn't need a break, because Gary doesn't have a dad. They have a Rod. But not a dad. Rod is Sue's, not theirs. They don't want him.

'Where's your dad, Gary?'

'I dunno, don't got one.'

Gary and Dave's dad is a mystery. There is Gary and Dave without a dad, but the very fact that there is Gary and Dave means there was a dad.

'It's biology. Sex', says Gary.

Or maybe he just says 'sex' and Vera has added 'biology' over the years of remembering.

'What happened to your dad, Gary?'

'Dunno.'

Sue does not speak of him.

Dave says he remembers him but Gary says Dave is a liar. Dave is very calm, very matter-of-fact, ‘No, I think I do. He smiled a lot. He was quiet and gentle. I think I remember his laugh –’

And Gary hits Dave.

‘No!’

This happens over and over again. The same scene repeated. But the Gary and the Dave in the scene change, grow, wear different clothes. The punch gets harder. Gary can’t stand Dave knowing, remembering, having something he can’t have. Can’t see. There aren’t even any photos to look at, to make up memories with. Sue has erased their father. And so Dave is hit. Gary can’t control himself, his arm just springs out.

Yet even knowing this, knowing what’s to come, no matter how many times this happens, Dave’s voice remains resolute. He seems unable to hold back the words, like Gary unable to control his fist, as if by saying it, sharing it, Dave makes it real. So, Dave speaks –

Thunk!

But Dave never fights back. Doesn’t even yell or threaten. Even though he’s older, even though he’s bigger. At first Vera thinks him weak. If Emmeline hit her, she’d have her down on the ground, pushing her face in the dirt, making her scream – Mercy!

And then his calm, his inaction, unnerves and fascinates her.

In the end, Gary is the one who stops.

One day, Dave mentions their father and Vera waits, her eyes locked on Gary’s hand. His right hand. His writing, hitting hand.

But Gary seems not to have heard.

Instead he says, ‘You guys hear about that dead woman they found at the old police station?’

Gary trumps Dave with death. They all want to know about the dead woman. The mystery of Gary and Dave's dad is old news, at least for Vera and Emmeline.

'What police station?'

'The one at Payneham. They don't use it anymore.'

Vera knows it. She walks past the building when Annie takes them to the library.

'Kid from school said he saw her, the dead woman. Said he saw her body. Said she was naked,' Gary pauses for dramatic effect, 'Poked her eye with a stick and maggots popped out.'

The story unsettles Vera. For some reason the women in Father's magazines come to mind. She thinks of them, lying spread out on the glossy pages, naked, waiting. Their breasts, varying in size and shape, seem particularly vulnerable; the nipples hard, bite-sized. Vera crosses her arms over her own chest. Beneath the flesh is tender, her nipples sensitive, sore. She feels embarrassed, angry. Vera snaps and tells Gary the kid is full of shit. Gary tells her she doesn't know shit.

Gary is now fascinated with death. Adelaide is full of it, he tells Vera when they are alone. Full of murders and disappearances. Forget making up stuff – there's bodies in freezers and disappearing children out there.

'There's a couple'a guys goin' round in a brown car at the moment, picking up kids. Call you over, all nice and friendly, and then you're gone.'

'Gone where?'

Gary shrugs, 'Gone as in dead gone, I reckon. Chopped up somewhere. Probably do stuff to ya first.'

He looks at Vera, waiting for her to ask what sort of stuff. But she doesn't. Vera doesn't want to ask. Vera doesn't always like Gary's stories. Doesn't like the way he enjoys telling them, as if he's stabbing at her with each word. Or at other times, after he's told them, he becomes sullen and silent. Gary is not only fascinated with death,

he's fascinated with bodies. With what happens before death. With what might be done to a body. Again, Vera is reminded of the magazines in the basement. But she doesn't want to give him the satisfaction of commenting or asking questions. Of her caring that he knows something she doesn't.

'I prefer made up stories. I prefer making them, then, whatever you want to happen, happens,' Vera says. 'Let's make one up where kids chop those guys into pieces. Maybe they can make them into meat-pies and sell them at the footy?'

Gary loves footy.

Gary grins, 'Make them into pie-floaters.'

'Gross,' says Vera. She hates pea soup.

†

Breakfast was on the porch. Vera got up before Oswald woke and arranged bread rolls, butter and jam, fruit, cheese and juice on the table outside. She brewed coffee. It reminded her of breakfast in Paris.

Sitting in silence, Vera spread butter and raspberry jam thickly on her roll; it looked lurid in the sunlight. The roll was dry, already slightly stale, and the jam tasted alcoholic after sitting in the heat of the car and kitchen. Oswald chewed slowly. He ate with his mouth open, staring into the distance. He ate like a cow.

Vera's mouth was dry, her head heavy from poor sleep and wine. She sipped her coffee. It was burnt, bitter. It made her feel ill. Flies settled on the jam and bread. Aside from the vague hangover, it was nothing like Paris.

'Should've put the jam in the fridge,' said Oswald. He looked tired, worn out, as if his night had consisted of more than eating, drinking and sleeping. 'Should've sat inside,' he said, shooing away flies.

Vera shrugged. She couldn't bear the thought of being inside, enclosed behind walls and doors, even though the sun-glare hurt her eyes.

'I wish it would rain,' she said.

Oswald tore off a piece of bread and flicked it into his mouth, 'Not likely.'

'I know. I just wish it would.'

Oswald pushed his chair back and sat with legs open, and arms behind his head. He wore shorts and a singlet and the dark hair that curled up from the neckline and under his arms was damp, his face shone with sweat.

'You know, there's no one around. No one can see us here, it's very private.' He grinned, eyes crinkling at the corners; smile crooked. 'You could give me a little striptease.' He put a lazy hand between his legs and rested it there. 'Or something more hands on?'

Vera remembered watching a documentary on polar bears and how they mated. The male bear would court the female, proving himself on the snowy slopes, displaying his agility, his strength, his stamina, to the point of exhaustion. And then, just as it seemed he didn't have an ounce of energy left, and he had collapsed, the female would come to a point just out of reach and roll around, doing headstands and somersaults to encourage him to continue.

Polar bears, thought Vera, definitely had more finesse.

'C'mon, Vera,' Oswald said, sitting forward, getting impatient. 'Remember what it was like in the beginning? We couldn't get enough of each other. I want that again.'

I want. He's going to stamp his foot, she thought. In the beginning there was sex, and a lot of it, but there was also the equivalent of rolling down snow slopes and doing headstands and somersaults. There also weren't any other polar bears on the side. Vera wondered if polar bears were faithful animals.

'What about the man in the bushes?' Vera asked innocently.

Oswald laughed, 'I forgot about that. What makes you think it was a man? Could've been a woman.' A wolfish grin appeared on his face, he could barely contain himself. Soon he would begin to howl. 'Would you like that? A woman in the bushes watching us?'

'It's too hot,' she said and got up. Oswald reached out and grabbed her arm as she walked past. He held her, his grip firm. Vera did not look at him, she just stood there, neither resisting or abiding. She looked at the house, it seemed to stand patiently, waiting for something to happen. The screen door prevented her from seeing inside. She stared at the mesh, at all the tiny holes, and imagined passing through them, fragmented, and coming together on the other side. Would she be whole? Would she be Vera? Perhaps something might be lost in the process? The tiniest cell misplaced, a piece that was intrinsically her, so without it, it wouldn't be Vera stepping through but some unknown person. Someone fresh, who didn't have this life but could make up a new one, start from scratch; a blank page. How many pieces of yourself, she wondered, could you misplace or lose or have stolen or damaged before you became something or someone else?

Everything was still. Neither of them said a word. And it dawned on Vera just how alone they really were out here. She ran her tongue over her teeth feeling the grittiness of the jam, the stale taste of coffee, superseding every other flavour and texture. She felt dirty, inside and out.

Oswald tightened his grip, squeezed, and then, let go.

†

Sunlight streams through the window. She can feel it on her back, baking her naked skin. She wonders if she'll burn but it is only a fleeting thought, not a real concern. She will not move. It is far too pleasant to lie like this.

The room smells of jasmine and cheeseburgers and sweat. She wishes she could bottle it, just to hold on to this moment.

She can feel him watching her but cannot meet his gaze. It is too intense. Instead she wriggles in beneath his armpit, to where the soft brown skin emerges from the dark hair, and licks him.

He giggles, rolling away from her momentarily before coming back to put one arm over her and bring his face close to hers so their noses meet. He darts in for a kiss, his eyes not leaving hers.

There is a cheeseburger wrapper stuck to his arm. She peels it off. Yellow cheese, like melted plastic, clings to the hairs.

‘I can smell you,’ he says.

‘You can smell cheeseburgers. Easy mistake.’

He shakes his head.

‘I can smell *you*. I can smell me on you,’ He smiles, ‘I like that best of all.’

She feigns disgust and he, holding her down, rubs himself on her, pushes his armpit into her face, until she, in the midst of laughing, admits defeat.

There they are, naked, sheets tangled, pushed to the edge of the bed. Still. Quiet. He reaches forward and brushes her hair back from her face. He tells her he loves her – a kiss on the nose – he tells her she’s beautiful. She buries her face into the pillow, hiding.

Kissing her shoulder, he says, ‘Don’t do that. I want to see you.’

She buries herself in deeper and shakes her head. Gently, he rolls her onto her back. He takes her hands in his own so she cannot cover her face again. She is smiling.

‘I love you,’ he says again.

It is warm and light and lazy here in this room. Three weeks she has known him, but it is enough. She knows she loves him, too.

Oswald.

†

‘We should go to the beach,’ Vera said, not turning around. Her hand rested on the handle of the screen door.

‘Sure.’

She turned to look at him. He was on his phone.

Vera longed for a cheeseburger. She longed for the scent of jasmine.

†

With Enoch, Vera felt completely present.

For her, when they were together, it was just the two of them on a bed in a rundown house in Collingwood. The world beyond the walls stopped; it did not exist.

Enoch tells her she’s beautiful, he tells her he wants to take care of her, he tells her he loves her. Vera laughs and tells him he has no money, that he is impractical, that he is blind, naïve, that he is a boy. She tells him she can look after herself.

Boy. That is her name for him. Boy.

His feet are too large, he has a spattering of pimples on his throat and back, his nose is crooked. He is perfect. Vera wants all of him, all of the time, like she hasn’t wanted anyone or anything in forever.

Beautiful Boy, she coos to herself when alone. Piece by piece he comes together in her mind, tall and slender, doe-eyed, so uncertain, so lacking in arrogance. And that mouth. The curve of the lip; the fullness, softness, familiar, forgotten. When she looks directly at it, for a moment, it doesn’t belong – at least not to you, my beautiful Boy. And then he speaks. And it does.

Vera wishes he spoke less. At times Enoch is so serious, so earnest, she wants to laugh. He speaks of famine, feminism – he is a feminist, he assures her, though she hasn't asked – animal rights, the rights of Indigenous Australians, the state of the Middle East since the Arab Spring – a term she later Googles – and the Green movement. He speaks at her, trying to impress her, at ease enough to finally have an opinion, although she suspects, none of them are his.

Until one day, lying naked together, Vera confesses, giggling, that she doesn't give a crap about any of it. Perhaps once she did. Perhaps. Or at least she cared enough to pretend she did. But not now. What difference does it make, anyway, talking about it, reading about it, knowing that all that sadness is out there, all that oppression? She can pretend a lot of things, but not this. Not to care. Let others pretend. Let others talk and talk and talk and with their words feel better or worse about the world and their part in it. But not her.

He stares wide-eyed for a moment, uncertain whether she is serious. And she, unable to contain herself, for it is all suddenly so funny – all of it, everything he says, who he is, the room, the situation, all the sadness, all the oppression and pain and guilt and violence, all of it – all so damn funny that she throws her head back and laughs.

When Vera stops, she sees him sitting there, an awkward smile upon his face, a smile that doesn't belong upon those lips; so much so that it seems to her he abuses them cruelly.

So she kisses them.

†

It was very stuffy inside.

This, thought Vera, was not simply because of the heat, but also because of the women. There were too many women.

At first she thought they were just in the kitchen but they were everywhere. Even in the bathroom, watching her as she sat on the toilet. Her knickers around her ankles and toilet paper in hand, Vera was waiting. Waiting for something to happen: for her body to function properly. For it to relax. But she was having trouble – she had stage fright.

Her audience didn't say much. They just hung around. Some sat in the bath, one was perched on the side of the sink, others were sitting on the cool tiles – a good place to be considering this heat, thought Vera – and there was one on the ceiling. The one on the ceiling was hiding her face.

The women were unknown. Vera could not name them – except perhaps the one on the ceiling, if she could just get a look at her face – yet their presence was familiar. They had long been accumulating, their numbers growing over the years. Normally they resigned themselves to the bedroom. To the most intimate moments between Vera and Oswald. They got beneath sheets, stuck their faces in inappropriate places, scrutinised and commented on Vera's body and performance: on the size of her nipples, the cellulite on the back of her legs, the fine moustache on her upper lip, even sometimes on her big toe – its width a cause of alarm for some – on her orgasm face, on the way she gave fellatio or the absence of the act, the way her hips moved when she was on top, or on her lack of enthusiasm. No wonder Vera was reluctant to have sex with Oswald. There was too much pressure. Too many cooks in the kitchen.

Sometimes she tried to return the gaze. Tried to criticise *them*, pull them up on *their* shortcomings. But they just didn't stay still long enough, so that she thought that they were one thing and then they'd turn out to be something else.

Vera wondered if the one who gave Oswald crabs was there. She wanted to say something to her. Something about personal hygiene and a lack of consideration. There was no way of finding out, though, as none of the women seemed capable of speaking.

Or none of them wanted to.

Vera wondered why they were here. Why they insisted on watching her take a crap. Maybe Oswald sent out a group text. Perhaps that was what he had been doing.

Women don't shit. That was what she could see in the eyes of the one on the sink.

'Well fuck off, then!'

But they didn't. They just hung about looking sad and mean and lost.

Vera could hear Oswald outside the door.

'Can't get any reception,' he said. 'You?'

'I don't know,' she replied. And smiled at the women who were watching, waiting, wondering what would happen next. 'Are you trying to contact someone?'

'Nah. Just wanted to look up Innes National Park. Thought we could do that first before it gets too hot. Then beach.'

'Ah.' And then she whispered to her audience 'You weren't invited.'

The women scowled and began to fade.

'Aunt Faye'll have a map or something in one of the drawers. Probably in the kitchen.'

Last to go, only the eyes of the one on the ceiling were visible. Cheshire cat-like they hung there blinking.

I *do* know you, thought Vera. She smiled and waved – *Pop!* – the woman disappeared. Vera relaxed.

Plop!

Finally, Vera relieved herself.

†

Ethel has made an appearance. One hundred and thirty-eight years old, she's climbed out of the sand, dragging her rusted bones and laying them bare for all to see. One

hundred and ten years she has sat here, caressed by wind and sea, admired, photographed, loved, and, at times, when the weather is too wild, too forbidding, or when the sea blankets her with sand, she is forgotten.

More people came when she was whole. Now that her body has succumbed to the elements, her insides spewing out, she is not so popular. But she is still a tourist attraction. She is part of a national park.

Some say she looks like a dinosaur's skeleton.

Ethel disagrees.

Ethel looks like Ethel.

It is the children who love her best. She remembers one small boy, curly haired, plump, in his father's arms, crying out upon seeing her – 'Broken! Ship broken!' – in distress. Tenderly he touched her metal frame, her fallen mast, with soft, chubby fingers, whispered to her 'Broken, broken, poor ship, ship broken, poor ship'.

But she is not alone.

Ferret, who didn't make it to shore, is strewn across the ocean floor. She met him in passing on the night she came to rest. And he, in a case of love at first sight and being a hopeless romantic, came back sixteen years later. Fog was blamed instead of misplaced affection. For the feeling is not reciprocated.

Ethel is glad Ferret has never completely made it onto shore. Sometimes, when the tide is low, Ferret's boiler is revealed. Water collects in there and sunlight winks obscenely at Ethel. She hopes their parts never become mixed up, intertwined, irreversibly imbedded – at times, already, they are mistaken for one instead of two – for Ethel is in love with another.

On the night she was grounded, a young sailor, fearing Ethel would be broken up by the turbulent sea, attempted to swim a line to shore. Such bravery in one so young, she thought, in one so soft, so malleable, so vulnerable. And when his body

swept by, lifeless, broken, Ethel groaned, her timber creaked, crying in pain at his demise.

In the morning, when the water was calm and had receded, the skies clear, Leonard Sterneson sat on the tip of her bow and watched the other sailors clamber ashore. Ethel rocked him gently. But Leonard was restless and soon grew angry when he discovered he could not leave the beach, could go no farther than a few kilometres along the seabed. In a rage he would kick Ferret's boiler or beat his fists against Ethel's hull.

Other times he moped around or howled and wept.

Ethel longs for Leonard, Ferret longs for Ethel, and Leonard longs for life.

Today footprints, hundreds and hundreds of footprints litter the shore. Moving in and around Ethel's skeleton and then down to the water. Back and forth they go. If you follow them, you'll get swept away. The ocean here is still unpredictable, still swallows things, and spits them out and sucks them back and spits them out and rips them apart, like Ethel and Ferret and Leonard, reassembled, ugly, beautiful, broken, whole, depending on how one feels about the transformation.

Children squeal. Gulls float on the wind. The sea, the sky are lilac and rose and gold, they bloom and bleed into one another. Pieces of Ferret are still trying to clamber out but can't quite free themselves from the shallows to join Ethel. The children run up to them as the water goes out, and then run screaming, laughing when it comes back in trying to grab their ankles, trying to love them, to hold them, fill them, rock them to sleep.

Annie and Sue sit on the rocks, heads bowed in close, the wind whipping their hair, making it difficult to light a cigarette.

Vera is nine. Gary is ten. Earlier in the day, there were pirates and sea monsters and bodies washed ashore. But now the children play chasey with the sea.

Annie calls out to them to stay away from the water. Even though the sun has been out, it is mid-winter and cool with the close of day. The children ignore her and she can't be bothered getting up.

Emmeline finds a crab stuck on its back. With sticks and precision, Vera, Gary and Dave turn it over. They watch as it buries itself in the sand and then start hunting for other creatures. Gary finds a dead fish, shredded, pink and silver. A smelly treasure.

A chill wind sets in.

Back, back, we must go back.

Annie and Sue gather up things, gather up children.

As they make their way up to the car, Vera turns and looks back. She can hear Ethel creak and moan. She hears a *clang, clang, clang* as if someone is hitting metal, like the sound of a bell, soft and sweet. Vera thinks of the book Annie has at home by her bed, she can't remember the name, something about a bell, something by a man named Ernest. She stands there, a moment longer, watching, listening, wind whistling, waves rising, rising, rolling, crashing against the wreck.

Clang!

The sound rings through the air. With a jump, Vera turns to see the others have disappeared. Without looking back, she runs after them.

Vera does not want to see what is coming. Vera does not want to see what has been called up.

†

Clang!

Oswald rapped his knuckles on a piece of the Ethel protruding from the sand. The wreck was buried, for there had been no wind or wild storm that summer to uncover her.

‘Shit,’ Oswald said, ‘the metal’s burning hot.’

Vera laughed. She stood where the ocean lapped at the sand.

‘I wish we could see more,’ said Oswald. ‘Maybe we could dig her out?’

‘In this heat?’

‘What about a swim, then?’

‘It’s too unpredictable here.’

Oswald didn’t argue. Vera was a strong swimmer and she should know.

Vera was broad-shouldered, built for it. Father and Annie made sure the girls knew how to swim. Father was obsessed with water – fishing, boating, swimming, water-skiing. Vera thought that he would be sick of it from working on the offshore oil rigs. But no, the dry heat of Adelaide made him restless, made him yearn for it, and when he returned from a stint on the rigs, he’d be searching out water as soon as he walked through the door. In winter he was known to drive to Glenelg and jump in the ocean, striding out blue and salt-encrusted.

Vera, like her father, searched out water.

Back in Melbourne she swam in the morning. Starts the day with laps at the local pool. Her arms were wiry, strong, from all that swimming. The chlorine dried out her skin, her hair, sometimes it burned and she would step out of the water pink and red. But Vera could not give it up. In the water she felt graceful, weightless, free, like she did as a child. Not ungainly and cumbersome as she tended to feel as an adult.

Despite his increased girth, Oswald was agile, his movements strangely elegant. Lifting beer to mouth did not develop muscle, nor did it help increase lung capacity. But he could not give it up, and under the influence it gave him a certain gracefulness when he was not completely inebriated.

Oswald’s father was an alcoholic. As was his father’s father, and his father’s father’s father and so on, down the generations. It was tradition. And traditions were to

be upheld, cherished. Not broken, discarded or questioned. Despite his father's early passing.

'Whiskey was his poison,' Oswald told Vera early in their relationship, when it was habit to talk through till dawn, to lay bare everything and anything. And Vera recalled the note of pride with which he said it. Oswald preferred beer. And because of that he felt he really wasn't much of a drinker.

Oswald was an adequate swimmer.

The water lapped at their feet. It looked harmless, calm, the sun blazed above, making it glitter, sparkle, beckon. So Oswald didn't argue, but he did wade in further.

The cliffs curved around, sheltering them, hiding them. Innes was all but deserted today. The only people Oswald and Vera had seen were a fisherman on the jetty, and an old man and woman sitting on a bench in long-sleeved shirts and trousers, gazing out to sea.

Mad dogs and Englishmen.

Vera watched Oswald wade out.

On the sand there were two sets of footprints. One was wide and flat-footed, the other long and narrow. They seemed so deep, so permanent, and yet, as Vera watched the water wash over them, the prints shifted, changed shape, faded.

'Seems okay to me,' Oswald called out. He was knee-deep, facing her. Just behind him a gull sat on the water, bobbing up and down, observing, occasionally flying up for a second, when the water got too excitable before settling back.

Vera smiled and, extending a foot, struck out one of the wide prints. A one-legged person was hopping about the shore.

'Does it?'

'Yep.'

'Well, there you go.'

There was a pause. Vera wiped out another print.

‘Someone drowned here.’

And Oswald, who had turned back to carry on with his march, stopped.

‘He was on the Ethel.’

‘Is this one of your bullshit stories?’

‘What makes you say that?’

‘I didn’t see a sign. No plaque like for that Vietnamese guy.’

‘That was a memorial. He died on the ship. They had his body to bury. Poor Leonard’s was lost.’

‘Jesus Christ. I just want to have a swim.’

‘Poor lost Leonard. And they were so close to shore when it happened. It was a stormy night –’

‘So just like right now, then?’

Vera stopped and said, ‘No. But you know what makes this place so dangerous for swimming – all the riptides and undercurrents. What you can’t see. Or at least, that’s what they say. But really –’ a weighty pause, and her voice lowered, ‘it’s Leonard waiting to pull you down. Down! Down! Down to his watery grave.’

Oswald was not amused.

This made her smile. No, more than smile. It made her laugh, ‘You’re probably standing on bits of him right now.’

‘What the hell is wrong with you? Can I swim here or not?’

‘You can do what you like,’ Vera snapped, suddenly annoyed. She wanted a more cooperative audience.

She picked up a stone. It sat smooth and round and hot in her hand.

Goliath walked in the water.

I said no, she wanted to say. No swimming, you idiot. You moron. You fucking fool.

It'd be his own fault if he got pulled under. If he drowned. How many people have drowned here with nobody to see because they were too stupid to listen? How many Oswalds polluted the ocean floor: non-biodegradable junk leaking toxic filth, choking marine life, killing coral, smothering penguins?

Vera stared hard at the back of his head, trying to bore through with her fury; she raised the stone –

And threw it at Ethel.

Clang!

'Fuck!'

Oswald hopped up and down, and then limped back to shore. The seagull squawked and flew away. The one-legged man had returned, bitten by Ferret.

'Fuuuuuck.' He rolled around on the sand, holding his foot.

'You scared the bird away.'

'Fuck the bird. Fuck you. Fuck this place. It's a fucking death trap.'

'What did you do?'

'Kicked some fucking hunk of metal.'

He writhed in the sand. Smudging out footprints; leaving, instead, a fat, stumpy, slug mark of Oswald. His face was ugly, contorted. A face she wanted to kick.

'Let me look at it, will you.'

Vera knelt down to inspect the injury. There was a small cut on the end of his big toe. Blood poured from the tiny wound. The colour reminded her of the jam they'd had this morning – gaudy against the white sand, the crystalline water, the cobalt sky.

'Well?' he demanded, 'What's your diagnosis, then, Nurse Ratchett?'

Vera's eyebrow flicked up. If only she had that sort of power.

'Obvious, isn't it? Only one course of action to take.'

'What?' His dark eyes, flat, angry, impatient.

'Lobotomy.'

And Oswald laughed. Vera laughed. For that's what holidays were about, after all – laughing, having fun. Not accidents. Not drowning. Not blood and lobotomies. Those were not pleasurable holiday activities. They were not recommended in the guide books. They did not induce a state of relaxation or exhilaration. They did not prepare you for the return to the humdrum of life.

And so smiling and laughing, Oswald and Vera made their way up the stairs back to the car. He limped in front, she came up behind, offering support if needed.

Vera paused at the top, looked back and saw –
a shipwreck, an empty beach, a memory, and felt –

'Ow!'

A punch on the arm. A hit that was playfully hard.

Oswald was smiling, but the laughter had stopped.

'Hurt?' he asked, teeth blinding her in the sunshine, 'Not funny, is it, babe?'

And he walked with ease to the car.

†

She can hear Enoch's voice, imploring, see the hurt in his eyes, the beautiful tear-stained face beseeching. She sits, cold, indifferent on the edge of the mattress staring down at a used condom on the dirty carpet, an object that was inside her not long ago. She gets up, says good-bye and closes the door on him.

But endings are not as easy as one might hope.

†

'The heat. The heat, babe. I'm sorry, baby. The heat, it makes you crazy.'

She nodded her head.

He kissed her nose.

Her eyes.

Her mouth.

Her ear.

‘Crazy, baby.’

He rubbed her arm.

‘Let’s go back and have a swim. Cool down. Let’s not fight,’ he winked, ‘we’re on holiday.’

She nodded and nodded and nodded. Like the bobble-headed dog that sat on the dashboard, his dog, that he thought was so funny, like that, she nodded. Tongue out, cross-eyed, she nodded and nodded and nodded...

†

The shadow shifts; the children are still fat with puppy flesh. They bark and yip at each other and fight over toys.

Annie comes and grabs the loose flesh at the back of their necks in her teeth to haul them apart. The children snarl and whimper, running off with tail between legs. Not yet old enough to be de-sexed.

Watch the pups, watch the children, get the leash out, rein them in.

†

Vera and Oswald sat, uncomfortably, side by side on a towel on the sand.

Vera wore a large hat, sunglasses and a T-shirt over her bathers. She glistened with the milky residue of the sunscreen. The hair on Oswald’s chest was matted, his skin grey with it. He lay back and then sat up, he turned over and lay back down again

before returning to a seated position. Vera pulled her legs into her chest and wrapped her arms around them, trying to protect herself from the sun.

Lately she had noticed crows' feet developing around her eyes, crevices deepening on her forehead, laughter lines appearing. She felt she did not laugh enough to warrant the depth of those. Vera's face had been colonised; a slow and insidious assault by the sun and time. Sitting there, looking out at the ocean, she was torn between caring and her desire to swim unhampered. She pulled herself in tighter. The water stretched out in front: still, sparkling, indifferent; aquamarine glass, until, in the distance, it plunged into darkness.

Last time Vera had been there, the skies were wet and grey. The wind had been so strong that the rain, heavy as it was, blew at an angle, right into her ear. The water, combined with the wind, had given her an earache. The waves had crashed and broken on the shore, churning up seaweed and dumping it on the sand before dragging it back to swirl around like Medusa's hair. What escaped the grip of the sea was piled high like H.G. Wells' red weed. Spongey and thick, it felt alive when she and Emmeline had stepped onto it. Cuttlefish and coral were scattered amongst it and there were rock pools, in which Vera and Emmeline found tiny grey butterflies drowned, their wings spread wide; perfect unpinned specimens.

Just the two girls that time. Emmeline, eyes emerald green in her shining, near translucent skin, her long fleece-coloured hair streaming out behind her. Beautiful, ethereal Emmeline, born for romance and tragedy. And Vera, scruffy, surly, odd, angular, her hair sticking out in orange tufts, black eyes cold and hard. She blended into the harsh landscape. She was rock and weed and shark's egg.

This was an alien world filled with alien creatures.

Vera and Emmeline on the beach, hunting, and Annie and Father in the background, out of the wind, silent, watching. And dead butterflies floating in the pools, drifting round and round and round...

†

‘You lock your windows at night, don’t you?’

Annie asks Vera and Oswald.

She has come to stay for the weekend. Hooray! A lovely weekend together. A lovely weekend for Annie and Vera and Oswald.

No. Wait. Not Oswald. He suddenly remembers he has something on he can’t get out of.

‘I forgot about it,’ he mutters on the Saturday, ‘slipped my mind...’

And he slips away. Slips out of reach.

Vera – loving girlfriend that she is – sees him off at the door.

‘And what am I to do?’ She hisses between kisses, between telling him loudly – for the benefit of the audience, of course, good little girlfriend, good little actress, good little liar that she is – to go have fun, we’ll be fine, just a shame you can’t stay, but it’s fine. *Really* it’s fine.

‘I don’t know, she’s *your* mother. Take her shopping, take her to lunch – wine and lunch, like you do with your girlfriends. Wine-time – that’s what you call it.’

Wine-time without Oswald – not that he’s bitter, not that he’s jealous, because look how he’s smiling, look how sincere he is – it’ll be lovely, mother and daughter time. Quality time. Such a shame I can’t stay but Bob, you know Bob, remember Bob? Bob with the mutton chops? Bob the conceptual artist? Bob’s having this thing – I dunno, this exhibition thing – somewhere in Fitzroy, of course – or maybe it’s Collingwood – I dunno, I dunno – I’m going with Nate. Nate knows. I’m meeting him first. Been organised for aaaages. So gotta go, gotta go, I’m running late. But have fun, gotta run –

Got to, got to – it's two words, not one. And Bob's a tool, Bob's a bum, snaps Vera. But Oswald is gone.

Vera takes Annie to St Kilda.

'We'll go shopping. Do lunch.'

St Kilda is perfect on a Saturday, on a warm, sunny Saturday. Everyone is in St Kilda on a warm, sunny Saturday. People spill off the pavement onto the road amongst the trams and cars and bikes. The trams groan and sound their bells when people get too close, when they come so close that they risk being hit by such a slow moving vehicle – Watch out for that tram! Make haste! It's coming at a snail's pace and surely we'll be killed! – cars honk, drivers and pedestrians swear at each other, a momentary exchange before moving on. People talk and laugh and yell and sing and preach –

'God will save you!'

'You're all going to burn in hell!'

'Hallelujah, Hallelujah

You say I took the name in vain

I don't even know the name

But if I did, well really, what's it to you?'

A woman is muttering – not quite under her breath, not quite, because what is the point of that? If no one can hear? – at people, at passers-by, for having jobs – 'Look at you, look at you, with your shopping, with your clothes, with your shoes, think you're better than me, think you're so good because you have a job. Bastards, bastards, all of you' – she looks like somebody's aunt or a librarian; people come in close then swing away when they hear her.

A man yells out –

'Big Issue! Big Issue! Get your Big Issue!' Pausing to say hello when people get close – 'Hello luv, hello ladies. Isn't it a lovely day? Have yourselves a good one.' And tips his hat to them as they sail on by.

Vera, like many others, walks right past without stopping, without looking, she is of a similar mind to the woman who looks like somebody's aunt, somebody's lost and angry aunt – Bastards! Bastards! All of you! – Vera feels sorry for no one.

No one.

Not even the man who sits barefoot, huddled beneath what could be clothes or could be blankets, and draws pictures of people and places and skies. Lots of skies, night and day, with chalk, brightly coloured chalk on black paper and doesn't look up, doesn't speak. He is so dirty that it seems permanent, as if he slipped out of his mother that way. He looks like part of the scenery, part of the building he sits in front of, part of the pavement, part of the road. Walked on. But Vera doesn't feel sorry even for him.

Because no one has it worse than Vera today. No one else has to escort Annie and show her around. Keep her happy. Entertain her.

Vera feels herself walking faster and faster, weaving between people, dodging and side-stepping, there's no stopping, she's not even sure where she's going, just forward, just away – I'll lose you, I'll lose you, you'll disappear amongst all these people and it'll be like you were never here – and Annie's not saying anything about it, Annie's just trying to keep up, to not show that anything's wrong, to just keep going with whatever mad dance this is that Vera's got going on, and Annie's huffing and puffing because all that smoking is no good for keeping up with Vera. But she won't say anything, partly because she is too out of breath but also because if you ask, you might not like the answer.

And why start talking now? Why start saying things?

Poor Annie.

Annie keeps following Vera. Annie'll keep up, even if it kills her .

You can't lose me, I won't be lost, I won't be discarded, you wicked, wicked child. You always were a difficult child, Vera. So moody. So angry. Such an angry child.

And she follows her, shadows her, hangs on to Vera. Vera, who doesn't lock her window at night because you never know, you never can tell, when you might need to climb out.

†

'I'm going for a swim. You coming?'

Oswald stood over her expectantly, hands on hips.

Vera thought it was too hot even to swim. The sky and sea suddenly felt too much, too real, with the mid-afternoon sun high and white in the sky. The thought came to her: there is nowhere to go, nowhere that is out of this heat, nowhere to hide, to escape.

'It must be at least forty degrees. At least,' she said. 'Let's go back, we can lie in a cold bath, have a cold shower. We shouldn't be out in this sun, it's ridiculous, it's dangerous.'

Oswald laughed, 'Bullshit. I didn't drive down here to lie in a bath. What kind of Australian are you? It's perfect swimming weather. Are you coming or what?'

She should just go back. But Vera stayed where she was. Lowering her sunglasses, she gave him a long hard stare.

'I'm fine where I am, thank you.' She rubbed her arm where he'd hit her.

'You're not still pissed about that, are you? I was just mucking about. It wasn't even hard.'

Ignoring him, Vera said, 'If you want to swim you'll have to walk out to that dark patch on the horizon. Anything before that is ankle-deep. Watch it though, the sand drops away there. It's like an underwater cliff.'

'So there's no easing in then?' He grinned, 'My balls are gonna be in for a shock.'

Vera laughed in spite of herself.

‘Oh, I see – balls are funny, are they?’

‘Not all, just yours.’

‘Dirty bitch,’ said Oswald and flicked seaweed at her with his foot. It stuck to her arm, warm and clammy. It felt like flesh. Vera squealed and threw it at his departing figure but missed.

‘How can you run in this heat?’

‘Because I’m excited!’ He let out a yell and ran into the water, ‘We’re on holiday!’

Oswald’s enthusiasm reminded her of being a child. She wanted to get up and run with him. To hunt fish and crabs, to throw seaweed and jellyfish, to chase the tiny sandpipers that skittered across the sand, to look for buried treasure, to wade over to the dark water and imagine sharks and sea monsters circling around below...

†

Standing on the edge of the sandbank, peering over, she tells the boy with blue eyes that some ancient Kraken is down there, slowly extending its long tentacles from the depths, towards the light, curling, slithering until it grabs hold of its prey and pulls you down, down, down....

He teeters on one leg, the other wavering over the abyss. She grabs his arm to push him over and they clutch at each other, wrestling, giggling. Annie’s voice in the distance, Emmeline and Dave, dark shapes in the shallows coming closer. And then, pushing, pulling, laughing – they fall.

The water is ice cold and for a moment she is blind, deaf and numb, and then she opens her eyes and sees him, his hair fanned out around his face, the sun breaking through and bathing him in green-gold light, he treads water effortlessly; a sea-angel

suspended. Gary grins – Botticelli never painted one so beautiful – and farts, a delicate stream of bubbles rising up.

A strange gurgling sound escapes Vera’s mouth and she must swim up up up until she bursts through the surface and bobs like an empty bottle, laughing. Unceremoniously she is plucked from the ocean, the world is still blurred by salt water, which stings like hell, but not as much as the slap on her bare, wet leg.

Annie is furious. She is raving about sharks and undercurrents and drowned children and towing bodies to shore or finding them on the beach...

†

Sharks.

Vera stood up and looked out across the water searching for Oswald. She spotted him out on the dark horizon and watched as he plunged over the edge without her.

Alone, she was suddenly very conscious of the silence. She looked over her shoulder at the trees behind. There was no wind, nothing moved; it was too hot even for the birds. The trees stood close together, tightly knotted, revealing dark spaces between branches. Good nooks for hiding. It was too quiet. It felt like something was watching, biding its time, like she and the others when they played their games and Annie sensed they were there.

Vera stared into the branches, daring something to peep through.

Gary? She nearly said it. Wanted to say it.

She imagined him there, watching, waiting, following them, softly, softly. His name was on her tongue – salty, sweet – but she couldn’t. Not aloud, not even alone. Never alone.

Vera has the phone cradled against her ear. Emmeline is on the other end, or at least she thinks she is. She strains to hear her sister breathe.

Vera can picture Emmeline, her long hair in a top knot, her feet bare, biting her lip. Still beautiful. Voluptuous, a fifties pin-up girl with baby spew on her shirt.

The dog barks in the background. Her nephew begins to cry. She can hear her sister's husband Ramesh, soothing, settling the child.

Vera wants to be soothed. She wants to be settled. She wants to be there in her sister's world. Warm and getting fat on Emmeline's favourite foods: lasagne in the oven, gulab jamun on the stove. The kitchen smelling of cinnamon, cardamom, garlic, onion; a delicious, heady mix. But Emmeline is pissed off with Vera.

'He keeps coming around. He keeps asking after you.'

'I can't help that.'

'Well I can't have him moping around here, either. I'm back at work two days a week. I've got cases coming outta my arse. Funding's been seriously cut from the disability sector, but that doesn't mean the need's not there. It's a bureaucratic nightmare. I'm swamped at work, I've got an eighteen-month old at home *and* another on the way. Not that you *care*, but you better listen – I *don't* have time for your drama, too. Fuck's sake, Vera.'

Emmeline hardly ever calls her Vera. It's always Emu or Ver. She imagines Ramesh shaking his head. Holding Marid and shaking his head. Sensible, steady Ramesh. In many ways he mirrors Emmy. Mirrors her in generosity, kindness, warmth. But he is quieter and his calm makes Vera uneasy. He is not Emmy. He doesn't share what they share. He doesn't like me, Vera thinks. But he would never say. Not to Emmeline anyway. Emmy can be angry with Vera, but she'll defend her against anyone else. Even Ramesh.

‘I don’t see why you couldn’t keep your legs closed a bit longer. I mean it’s ridiculous having them one after the other.’

A pause, and then Emmeline’s voice snakes down the line, ‘Well perhaps I oughta give him your new number? Or your home address?’

‘How’s Marid doing?’

‘Don’t change the subject.’

‘I just want to know how my nephew is.’

‘Marid is fine.’

‘You know,’ says Vera, ‘I think that if you push the baby out, you should get to choose the name.’

‘I did *choose* the name.’

‘Oh,’ a pause, ‘I just thought...’

‘You just thought *what?*’

‘Well it’s an unusual name, so I guess I assumed –’

‘Marid is *Arabic*. I heard it. I liked it. I chose it. I swear, you and mum –’

‘Fine,’ Vera cuts her off.

‘*And* you’ve changed the subject.’

‘Jesus. I don’t see why it has to be such a problem. Just tell him to piss off.’

‘He’s my friend. I don’t *want* to just tell him to piss off. For some unknown reason, he’s got it into his head that he’s in love with you and he doesn’t know what he’s done. And I don’t know what he’s done, so I can’t tell him anything.’

Vera laughs.

‘Why are you laughing?’

‘I just think it’s sort of funny. I thought he would hate me after what happened.’

‘Please, Vera. Illuminate me. What happened? What’d you do?’

Vera doesn’t want to say. Emmeline won’t understand.

‘God, why can’t he just go away? It’s over. Done. I wish he’d just die, already.’

‘You know what? It’s fine. I’ll deal with it. I don’t want to subject him to more of you than need be.’

‘What will you say?’

‘I’ll tell him you’ve had a terrible accident. You’ve been killed and I’m in mourning and can’t bear to speak of you – hey, bubba.’

Vera can hear her sister coo and kiss her son, and then –

‘Or something like that. I mean, I should be able to come up with *something* – bullshit runs in our family.’

And with that, Emmeline, Marid, Ramesh, cardamom and baby spew, disappear.

†

Vera lay in the shallows near the shore. She was too sleepy to swim, too stubborn.

Let him drown, she thought. I’m not moving.

Her hat detached itself and floated away. Lazily she made an attempt to grab it, but the hat was just out of reach, bobbing cheekily on the surface. Vera closed her eyes. She could feel rocks and shells biting into her backside, the sun, her front.

If someone would just turn the sun down, she thought, I could sleep here quite comfortably. Water filled her ears; she was in a cocoon, protected from the sounds of the outside world. If Oswald cries out, I won’t be able to hear him.

Something brushed against her, gently, nudged her. Her hat? Oswald’s body? His blonde hair splayed out like an anemone, decorated with tiny bubbles, glittering jewels. How long does it take for the body to bloat and swell, she wondered. Would she even be able to tell the difference with Oswald? He had, after all, done such a marvellous job himself.

I would pick up my hat first, Vera thought. That would be the sensible thing to do, what with the harsh Australian sun barbecuing her exotic Anglo skin; foreign flesh

in a sunburnt country. And then with the aid of the ocean she would tow Oswald in to land. Getting him up to the house would be difficult, though, dragging him through sand and then soil as she made her way back across the paddocks. She would have to clean him up at the other end – God knows what he would've picked up along the way! – hoist him into the bathtub and fill it up. Watched all the while by his unblinking gaze. His angry gaze. He hated baths. Stewing in your own filth, he said. She would have to shower him – what a pain in the arse this was turning out to be – lugging him over and then lifting his limbs, getting in between the folds – he wasn't circumcised, after all – perhaps she could get some cotton buds and do a thorough job. Get right in there with the cleaning alcohol. Disinfect him entirely. Wash his hair and comb it out, trim it, even, so it sprung back into soft curls. Pat him dry with a towel, massage lotion into his skin, and, because he could not resist her, could not fight back, take to his lashes with a curler and mascara. Those long, lovely lashes that she'd had her eye on since they met. Just one clean sweep; no one would even notice.

Vera sighed dreamily, how lovely it would be! A compliant, sensible Oswald. She would tuck him into bed and lie beside him and they would chat about his giving up the band thing and Vera focussing on her writing. He would play with electricity and she, write. Vera would tell him anything and everything – secrets, dreams, thoughts, stories. Before rigor mortis set in, she'd part his lips and shape them into a smile, those lovely white teeth grinning in agreement with her forever and ever and ever.

†

Enoch's skin is smooth and soft and nearly hairless. Vera thinks of his body with a mixture of envy and revulsion. Without lines or visible pores, no broken veins or errant hairs, just the odd pimple or a faded stretch mark from a sudden growth spurt, all further reminders of his youth. Yet at the same time he simply seems unfinished.

Vera watches him smoke as he sits on a crate in the courtyard, flicking ash into the closest pot plant. Soft lips grip the cigarette end limply. Not like Annie, who smokes with such purpose, such precision. No, Enoch is elastic, mouldable, clay before it has been fired in the kiln. There is something lacking, and it occurs to her as she follows the smoke curling out from his mouth, there is nothing to him. No hidden depths, no eccentricities. He is a shell, a pretty play-thing.

And in the beginning that was enough. Something new, something that was not Oswald. To smell another's sweat. To taste it. To feel a warm body pressed close. To hear another heart beating against her own, so that when she concentrated, when she tried to keep time, it felt as if her own missed a beat and she was left suddenly out of breath. To have teeth at her throat, on her earlobes, on the fleshy part of her upper thigh, grazing, nipping –

Just don't leave a mark! Leave everything just as you found it. You break it, you pay for it. We both will.

And then, washing in the shower afterwards, her breasts to clean away saliva, her lips and tongue to clean away the taste of semen, in-between her legs to clean away the smell of rubber; scrubbing all over to cleanse herself of this other body. Erasing it, erasing him.

†

A shadow fell.

'What are you doing?'

Vera kept her eyes shut tight.

'Dreaming.' Of where to set up a study, of quiet, of writing uninterrupted.

'What about?'

'Silence.'

He snorted, 'Aren't you bored?'

'Nope.'

'I'm bored.'

'Entertain yourself.'

'It's boring just me. I need someone to play with.'

'This is my problem?'

The shadow moved, deepened.

'Well, what are *you* going to do?'

'I'm doing it.'

'If that's it, why can't you just come swim?'

She opened her eyes. Oswald was squatting over her. She could see up his nose.

It was cavernous. One could easily get lost in there.

'What are you smiling for?'

Questions, too many questions. A story she read years ago popped into her head.

'Where are you going, where have you been?' Vera said.

'What?'

'What! What! What!'

In response, Oswald hit the water hard with his hands right by her head.

She sat up, wiping salt water from her eyes and blowing it out of her nose.

'Fine,' Vera said. 'Let's play.'

†

One night when Oswald is away in Ballarat or Bendigo for a gig, Vera stays at Enoch's house. His housemates are away: the guy who spends all day smoking weed in his room and the guy halfway through his PhD. Vera envies the latter, envies his dedication, his youth and determination. So determined is he that he locks himself in his room, day

after day, until he's gone a little mad, gone a little crazy, and fallen for the weed-smoker.

These two sat in rooms, side by side, for a year. The smoker occasionally leaving the safety of the cloud to paint walls and fix fences and mow lawns. The student reading, writing, gathering information on the work of Flannery O'Connor. Until the student, in a sleep-deprived-caffeine-induced frenzy, slipped past the smoke and around the piles of clothes and paint tins, and into the arms of the smoker. And now they have gone away together to visit the student's family in Shepparton.

Vera envies them their easy love, their mutual affection.

So here is Vera, alone with Enoch, a whole house at their disposal, the freedom to move about as they please, and be as vocal as they like.

And there they sit on the couch watching television.

All Vera can think of is Oswald. Of how he will be drinking and singing and talking to people. The band a novelty in a small town; new flesh, new faces. And who doesn't love a musician? Like Gypsies. Here one day, gone the next. Oswald on stage, a smile that when he's singing and looks you in the eye, it's personal. It's sex. It's a violation. One you want to participate in, one you want to repeat. And then, when the set finishes, off he'll go, walking through the crowd of sweat and noise, collecting ghosts, echoes, anomalies to decorate the house.

And here is Vera on a couch with a mere boy. Looking at Enoch, Vera wonders what Oswald would make of him. She is not entirely sure what she makes of him. Vera regrets agreeing to this. A whole night together. Enoch looks content, infuriatingly so.

He says, 'This is nice, this is how it should be. Us together, just hanging out, watching a movie, drinking wine. Like you're my girlfriend.'

Vera gives him a tight smile. *Girlfriend*. The word makes her stomach churn; it is so adolescent.

‘Why do you smoke?’ She asks. She stares at him intently, expectantly, willing him to metamorphose into someone else, someone more interesting. He seems to squirm under her gaze.

Enoch shrugs, ‘I dunno. I like it, I guess.’ And then he grins, an attempt to alleviate the tension.

Vera can see that if she was somebody else at this particular moment, in this particular place, that this shrug and grin would be, could be, attractive. She thinks of all the young girls at the university he attends, the ones who love him, because they don’t know any better. They don’t yet know that a cute smile and nice eyes, a handsome face don’t mean much in the scheme of things. It’s what’s inside that counts! And Vera snorts.

Enoch adjusts himself, fiddles with his hair and rearranges his limbs and facial features, trying to look nonchalant. Trying to look like all those models he’s seen: a pout, sultry eyes, and an arm flung casually over the couch. He’s like a doll. A pretty, porcelain doll. And Vera longs to rap her knuckles against his skull, just to see, just to check, if he’s hollow.

†

She glided beneath him, smooth, lithe, slippery. Only his legs were visible, treading water; half a man, something delicious to snack on. She swam up, faster, faster. Jaws open, she bit down on his Achilles.

A scream echoed from above and her prey broke free, swimming in a frenzy of arms and legs. She paused a moment in pure delight, savouring the spectacle, before heading off in pursuit.

†

After spending time with Enoch, Vera will go back to Oswald and laugh and joke with him, tell him about her day at work or make up stories of how she has spent the evening with Emmeline or having dinner with friends that he has never met; is never likely to meet. Vera crafts her stories around little oddities she has witnessed that give life and authenticity to her accounts. These little anecdotes give her more joy than the affair itself.

Let me tell you a story, Oswald. Let me tell you the story of the bird lady and her pigeon. That poor bloody pigeon. That crazy lady. This is what I saw on my way home from dinner, this is where I was, it's the truth, the crazy, awful truth...

There down the alleyway – can you see her? People rushing past, they don't see her. They only see what's in front of them. But if you stop a moment, there she is in the shadows, the woman tucked away, sitting amongst the bird-shit and the graffiti, the bins and the lost litter, the week-old vomit and urine streams etched from wall to ground, splatter all around.

And if you get close enough you can hear the *coo coo coo* of the pigeons. Out of sight, out of range, rats of the air. *Coo coo coo* echoes from nowhere, everywhere.

Come take a seat, come see, you must, the old woman – is she old? It's so hard to tell – the woman as she sits, hunched over like an old bird herself, like a hen about to lay an egg. Layer upon layer of clothing balloons out around her, puffs out like feathers. The street lights illuminate her in all her finery. In her boho chic. Sit her in a cafe, put her in Fitzroy or Brunswick, provide her with a different context, transport her as she is, and then you'll see her transformed. Hers is the height of fashion. A little eccentric, perhaps, I grant you that. But still, what style! What taste! What artistic flair! Dark and daring, her rejection of consumer culture, of high street fashion is inspired. And the masterstroke?

A pigeon.

Gone are the days of the handbag puppy, what everyone needs now is a pigeon. They will be the new accoutrement of the hip and the savvy, those out to be seen, to be noticed, the cool cats all sipping lattes with their pigeons and their laptops. See how it sits so unresisting, so passive and content to be part of the picture – part of the *mise-en-scène* – as the lady, the dear old bird, strokes and strokes and strokes, so lovingly, its head. Her love wearing away the feathers, revealing what is beneath, the red, the raw, the real pigeon.

Flesh of my flesh; hen and her chick.

Receive my love.

I'll wear you down with my love.

Wear you out, my love.

And there's Vera, hovering, a shadow, watching, unable to tear herself away from the lady, from the pigeon. Listening to the lady muttering softly, to the pigeon, one assumes, but never assume, always ask, and she might respond. To you or the pigeon.

And there the bird sits, unresisting as the hand comes down again and again and again, bald head bleeding, as it wears away the skin...

...and away and away the feathers fly, up into the air, catch them if you can.

Quick! Before they get away and start a life all of their own as other birds, as chickens or lorikeets or galahs or...

an emu.

This is the tale of the silver man on the yellow-bee tram. A paint sniffer, he steps on board kitted out with spray-paint emptied into a plastic bag, silver-tongue and lips, bug-eyes that roll heavenwards as the tram starts and he falls to the floor. The crowd shouts and parts. The tram stops. The doors open.

We all look down and the whispers begin – is he dead? Should we call an ambulance? How long do you think this will take? I must get home for *Masterchef*. And then, like Lazarus, he rises. Like the living-dead, he moans. He sits there looking

straight out in front but not at anyone or anything in particular. Just looking, just staring into the space that whatever he's inhaled has created, and doesn't notice when we give him a gentle (but firm) nudge (push) and he rolls out without hesitation. He rolls out clutching his plastic bag, a bag brimming with silver, silver paint that is, and the doors shut and we all sigh, one big collective sigh, of relief not longing – well I have to clarify, because maybe you long for that space, that bag, that escape – before we sit back down, before we relax back into I and not we, and forget about the man, the man and his bag of silver and his funny smells and his vacant stare the one that revealed he wasn't really there, wasn't part of us and so we forget all that, or I forget it, except now here I am telling you.

And yeah, I know, it's a bit of an anticlimax. There's no fight, no raging or ranting. Just a nudge. Just a sigh. And he's gone. And the yellow-bee tram flies far, far away.

And this is the story she tells. These are the stories she tells. And they trip off her tongue like nobody's business...

What a trip. What a gas.

But these stories are told out of time. Out of their time. Out of her time. But they are her stories and she will tell them as she likes, when she likes, to whom she likes.

If they will listen.

A bird man with a bag of silver, pink skin, vacant eyes; a bag of birds and a silver-skinned lady; a silver bird and a woman with her skin raw and weeping, glistening in the white and terrible light...

...alone in the bathroom, Vera inspects her own skin for any wear and tear. Any damage. Any mark. Any feathers.

†

‘What the fuck was that?’

Vera picked up her hat, laughing, ‘A game.’

‘You bit me!’

‘A love bite, darling.’

‘There wasn’t any love in that bite. You scared the shit out of me.’

‘You were bored, remember? So we played a game. I was the shark and you were the bikini-clad babe, all your fleshy bits bouncing around, screaming your delicious double D lungs out. Besides, you knew it was me.’

Vera took a long drink of water from the bottle they had brought with them. It tasted thick and warm from the heat, but she was so thirsty after the sun and swimming.

‘I wasn’t expecting you to *bite* me.’

She shrugged, ‘At the end of the day you knew it was me. And it’s not like you’re hurt –’ Oswald pouted – ‘I mean *really* hurt.’

‘Still, you scared me.’

‘That’s the fun part. Everyone likes being scared.’

Oswald grinned, ‘When do I get to scare you?’

‘What do you mean *when*? Try every morning.’

Oswald came up close and wrapped his arms around her, ‘You think you’re so funny.’ He kissed her forehead.

‘I am funny.’

He squeezed a little harder. ‘I love you,’ he said and Vera stiffened. ‘Despite what you think. What I do,’ he chewed his lip, looking over her, ‘That stuff, it means nothing.’

The women were never mentioned directly. They were but ghosts, after all. Even speaking of them in this vague manner was breaking a taboo.

‘Anyway,’ Oswald continued after a moment’s pause, ‘It’s past. Done.’

And with his magic wand, all was erased.

Vera's mouth felt dry, her body heavy, but she didn't want to go back to the house. Not now, she thought, not with this topic lingering in the air. Everything felt closer, breathless. She pulled away.

'Let's go treasure hunting.'

†

Vera sits on the train. Her feet and legs ache after an eight-hour shift of standing and smiling and being polite, even to the pigs of the human race. The oinkers who snort their way around the shop and grunt at you and oink about how terribly, terribly important and terribly, terribly busy they are, the kind of pigs that snuffle up human remains just to bring home the bacon – *Oink Oink* – so they can deck out their piggy pen with the finest muck and swill.

Vera works in a chocolate shop. She wears white and is surrounded by glass cabinets filled with tiny chocolates. Rows and rows of them. So many flavours to choose from: milk, dark, white, ganache, Turkish delight, marzipan, peppermint truffle, praline, strawberry cream, coffee, toffee, caramel, salted caramel, chewy caramel, hard caramel, almond, hazelnut, cherry, vanilla cream, cherry liqueur, to name but a few. And then there are the blocks and boxed and novelty or seasonal chocolates depending on the time of year. So much to know, so much to share, so much to be versed in on the chocolate front.

But look! Here is a big piggy now for Vera to share her knowledge with. In he comes, teetering on his little trotters, wobbling this way and that, barely able to hold himself up and in, to that ill-fitting suit. You have to spend a lot of money to get a suit for a pig. To get a pig suit that fits. Tut tut, Mr Piggy, looks like you've been enjoying one too many piggy delights. But surely, then, he is a connoisseur who will appreciate Vera's wisdom.

Mr Piggy stands at the back of the line behind the other little pigs, checking his watch, and twitching his tail.

Snort Snort Oink Oink Snuffle Snuffle Gimme truffles!

Ok, Mr Piggy. But let's do this properly. How are you today?

Piggy's eyes narrow down into a mean piggy squint.

'How about you just get on with it.'

Grunt Grunt

How rude, Mr Piggy! Look you've made poor Vera blush.

'Shall I make you a cup of tea,' he says, waving a trotter grandiosely, 'while you think about taking my order?'

Snort Snort

Oh no, Mr Piggy. Please don't put yourself out like that. And logistically speaking, how could you possibly carry a teacup with your little piggy trotters?

Vera places Mr Piggy's carefully selected truffles into a paper bag. He watches over her as she does.

Snuffle Snuffle Snuffle goes his glistening snout.

Tick Tick Tick goes his watch.

Tap Tap Tap his little piggy foot.

If only this were an abattoir and not a chocolate shop, Mr Piggy. This would be a very different story, wouldn't it? With a much happier ending, I think.

Oink Oink

Chop Chop

Ho. Ho.

But Vera is still a student. A student, who, she wants to tell this fastidious swine in front of her, already has a degree, and two stories published. That's right – one, two. But piggy won't care. Piggy will just say – oh, is that all? Then why are you working here? I live in a lovely big pen in Albert Park – *Oink Oink* – which I drive to and from

every day in my Mercedes Benz – *Snort Snort* – and I work a very important job in a sky-rise on William Street. So there – *Grunt Grunt* – And you are, after all, just a student working part-time in a chocolate shop. Serving me.

A student studying Social Work so that she will work with more human piggies. But not this one, who is waving his Rolex around in her face before his phone rings and he starts snorting and oinking into the phone in a snivelling, ingratiating manner.

Must be a bigger piggy on the other end, thinks Vera. A bigwig pig.

But now Vera is on the train – *wee wee wee* went the little pig all the way home - she rests her head against the window, and in the darkness of the city-loop tunnel, a tired, anxious face stares back.

There is a woman sitting cross-legged on a seat on the opposite side of the carriage. Even distorted in the reflection of the window, Vera can tell that she is beautiful. Her cropped hair reveals a long slender neck bowed gracefully as she reads a book. Vera sneaks a sideways peek. The woman wears a simple floral shift dress and heavy black boots. Her arm is sleeved in tattoos, but otherwise she appears fresh-faced and without adornment. She glows under the fluorescent light, whereas it leaches the colour from Vera's skin.

Oswald would like her, thinks Vera. A tiny pixie woman he could carry in his pocket. Not like Vera, who is, perhaps, if they are being honest, a half-centimetre taller than Oswald. And that half-centimetre makes all the difference. Do not mention it. Along with politics, religion, money and sex, the half-centimetre is a taboo subject.

But, forget the half-centimetre – please! – and back to the pixie.

Vera wonders what she's reading. She hopes it's a Danielle Steele or Jackie Collins. But she doubts it.

I bet she looks even better naked, thinks Vera. I bet she's flawless. I bet she's soft to touch and never gets a double-chin when she lies on her back, and her thighs

never crinkle or crease. I bet she moves like a cat and purrs when she comes. I bet she tastes of honey and cinnamon and cloves. I bet –

The girl looks up. Vera looks away, burning red, feeling like a peeping Tom caught in the act. She stares down at her hands, down at the torn cuticles and dirty, bitten nails.

I wonder what she sounds like. How she speaks? Is she funny or serious or both? Does she have a boyfriend? A girlfriend? Is she married? Would she prefer me over Oswald?

She feels better thinking about Oswald's rejection, a small satisfaction before remembering it is a fantasy.

Vera looks up and the woman is watching her. Their eyes meet, and it is now the pixie's turn to look away. But it is a cool, lazy movement. Just like a cat; the same nonchalant appraisal and dismissal. But was there something more? Recognition? They are on the same train, heading in the same direction. Does she know Vera? Or know of her? Has she seen a photo? Maybe she has been inside her house, lain in her bed, rested her head on Vera's pillow. Spoken her name. Said it to Oswald, laughingly. Maybe made jokes about the half-centimetre. Maybe Oswald doesn't mind her mentioning it, joking about it, with her perfect pixie lips. Ridiculous.

She is just a woman sitting on a train. There was nothing in that look. It was a glance, if anything. Vera is just letting her imagination run wild. Run away with her. This is the problem with a lie found out, it distorts the truth. Or reality. Or one's perception of reality.

The woman does not look Vera's way again. Vera is not sure whether this signifies guilt or innocence. She is leaning towards innocence when the woman looks out of the window and, registering where they are on the line, slips the book into her handbag and gets up.

Northcote station. Vera's station.

Vera gets up.

That the woman is getting off at the same stop makes Vera uncomfortable. The incident with the man in the shop earlier in the day has left her feeling vulnerable, exposed. His face, his tone, echo in her mind as she moves over to where the other passengers, including the woman, stand waiting to disembark. Every bump, every touch, feels like a pinprick against her skin, such is her sensitivity.

Oink Oink

From her position, Vera can see the woman's ears. They are perfect. Fine and delicate as eggshells, with soft plump little lobes. Perfect for biting. Vera is mesmerised. Here is this beautiful creature, with perfect ears, coming to Northcote to steal into Vera's home to displace her. To expose her for what she truly is – just like the man in the store did – nothing.

Vera walks quickly to keep up with the woman. The station stinks of urine around the exit. Entrance? Exit? Whatever it is, the ground is covered with bird-shit. All these normally insignificant details glare at her as she steps out onto the street. They both turn left and head towards High Street. They step in time. The woman pulls out her phone, checking it as she walks. Vera can see bubbles of text on the screen. An ongoing conversation she longs to read. The woman sends a message.

Who are you texting? Where are you going?

Surely Oswald wouldn't be meeting up with someone when Vera is on her way home? Surely not. The ground feels shaky beneath her feet. She's been knocked about today, left with the feeling that anything might happen.

It's seven o' clock and the sun is still in the sky, and although it's only Tuesday, voices, music, the clink of glasses and the smell of barbecuing meat are in the air. A dog barks. Children squeal and laugh. People are heading out to bars and pubs up on High Street. An old man is out in his garden. Or what was once a garden, but is now a single tree erupting from a concrete slab, its branches covered with netting. The man stands

beside it, a cigarette dangling from his lip, saggy breasts barely covered by the yellowing singlet he wears. His gaze is unwavering as he watches the women.

The woman does not notice him, or does not seem to, it is hard for Vera to determine from behind. Vera watches the man's face as the woman passes across his line of sight. He does not move, does not blink, his face does not change. Is he watching or just standing there as people pass by while he thinks of something else? Dreams of someone else? As Vera walks past, she looks directly into his eyes. Not a flicker. Like his garden, the man is made of concrete.

The woman passes Vera's street.

Vera thinks, I should go home. I should forget about this woman. She is just a woman going home, going to High Street, going who knows where. She is just a woman.

Vera passes her street. She follows the woman out onto High Street, past vintage shops and cafes, past a hair salon and Halal butcher, past a bar with a few lonely looking smokers out the front. The woman stops and pulls out a compact mirror to check herself. Vera falters, and not knowing what else to do, turns to look in a shop window. A mannequin stares back at her. Its wig has slipped and fallen to the floor, leaving the face strangely naked and exposed, its eyes, large and sad.

Satisfied, the woman puts her compact away and steps into Pizza Meine Liebe. Vera's heart beats hard in her chest. She'll just go up and have a quick peek. Just to reassure herself, she's come this far, after all. And what if it is him? What then?

Oink Oink, says Mr Piggy and taps his watch. *Oink Oink*. We don't have all day.

Vera goes up to the window, shades her eyes with her hand, and looks. The place is crowded, people sitting, people standing, people moving, all squashed in together. And there, in the far corner, at a table for two, is the woman. And a man.

A man who is not Oswald, true, but he is all wrong.

This man has a crew-cut and an unusual tan. He is all ropey veins and bulging biceps and an indecipherable neck. Vera is pissed off. She turns away from the window and heads back the way she came. He doesn't even have a neck! No neck. His head and shoulders have absorbed it. Why would that woman, who has the swanlike neck and beautiful skin, want to be with him? It is an outrage. An abomination. Vera constructs a different life for the woman as she walks home. A life with suitable lovers, men and women, all of whom, have necks.

When Vera opens the door, the smell of garlic and onion greet her. Oswald is singing in the kitchen.

'I made dinner,' he says, smiling when she enters the room. 'And I bought that wine you like.'

Vera stares at him, at his happy, smiling face. She wants to hit him. She wants to hurt him. She wants to tell him things. She wants to hate him.

Oink Oink

†

They are watching a documentary on adoption. On the screen an English couple watch their new baby from a Russian orphanage deteriorate in front of them. Emmeline is explaining neglect and attachment theory to Annie. Annie is ignoring her.

'When are *you* going to have some children?'

Vera shrugs.

'Oh Jesus,' says Emmeline, 'Nice segue, mum. Very topic-sensitive.'

Annie, unperturbed, persists, 'Doesn't Oswald want children?'

'I'm not sure either of us should be inflicted on children, Annie. I believe we are providing a public service by not having any,' Vera smiles a soft, secret smile that she saves for special occasions. That she saves for Annie, 'Or perhaps we could buy some

children. Lots and lots of children. We could pick out the ones we want and return them if they're defective. There must be some kind of warranty, some kind of return policy for children nowadays. It'd be like at work, people standing at the glass cabinet picking out chocolates. I want a child with strawberry cream filling. Or a Turkish Delight baby. Or a gooey caramel centred one. And then come back and say this one's too melty. Or I chipped my tooth on this one. Or damn it, it's just not what I thought it would be – white chocolate caramel double-dipped dried apricot babies are just not to my liking. Who would've thought so much sweetness could be so nauseating? I demand my money back!

Annie does not smile, 'Are you still working there? When are you going to get a real job?'

And all the little children inside the glass cabinet begin to weep. They weep because they feel sorry for Vera, they weep because they feel sorry for Emmeline; they even shed a tear for Annie. But mainly they weep because they have been told they are not real.

†

The bird was plump and glossy, its feathers neat. It lay there on its side, one eye visible, winking in the sunlight. Black and white and orange. Onyx and pearl and amber.

Treasure.

Vera squatted down to take a closer look. The bird's body rippled, as if a breeze was ruffling its feathers. With the winking eye and movement, the bird seemed, for a moment, alive; paralysed but aware. But it isn't breathing, she thought. The chest did not rise and fall, its tongue did not flicker from its open beak, as she had seen before with birds they had tried to save when she was a child. Birds placed in cardboard boxes out in the shed away from cats and other unseen predators. Bread and water carefully

arranged, just in case, only to be found untouched in the morning, the animal dead and cold in the box.

‘Why won’t they eat? Why won’t they save themselves?’ Vera asked.

‘Shock, Emu. They die of shock,’ Annie said, holding her hand, squeezing it. So unlike Annie. But then, Annie had a soft spot for animals. She would leave food out for the mangy tom that hung around the neighbourhood, baring its teeth and hissing when approached. ‘They don’t talk back,’ Annie would say, by way of explanation. And Vera would beg to differ with the tom as case in point. ‘He doesn’t do that with me,’ Annie would respond with a superior look.

‘Of shock?’ Vera said. ‘How can you die of shock?’

‘They’re fragile,’ said Annie. ‘A good scare is all it takes sometimes. Or they just give up.’

Vera couldn’t imagine wanting to just give up or being so scared that her heart stopped. It seemed almost funny when she really thought about it. But standing there with Annie, her cheeks were wet with tears.

‘How about we bury it?’

Vera nodded.

Such a silly girl crying over a bird. But Annie didn’t say it, Father did.

But that was later, after Annie and Vera, first up on a cool May morning, quietly buried a tiny sparrow.

That bird did not move, not like the one Vera bent over now.

The air was dry and still, no breeze to ruffle feathers. And yet the bird moved, its flesh undulating – *Poked her eye with a stick and maggots popped out* – the words came to her as if they were fresh from his mouth, lovely and sticky and new. Vera picked up a stick and poked. The flesh writhed. She poked again. Fat and white they popped out from some unseen opening and wriggled around amongst the neat, clean feathers. Maggots. The bird must be filled with them, she thought with horror and delight. Vera

poked the bird again. More and more burst through, and Vera pried the wound open with a stick, pushing it in, levering the flesh apart. Glistening, they spilled out, their soft featureless bodies moving together, gorging on the bird.

Eating it from the inside out.

†

Gary loves to poke dead things. Vera watches him push a stick into a dead chicken they've found by the dirt road between paddocks and beach. It's been cut clean in two; pink flesh, white feathers.

Only the bottom half can be located.

Without her saying a word, Gary says, 'It's dead so it's ok.'

'Oh,' she says, not taking her eyes from the chicken's soft insides.

'It can't feel anything.'

Vera squats down, 'What are you looking for?'

He shrugs, 'Dunno. Just curious.'

Something grey and stringy hooks on to the stick, and Gary delicately stretches it out.

'I just – it's just weird, you know. We're – I dunno – we say stuff to each other, and we walk around and stuff, but really,' he pauses, considering the thing on the end of the stick. 'we're just meat.'

†

'Gross.'

Oswald poked her in the back with his knee, 'That's fucking disgusting, Ver.'

He squatted down next to her.

She laughed and waved her stick at him, 'Lick it.'

'Get away.' He didn't laugh, 'It stinks. Jesus, look at the flies.'

Vera frowned. She hadn't noticed the flies, the smell. She had just seen something bright and beautiful. Now when she looked at the bird – a magpie – its feathers seemed drab, she saw that its eye was crusty and part of its skull was clearly visible.

And for a moment, Vera saw what Oswald saw. But she interpreted it differently. Here was a creature in a state of decay, exquisitely decomposing; dark, delicate, crumbling.

It was pulchritudinous.

†

Angel boy.

Dark curls, dark skin and pale, pale blue eyes, like cataracts. Maggot eyes. No, she is being too harsh. She is being ridiculous. Vera would never fall in love with such eyes.

'The little death,' says Gary, 'that's how the French think of an orgasm.'

And he stares at her with those eyes. There is a full moon above them. Gary is in high school now. He is very wise.

'Why do they call it that?'

Gary shrugs, 'Maybe because when you have one a piece of your soul dies,' he smiles at her. Not the kind of smile that Oswald, years from now, will give her. Gary's smile is pure and kind. 'Are you willing to give up a piece of your soul?'

Vera's not sure she believes in souls. She's also not sure, logistically speaking, how that would work out.

'But how many orgasms can you have, then, till you're soulless?'

‘Shall we find out?’ And he kisses her.

‘But,’ interrupts Vera, and this seems important, in case she is in fact wrong about the existence of souls, ‘can you still have an orgasm once your soul is gone?’

The angel scowls.

‘Fuck’s sake. Other girls don’t ask all these questions.’

Other girls. And they sit there, behind the outhouse, galaxies swirling above, in silence.

†

‘I thought we were looking for treasure,’ said Oswald.

‘This is treasure.’

‘You can keep it.’

‘Look how many it’s feeding,’ Vera turned and grinned, ‘one day they’ll feast on us like that.’

‘Jesus. You can have me cremated.’

‘Shall I burn you in your bed or send you out to sea on a pyre?’

‘Pyre. Vikings did that, right?’

Vera stood up. Her knees ached and her skin stung from the sun, it seemed to tighten when she moved. ‘I’m going to use you for compost.’

A meat garden, full of meat vegetables; Oswald was oh so full of meaty goodness.

†

The last time Vera sees Gary, she is sixteen and on her way to work. Vera’s made it big-time. She’s cashed up. A lady of means. Vera’s a checkout chick from five to nine on

Thursdays and nine to five on Saturdays. The *beep beep beep* of the scanner, the motion of her hands, her arms as she sweeps a never-ending stream of groceries across its path, the sound of her own voice over and over ‘hi, how are you?’ following her into sleep, preventing any chance of dreams beyond the fluorescent lights and rows and rows of aisles with rows and rows of shelves filled with rows and rows of products to scan over and over and over – and there he is, pulling up next to her in a beat-up Ford Escort as she walks down the backstreets of Payneham.

Vera doesn’t notice him at first, not until – ‘Hey!’ – and she jumps, jerked out of a daydream, on the back-foot from the start.

‘Where’re you off to?’

One arm hangs out the window, a cigarette dangling at the end, his other hand on the steering wheel. Gary’s face is pale now, like the ash from his cigarette, and there are shadows around his eyes. Gary is not looking at her. He looks ahead, at the road, even when he speaks. Vera feels small, standing there in her work uniform with this boy. Even though she can see, already, that he is wasting away, slowly fading out of this world, he seems huge. Vast. Which is odd when she thinks about it, for Vera is two inches taller.

Vera tells him she’s off to work and he asks where. She tells him where. She says words and points with her hands as if he hasn’t a clue where Marden Shopping Centre is. As if he is an idiot, except that she is the one left feeling a fool as she tries to look at him but not be noticed.

He does not notice. He does not even seem to pay attention to the words she is saying. Gary takes a drag on his cigarette. His bottom lip is too big. It droops, skin, the colour of a used condom opaque with semen, peels off. And just when Vera thinks she has lost him, he asks after Annie and Father. She says they are fine, there is nothing else she can or wants to say on the matter.

Gary says, and here his eyes light up a little, 'I saw Emmeline the other day.' He chews his bottom lip, or rather he pulls it up – it must be heavy, after all – and caresses it between his teeth, massages it, 'What is she – thirteen?'

Vera pauses before answering. Pauses, wondering where this is going. Pauses because she thinks she knows. She nods, 'Yeah.'

Now Gary looks at Vera. Looks at her and his bottom lip drags itself up into a smile.

'She's got nice tits,' he flicks the cigarette away, 'good face, too.'

An appraisal. He is a connoisseur and he approves. Vera is torn. She is torn between disgust and hurt, in his evaluation she feels dismissed, passed over. Vera has no tits.

She fiddles with the strap of her bag. She feels herself melting away, merging with the grey of the day. All around is grey; the cloud that covers the sky, the houses, the pavement, the bitumen, the stobie poles that line the street, all bleak, all lifeless.

Vera thinks of Emmeline, hating her, wanting to protect her.

'I have to go,' she says, 'I'll be late if I don't.'

'Maybe I'll come by later.'

And she feels sick with fear, sick with excitement.

'Ok,' she says, wondering if he'll offer her a lift. He doesn't.

Standing in the fluorescent light, scanning item after item, Vera looks out into the shopping centre, she looks for a dark head. She looks for a halo. For an angel.

He does not come.

A customer yells at Vera for packing milk and bread together. Packing groceries is a fine art; one almost needs a degree to do it. Her till is down forty-five dollars at the end of the night. She counts it three times to make sure. 'Tut-tut,' says the office lady shaking her head. With a Stanley knife Vera cuts open empty boxes, flattens them and throws them into a machine to be crushed. With each cut – I love you. I hate you. I love

you – ‘Hurry up with that,’ snaps the manager, walking past, ‘we don’t have all night.’ I hate you. Vera stands in a pool of yellow light waiting for Annie. Her breath hangs in the night air. She longs for the Ford Escort to appear, for the door to open, for the chapped lips to call her over. But it does not, and no one calls for her.

Lying in bed Vera wonders if she will see him again. She wonders why he does not see her. Why he will not speak to her about what happened. She wants to tell him everything. She wants to share it, the part that happened to her and only her. In dreams she’s told him. In dreams he loves Vera and only Vera. He does not think of Emmeline and her tits. Gary and Vera protect each other, fitting together perfectly, curling in and around one another. They climb out of a window and run away together, tasting the sweet warm air, smelling the sea breeze, feeling the hard earth beneath their feet. This is what she dreams.

Beautiful, breathless dreams.

Next time, she thinks when she wakes. Next time.

But sometimes, on the odd occasion, Vera dreams of climbing through his window. Slinking in like a cat, soft and deadly, leaning in close to him as he sleeps, as he dreams. Licking the salt from his cheeks, whispering – die, die, die – and stealing his breath.

Beautiful, breathless dreams.

When she wakes, she purrs.

†

And the maggots writhe and eat. Eat and writhe. And Vera thinks of a skull with a mane of black Snow White curls, grinning at her.

Because without lips that is its only option.

And he'll come to her window, he'll come to her window and call out and tap and scratch at the glass.

'Let me in, let me in,' he'll say.

'Or what will you do?' says Vera, 'Will you huff and puff? And puff and huff? And blow this house away?'

'Let me in. I'm here for Emmeline and her tits.'

And he'll try to get in, try to break through, try to force his way, and she'll drag his arms over glass, over and over, except there's no flesh. No blood. Only bones. Bone on glass. Words without lips. And a hard on for her sister's tits.

But bones don't speak. Leonard did not speak to Ethel; he did not weep and wander; his lament at the bottom of the ocean was Annie's concoction to keep the kids away from water.

Ghosts only exist in stories.

Bones don't speak.

Gary does not speak to Vera.

Only meat speaks.

†

'I found treasure, real treasure,' Oswald said. 'Not maggots and dead shit, like yours. It's some old ruin on the beach.'

'Oh, the house.'

Oswald laughed, 'It's hardly a house.'

Irritated, Vera said, 'I know it's not. It's some shack that got abandoned mid-build. That's just what we used to call it – Kid House. For kids only.'

‘You used to play in there? What were your parents thinking? It’s a death-trap. Looks like it could fall down any minute and probably full of snakes and spiders. Or junkies.’

‘Junkies? Out here?’

‘Good a place as any.’

‘Not really accessible or convenient.’

‘Nice and hidden. All the rich kiddies probably come down here with mummy and daddy. They have the best drugs those fuckers. They could sit in there and build a fire, sing songs, toast marshmallows and stick needles in their arms or snort shit while ma and pa are sipping on a glass of Chandon admiring the view from their balcony,’ he said, and added bitterly, ‘Like they do in Lorne.’

Vera could tell Oswald had someone specific in mind. A certain face or faces. With the mention of Lorne, needles and rich kids, it was someone he went to school with, no doubt. Pretty little boys standing in a row jabbing at each other with needles; acting tough and looking pretty. It was a hard knock life, when you’re the one left out of such intimate gatherings. Vera had heard the story a thousand times.

Oswald on his scholarship, watching on, studying hard – who would’ve thought it? – while these boys ran off and had fun powdering their noses and slipping their dicks into something soft and under-age. And all the while daddy hovered in the background with the cheque book – when such things were still common – and spoke quietly to the principal, the doctor, the lawyer, the pharmacist – come get your methadone on the sly, in secret, away from prying eyes, other patients, who sit hard and worn and angry waiting for us. You won’t wait. No siree. We’ll shake your hand while you wolf it down and smile and chat about medical school and where you’re off to for the summer – and then mummy telling them it was all okay, all alright, it wasn’t your fault, darling. How were you to know? My precious little lamb.

And there was Oswald studying harder and harder until his brain might explode, until his hand might seize up, his whole arm, even!

What'll you be, darling? What'll you be, hun? A doctor? A lawyer? An engineer? A butcher, a baker, a candlestick maker...

Bet electrician and musician were never on the list.

'But it's not what you know,' said Oswald for the millionth, no, trillionth time, 'It's who you know.'

And he didn't want to know. By the time he finished high school, by the time he got his perfect score, by the time he was halfway through the second year of university and it was happening all over again, he didn't want to know. Didn't want to be part of the world he had so long been excluded from.

Fuck'em. They can have it.

That's how he remembered it. That's what he held on to.

And it's all skewed, thought Vera. It's true and it's false, it's broken-glass-shards of unfairness, of being hard-done by, a distorted remembrance which placed him securely as the victim. For Oswald, she knew, it was what he could have been, not what he was. He held on to that, unable to relinquish it. An unrealised, undiscovered genius. He bolstered his ego with this, in case he discovered he was nothing without it.

'It's a private beach,' she said. 'People can walk across but they can't hang around.'

Oswald snorted, 'Who's going to stop them?'

Vera noticed that his hair was crisp with salt, eyes bloodshot, lips dry. Someone should take a photo of us, she thought. They could stand in Kid House together, side by side, entwined, two dried-up mummies baked by the sun. Her face peeling, Oswald's eyes bleeding, pretty as a picture.

'I'm thirsty,' was all Vera said, all she could think about. The heat was pushing down on her. She could feel it pressing in on her eyes and temples, feel it inside her

head. So stupid, she thought. Why didn't I drink more? Why didn't I go back inside, away from this horrible sun? She knew it was because she didn't want to leave Oswald out here alone. Not on her beach.

The world danced before her eyes, too bright. White aura plagued her vision, created wormholes in the sky, warping Oswald's face. He's too close, she thought, too close. She felt his breath.

'You ok?'

Vera shook her head and then, feeling nauseous from the motion, rested it on her knees, closed her eyes. She was cooking, her insides bubbling away: intestines, kidneys, bladder, ovaries. All simmering, boiling in their own juices. Except for her brain, it was fried, dried, useless.

'Come,' a voice faraway said. And then, close to her ear, 'sit down under the trees, I'll get water.'

†

Annie doesn't like Rod. Annie has been quite vocal about this point at home. He has been around a while now. But since the wedding, Rod has started putting his foot down as he likes to say. Rod won't let Sue and the boys stay more than two nights on the coast even though it's winter holidays and they usually stay a week. His foot has come down on this matter. This has pissed Annie off no end.

Rod tried to invite himself and Annie lied and said the house was only available mid-week when Rod had to work. Annie was pleased about this small victory. She even did a little dance. It was the only time Vera ever saw her dance.

This time, on the whole, the children are left to their own devices, unless Annie decides that discipline is in order or a meal is to be served. Annie has a schedule which everyone else must adhere to, though she makes it up as she goes.

The children hide and watch the two women, Annie and Sue, watch them as they wave their cigarettes about and chat and smile – Smile! Annie never smiles when Father is around – as the smoke snakes up and around them.

‘Look at them,’ Vera whispers, ‘Gorgons. Beautiful faces with snakes for hair. Don’t let them see you. They’ll turn you to stone!’

‘Gorgons?’ says Gary, ‘Where do you come up with this shit?’

Emmeline giggles at the forbidden word.

‘My head,’ Vera lies.

Gary is grown up now. He starts high school in a few weeks.

He says, ‘I can’t be fucked playing this dumb baby shit.’

Later on, when everyone else is in bed, Gary and Vera sit in a room with mops and brooms, the one furthest away from Sue and Annie’s room. Vera, light of the world, holds a torch, while Gary writes. She wants to write about the Gorgons; Gorgons that drink tea and smoke and wear frosted pink lipstick and turn little children to stone. He does not want to write that story.

We are not so little anymore, says Gary. We are not children.

Vera says, what are we, then? We’re not grownups.

We’re the in-between people. We fall in the cracks and nobody catches us.

Nobody hears us, not even when we call out. We hide in shadows. We are shadows.

Is this what we’re writing about?

And Gary is quiet. He spins his pencil between his fingers. He stares at the pencil; he does not look at Vera.

I dunno.

What about the Gorgons?

Gorgons don't exist.

Vera sighs. Usually this is fun, she thinks.

So, no stone kids and no Gorgons.

No, not no stone kids. Listen...

And Gary tells her a story about a stone boy – because there are such things, this is not make-believe – and the man who chipped away at him with a chisel. A hard, cold chisel. He chipped and chipped, to make him better, to make him good, to make him new, to make him a man. Piece by piece. Careful little chips that no one could notice, no one could see. Until it was too much, and the stone boy shattered.

This is not right. Gary does not tell this story. Not now. Not then. This story comes later, and Vera is not sure, not anymore, because everything she thought she knew is infected by thoughts and feelings and maybes, and other voices, other lives, that curl up and around this story, this story of a stone boy, and sometimes, when she thinks hard about it, when she tries to hear his voice telling her the story, she wonders if she didn't make it up herself.

†

She held her head in her hands, she could feel it splitting, opening up and leaking all over the sand. Vera opened her eyes to see what kind of mess her insides were making. There was a footprint on the sand. A perfect little footprint. She wanted to reach out and touch it but she had to hold onto her head, she had to try and keep it together. She closed her eyes.

'Drink this,' said a voice. Drink this and you will grow very tall or shrink very small. A hand stroked her head, another guided a bottle to her lips. Oswald's voice, Oswald's hands, Oswald being kind, Oswald being gentle.

The water was warm and thick. I am drinking plastic, she thought. I am drinking BPA, whatever that is – another of Annie’s things that will kill you – I am being filled up with BPA with every sip I take. BPA festering in her stomach and bladder, spreading into other organs, entering her bloodstream.

She wanted to laugh, she wanted to throw up. She opened her eyes, just a fraction, and amidst the globular pools of light dancing in front of her eyes, she saw, running down to the rolling sea, hundreds and thousands and millions and trillions of tiny footprints...

†

‘Run with me,’ he says.

They climb out into the night air and with only a glance back at the house – still and silent, a light on in the lounge room, a shadow moving there – they run down the path as quietly as they can, flying barefoot over earth and rock, their feet hard, calloused, from burning summer asphalt, to the gate in the fence. Quietly, carefully, she lifts the latch. Ancient, rusty, it threatens to give them away, but such is her skill that they slip through unheard, unseen.

The world has shifted. They are on the other side. Free to roam and run wild. Here, the house seems faraway and insignificant. She thinks of the open window, a portal to another place they wriggled into, not yet missed. Life carries on or stops without them.

He says not a word, just a shadow walking ahead, insubstantial. So much so, she fears he’ll disappear if she does not keep up.

Stars twinkle above, glittering, watchful. She walks, her head up, looking back at them, smiling, her heart beating hard. Everything is so open, the sky so wide and clear, the earth so flat, one seeps into the other. And they are part of it. She is of it. She

can feel it all around her, through the soles of her feet, the air on her skin. Scents flood through her nostrils, filling her lungs, tingling inside – for a moment she feels she might be lost to the world around and she grabs his hand, just to feel something human, just to ground her.

But he slips through her fingers like sand.

Run with me.

Down on the beach, they sit watching the ocean. The moon trickles through the surface, invades the dark water, rolls with the waves. There are sounds all around, things moving amongst the trees, in the scrub and dunes, through the piles of seaweed, you can hear them all when you stop and listen, *really* listen, instead of staying inside your head.

Mister Sandman, bring me a dream

Inside Kid House the sandman is waiting.

Make him the cutest that I've ever seen

She lies down and the sandman lies next to her.

Give him two lips like roses and clover

There are no windows, there are no doors, just empty spaces where they should be. Stars peek in. The moon ogles; a giant obstinate eye.

Then tell him that his lonesome nights are over

There is sand everywhere. In her clothes, on her face, on her breasts, in her mouth, between her legs – creeping in, sand inside, sand splitting her in two. She tries to speak, but she's choking on sand. She tries to move, but sand is weighing her down.

Mister Sandman, bring me a dream

The sandman fills her.

Mister Sandman, bring me a dream

She thinks: I can't breathe, but I'm not scared. It hurts, but I'm not scared.

Make him the cutest that I've ever seen

Because she likes this feeling of being filled, she likes this feeling of dying as she listens to the waves roll in.

Give him the word that I'm not a rover

What she doesn't like, is the end. When he's not there.

Sandman, I'm so alone

And when, what she thought was the sound of the sea, is someone laughing and laughing and laughing...

Don't have nobody to call my own

She gives birth to a boy.

He's there, spat out onto the sand, eyes wide, blood on his lips.

Her boy, her baby.

The sun breathes on them from above and the water licks the boy's feet. It cannot reach hers. She stands in the doorway and stares at the boy.

On the roof, a man sings. A man from a band. A man who *is* the band. He laughs and sings and offers warm, poisoned water to the sun. The sun is blinded by the glare from his teeth. The man should not be there, he has no right to be. Not in the same place as the boy, as the baby. They cannot know of one another. She forbids it.

Boy, she says, you shouldn't be here.

But the boy says nothing.

Boy, can't you speak? Cat got your tongue?

The boy opens his mouth to speak. He opens wider and wider, a great gaping hole that threatens to swallow her up.

Shut your mouth, boy, she says. You shut it right now.

His mouth snaps shut. He touches his mouth and his fingers stain red. The flesh blushes and blooms, the colour travels throughout, so that he is red like a rose; skin velvet and soft as a petal.

All babies are covered in blood when they are born, she tells him. They are sticky with blood and vernix. A cheesy, bloody paste. If we are careful, we can scrape the vernix off, scrape it off and feed it to the moths.

See the moths? See how they flit and they flutter? See how they are drawn to you? It's the smell of the vernix. Let them eat. Let them eat till they are full and fat and happy and then we'll grind them up and make moth cheese. We'll make moth cheese and feed it to the man who sings. We'll placate him with the mothy cheese. We'll drown him in it.

But still the boy says nothing.

She feels in her pocket. There is something in there, something warm and thick and slippery. When she pulls her hand out, there in the middle of her palm, sits a tongue.

Oh, my mistake, she says, the cat doesn't have your tongue, I do.

And the boy falls apart.

Vera

The name comes to her, it is said with clarity and conviction. She tries to bat it away, but it echoes. Not here, not now, go away. Her name, this story, she can't abide it. Can't work out how it happened. How she allowed it. Annie's face follows but will not stay. She won't let it stay. She pushes it away. Not here. Not now. Go away.

Vera.

So softly, so gently it comes. In a voice so unlike Annie's, and yet so like it, she wants to cry...

But it is Annie who is crying.

Vera sees her sitting with a baby – Emmeline, she thinks, Emmeline – rocking the baby, alone, alone without Father. Father is away, Father is working, Father is resting, Father is having time out. A small girl stands in the shadows watching, watching, while Annie is crying...

Run with me.

And Oswald said, Jesus Christ what drugs are you on?

And he laughed and he laughed and his laughter seemed to go on and on and on...

‘Vera, wake up.’

A small hand slips into hers, moist, delicate. And Vera, thick-headed and body-heavy, opens her eyes. Child kneels by her. He squeezes her hand, he grinds the bones together, grinds her bones to make his bread.

‘Sticks and stones,’ he whispers, ‘sticks and stones.’

But words will never hurt me.

†

‘Vera, wake up.’

Oswald sat on the edge of the bed, a glass of water in one hand, beer in the other, head bowed beneath the bunk above.

‘How’re you feeling?’

‘Like shit, but I’ll live.’

Vera took the glass and drank.

‘How long have I been out for?’

‘Couple of hours. It’s nearly seven. I thought you were going to sleep right through,’ he sipped his beer. ‘Put you in here so you didn’t sweat up our bed.’

‘How thoughtful.’

‘You really should take better care of yourself. You know what you’re like in this weather.’

‘Are you joking? I said let’s go back.’

‘But you weren’t firm enough.’

Vera stared at him, too worn out to say anything.

‘Are you hungry?’ he asked, oblivious.

She screwed her face up at the thought of food, ‘I still feel nauseous but I guess I should eat.’

‘Good,’ said Oswald. ‘We don’t have long here and we’ve got to make the most of our time off.’

Other people’s illnesses were an inconvenience in Oswald’s eyes, only his own warranted real concern. Vera looked out of the window. It was still light, though the shadows had grown long. She could hear galahs squabbling in a nearby tree.

Time off, she thought, and smiled. Time off from her job, her real, grownup job which her little sister helped her get. Vera the social worker. Vera assessing people’s needs. Assessing the needs of children, children in need of protection.

The job she quit a month after training ended.

†

Where are you going, where have you been?

Where has she been? That’s what Oswald would ask if Oswald knew she had quit the job which was meant to solve everything. Was supposed to cement Oswald’s grand plan – the plan for Vera and Oswald.

But mainly for Oswald.

The pay wasn't great but it had security – not physical security, mind you, but financial security, the kind of security that counts – with superannuation and maternity leave, with sick leave and holiday pay. It even had time in lieu! So you could take time, time before it is due and then you owe time. Time is for the taking. Or you can accrue it. Build up a wealth of time to be used at your discretion. Or when you're told. You can't have too much time, of course. No. Too much time is not right. It's not proper. It's a government job, where time is held to account through bureaucratic process. Through a series of checks and balances. With the most important check in Oswald's mind being maternity leave.

It's time for procreation, Vera – you better clock on!

'We can have a baby. And when you go back to work, I can help out. That's the beauty of being your own boss – the flexibility!'

Oswald's work as an electrician is very flexible. Being your own boss, if you're Oswald, has many perks. Like picking and choosing which jobs to turn up to. And it's not that Oswald is lazy, far from it, he works very hard, puts his heart and soul into what he considers his real work. Oswald is a musician first and electrician second. Where the role of Father would fall in all of this, Vera does not know. She suspects, but she can't be certain. You never can. Oswald is going to make it as a musician. His band is going to make it, just as Vera is going to be a writer. And writers and musicians are meant to be together. Vera and Oswald are the perfect couple. They're artists. Sensitive souls. Together, they look good on paper.

Someday, when they're famous and probably dead – although maybe not, you can't always wait for death to write about life, to drag a life or lives through the mud and parade them on the silver screen – Who will play Vera? Why Cate Blanchett, of course! Or maybe Tilda Swinton – and update their Wikipedia page accordingly – anyway, *someday*, people will write about Oswald and Vera. About their love. About

their affairs, their fights, their work, their addictions, their moods. Because they both have moods, as Annie would say – Oh, ignore her, Vera’s just in one of her moods – and each from time to time, would sit in a corner, or lie in bed and not move, barely even breathe because breathing means you’re participating, and stare at a wall or the ceiling, and not let the sky in – keep the sky out, the light out, I’ll have none of that sunshine in – and they, he or she, Vera or Oswald, whose ever turn it was – would lie like a dog, like a dog that doesn’t bark, doesn’t wag its tail – Those are the ones you have to be wary of, says Annie, those are the ones to avoid. They’re biters, those ones, and they’ll go for you when you least expect it! – and the other would pace nervously, treading carefully, whining, a nervous whine that comes from waiting, anticipating, that sooner or later the bite is going to come. And it’ll hurt when it comes but oh what a relief when it does.

But you must forgive them, for they are artists, and artists have moods. Even if there’s not much work being produced. Not by Vera. Not her work. She’s too tired for her work.

Oswald’s idea of housework is to do it when the mood strikes. When he fancies. When he’s inspired to do so. When Oswald cooks, dinner may be served at six. Or eleven. He will either spend hours on an elaborate meal – which, if it fails, will be followed by a tantrum. Yes, a fully grown man flipping over chairs, stamping feet and sulking, his voice getting louder, higher. Sing, Oswald, sing. You have a beautiful voice, darling – or sticks a frozen pizza in the oven. When he cleans, he spends hours on one particular area, he gets fixated on perfection. Removing every speck of dust on the bookshelves, every smudge on a wall, every weed in a garden bed. Then he is too exhausted to move and do anything else. He must rest, must build up his strength with beer and Nick Cave and a night with the boys.

While Vera, Oswald says, is a half-arsed housewife. Vera will wash dishes but won’t dry. Vera will vacuum but not under rugs, not beneath tables, not where the sun

don't shine, hun. Not there. No point. No one can see it. Vera will tidy but she won't dust. Vera will launder but she won't iron and she rarely folds. Vera will cook the same meals week in, week out. And she occasionally bakes.

Vera and Oswald love baked goods. But baking is her Achilles heel. For though Vera has no interest in cooking or baking, no aspiration to become the next Nigella or Maggie Beer, her jealousy peaks when Oswald compliments another woman's gingerbread, lemon tart, or Death by Chocolate, and, once home, she'll pull out a cookbook, blow off the dust, and follow, step by careful step, down to the tiniest detail, to the exact gram, the instructions.

Only to have cakes cave, brownies burn, and pastry crumble.

And Oswald, helpful, considerate Oswald, will laugh and say – 'You can't follow the rules with this sort of thing, it's a labour of love' – and Vera will glare and pout, and Oswald will smile and say – 'But what's the big deal, babe? Who cares? When you're so good at other things' – and wink and walk over to remind her what it is she's good at. And Vera will begin to tear chunks off a dried out sponge and hurl them at him to show him that it was a labour of love. For love is a many splendored thing.

And it is this that people will want to know about. Life reflecting art or the other way around, depending upon which way or from which end you would prefer to consider it. It should be the kind of love story people long to be a part of. Or think they long to be a part of because they are not part of it and don't understand the effort and time and heartache it takes to realise. You must be committed to this kind of love. No one wants to read about how they bought a couch or watched TV or paid their bills. No one wants to know about the tedium, the restlessness, the um-ing and ah-ing over whether to have a baby or get married or buy a house. Those things reek of conventionality. Their lives must be spectacular. But even infidelity becomes boring, monotonous, when you live it. When you repeat it.

What did you do today, honey?

I did a job in Templestowe and paid the water bill and shagged Klara, your hairdresser, and picked up some milk on the way home...

Oh, that's nice dear. Do you mind popping the kettle on?

Perhaps, to keep it interesting someone needs to go mad, someone needs to off themselves, some tragedy should befall someone? Think Virginia Woolf. Think Sylvia Plath. Think Gothic heroine – Cathy dying after childbirth, just to make a point to Heathcliff, just to let it be known she is displeased with his lack of cooperation.

But we've diverged from the point. Strayed a little. We've lost time because there is no one here to keep us in check.

The point is Vera quit her job. And Oswald does not know.

†

It was the home visits that did it.

At the very least, Vera thought, her job would give her an abundance of material for her writing. She could develop character and build on incidents she came across. There were plenty of strange, shocking, horrific stories told during training. Her university placements had been mild in comparison, at a school and in the disability sector.

Here they dealt with abused children

'Now you'll see what I'm talking about,' Emmeline had said. Emmeline who had helped her with the application and prepped her for the interview, 'Whatever we might say about Mum and Dad, you'll see, they aren't that bad.'

Marid sat on Emmeline's lap, chattering to himself, to Vera, in a language she could not understand, moving his hands, his face serious, and then, suddenly, laughing. What do they think about when they're that young, thinks Vera. What do they understand?

Emmeline pulls Marid close and kisses the top of his head, while he squeaks and squirms, 'You can't work in that environment long, it's soul-destroying. Six months, a year, isn't unusual. But it's a good place to start, experience-wise.' Emmeline smiles wryly, 'You'll learn more there in a couple of weeks than you did in your whole degree.'

Vera thinks of the story she heard from Mandy, one of the team leaders, about a girl who recently suffered a nervous breakdown after a home visit. She had walked into a unit to discover the mother sawing through her own leg, convinced the limb didn't belong to her, convinced it was trying to kill her. Her eighteen-month old daughter sat in front of the television watching *Play School*.

Prepare for the worst is the message from Mandy and Emmeline.

But Vera, when they give examples, is taking mental notes and wondering where she can fit these people, their suffering, into a story. Two clients stand out in her mind from her short-lived experience. One in the sprawling outer-suburbs, the borderlands, house-and-land-package territory. A woman with five children running, climbing over furniture, over Vera and her co-worker, their heads shaved because of lice, so young it is hard to tell if they are girls or boys. A room full of used nappies, a sink lost beneath dishes, a bin overflowing, piles and piles of junk mail, shit smeared on walls, and in the air, flies and tiny bugs, a constant presence. Complaints from the neighbours about screaming matches, dogs barking and roaming the area, rubbish dumped on the street.

A sixth child appears, and stands in front of Vera, dirty-faced, snot-nosed, holding what appears to be a balding bear with no ears. The child just stares, before thrusting the toy at Vera.

'This Ella,' the child says, smiling, awaiting approval.

On the extended arm, there is a bruise, the outline of fingers, a palm. The mother, sporting a black-eye of her own, snarls at Vera who hasn't said a word, 'How'd you spect me to keep 'em in line? Six of 'em and their dad's bloody useless.'

A woman after Annie's own heart.

When Vera leaves there, she feels she can't get clean enough. She begins to understand Emmeline's obsession with hygiene, with Dettol and washing her hands, over and over, until her cuticles crack and the skin is red raw.

The other client is a woman in a high castle. She lives in a beautiful house overlooking the Yarra. She has a two-year-old daughter and her home is immaculate. It's so clean, Vera feels dirty. The woman, too, is immaculate. Thin, contained, not a hair out of place, not a chip on her polish. All day she cleans and cleans and cleans. The place looks unlived in.

The woman's daughter does not cry, does not laugh, does not chatter the way Marid does. This child does not make a sound. When Vera looks into her eyes, it's as if there's nothing there.

The woman's husband is at work. Her voice is clipped, quiet.

'Do you *know* who *he* is? Do you *know* who *I* am?'

Accusations of sexual abuse have been made. A report filed by a doctor. The father is supposed to be here for this meeting, but he isn't. Unlike the woman with the five children, he is *somebody*. Just as his wife intimated.

And then this immaculate woman looks Vera in the eye, cool and straight, a look that says – I *know* you.

Confidentiality is vital in this job. No naming. These are private matters. And these people, when Vera discusses her work, become one person, one family.

'Jesus, Ver,' says Oswald, 'just leave it at work, will you? It's depressing. I don't want to hear about these ferals.'

Vera stops speaking these stories, but they continue to be told. Inside her head they won't shut up. A clean family, a dirty one, but beneath the same. Or, thinks Vera, perhaps not. Because unless you were informed, unless you were in the know, the clean one would seem ok. Desirable, even. And whilst the faces of all the children stay with her, loom large, it is that child, pristine and empty, which lingers at night and makes her feel odd, unsettled. It makes her feel something she hasn't in a long time. Guilt, perhaps, though she cannot work out why. Vera does not like this. She'd rather hear about these things than see them. Going into these places, seeing these people, she feels something is about to be unearthed, that she is about to be named, that something might erupt inside and burst; something she can't control.

She quits.

†

What face have you given me? Jonathan asks.

I have not given you one, dear-heart.

*What do you mean, my darling, my one, my only, my truly, madly, deeply,
dearest Dr Einstein?*

I mean you have no face. I cut it away and left you with none.

But why? Why would you do such a thing?

Because you are nothing.

Then how am I to speak?

You cannot. Even now I can't hear you.

†

'I just need a little time to wake up properly. I think I'll have a bath.'

Oswald sighed and got up, 'Ok, but don't be too long or I'll start without you.'

'I won't.'

As he left the room, he said, 'You know, we haven't had sex yet.' Oswald didn't look back, didn't wait for a response. He just disappeared down the hall, leaving her to dwell on his statement, the profundity of it.

Vera sipped her water slowly, she was in no rush. The blanket on the bed was an old patchwork one, that had always been there, made up of pictures of dogs and cats. Some of the stitching was coming loose and it smelled musty, as if it hadn't been washed in a long time and held the scent of many sleepers. Looking up, Vera noticed small clumps of knotted hair stuck in the wires of the bed above, a non-descript brown. The hair of little girls mingled together, entwined; small mementoes held onto by the house. There were probably more beneath the lower bunk from when she and Emmeline hid there to avoid bath-times.

Through the window Vera could see the previously squabbling galahs scratching at the dry grass. A lone magpie stood amongst them, head up, waiting, surveying.

Vera remembered sitting on the top bunk in this room, Emmeline climbing up beside her. Just the two of them, after the boys and Sue stopped coming. How old were they? It all seemed mixed up around then. She must have been at least thirteen, maybe fourteen. Was it before or after? She couldn't remember. After, she supposed.

†

Vera breathes on the glass and it fogs up, she rubs it with the sleeve of her jumper. Crystal clear, she presses up against it, hands cupped around her eyes, looking out into the darkness.

'What are you looking for, Emu?'

Vera shrugs.

The TV can be heard from down the passageway. In the lounge room the fire is burning, the room hot and smoky. Annie and Father will be sitting in separate chairs, watching a movie.

Here with her face near the window, Vera can feel the cool of the winter's night through the glass, she can hear the wind outside, and, if she strains hard enough she is sure she can hear the ocean. The rise and fall of waves crashing on the sand, dragging back the seaweed, the bark, the shells, the glass, the pebbles, the remnants of fish and birds, dragging them back into its depths to whirl around in the churning water only to be spat back out again so that in the morning it seems nothing has changed.

Emmeline, copying her sister, breathes on the glass, rubs, and presses close to the window.

'What's out there?' she asks in a whisper. Though they are doing nothing wrong, soft voices and movements seem appropriate somehow. The room is quiet, enclosed. Separate from the rest of the house.

'I can't see much,' Vera admits, 'but I thought I heard something. Like there was someone or something out there.'

Emmeline shivers and comes in closer. Vera can smell sweat on her, stale and pungent, and something else – she reaches a hand out and feels Emmy's sleeve.

'Gross. Have you been sucking on your sleeve again?'

Her sister giggles but looks embarrassed. She is too old for this habit.

'What do you think it is?' Emmeline says.

'I dunno,' says Vera, suddenly not wanting to play this game. 'Something. Maybe a possum.'

Emmeline nods and doesn't say anything. They sit there looking out, in silence.

Vera thinks about the beach, imagines being out there in the pitch black. Her voice dragged off, whipped away by the wind, as she steps cautiously, one foot in front of the other, trying to feel her way back to the pathway. Back to the pathway beneath

the trees. Those trees with their twisted arms and fingers, things hidden within, watching, waiting, for someone to get stuck, hair caught by a twig, clothes snagged by a branch. Something dead, Vera thinks. Something forgotten. Something trapped, trying to get out.

Vera imagines standing there in the dark, with hands outstretched, trying to disentangle herself with the roar of the ocean in the background, the howl of the wind, and something else –

Something closer, whispering, breathing, touching her in the dark. But the dead don't breathe, she thinks. They don't breathe. They don't whisper. They are dead.

Vera stares harder through the window, trying to see beyond the light cast by the house, trying to see out to the paddocks and beyond. Trying to see the outline, a skeletal shape moving –

Here they come marching two by two! Hurrah! Hurrah!

Her body tingles and she wants to run or squeal or pull the sheets over her head. But instead, 'They're out there,' whispered in Emmeline's ear. And Emmeline, eyes wide, transfixed on the window searching for an explanation, says 'Who?'

'The dead.'

'Oh.' As if it were all explained. 'Like Grandad?'

Grandad: cool wax in his coffin. Best suit on. Eyes closed, lips parted, hands crossed resting on his chest. Hair smooth and sleek with Brylcreem. His mouth and nostrils, his ear holes, cavernous. Empty spaces. Flesh hollowed out.

No, not like Grandad. Grandad was old. Grandad lived and now he has departed at what one suspects was his duly appointed time. These remain, weighed down by – what? Their disappointment? Their surprise? Their despair? Their apathy? As if they knew this is how it would be, as if there was never any fooling them with dreams and fairy tales, so they never had any hopes or aspirations. Or maybe they did. Maybe this

was an entirely unexpected ending, and here they remain, caught in-between, before anything could be realised, left without peace.

†

Vera watched the magpie. It swivelled its head, cocked it from side to side. At one point it appeared to examine the galahs from upside down, as if that were the best possible angle from which to ascertain the situation. The galahs carried on scratching, kept their heads down, intent on the task at hand. They ignored this intruder, the odd one out amongst their pretty pink comrades.

Quick as a dart, the magpie shot forward and grabbed something from the beak of an unsuspecting galah and flew away. The birds scattered, squawking loudly at such insolence. And then, after a moment or two, they settled down and resumed their foraging as if the incident had never occurred.

†

When Vera thinks of a future with Oswald, she sees two corpses lying alongside each other in a bed, slowly decomposing. Shrinking away from each other until there is nothing left. Perhaps somewhere in another room, beyond her mind's eye, there is a tiny corpse in a crib.

She cannot see that far, she does not know.

†

Vera sat in the bath with the water running. It was a deep bath. Not as deep as her memory had allowed, but that was because it linked back to childhood. And she was much smaller then.

She remembered Annie filling it so she and Emmeline had to sit with their chins tilted upwards to avoid drowning. And then, when Annie left the room and was a safe distance away, Vera would whisper to Emmeline – ‘Rock the boat, rock the boat.’ – and they would squeal and slip and slide along the length of the bath on their tummies, like seals, rocking the water back and forth in big waves so it crashed over the edge and onto the floor.

‘Tidal wave! Tidal wave!’ They would cry, caught up in the excitement, and Vera laughing and screaming, her mouth so wide it hurt, gulping down water in the process and yelling – ‘I’m drowning! I’m drowning!’ – louder and louder – I will be heard, I will! Me! Me! – until –

Slap!

Thank you, Annie, thank you. I needed that, I was quite hysterical. Quite, quite beside myself.

And Emmeline, wide-eyed, mouth a soft pink O, would pat her arm – ‘Poor Emu’ – and Vera blinking back tears, because this was a time before she could take a slap and not feel it and simply look Annie in the eye and say – ‘Is that it?’ – would snap at her sister, ‘Don’t.’ The game over, the fun ended, the bath continued briefly, but in silence, as Annie mopped the floor.

Vera filled the bath to the top. She lay there, immersed, nose and knees peeking out, eyes open, the world distorted. She thought of a fallen angel.

What is it like to die? Vera thought, going under, holding her breath, what is it like and why did you do it?

‘His poor mother’, says Annie.

‘Bloody selfish,’ says Father.

And they look at the girls from across the table. Here they all sit, as a family, being told of how he was found – no, wait. Let’s get the specifics right – how his brother found him hanging from a beam in the garage. An empty bottle of Jack Daniels on the floor beneath his feet – Dutch courage or a moment of madness? – and nothing else. No note to say why and who he blamed, if anyone, and those cuts on his body hidden by clothes, old cuts, scars...

Annie getting into the gritty details, a sparkle in her eye – death! It’s just so delicious – until Father intervenes.

‘That’s enough now. They don’t need to hear all that.’

And then, Annie and Father stare hard at the girls, a warning in their eyes, stern, unspoken – Don’t you even think about it. Don’t you dare.

‘Remember when you girls would run around with Gary and Dave, playing God knows what?’

We played cops and robbers, Annie. We played spies. We played farmer rounds up the piggies and then eats them. Farmer likes his bacon, Annie. I was the farmer, thinks Vera.

‘Those holidays at Corny Point, the lot of you running all over the place, we could barely keep track. Even in that poor old farmhouse – bouncing down hallways, jumping over tables, climbing up the bunk-bed ladders and leaping off the top. A miracle that none of you broke your neck...’

Yes. But in the end, Annie, in the end, one of us did.

Swing low, sweet chariot, swing low. Swing to and fro. Swing back and forth. Swing side to side. Swing up. And then swing down.

‘Such a sweet boy,’ Annie lights up a cigarette.

‘Not inside, love,’ Father says.

And she, Annie, well, she ignores him. Puffs on it anyway. Annie’s so used to his not being about that as far as she’s concerned, he isn’t really there.

‘Poor Sue. Poor, sweet boy. Well, I say sweet, but he wasn’t later on, was he? I mean after Sue met Rod, well, he changed, didn’t he?’ Annie taps her cigarette on the edge of Father’s mug, a chunk of ash falls in. Father mutters something about not being finished with that. ‘So sullen. So moody. Poor Sue, poor Sue,’ Annie continues, ‘Not Dave though, not his brother. Nice boy, that one. Studying psychology at Adelaide now, I hear. But Gary,’ raises her eyebrow, ‘Remember how angry he used to get? How he punched his fist right through a window? Glass and blood everywhere. Drugs do you think, Ver?’

Vera says not a word. So Annie answers herself, ‘Must have been.’ And then puffs away, smoke curling up and caressing her face.

Smoke gets in your eyes, Annie. See how they tear up with all that smoke.

‘But,’ says Annie, tapping her cigarette again, ash falling onto the table, Father tut-tut-tutting, Annie ignoring him and carrying on, ‘it is strange how it all seemed to start after Rod. I don’t like that man.’

‘You don’t like anyone,’ says Father. ‘Gary was always a cocky little shit. Just didn’t like someone coming in and taking a firm hand with him. Sue let the kid run wild.’

‘I guess,’ says Annie, ‘some kids are just trouble.’

And Annie looks at Vera. And Vera looks right back and smiles.

‘Guess so,’ says Vera.

Isn’t that odd? Annie and Vera in agreement.

†

Gary. What a name for an angel!

No more cigarettes for Gary. No more leaning out of car windows – I saw you, I saw you, only six months back, and you never came. You never visited me as I scanned and greeted, greeted and scanned, under the cold fluorescent light. You said you might, but you never did. You never will. No more assessing Emmeline's tits. No more assessing *anyone's* tits, no more drinking Jack Daniels, no more taking the hand of someone who trusts you and sticking your dick in and then leaving, never saying nothing about it – not that she cares. Not anymore.

And so they came to the house, to Corny Point, they came to Yorke Peninsula as a family, to get away from Gary, from what he had done. So the girls could have a break from such morbidity. So they could spend time together as a family. Tighten those family bonds.

What a silly place to go for reprieve, thinks Vera. Gary's always there, always here, even when he's not.

†

The water was cool, the light had dimmed. It was a golden, rosy light, an end of day light. There was a certain clarity that came after a migraine, despite the nausea. A lightness. As if the body had been cleansed, refreshed, expelling whatever had built up inside. Vera concentrated on her breath, the rise and fall of her chest, and the cocoon of water surrounding her, encasing her, quieting her.

'Hurry up!' yelled Oswald.

She closed her eyes, ignoring him.

†

Today is a digging day. They sit in Kid House, just the two of them: Vera and Emmeline.

What are they digging for? Well that's a good question, a fine question, a question worth asking. But one that can't be answered. Not yet. It's a surprise, really. Yes, a surprise. When they find it, they'll know what it is they're looking for. The key is to just dig.

And so they do. Side by side, they dig. They dig deep and the sand is moist and full of old, forgotten things: bits of carcass, a toy soldier, broken glass.

Annie comes in.

'Join us,' says Vera. 'Come dig.'

Annie declines. Annie more than declines, she yells. She says they are filth – or perhaps they are filthy – she says, 'What are you doing, Vera? *What* are you doing?'

Vera smiles, 'I told you. We're digging. And you should dig, too. Who knows what we'll find, hopefully treasure,' and she winks at Annie.

Annie demands an answer from Emmeline. But Emmeline doesn't know and looks to Vera for help. Vera says, 'That's because we haven't found it yet, but it's good that Annie is here because she can bear witness when we do.'

And Annie's eyes have narrowed, they are two tiny dots. Pinholes. Holes for sticking pins in, 'Why would I need to bear witness? What sort of treasure is this, Vera?'

Vera stops digging for a moment.

'Well,' she says in a matter-of-fact way, 'we're –' and she scratches her head trying to think of the correct term, 'Anthropologists? Historians? Archaeologists? Something of that nature, anyway. Truth is our treasure.'

And Annie gets very still, frozen, even. Vera looks at Emmeline and her eyes are on Annie and she is frozen, too. It's Vera and a couple of statues. She's turned them to stone.

‘Truth? What sort of truth? Here’s a truth – you’re sixteen and far too old to be playing these silly games.’

‘No, Annie. That’s not the sort of truth we’re interested in. We’re interested in buried truths – things unsaid, hidden. You know what I mean?’

‘No I don’t. Get your things together, we’re going back. I want to start dinner.’

‘You can go back, we’re not done digging.’ Vera waves her off.

‘Yes you are.’

‘But we’re not. We haven’t found what we’re looking for.’

‘What you’re looking for is a slap.’

Vera shakes her head, ‘Nope, that’s not it. We’re not looking for something that is *about* to happen. We’re looking for something that *has* happened. Remnants left behind of something that happened here or maybe –’

‘You don’t know what you’re looking for. I’m not playing this game, Vera. I’m not. Do you want me to get your Father.’

Vera shrugs, ‘Go for it. He might be interested in digging, too. Or not. Let’s find out.’

‘Enough is enough. Now do what I say. We’re going to have dinner and then we’re going to watch a movie. We’re going to have a nice evening and you’re not going to ruin it, Vera. I won’t let you.’

‘They’re my secrets, Annie. My secrets we’re digging for. I can do what I like with my secrets, right?’

Annie’s face drops. Not from sadness, not anger, but weariness. She sighs.

‘Emmy, go find your father and head back to the house.’

Emmeline darts off. Little traitor. Vera is left alone with Annie, alone with a trespasser. Trespassers will be executed, dear Annie.

Annie comes over and squats by Vera and the hole. Vera can see her moustache this close up; it’s piss-yellow from the bleach and cigarettes. Her lips are dry, lipstick

flaking in ugly tawny-coloured chunks. Neither moves or says anything for a moment, so that when Annie finally does, Vera flinches. She flinches because she's expecting a slap so that what Annie does is quite unexpected.

She hugs Vera. She holds her tight and close, she strokes her hair. Vera can smell cigarettes and imitation Yardley soap: Lavender Dreams. Years later, Vera will remember clearly the feeling of sand on her lips, Annie's hand on her head and the smell of Lavender Dreams. And crying.

Vera hates herself for crying. She hates Annie for being so unpredictable, for knowing her better than she knows herself. Vera hardly ever cries, but Annie is so cunning that she can never find her feet. And it's hard to hold your own when you're unsteady.

Father would call her a baby if he was here. But unlike Father, Annie won't ridicule you for crying. She just pities you. Pity makes Vera feel dirty.

Annie kisses the top of her head, 'When you're done, when you're feeling better, come up to the house and we'll have a nice evening. We'll watch a movie. Your pick.'

Vera just nods. She wants to say something but she doesn't. She can't. She just keeps crying. So weak, she thinks, so fucking weak.

Annie pauses at the entrance, brushes herself off and fixes her hair. The wind is just going to mess it up again, Vera thinks with small satisfaction. For it is a mean wind, this wind. It pierces your ears and whips and tangles your hair, blinds you with sand and steals your words. But not Annie's words.

'Some things are best forgotten because we can't do anything to change them. Let sleeping dogs lie, as they say,' and she turns, and if anyone else were watching, anyone who didn't know her better, it would seem that Annie's smile was apologetic, 'It's just, people wouldn't understand, baby Emu. They just wouldn't.'

And she's gone.

And Vera digs. She digs because today is a digging day. But now she digs not to find something, but because she has something to bury. She digs and digs and she could probably reach China or wherever with a hole that big and deep. But even then, even with a hole so big and deep, she fills it till it's nearly overflowing and she is almost empty.

And then she covers it up. Buries it. So that when she leaves, when she looks back, it's as if it never was.

†

Oswald sat at the head of the table.

Spread before him was a banquet: burgers, sausages, bread, salad, sauce, mustard, beer, wine, flies. One particularly large one, a giant blue-green mutant, crawled over a sausage. Vera waved it away.

'Where'd all these flies come from? Didn't you keep the screen door shut?'

Oswald shrugged. His mouth was greasy. He'd started without her. The plate in front of him was brown and red and yellow; a child's finger-painting of oil and sauce and meat juice. There was an open beer at his side. He licked his fingers one by one, eyes glazed, his face glowing from the sun. He reached for a sausage.

'Hurry up or you'll miss out,' his mouth already full as he piled bread and patties onto his plate. The salad remained untouched.

Vera cut herself two slices of bread. She cut them slowly, carefully, evenly, Oswald watching. She arranged them on her plate and placed a patty in the middle of one, and then two pieces of tomato and a single leaf of lettuce, curved like a cupped hand, on top. Finally she squirted sauce on to it delicately, as if she were a dessert chef adding the finishing touches to a masterpiece.

‘It’s a bloody burger,’ said Oswald, ‘No point in making it pretty, only gonna end up like this,’ he opened his mouth to demonstrate, masticated meat and bread proudly displayed.

‘If I open my mouth and tilt my head back you could feed it to me, like a mother bird.’

Oswald laughed, an abrupt bark, ‘Tweet, tweet.’ He swigged his beer, ‘Could do, but I’m not good at sharing.’ And he held Vera’s gaze for what she felt was a moment too long. ‘You’re not drinking?’ he asked, finally.

She held up her glass of water and drank from it.

‘I mean alcohol.’

‘I just want water for now, maybe later.’

Oswald muttered something and tapped his beer bottle on the table.

‘What did you say?’

‘Empty,’ he said, tapping the bottle again, ‘I *said*: well, I’m gonna have another,’ and he got up. As he passed Vera, he added, ‘Someone’s gotta have some fun round here.’

†

He lines them up. He’s smiling at her.

When Gary starts taking his medication he’s lovely. He is in love with the world. He wants to touch and hug and feel the world. His eyes sparkle like sun on water. His hair is electric.

‘Look,’ Gary says, ‘look at each tablet. Twenty-two tablets. Twenty-two days of happiness.’

Vera is transfixed by the tiny white pills – their smooth surface, the way they curve inward, drawn together by a line. Snap! Half a day of happiness. They are so grown-up looking. Adult medication to be taken every day.

‘Some people only need half a tablet,’ he says, ‘some need two.’

Gary takes a whole one. Just for starters. See how he progresses, then, perhaps, adjust the dose.

‘Oh,’ says Vera. She hugs her knees to her chest. They are sitting in Gary’s bedroom. Vera should be at school. First term of high school, first year of freedom to make her own way in, and she’s made it here. Nick Cave, black and grey, looks down over them from the wall. Above his face are the details for a gig. The poster reads: *Do you know this man?*

‘Why do you take them?’

‘Because I get sad.’

‘Everyone gets sad.’

‘Because I get sad a lot. Because Mum can’t handle my sadness.’

‘Oh.’

Gary looks anything but sad. He’s grinning. His grin broadens each time he says the word sad.

Vera thinks about lonely lunchtimes, about hiding in the library, about slinking around corners and sitting in shadows, about the sting of a tennis ball in the crotch, about laughter, collective laughter, laughter that burns, a mirthless cacophony that echoes in your head at night, and seeps into your dreams. She reaches out a hand.

Gary says, ‘No. You can’t. You can’t just take one. It’s not like that.’

And he tells her how at first when he took them it was like being drowned, like being swallowed up and hollowed out and thrown against rocks in a storm – ‘You burst. You shatter. You’re nothing.’

And then?

‘And then you feel kinda normal. Kinda ok.’

Vera can see notebooks next to the bed.

‘You been writing?’

‘Can’t stop. Sometimes can’t sleep for all the words in my head. For all the words that wanna get out and I just gotta get ‘em down.’

Gary’s foot is tapping. It’s tapping with love.

‘Want to write something together? Like we used to?’

Gary says, ‘Nah. Got my own stories. Stories I gotta write. Gotta tell on my own.’

Slighted, she still asks, she can’t help it, ‘Can I see?’

‘Nah.’

He scoops the tablets into a pile.

‘Imagine if I took them all at once?’ he says. ‘Imagine how happy I’d be having all of them, all at once? Imagine how happy mum’d be? I’d never be sad again.’

Frowning, Vera says, ‘But you said you’re happy. Aren’t you happy?’

‘I’m fucking delirious with happiness, Vera. Fucking delirious.’

And when Gary says ‘happiness’ he grins; and it’s the same grin he did when he said ‘sad’.

Sad, happy, smiles all round.

And then he stops tapping his foot, stops grinning, and leans across and kisses her.

This is not like other kisses they’ve had. Not the pecks beneath blankets, in cupboards, down at the beach, under water, sneaking them in at Corny Point when Sue and Annie are preoccupied. This is tongues and the warm, metallic taste of blood, the taste of lust. This is what Gary tastes like on the inside. Of sad and happy at the same time, this is what it tastes like when you feel them all at once.

He puts a hand inside her dress, inside her bra and rubs her nipple. He lifts her skirt and slips his hand inside her knickers. He pushes a finger inside her.

Vera flinches.

Gary stops. He pulls his hand back, eyes wide.

‘Sorry,’ he says, biting his lip.

‘No, it’s ok. I just – it just hurt a bit. That’s all.’

Vera moves to take his hand, to put it back where it was, where she wants it to be. But Gary won’t let her.

‘Better not, hey. I don’t want to hurt you.’ He gives her a small, sad smile, the sparkle in his eyes has died. ‘Just listen to some music, yeah?’

Snoop blares out from the radio:

Follow me, follow me, follow me

Follow me but don’t lose your grip

And Vera watches Gary sing and dance along. And all the while Vera watches, she smiles, a warm, encouraging smile. But inside she wants to scream.

†

They sat inside that evening.

‘Too many flies,’ said Oswald.

‘Too many mosquitoes,’ said Vera.

The air was heavy, electric. Unusually humid for the climate; the insects revelled, the humans did not.

‘Maybe it will rain,’ said Oswald.

‘Maybe,’ said Vera.

The dark clouds gathering certainly suggested as much. They moved across the sky, shutting the heat in on the world. Even sitting still, Vera could feel sweat trickle

down the side of her face. She sat on the floor in the lounge room in a singlet and undies. Legs stretched out, a fan directed on her. The unwavering blast of air did nothing to alleviate the stickiness. Bite marks of a violent red stood out, even against her burnt skin.

There were three fans going in the room, a circle around the couple, though Vera hardly saw the point, since Oswald insisted on dancing. He danced to *Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds*; he thought he was Nick Cave. He sang into his beer bottle.

'Father, why are all the children weeping?

O, they are merely crying, son

O, are they merely crying, father?

Yes, true weeping is ye-e-e-et to come'

Oswald sang 'come' right in Vera's face with sour breath. He stank of beer.

'C'mon, dance with me,' he said, beckoning provocatively.

'It's too hot and you're making it hotter with all your dancing.'

'You need to drink more. I can't feel the heat,' Oswald spun around, 'I can't feel anything!'

'I wish it would hurry up and rain,' said Vera. 'It will rain, won't it? It's not just teasing us with all that cloud?' She wanted an assurance, she wanted to know that there was an 'it' out there whose behaviour could be predicted, could be relied upon.

Oswald wiggled his bum at her, 'Who knows? Probably just a tease. The clouds, the sky, the rain gods,' he paused and looked her in the eyes, 'all just a bloody tease.'

'If you want to have sex, let's have sex,' said Vera abruptly. 'Let's do it. Right now. C'mon. Put it in.' She spread her legs wide and made a humping motion, 'Do me, Ossie.'

Oswald stopped dancing and scowled.

'Don't do that, it's a turn off. And don't call me Ossie. I fuckin' hate that name, you know that.'

Vera did. Of course she did. His nickname in high school. She loved to bring it out on the odd occasion, when his guard was down. When he was having a good time.

‘Oh! I am sorry, please accept my heartfelt apology. I wasn’t aware that you liked to be wooed.’ She leered at him, ‘You wanna dance with me, angel tits?’

He grinned at the familiar line. In a high-pitched imitation of Sandy Dennis, he said, ‘I love to dance, I dance like the wind.’

Vera peeled herself off the floor. They stood in the midst of the whirring fans, and as if cued, began to dance. Not together, though, but as children do, near one another, proximity being the only thing shared. Eyes down, each felt the music. It rippled up arms and legs, it vibrated inside heads, and throbbed deep in the belly. Each interpreted it differently: one jumped, one jerked about; one jived, one hustled; one wriggled, one hopped; one bumped, one grinded; and then they were spinning, wheeling around like ungainly ballerinas, coming together and flying apart. They stomped and clapped and slapped and snapped and their clothes, hair and skin were drenched. Vera’s skin stung with the salt of her sweat where she was licked by the sun. And they sang – oh, how they sang! They sang about weeping and a red right hand; they sang about a dog-boy and a half-man; and they sang about a wild rose and little Henry Lee. Poor little Henry Lee.

And outside the sun set, it burned and it boiled and ignited the sky and the clouds with fire and smoke until everything disappeared into darkness. But the dance carried on even then. Indeed, even after the music had long ended. No stars shone, no moon, the light of the world had dwindled down to the glow of a lamp through the window of a house; a light that illuminated two figures cavorting. All that could be heard was their breath, heavy, laboured, and the sound of their feet stomping and their hands clapping.

And then, abruptly, as if they had, once again, been cued, the figures halted and dropped to the floor.

Vera's was a clean birth. This she remembers. It was not like the births she has read about, heard about, real or fictitious. Births filled with the squall of the newborn and the shrieks of its mother; births where mother is torn wide open and the baby comes out with hand nestled against face, such a peaceful image when not passing through a vagina; births where the mother claws at her back until it is bloody and raw and the labour goes on and on and on for all eternity; births that occur in the backseat of a car or under a table or in an alleyway or while going to the toilet or in a junkies' den. Or the birth where baby comes through still, quiet, and its chest does not rise or fall, its eyes do not see, its mouth does not seek mother's nipple, and none can stir it.

No, Vera's was different.

It was a conscious effort on the part of all involved; Annie's grand design. There was no blood and shit, no amniotic fluid spilt, certainly no vernix coated Vera's skin. Nothing quite so disgusting could be allowed in Annie's vision. Vera was shiny and new. She was as smooth and perfect as a raw chicken breast. The smells that met her nostrils upon entering the world were of disinfectant and soap and nicotine. No amount of scrubbing could erase that.

Annie did not break a sweat, she did not swear or scream, and Vera did not cry. She did not dare. Annie would not let her; a raised eyebrow was all it took. And it would have been embarrassing for her to do so after Annie's restraint, a restraint that was not there in the conception. An intimate wedding, headshots only, and the word 'bastard' flits around her bassinet like a dying moth.

Vera came from a world of darkness and warmth and flesh and noise into a world filled with bright, white light and whispered words, a world, sterile and cold. This she remembers. Her eyes open from the beginning, black eyes, shining in the dark. And

she kept them open for days, for nights on end and watched Annie closely. And Annie watched Vera, helpless, pathetic creature that she was.

But Vera is no longer small. She is no longer a baby. So Annie can't watch over her all the time. She can't watch over her now.

†

There they sat, Oswald and Vera, side by side on the floor, frightened, lost, drunk. Oswald held his bottle, and Vera, well, Vera could handle a glass, big girl that she was. She nursed it, twirling the wine inside round and round. Oswald guzzled his drink down, greedy piglet that he was. But you must forgive his manners, dancing was such thirsty work and the poor little tacker had worn himself out; poor little mite, such a trooper. Oswald rested his head on Vera's shoulder. Children nuzzled up against one another. Children all tuckered out. Children, though their faces were not as fresh as they should be, and they were long-limbed and grotesque in stature. Six-foot is no common height for babes.

'No one else would put up with us, Ver. We're made for each other, you and me. Me and you.' My one, my only, my she-is-more-myself-than-I-am, my darling.

Difficult children brought together in a pub, brought together under the influence, brought together to procreate – for that is the correct and true order of these things even though it hadn't happened yet. It is tradition! – and thereby brought together to love each other forever and ever and ever. I'll haunt you if you leave me. I'll wander about in the heat and the flies, banging on windows, cutting my wrists on shattered glass. And there will be blood, don't think that there won't! Ghosts might not breathe, but they bleed. They bleed more than the living because they don't know how to stop. They don't understand the biology, physiology; the workings of the human body. But the flies will love it, they don't know any different. All that blood, open wounds, they

dig that scene, even if you don't. Even if you bitch and moan about having to clean me up, about the mess I've made, about how I'm dead but still making a goddamn mess! But those flies'll enjoy it, they'll dig and burrow their way in and have their fly babies – because somebody's got to have babies, right?

Vera watched a fly crawling along the curve of Oswald's ear, the fat blue-green mutant. It stopped, rubbed its front legs together with glee, and continued round and down into the earhole. Fascinated, she wondered if it would come back out. She wondered that Oswald did not notice that fat thing buzzing around in there, settling in to the firm pink-grey matter, trying to decipher the workings of his brain.

But Oswald was drunk. Quite drunk for Oswald. The heat and the dancing, the conversation, and now the fly on his brain, have all contributed to this drunkenness. Have all helped Oswald achieve a state of mind he had not reached in many a year.

Here we are again, Oswald. Out of our minds – well, one of us, anyway – so, where do we go from here?

Vera set her drink down, a near-full glass of wine, barely touched, and sipped from her water instead.

Oswald was gathering his thoughts, it took a while. It took a while because he was drunk. It took a while because of the silence. The human silence. For neither he nor Vera, were speaking. She was just watching and waiting for what came next. Watching and waiting as Oswald realised that the silence wasn't so silent, wasn't so still. There were things out there, moving, listening.

Choose your words carefully, Oswald.

'I want,' he started, and then stopped. It was so noisy that silence, it was distracting.

'It's the wind,' said Vera, 'the wind in the trees.'

And Oswald looked at her, red-eyed, as if he didn't know her, as if she shouldn't be there, speaking, telling him of a wind he wasn't sure existed.

‘I want,’ he started again – there was something on the roof, something running and hissing on the roof.

‘It’s a possum,’ said Vera, smiling.

‘Stop it. Stop interrupting.’

‘It’s not me. It’s the wind and the possums.’

And the flies, thought Vera, the flies on your brain.

‘Fuck’em.’ A pause as this thought ticked over, ‘Fuck’em.’

‘I’d rather not,’ said Vera, for she was a difficult child. She wondered which way this remark would be taken. It could go either way – a bottle might be thrown, a chair overturned, a sulk might ensue – but when he lifted his head, Oswald was smiling.

‘See? Me and you,’ he pointed to himself, pointed to Vera, just to be clear, ‘Me and you, we get each other. Me and you,’ and he was smiling with a certainty which reminded her of the smile that caught her eye in the beginning. In the beginning, when God made Adam and Eve, ‘I want a baby. I want a baby with you.’

And Vera heard, ever so distinctly, crisp and clean, the sound of a tiny skull, a fragile thing, breaking...

†

I know, says Vera. Let’s play Mummies and Daddies and Baby, or as it’s more commonly referred to – Happy Families. It’s a bloody game, though, so beware.

Now, you be the mummy and I’ll be the daddy. No wait, that’s not quite right. Biology, society, says otherwise. I guess I’ll be the mummy since you are inadequately equipped, at least as far as physiology goes.

So, it begins a bit like Doctors and Nurses. A case of you show me yours and I’ll show you mine and then, like a puzzle, we have to get the right pieces in the right places to make baby. Cabbage patches and storks? What nonsense is this that you speak of?

It's willies and vaginas and ovaries and testicles. And we bake them all in an oven until there is baby.

Then I swallow baby.

Because I'm the mummy. Baby in mummy's tummy. Very yummy in my tummy. And I grow very round with baby, very full, and baby kicks and kicks and punches and squeals because baby wants out! Baby doesn't like it in there with all the blood and guts. It's crowded and yucky.

No. Hang on. I don't grow very round – we don't get that far, baby and me.

It's Annie doesn't like baby in there. Annie screams and squeals because Annie wants baby out.

Annie says, Let's not play Mummies and Daddies and Baby. That's not a fun game. No it isn't. Father won't like that game. No he won't. Let's play Doctors and Nurses.

So someone must be doctor.

And look! Here's Annie's friend – Doctor Wolf-face.

Hello, Doctor Wolf-face!

Hello, Vera!

But it's not a case of you show me yours and I'll show you mine. No siree, it sure isn't. Instead, Doctor Wolf-face says, Open wide, let me come inside, and get baby. And Doctor Wolf-face climbs inside and pulls out baby's ankles – what? No, not *by* the ankles. Just the ankles. Baby comes out in incy wincy little bits.

And I say, Let's put baby back together.

And Annie and Doctor Wolf-face say, No! No! No! Not by the hairs on our chinny chin chins.

And they huff and they puff and they blow all those bloody, gutty, bitty bits of baby away...

‘I had a baby.’

It was quiet, even the wind and the possums had taken heed. All that could be heard was Oswald taking a sip from his bottle.

‘Once upon a time I had a baby. For just, you know, a moment.’

Another sip was taken. Oswald breathed through his nose, slowly, steadily, loudly.

‘What?’

‘A baby. He was tiny and perfect,’ Vera sighed, ‘You could hold him in the palm of your hand.’

‘You could not.’

‘You could.’

‘You did not.’

‘I did. He was perfect. I kept him in a shoebox under the bed so Annie wouldn’t find him. Annie knew, of course. But Annie didn’t approve. So he stayed in the shoebox until night-time. At night-time he came out and I read to him. He was a shoebox baby.’

Oswald put the bottle down. He put it down hard and it fell on its side. Beer, just a drizzle, soaked into the carpet.

‘A shoebox baby.’

Said so calmly, with such clarity.

‘Are you drunk?’

‘No.’

Oswald nodded to himself, as if working something out in his mind. Putting all the pieces together, trying to make sense.

‘I had to bury him in the end. You know, to keep him safe from Annie.’

Oswald turned to her. He was smiling, a thin sliver of a smile. He seemed, as he put his hand on her leg, a fraction more lucid.

Vera smiled back.

'*The Twits*.'

'*The Twits*, what?'

'That's the one he liked best. He liked it when I read *The Twits*. You know – the Roald Dahl one with worms for spaghetti.'

'Ah. *The Twits*.'

Oswald licked his lips.

'So whose baby was this? Who was the dad?'

'You don't know him. He's dead. Dead daddy. Like mine.'

'Your daddy ain't dead. He's in a home.'

'No, that's an illusion – his being alive. That's a dead man sitting there. We all go and visit a dead man. Annie sent him to a taxidermist. You know how she has such trouble letting go? Letting things be. Letting them run their natural course. So she told daddy to go get stuffed, and he did.' Vera put her hand over Oswald's. 'Funny, he's more present now than he ever was.'

'Is he?'

She nodded.

'Such an attentive listener.'

'Vera?'

'Yes.'

'Your dad's not dead.'

'That's what you think.'

'Vera. He's not and you never had a baby.'

'Oh. I didn't?'

‘No. You would’ve said so.’ This was beyond his comprehension, Oswald, who was no good at keeping secrets, had such trouble containing them. The pieces didn’t align. And life, events of such magnitude, before Oswald – impossible! ‘And I can’t do this right now.’

‘Do what now?’

‘This. Your weirdness.’

‘He was tiny, Oswald. So tiny.’

‘Vera. Don’t say shit like that. I can’t do it. I’m feeling good and this – you saying shit like this – it hurts me. That you’d want to make up some baby you had with a dead man rather than talk about us having one – a *real* one – it makes me sad.’

‘Oh.’

Oswald squeezed her knee. His fingers rubbed bone. Vera’s eyes didn’t leave his.

‘I love you,’ he said. ‘But no more games.’

There were tears in his eyes.

Salt water wells in my eyes, said the crocodile.

‘Right,’ said Vera. She squeezed his hand – a tear fell – squeezed it tight. ‘No more games.’ She pressed his hand to her cheek. ‘Looks like you’re empty,’ she said, and gently nipped the fleshy part of his palm, ‘I’ll get you another drink.’

†

The old man sits in a chair. Old, but not in years. He sits there, frail and small and lost. Rheumy eyes registering nothing. Vera, opposite, watches him. Finally he’s managed to swim away, to evade them forever.

Oswald isn't here. He didn't come with her to visit Annie – 'She doesn't like me. I'm doing her a favour' – or, now, to see Father – 'I find those places depressing. He doesn't even know you're there, Ver. What's the point?'

What is the point? She wonders. Here alone, just the two of them; daddy-daughter time. Daddy's girl. Listen, *Daddy*, let me tell you a story about your darling daughter.

And Vera, in the quiet that is so like the quiet when she crept down into the bowels of their house, sifting through those magazines, those perfect pictorial guides, digs up words. Digs up secrets. And she speaks to Father, she fills his head, she fills the room, she fills the silence. Vera tells him about the girl with the nappies, the boy who studied ever so hard and lived with his father who drank just as diligently, the girl who cleans and cleans and cleans in a castle with a baby who doesn't cry, the boy who sniffed paint and went far away – he had that same look as you do now, Father, far, far away – the girl with the pigeon, the boy who was punched by a woman because he wouldn't listen properly, and finally she tells him of the boy and the girl who lay down together in a house for children, made of sand and stone and shells and bits and pieces – you know the sort of house I mean, don't you, Father? – and the baby they made in there – he was ever so tiny! I'm sure it would've been a him, Father, I can just feel it – who might've been, but fell apart in the outside world, and so the boy found a rope and climbed, swung away on it, to get away from the girl and to escape the tiny, broken baby.

And Vera tells these stories in a careful and considered way, slowly, as one would to a small child – read my lips, follow my mouth, understand me, hear me, wake up, you son-of-a-bitch – and all of the boys and all of the girls bleed and weep into one another. Until they seem to be the same person, leading a life filled with cracks, filled with anger. And Vera cannot separate them, not for herself and not for the listener. Once done, for just a moment, she feels naked.

But the man says nothing.

He just sits and stares and when she looks into his eyes, Vera thinks she sees the ocean. She thinks she sees him swimming away, swimming in that unforgiving, ice-blue sea.

And Vera leans over and pinches him. She pinches him hard on the soft, loose flesh of his arm. But the man does not move.

Vera wishes she could hate him, but she can't. She can't hate this small, lost person. She feels nothing for him. She does not know him. And though the words seem to disappear, though the story seems to have never been, it hangs there in the space between them. It follows Vera home. It etches itself onto her skin.

†

Oswald stepped out into the night. He swayed slightly, stumbled and grabbed onto the door frame for support. Standing was such a tiresome business; it required concentration, stamina, balance; it required a certain soberness of which he was not in possession. And yet, despite that, he somehow managed to look solemn, purposeful, standing beneath the crackling blue insect light. Moths, flies, mosquitos, other insects not so readily identifiable, flew into the light and dropped at Oswald's feet, swooning. God of the insects, they laid down their lives for him, hung on his every breath, clung to him. The flies were particularly enamoured, they loved his sweet, sticky sweat, his yeastiness. Oswald, however, did not notice their presence, their adoration. He stood in their midst, ignorant, staring out into the darkness, waiting.

Vera came out holding an unopened wine bottle. She stood in the doorway a moment, watching Oswald, waiting for him to gather his thoughts and move forward.

If she were Annie, Vera thought, she'd be leaning against the doorway, cigarette in one hand, looking for all the world like she owned the place, looking to see if

anything was out of place, if anything, anyone, needed seeing to – Don't go too far, girls; Gary, I swear to God, I'll wash your mouth out you say that again, never mind what your mother says; Put that stick down, Vera, you'll poke someone's eye out; For God's sake, you kids, shut it! You're making enough noise to wake the dead.

Vera opened the wine and flicked the lid, 'Here, babe,' she passed the bottle to Oswald.

He held it, brow creased, confused, 'S'not beer.'

Vera stepped down next to him, 'It's wine. Wine's more romantic, don't you think?'

Oswald gulped from the bottle. When he handed it back to Vera, his perfect teeth had taken on the hue of the wine. They stood a few moments longer before Vera took his hand and, like fairy-tale children, they walked down the path. Unlike fairy-tale children they passed the bottle back and forth. Vera simply held it a moment, before returning it to the thirsty Oswald.

The world around them was ink: the sky, the shadows, the trees, buildings, equipment, all melted into one another, varying here and there in depth and shade. The wind, strong as it was, made it feel as if they'd stepped into an oven. The witch had pushed and the heat engulfed them. Everything was liquid, swollen, alive. As if the world was waiting to give birth.

†

Gary never came to visit after he said he might, after Vera saw him on her way to work. On her way to scan groceries and make pleasantries with people she didn't give a shit about. To pack their shopping and smile and agree with whatever drivel came out of their mouths, because the customer is always right even when they're wrong. It's so easy, after all, to make that smile seem real, to make your concern after someone's

welfare appear authentic, when you've had enough practice. And once you've got the trick, it almost comes naturally; at least that's what Vera has found.

So whilst Gary never came to visit Vera, Vera did in fact visit Gary. She went to his house. Well, perhaps that's an exaggeration. This isn't *his* house, he only occupies a room. The other occupant rules over the rest. He is an older man, much older, mid to late thirties, so in Vera's sixteen-year-old eyes, ancient. When she knocks on the door the older man answers. He is wearing a kimono. He smells of cologne, something spicy and pungent, and his hair is well oiled. From behind him, she can see a red glow coming from the lounge room and incense wafts out.

He stretches against the doorway so his kimono loosens. Chest hair springs forth: 'Gary's in his room doing God knows what, but you can head on back, darling. I have a guest over so if you could keep it down, it'd be appreciated,' he smirks, 'Unless, of course, you'd like to join us?' and winks.

Vera feels ill; true she has been drinking – cask wine, hidden beneath her bed – but the trip over has sobered her somewhat. Out of a window, a walk in the night air and a ride with a stranger. So it must be this flirtation that has her feeling so nauseous. She wants to vomit on this man and his kimono. Vomit and walk past as if nothing has happened. But she doesn't have enough inside, so just stares at him until he moves aside. The cabernet has made her bold.

She walks past the lounge room, with its seventies décor, shag carpet, lava lamps and blonde-haired woman sitting on the floor, and into Gary's room. A room for his mattress and posters, just two: one of Hendrix, one of Kurt Cobain; Kurt in tatters, barely hanging on. To the wall, that is. He'd been dead two years at this point in time when Gary and Vera are standing in a room with a mattress and Kurt between them. No more Nick staring down on them, chaperoning them.

Gary does not smile when Vera enters. He is sitting on his mattress, writing in a notebook, 'What?' is all he says. His eyes are bloodshot; the irises are violet and alien.

He does not look at her directly, instead focusing just behind her, through the door, as if that is the way one of them should be heading.

Vera erupts. It is the one small word that does it, one syllable, like the tap that starts an avalanche. She realises partway through that the alcohol has crept back up on her. Snuck in and rearranged her thoughts, her carefully prepared words, jumbling them, vulgarising them. She is not an eloquent drunk. She's no Richard Burton. But thankfully, later on she will not remember exactly what she said. She'll remember the gist. That she swore, that she called him a loser, that she told him he was a worthless piece of shit, that much of it made little sense. She'll also remember his face remained impassive throughout, unreadable, so that when she stops, there is no catharsis.

Instead, Vera stands there shaking, angry, wanting to carry on, but she has no words left. She wants to punch him, strangle him, scratch him to pieces, but she can barely stand.

It is then that Gary speaks.

He tells Vera this is not a world for children. He tells Vera he is sorry for what happened to her but what's done can't be undone. He can't change it. But he'd be there for her. To listen. To be the boy she wants him to be; the Gary he used to be.

Isn't that sweet? Doesn't it just bring a tear to the eye and make your heart swell? Shame it's not what he actually says.

What Gary actually says is – 'Well? Whaddya want from me, hey?'

He isn't angry or upset. He just doesn't give a shit, she thinks. The whole time she spoke he never looked at her, just played with a pencil; flicking it between fingers, watching it spin round and round. And when Vera finished, the pencil stopped, Gary spoke, and now the speaking is over. At least, as far as he's concerned.

Gary's eyes return to his notebook, which lies open on the bed. Vera wants to reach over and snatch it up, to see what is in there, to see what is in Gary. To read it aloud and expose him. She looks down and notices a pile of notebooks near her feet.

One is open and the pages are filled with writing, the letters very small and tight, the words close together as if they are scared of being seen. As if they are hiding. Vera looks up, Gary is watching her.

She squats to get a closer look, and nearly as quick, Gary lunges forward. He grabs her wrist, but it is the other that holds the book. Vera twists in his grasp, reading, biting her lip with the pain, until he grabs her other arm, wrenching it, and she drops the book. In the process, his own arms have been exposed. Bony. Birdlike. That his jumper and track-pants swallow him, she had not noticed until now. Nor the lines around his mouth and eyes, the gaunt, tightness of his face. His breath is dry, sour. The breath of the dying, she thinks. But these things are not what make her freeze. Beginning just below the elbow, she sees a cross-hatching of white scars, angry against his dark skin.

Now his eyes meet Vera's. In his face she searches for the boy who hid in the long grass with her, the boy who is salt and sugar and silk. But only a stone boy looks back.

'You need to leave,' is all he says. And they are done.

†

A stone boy watched as they stumbled through the dark

He laughed his stony laugh

And whispered in her ear

Sticks and stones and sticks and stones

And words will never hurt.

†

Gary went home to do it.

‘He turned up just in time for dinner,’ says Sue.

Vera is crouching in the hallway listening. She can smell the smoke from Sue and Annie’s cigarettes, and every now and then, she can hear a little *pah* as someone takes a drag. This is all she hears for a minute or so – *pah, pah, pah* – and then, Sue’s voice, thin and whiny, like an annoying child asking why? why? why? When no one has the answer.

‘He seemed almost happy,’ she says, ‘calm and peaceful, not angry like he usually is. You know how he gets –’ and there’s a sharp intake of breath and a sob – ‘how he got. He just seemed like Gary. Like my little boy again and then –’

And then there is nothing more. Just an aching silence and Vera cannot see their faces so she does not know if Sue is crying. She does not know if Annie is crying or looking away, looking anywhere but at Sue, the way Annie does. Vera thinks of Sue with her limp-parsley eyes, her dirt-blond hair, her off-milk skin. She’s a phoney, a fake, she thinks. Sue doesn’t even look like the boys, looks nothing like them. Acts nothing like them. So much so, Vera can hardly believe it was Sue who pushed them out. So meek, so weak, so blah. So two-faced. Flakey, fakey Sue. Never saying the truth to her boys. Never. On anything.

And Vera goes back to her room before Sue starts again. She doesn’t want to hear her voice, doesn’t want to listen. Doesn’t know if she can hold her tongue.

†

Someone suggested a skinny dip. Clothes were peeled from bodies and thrown aside and then someone ran, shot away, like an early starter in a race. The moon slid behind cloud, as they cried out ‘Run! Run! Run!’ And the other followed, tripping and tumbling and running.

They hit the water. Water that had been calm in the daylight, but now crashed and snarled on the shore. Waves that were only knee-deep but were desperate to prove they had bite, they had weight, as they tugged and pulled at ankles, at feet. And then the seaweed, so tender, so alive, grabbed, too, it fought with the waves – no, no, don't let them go, make them stay, hold them tight – but the runners kept running and weaving, as unseen things, things that appear only when the sky is at its darkest, these things drove them forward, pinching them with tiny fingers, pulling at their hair, and with the howl and heat of the wind – bake, bake, my darlings – one fell.

There was a man down. Or a woman. The fallen called out, but nobody stopped, so the fallen one arose and ran – Quick! Quick! Catch up! – heaving and panting, and then a voice cried out – Swim! – but who? *Who*, I ask you? Or perhaps it was just a word on the wind, a word left behind long ago, picked up and let loose out of time, for nobody should have said it. Not in those conditions.

A sliver of moon cut the cloud and somebody jumped, they leaped into the air and off the edge of the world and the other followed. The moon bled white light across the surface, the swelling, heaving surface that dropped down, down, down and was so strong in its depths that it picked a person up and held them to its bosom, smothered them with its love, until they broke away momentarily and gasped for breath until – come back, my love, come back and let me love you...

†

There was a cry in the dark. Someone called out, and then, called out again. Someone reached out, and then, reached out again.

To find nothing. To find no one.

†

Treading water, Vera and the child.

It's a gull, said the child.

A gull, repeated Vera.

And they smiled at one another.

†

'Mummy, are monsters real?' Emmeline asks. She stands naked, an arm hooked around Annie's leg, looking up at her expectantly.

Vera stands by the bath, smiling and dragging a lazy hand through the water.

'Make it deep. Real deep,' she says.

It is the calm after the rounding up. Once alerted that it is bath time, the girls scatter, hiding beneath beds or behind doors or in cupboards. Here, in the farm house, there are so many more places to hide than at home. Sometimes, if quick enough, they make it outside which can turn the game of hide and seek into chasey.

Tonight when the hunt took place, Father was playing with fire in the living room, under the pretence that it is more difficult to make a good fire than it was to get his four- and six-year old daughters into a bath.

Emmeline was found first. She always is. When Vera was extracted from beneath a bed, she went limp.

'What are you doing?' Annie's voice high with impatience.

'Playing dead. It's what you do with bears.'

'I'm not a bear.'

Vera rolled her eyes back in her head and hung heavy. Annie was trying to keep an eye on Emmeline to make sure she didn't disappear again, though Emmeline seemed happy enough to stay and watch Annie drag Vera to the bathroom.

‘Are you a crocodile, then? Are you dragging me to your watery lair? Are you going to eat me?’

‘No I’m not. Now stand up and stop being silly. Use your legs and walk, or else.’

‘I can’t! You’re a crocodile and you’ve killed me. How can I walk if I’m dead?’

Emmeline jumped up and down, ‘Kill me, Mummy! Eat me! I want a turn!’

Annie let go of Vera’s arm and she dropped to the floor.

‘Ok, then,’ Annie said, ‘Go and get ready for your bath and I’ll kill you both. Together. Crocodiles drown their prey, don’t they?’

So here they are, standing in the bathroom, naked and ready, awaiting Annie’s wisdom on the reality of monsters.

‘Of course they’re not real. There’s no such thing as monsters.’

Emmeline looks thoughtful and then turns to Vera for confirmation.

Vera’s eyes are very bright, ‘But what about dinosaurs? *They* were real.’

‘Dinosaurs aren’t monsters. They’re animals,’ Annie pauses. Vera watches her mother considering her next step, eyes narrowing in her tired face. ‘Reptiles,’ Annie says, triumphant, ‘They’re reptiles. Like crocodiles.’

‘But crocodiles are scary. They have big sharp teeth and they like to eat people. That’s what monsters do, isn’t it?’

Annie, clearly hoping to end the conversation, goes to turn the taps off.

‘No!’ says Vera, ‘it has to be deeper! How will you drown us in that?’

Annie sighs and leaves the water running.

‘You haven’t answered the question,’ says Vera.

‘Fine – if you stay away from where a crocodile lives then it won’t eat you. They don’t look for you. Monsters do.’ Triumphant, Annie turns and looks Vera in the eyes, ‘There. *That’s* the difference.’

Vera chews her lip for a moment before speaking.

‘Well, I’ve heard of crocodiles going into people’s homes. Just strolling in and families finding them in their lounge rooms and stuff. Once a crocodile crawled into this woman’s bed and ate her all up. Like this –’ Vera chomps the air with her arms. ‘She had two daughters and all they found of her in the morning was her big toe,’ Vera smiles lovingly at Annie, ‘and the two girls lived in the house with the crocodile forever and ever and never had to have baths if they didn’t want to. And they all lived on chicken sandwiches. The end – oh!’ and Vera laughs, ‘the woman’s name was Annie.’

Emmeline gasps.

‘Very funny,’ says Annie. ‘That’s really clever of you, Vera. Really. Now Em is going to have nightmares about crocodiles coming in the windows.’

‘In the window?’ repeats Emmeline, wide-eyed.

Vera rolls her eyes, ‘Crocodiles can’t get in the window. That’s just silly. But monsters can. They slip in through the cracks and then inflate on the other side. Like balloons.’

‘No they don’t. For Christ’s sake, Vera, stop it. There’s no such thing as monsters, Possum – shit!’ says Annie, seeing that the water is near overflow and scrabbling to turn the taps off. Silence.

‘Vera’s a monster,’ says Emmeline quietly. And then, as if wanting to clarify, ‘sometimes.’

Vera looks at the ground. She can feel Annie watching her.

Emmeline, a solemn expression on her small face, ‘Sometimes she creeps around the house and I have to hide or she’ll eat me,’ she says, getting excited. ‘She’s really scary! And at night, when it’s dark, after you’ve tucked us in, she tells me that she’ll get me when I’m asleep and pull all my guts out!’

‘Dibber-dobber,’ says Vera, and pinches her sister.

Annie slaps Vera’s hand, ‘Don’t pinch your sister. You,’ she says to Emmeline, ‘stop being so bloody gullible.’

‘Yeah,’ says Vera.

‘And you, stop being a monster and scaring your sister.’

‘But she likes it,’ says Vera.

‘I do,’ says Emmeline, quickly, sorry that she even brought it up.

Annie ignores her, and points a finger at Vera, ‘Don’t. I’m warning you.’

Vera glares back for a moment, and then, looking down, ‘I’ll try,’ she says, ‘But sometimes I can’t help it.’

†

Wake up, Emu.

The world was red; sunlight bright and searing on the delicate skin of Vera’s eyelids. She opened them. A naked adult in Kid House. She smiled and sat up, surely she was a violation.

Wake up, Emu.

Emmeline’s voice echoed in her head. The residue of a dream, a memory. Emmeline with her sucked-on-sleeve by Emu’s bed, gently shaking her.

‘Wake up, Emu. Let’s play. Let’s play one of your games.’

Wide-eyed Emmeline. Nervous about waking her sister, who can be unpredictable, but too eager to play to let Vera be. Emmy, always ready to listen and cooperate. To help.

Something in Vera hurt. She retreated into the shadows where the sun couldn’t reach, where the pain diminished. She’d have to make her way back in the heat, in that unforgiving light.

I must find my clothes, she thought.

†

Lock the window every night. You hear me, Emu? We keep the windows locked so no one can get in. As we say goodnight, we check that the windows are locked. Keep us safe locked windows. Don't let us down. Back in my day we could sleep with the windows and doors unlocked, open even. We could run about on the road with the neighbours' kids and nobody batted an eyelid.

That's because nobody gave a shit, says Emu.

Back in my day women dressed like ladies and didn't give men the wrong idea. Little girls dressed like little girls and weren't all sexed up. Back in my day there weren't all these paedophiles. Back in my day there wasn't all this sex and violence on TV. Family was what mattered. There's no sense of right and wrong nowadays. No sense of family. Back in my day nobody had sex if they didn't have to. They only did it for the family. For that old institution – the family institution – where you went when you were in the family way. Back in my day nobody had an abortion – it was *unheard* of back in my day – nobody needed to, we walked around with our legs crossed. We just hopped around, legs together, criss-crossed. Hoppitty hoppitty hop! So there was no chance of anything getting in. No chance of confusion and misunderstandings. It's why we all had such shapely calves.

Back in my day...

Liar, says Emu. Liar!

†

Vera wondered if Oswald was back at the house waiting for her. She wondered if he had made it ashore.

But of course he did, she thought. Oswald was a constant in her life. Vera and Oswald, Oswald and Vera. Just as the sun rose, so they must be. They played games,

they told stories, they had secrets. Just like all normal children. And like all normal children, occasionally they must be punished. Put in their place. Last night was Oswald's turn. Now Vera must anticipate hers. Perhaps a pre-emptive strike was in order? After all, Vera was more adept at doling out punishment than receiving it.

She got up and stood in the doorway. Shoulders hunched, body aching and stiff, Vera looked out at an ocean of glass, a cloudless sky and air hazy with heat. A world exhausted from the effort of the night before. Looking at all that water made her thirsty. And no wonder! She had not had a drink since the early hours of the morning. At least, and this gave Vera great satisfaction, she was not hungover. Not like Oswald.

Hopefully, she thought, Oswald, unable to sleep because of the drink, was up and getting breakfast ready. Maybe he was even packing up the car. He could be so motivated when hungover!

Or maybe he was getting in the car and driving away. Maybe he was leaving her behind to walk back...

But if so, he had forgotten to take his clothes. Vera could see them strewn across the sand, caught up in the red weed that had, itself, been thrown about.

Maybe he was lying somewhere in a pool of spew, a hangover under this sun would be hell. Hangovers in somewhere like Finland or Norway or Sweden must be comparatively pleasant. Unless, she thought, it was winter, and you passed out on the way home and froze to death. But still, yes, still, even that, comparatively, would be better.

Maybe he was playing hide and seek.

Too many maybes, she thought. Too many maybes when I am tired and hungry and thirsty. Plus, it was time to go home now. Time to be off. And what fun and larks we've had here! Such games! But the games are over. They are done and the children must be gathered together, fed and washed, made presentable, and then packed into the car for the long drive home.

Home again, home again, jiggety-jig! The chorus from the back of the car – Are we nearly there yet?

Nearly, my darlings, nearly.

†

There is a letter in the mailbox. There is a single word on the envelope printed in a neat blue script: Vera. A careful hand wrote the word, a careful hand delivered the letter, the author's identity concealed.

Inside, typed on a typewriter:

Vera,

You have brought shame on your mother and family and others who do not deserve it.

Though you have shown great wickedness, I pray that you find a new path filled with God's goodness.

May the Lord forgive you,

A concerned friend

Reading these words, Vera's eyes sting and her cheeks flush. She wants to laugh but can't. It – the letter – is ridiculous. She does not believe in a God, in any God but now she feels watched. This 'friend' who writes such words, writes them so she must read them, see them, remember them, this is a terrible power.

Vera takes the letter to the bathroom. She rips it in half. One half she puts in the toilet and shits on it. Done, she wipes herself clean with the other.

Vera says nothing of it to Annie. She knows Annie is not the culprit – Annie has no time for God.

A ‘concerned friend’, thinks Vera, and clenches her fists tight so her nails dig in red, jagged half-moons bleed in her palms, her eyes are bright and hard like dying stars, pressure sits and boils inside, a pressure like she’s never felt before. She does not know how to alleviate it. Vera tries to forget. She never mentions the letter to anyone. But a ‘concerned friend’ stays with her, always, whispering in the back of her mind, in her dreams, her nightmares: contain yourself. And for a while, she does. The hurt, the shame, the anger, cools, hardens but she holds onto it, carries it with her, buries it. For a while, even from herself.

†

Vera stood outside the house, listening, waiting a moment, before entering. Though she could not put it into words exactly, there was, she felt, reason to pause. Once she stepped inside, things would be different. Or she would be different.

She wore Oswald’s clothes; they hung loose on her lanky frame, her own had disappeared, washed away or taken. Vera could smell him, a familiar, unpleasant smell; sour and sweaty and sweet; a hint of aftershave. Breathing it in, her stomach churned. Not with nausea, no. Something else, something indefinable. Noticeable only when she stopped. Like feeling a pain in the breast in the depths of night; there when alone, but absent in the noise of day.

†

Warning: these images may disturb some viewers

On the television screen there are faces staring out of windows – children, men, women. Or they were once. These faces are gaunt shadows. Listless eyes caught on camera, children old before their time, ghosts reminiscent of another atrocity. Once

counted as human, now they require a warning. Cut off from the world, starving in a town in Syria. These images may disturb, these familiar faces may disturb. If we're lucky they may disturb.

'How can this be happening?' Enoch says. 'In this day and age? Those kids ...' he shakes his head, on his face, a look of horror, disgust. A perfect portrait: 'Boy Disturbed.'

Vera watches him lean forward, dip a chip into guacamole and, heavily laden, insert it into his waiting mouth.

'I don't know,' says Vera.

Enoch waits for her to elaborate. She leans forward and grabs a handful of chips, plunges them all at once into the dip and stuffs them into her mouth. Mouth full, she says – 'Those poor, starving children' – and sprays Enoch with flecks of dip and chip.

That night she dreams of the child in the high castle, covered in pale white scars; old before her time.

†

There was a trail of beer bottles that started by the door and then proceeded into the kitchen where several stood erect on the table. As Vera walked past, they seemed to salute her mockingly from their position amongst the leftovers from dinner. In the lounge room, others were scattered haphazardly over the floor and furniture.

Vera walked into every room, she checked behind every door, in the bathtub, in cupboards, under beds. She did not speak or call out. She thought, he does not want to go home, naughty child, he's making me find him.

But the house was empty.

Vera returned to the kitchen. She had a glass of water. She had another. She ate some bread. She sat down. The house was silent except for the dripping of the tap. *Plop.*

Plop. Plop. Great, delicious drops. She watched as each one gathered at the mouth of the tap, as the water grew heavy and began to hang, to sag, to stretch, until, with its own weight it broke free and –

Plop!

Vera picked up another slice of bread and chewed slowly. Today was the day they were supposed to leave. She stared at the leftover meat spoiling in the heat, thick and greasy, covered in flies, as she thought, as she considered what was to be done.

What a dump!

She could just throw the leftovers down the old toilet. All of them. No one would know. No one would care. No one would ever use it again. All of this, every bit, was being sold off. Buyers wouldn't want mismatched dinnerware. And it wasn't as if they'd used it all. There would be enough remaining to seem reasonable to her aunt. Really, she'd be doing her a favour – less to sort out, to deal with, to move. Vera was familiar with moving. She and Oswald always moved, again and again, moved from apartment to house to unit to apartment and to a house again. Nothing ever changed. It was always the same, so they moved. She was sick of moving.

Vera began to gather up the plates and cutlery and cups. She scraped the leftovers onto one plate and then stopped. She stared at the table. The dripping tap seemed to keep time as she stood there, a knife in one hand, the other resting on the pile of plates. And then, she re-set the table as it was. She divided the leftovers accordingly. As you were, she thought.

Vera picked up some of the beer bottles, not all, just some and took them to the outside toilet. The long drop, she thought and smiled as she did just that, dropping them down there, one at a time. The first two made hollow thuds, but the last couple smashed loudly, the noise satisfying in the silence. Inside the house, Vera emptied her wine glass in the sink and placed it back on the table in the lounge room.

She went out to the car. There it sat neglected, a hot metal beast, impenetrable without the keys. Vera swore and went inside to hunt for them, knowing already, because she knew Oswald, that they would not be there. He coveted those keys, like a miser with his money. She checked the pockets of his shorts. No. Maybe they had fallen out when Oswald took his clothes off. Or maybe, unable to part with them, he had clung to them as he swam, refusing to relinquish them even to his own detriment. Or maybe he had some special place to insert them. More than likely the tide or sand had swallowed them.

Her skin felt tight. Soon it would begin to peel. Soon she would burst open and a new Vera would step forth. And perhaps, somewhere, out there, a new Oswald would be emerging.

She sat down, feeling caught between two, as yet unclear, paths. She needed to think.

A plan would be to try and find the keys – no, let's be more positive in our thinking – Vera *would* find the keys on the beach, then to find Oswald and then she and Oswald would leave. So simple. So clear. And that would be the end of the story. That was how it was going to be. She'd take a leaf from Annie for once – this is how it is going to be. My will be done. For ever and ever. Amen.

All. Hail. Me.

Yes. That was a plan. Vera sat there in the quiet for a long while. She did not move, she barely blinked. She was a dishevelled painting entitled 'Woman Sitting'. The tap continued to drip.

Eventually, she stood up slowly, picked up a wine bottle, grabbed a glass, and went into the lounge room. She turned on two fans. She selected some music from the playlist. She selected some of *her* music. Music that Oswald hated: Satie's Gnossienne No. 1. She poured herself a glass of wine and lay down on the couch, head resting on a cushion, fans blowing, the music playing. It swelled up around her, through her, inside

her. It was water music, she thought, music that ebbed and flowed, rose and fell, receded. Yet it came to her as if she were in the ocean's depths, held there, and made her heart ache for things that had not come to pass but might still. Made her ache for life.

It was music for drowning in.

†

They hang off the Hills Hoist, he on one side, she on the other. Up and down it creaks, groans beneath their childish weight, shifting slowly round in jagged bursts. Her arms ache, her palms burn, they pull and rock and laugh.

She is chasing him, he is chasing her, and one will never catch up with the other.

'Ver! Ver! Look!'

She twists around and sees Gary, head hanging to one side, mouth wide open, tongue lolling out, eyes heavenward – 'I'm dyyyyying,' he gurgles – and drops. Dust flies up as he hits the ground. He spins around, and hands on hips, looks at her for approval.

'I win,' she says.

'It wasn't a competition,' he says.

'That's because you lost. It's always a competition,' she says. Vera smiles though, he always does this. It's only a competition if he wins and vice versa. Gary's smiling, too.

'Nuh-uh.'

She starts swinging her legs back and forth, getting a rhythm, building momentum. Gary's eyes widen in anticipation, in fear. The soft pads of flesh beneath her fingers are screaming; blisters blooming, swelling, getting ready to burst – she lets

go. And she's flying. No wings, but flying even still, soaring through the air straight towards him. Gary runs. He takes off before she has even hit the ground.

Whoompf! Propelled forward, Vera stumbles but goes with it, uses the force behind her to start running.

She is nine, he is ten. For now, they are of the same height, the same weight. By next spring, she will be taller, he stockier. But for now, and this is what matters, for now they are the same.

Vera leaps, a lioness, and brings him to the ground. Gary tries to roll away, but she has a hold on him. She pins his arms with her knees and uses one hand to hold his shirt.

'I win,' she says, triumphant. She's smiling, all teeth are on show.

He's laughing, 'No-o-o-o-o,' he struggles to get the word out; he shakes his head for emphasis. Vera punches him on the shoulder. For emphasis. 'I win,' she says again.

'Ow!'

'I win,' her fist is raised, ready to come down hard on bone if he refuses to submit.

'No,' he says, grinning his idiot's grin and trying to twist away, 'you hit like a girl.'

Vera knows this is supposed to get her all riled up. Get her so she can't think straight and she'll shift her weight to his advantage in her eagerness to beat him. So Vera changes tack. She says, 'That's because I *am* a girl, idiot,' and punches him once for good measure, and then, as he squeals, she begins to tickle him. She digs her fingers right in, between his ribs, harder and harder, deeper and deeper. Vera is merciless. If he wets himself, then so be it.

Gary writhes beneath her. His face red, eyes popping, he gasps for breath, 'Y-o-o-u,' gulps in air – Vera pauses but her fingers are poised – 'win.'

She pats his cheek and releases him. Good boy, she thinks. Gary lies there panting, arms and legs spread wide like a starfish. Vera curls in next to him. He smells sweet and biscuity.

‘Fark,’ he says, but nothing more.

Quietly, just the sound of their breath slowing, they watch the clouds drift by. Vera feels something on her arm, an ant. She watches it; antennae twitch as it climbs over a mole near her elbow. She wonders if it’s going to try and take a piece of her back to its anthill.

‘Let’s just stay here,’ says Gary. ‘You know, forever.’

‘Let’s,’ says Vera, eyes still on the ant.

‘Just you and me, we’ll hide so they can’t find us.’

‘Yes,’ she says, her interest piqued. ‘We’ll sneak away tonight, climb out the window and hide in the dunes. And then, when they’ve given up looking and gone back home, we’ll live here when it’s empty and the rest of the time in Kid House. We’ll hide when people come here and steal from them when they sleep.’ Vera smiles as she says this. She loves hiding, she loves planning an escape. And it’s better with two: more fun than one, less chance of getting caught than with more.

She looks over at Gary and his expression is grave, his face looks older, worn. And when he turns to face her, she thinks he is about to cry. She is sure of it. But she must be wrong, because Gary never cries. Neither of them do. That’s why they’re mates. Because no matter what they do, no matter what they say, it’s forgotten, forgiven. And see – his eyes are dry and he’s grinning his goofiest grin and nobody could grin like that if they are about to cry.

‘You know I letcha win dontcha?’

‘Whatever,’ Vera says. The sun has made her lazy again. Too lazy to even worry about what Annie might say should she find them lying in the dirt like this. She rolls

onto her back. Gary grabs her hand and squeezes it tight. His palm is warm and sticky. She can feel the bumps of blisters that match her own. She squeezes back.

‘You’re gonna burn we stay out here,’ he says, ‘You always do.’

Vera shrugs and says, ‘Just a little longer.’ Just a little longer and then they can plan, then they can run away. The sky stretches out above them, blue and beautiful with wisps of cloud threading through it; an endless, open, radiant world. Lying there like this, it is all that she can see; it is all that exists. That and the boy next to her. Two fallen angels lying in the dust, staring at the sky.

†

Vera woke to what she thought was the creaking of the Hills Hoist. She sat up and realised that it couldn’t be. The Hills Hoist was broken. Perhaps it had been the echo of dream but it had felt so real and close, as if made by the weight of something or someone swinging.

‘Oswald?’ she said. But there was no answer, only the quiet of the house.

The music had stopped but the tap still dripped. She got up and tried to turn the tap as hard and tight as she could.

Plop. Plop. Plop.

Vera stared at the dripping water, willing it to stop. She couldn’t bear it. It was too much. And suddenly she felt she could not stay put any longer, not here, trapped inside these breathless, watchful walls.

†

In a suburb in Adelaide, just off Newton Road, before you get to the shopping centre, where the houses are all squat and ugly and angry, and there aren’t many trees, in this

urban desert, bleakest beneath the summer sun, sits a house. Angriest and saddest of the lot, a monument to superstition and fear, it is easy to spot. The windows are broken and boarded, the screen door hangs from a hinge, graffiti, all the colours of the rainbow, adorns the walls, weeds grow out of every orifice, and the garden, or what was once a garden, is overgrown and, in some parts, dead. Sue and Dave and Rod are long gone. Evicted by tragedy.

This is Gary's place. Gary owns it.

†

She was rested. She had eaten and quenched her thirst. She was ready.

Vera stepped outside; bare feet on hard, dry earth. All around was open space. It was still and silent, the world too heavy with the heat of the day to move, to make a sound. She felt she had stepped out into a movie, an American one set in Texas or Arizona, someplace harsh and unforgiving. *Badlands* or *No Country for Old Men* sprang to mind – unseen enemies lurking, watching the house, waiting for the right moment...

And then *Pow!* or *Bang!* or *Pop!*

Or whatever sound a gun would make in that moment, that space; loud and lurid like comic book onomatopoeia.

And if you were a spectator, someone looking on from afar – maybe it is even you that took the shot, you bastard – then you would see a figure crumple. Drop like a rag doll. And that would be Vera.

Because Vera was a sitting duck.

But this did not happen. Even though Vera's body was tense and ready for it, anticipated it, it did not happen. This was Australia not America. This was not a movie.

She was reminded of a game she, Emmy, Gary and Dave used to play here. There would be someone in the house waiting, counting, while the others were outside, hiding. If you were the one inside, you were meant to hunt the others out. Round them up, bring them in, or shoot them dead. Everyone would have little stones to throw. These were bullets. Often there were big arguments about whether someone was hit or not. But with a real gun there would be no arguments. The dead don't argue and even the injured are disinclined to put up much of a fight. Vera smiled and wondered if Gary was aware of this.

She walked away from the house towards the beach. Gary could have this place. It was going to be sold anyway, she wouldn't be back. How disappointed he would be when strangers turned up, bringing with them their own lives, fears, dreams, secrets, anger. Or perhaps they'd just knock it down. Wipe it all out and leave an empty space or erect something new over the top without knowing all that had happened here. All that had come before. Gary could keep it, whatever it turned out to be. If only, she thought, he would just stay here. If only he would appreciate what she was giving him.

As the sound of the ocean drew closer, Vera's thoughts turned to Oswald – how quickly one forgets! – she began to wonder whether when she found him, he would be happy to see her.

She was starting to think not.

†

Sticks and stones may break my bones

But words will never hurt me

Na-nana-naa-nah!

†

Vera never saw Gary look sad or hurt when she hit him with one of her stone bullets, or when she whacked him with her stick sword. So that rhyme seems kind of funny. It seems kind of bullshit, really, when you think about it. When you consider what Vera did. Or rather, said. And then what Gary did.

Because Vera hasn't been particularly truthful – wait, hang on – it's not as if she's told a lie. Well, maybe she has. But Vera is a storyteller. And it is the storyteller's right to omit. And twist. Because, of course, their interest is in telling a story.

Their story.

And this takes precedence over something as subjective as the truth or as inconvenient as fact. So that when Gary said to Vera 'You need to leave', with a man in a kimono in the next room, and Jimi and Kurt looking on, listening in, Vera, who is known to be difficult, may have left.

But not quietly.

Not without retort.

For she may have seen something in that notebook. Something useful.

Something that coolly and calmly came out of her mouth. She may have told Gary a few truths. Of what Vera thought was true of Gary. Of what he should know about himself. And it sure looked as if words hurt, then, when Vera said those things. Because when she was done, for just a moment, invisible to the untrained eye, a fracture appeared. And Vera saw first-hand the power of words. The power of *her* words.

For Gary hung on every word. Hung himself on every word.

Perhaps this is what happened.

But really, this is all supposition and conjecture. All maybes and could haves and do you supposes. I mean, words didn't form the rope, didn't tie the knot, didn't slip the noose, didn't push the chair, did they?

†

Vera found a body.

Dry and bloated on the beach. It couldn't be Oswald; it had been there far too long. She thought it, the body, was a man before it became an *it*. Before it became just a slab of meat. But it was too hard to tell. Something had nibbled at this body before it washed ashore and the sun baked it. Something had got at the face, at the genitals. Something had erased the person. Left the it.

Vera held the head in her lap and stroked the hair. It was as curled and crisp as the dry seaweed strewn across the sand. She stroked it and looked at what was once a face. What was still, in a way, a face. The face of no one. No one that she recognised. And in it, she could see different faces. Different faces that were all, in a way, the same face. Men, women, children, who had been there all along, from beginning to end.

They were all there – in the empty eye sockets and that gaping, screaming mouth.

†

Enoch stares at Vera. Mouth open, stunned.

'What'd you do that for?' he says.

They always want to know. The whats and the whys. But what should she say? – I've had enough of your bitching and moaning? I don't want to hear about your trauma. I don't want to hear about how you were abandoned. About how your mum fucked off and uncle so and so paid you too much attention. We're talking about me. Not you. It's always a competition, isn't it? Oh, I see. Really, you had an abortion, did you? Well I see you your abortion and raise it with abandonment and molestation. Or not even

molestation as such. He just showed you his dick. Big deal. Toughen up, Princess, as Annie would say. Or maybe that's Vera.

But if Vera says that then she'll sound like the heartless one. Vera knows the drill. It is her job to be sympathetic, to listen with motherly, heartfelt concern, and perhaps provide sex. To fulfil her Freudian duty. And so the pressure had built inside, built until out it whipped with a crack, bottom of her palm smacking up into his mouth, splitting his lip.

Hush, Enoch. Stop your snivelling, Boy. Or I'll really give you something to cry about – Ah! That's Father, there. One of his gems. Bless him.

Watching him cry, Vera feels quiet. She feels at peace.

†

Out of the sand they came.

Vera saw their legs first: fat, chubby, shining in the sun. They wiggled through like saplings caught in time lapse frames. Their sexless crotches followed, smooth plastic surfaces, and brazen buttocks from which, on either side, legs sprouted, moving up and down at the join; legs that Vera knows will pop right off with a simple tug. Bellies, arms, shoulders, round faces with unblinking eyes, lids stiff and gritty with sand, curls dull, matted, if not worn away. They were pink and cream and golden and brown. There were brunettes and raven-heads and blondes and auburns and coppers and gingers.

Look, Annie, gingers!

Babies. Little fat babies coming out of the ground. Bleating: *Ma-ma, Ma-ma, Ma-ma*

And Vera thought of Marid.

Annie and Emmeline are arguing over a story on the evening news. A man has killed himself in an off-shore detention centre.

Vera sits with Marid on her lap. He looks startled, hearing his mother raise her voice at his grandmother. Annie's voice remains calm and quiet; the voice of reason. Vera wonders why they bother. All this talk is tiring. Nothing will change. No-one's opinion will be swayed. The only thing that will be different are the candidates to be argued over. She thinks of *1984* and people yelling at screens: a constant but ever-changing enemy.

Vera pinches Marid's cheek, softly, distracting him from his mother's increasingly irate voice.

Marid points to his nose – 'Noh,' he says.

Vera nods and says, 'Yes, nose.'

He beams.

'Where are your eyes?' Vera asks.

He sticks his fingers in his eyes, 'Eye,' he says.

'Yes, eyes. And your mouth?'

He points to his pursed lips, 'Mouf.'

'Yes. Now where's my mouth?'

Vera is greeted by an enthusiastic jab, 'Mouf.'

She grabs the offered hand and pretends to bite down on it – 'Mmmmm a tasty morsel.'

He giggles. She tickles him, he squeals. He is soft and fat and warm. His eyes twinkle in anticipation when she stops – 'Again?' And so Vera does. The wriggling body, the peeling laughter, this tiny person, blocks out the voices.

It, the body, was not Oswald. It couldn't be. For Oswald was following Vera. He had been there in the distance, coming up behind, taking his time. He and the child. She hadn't noticed them at first, had disregarded them; thought they were trees or a trick of the sun. But there they were. Funny, because Vera was looking for Oswald but he found her. Just when she had decided she did not want to be found. Not by him. Not by them.

They held hands, Oswald and Child, and Vera saw them stop and talk every now and then. Oswald bending down so Child could cup hands over his ear and whisper things to him. Things Vera could not hear. But she could imagine and she did not like it.

As they drew closer, they whispered more and more. And though the words were indecipherable, their voices tickled her ears like the feet of flies. But she knew what they wanted. Knew it without asking them to speak louder or articulate their words more clearly. They wanted to be a family: Vera, Oswald and Child.

At first she thought they wanted to live in Kid House on the sand, 'An ocean view! And at such a reasonable price – how can you say no?' she thought they'd say. But the child did not like Kid House. It was too full of secrets. He did not want secrets. He did not like them. Neither did Oswald. Families shouldn't have secrets, this they had conferred on, this they had agreed. And they did not want to be buried inside, closed in behind walls, sealed over with a roof, regardless of whether there were doors and windows. They wanted to walk beneath a blue, never-ending sky, beneath a white-hot sun. They wanted to be seen – See us! – they wanted to be heard – hear us! – but Vera did not want to see, she did not want to listen.

So she walked and they followed.

I'll take them home, she thought, I'll take them home to Annie. I'm sure she'd appreciate the company now Father's not around, now that he has a home of his own.

Maybe she'd walk the whole way, walk across the land – passing through Yorketown, of course, I'll need my chicken sandwich and Classic Chocolate for this journey. And no, Oswald, you're not getting any. You should've let me stop there in the first place, so I'll have none of your lip. Thank *you* very much – making her way back to Adelaide. Or maybe she'd just hitch a lift. That seemed the most practical solution; if anyone would have them, of course. A burnt woman, a drowned man and a scarred child were not everyone's desired travel companions.

A scarred child who rubbed his neck and watched Vera, tried to catch her eye when she least expected it, opened his mouth as if to speak but she would hold up her hand and turn away from him. He could keep his secrets, she thought, all the things he'd never said, all the words he never showed her. They could stay stuck inside him, festering. He could choke on them for all she cared. Child and man, both. For the man had secrets, too. His flesh was bloated and rubbery with them. It was blue with them. They oozed out of his pores, weeping onto the dry sand where they disappeared.

But Vera did not want to know.

And what about her secrets? They had come to the surface, risen up on her skin. She laughed aloud when she saw them. She could see Oswald and Child peering, trying to get close enough to read something barely legible; the words were small and tight and closely written, as if Gary and his pencil had been at work. They squinted and frowned and sometimes reached out to touch, to feel. But Vera would just pick up her pace, keeping them at a polite distance.

It's too late, boys, she thought. Too late to show an interest. You didn't want to listen before and now I'm over it and taking you to Annie.

Her skin had been barbecued, the parchment fried, and soon she would peel it off. And what would be beneath? She was not sure. A clean slate, perhaps.

When they got there, to Annie's, and walked up the path and knocked on the door and Annie let them in – and she would! She couldn't help herself for fear of

causing a scene. Because who can ignore, when they come to your door, a peeling woman, a blue man and a broken child? And then they'd shut themselves in, pull down the blinds, and sit around the table. Like a family. And Vera would fill Annie in, tell her the story, just enough, mind you, so she understood that it – the two of them, Oswald and Child – were her fault. Not Vera's. And then she would leave.

She'd leave and she'd say – you deal with it, Annie. After all, you know best.

†

Sitting in the bath together, alone, Vera and Emmeline pretend they are crocodiles hunting Annies. They capture them and then roll them round and round in the water. With their Annies carefully stored, they sit and discuss cooking methods. Vera wants to roast hers. Emmeline wants to make a pie.

As they gather utensils for cooking – shampoo and conditioner bottles, the saucepan Annie uses to rinse their hair – Emmeline says, softly, 'Emu?'

'Yeah,' says Vera, her back to Emmeline as she lines up the chopping knife to cut the head off one of the Annies.

'I love you all the time. *Especially* when you're a monster.'

†

Vera's skin had peeled. She was fresh and clean and new. She was raw and pink; a six-foot baby possum, naked and sharp-eyed in the night. She saw everything clearly.

Possum.

Of course Vera was a possum not an emu.

Stupid Annie.

Emmy was a possum, after all. And Vera and Emmy were sisters. When she went back to Melbourne, she would move in with Emmeline. It was the only sensible thing to do. Emmeline would take care of her, she always did. And Vera would be able to write. Emmy always encouraged her writing. Everything would be right with Emmy. She'd stroke Vera's hair and say, 'Poor Emu. What a horrible thing to have lost your Oswald.'

Even though Emmy never liked Oswald, she'd still say this. Because Emmy loved Vera. And Vera would take care of Emmy. That was what she should have done all along. Never mind Oswald. Never mind Gary. Never mind Enoch. It was Emmy that always wanted to play Vera's games, Emmy that was always ready to listen. And Vera would take care of her, because Vera loved Emmy and that's what big sisters do. Take care of their little sisters. And Vera would take care of Marid. Because Marid is Emmy's and Vera loved him like he was her own. They'd bring up Marid together and the new baby. The one that was on its way. Vera wondered whether it would be a girl or a boy. It didn't matter, though. No, because whatever it was, Vera would make sure nothing bad happened to it. To he or she. Or Marid. Vera would protect them from Annie and her interfering. She would protect them from all the horrible things in the world. And she would teach Marid and New Baby to be good listeners, good storytellers, so they could protect themselves.

Vera used to think that speaking words was not enough, that nobody listened, and could not say them right, anyway. Say them straight. Tell the story in a manner that made sense. She thought that writing the words down was the answer, because writing them might help her get them in the right order, give her time to shift and change them, rearrange them. But written words could be burned, erased, they could incriminate. And Vera knew now that speaking could work as it did when she played God on paper. What you said, the way you said it, when you said it, what you withheld could change perspectives, influence others, shape reality. And just as with writing a story, when

something didn't work, no matter how attached to it you might be – what was it they said?

Kill your darlings.

You had to kill your darlings to make the story stronger, make it work. And Vera's story had shifted, her focus had changed. It was no longer the story of Gary and Oswald and Vera. It was now the story of Vera and Emmeline and Marid and New Baby.

And with each step she took along the shore, as Vera made her way towards Adelaide, towards Annie's house to drop off her darlings, to say see you later – or never again, she hoped – Vera repeated to herself, stepped in time to the words:

I am coming, Emmy. I am coming.

‘VIOLENT, ANTAGONISTIC, MORALLY AMBIGUOUS:
ANTI-HEROINES AND THE FEMALE GOTHIC’

Volume 2: The Exegesis

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Table of Contents

Volume 2: ‘Violent, Antagonistic, Morally Ambiguous: Anti-Heroines and the Female Gothic’

Table of Contents.....	iii
Declaration of Originality.....	iv
Introduction	
‘Something Wicked this Way Comes’: Revisiting the Female Gothic.....	5
Chapter One	
‘Miss Wickedness’: Shirley Jackson’s Charming Mass-Murderess, Merricat.....	22
Chapter Two	
Monster-making: The Power Relationship between Mother and Child in Lionel Shriver’s <i>We Need to Talk about Kevin</i>	38
Chapter Three	
Self-Harm and Callous Behaviour in ‘Irrelevant Bodies’.....	54
Conclusion	
Unsettling Reflections.....	70
Bibliography.....	74

Declaration of Originality

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Michelle Caroline Jager

Introduction

‘Something Wicked this Way Comes’: Revisiting the Female Gothic

Women are natural victims. When a man is threatened with violence he will shrink back and prepare to defend himself. When a woman is threatened with violence she will stumble forward to embrace it. (Gibson, *The Sandman* 120)

The Gothic genre is traditionally associated with moody landscapes, spectral beings, labyrinthine castles, villainous men, and trembling, virtuous women. The latter, the Gothic heroine, shares a long and fraught relationship with the genre. One of the key tenets of the mode, her role is often cited as the defining element (Ellis, ‘Can You Forgive Her?’ 457; Hume 287; Punter, *Literature of Terror* vol. 1 9; Wallace and Smith 3; Williams 14). But such significance comes at a cost. Since Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* was published in (1764) the resounding image of the Gothic heroine in Western literature is that of victim to a male anti-hero or villain. Whether the text is male or female-centred, the expectation is that the narrative will, in some sense, revolve around her suffering (Ellis, ‘Can You Forgive’ 458; Massé 3; Punter, *Gothic Pathologies* 14; Williams 100).

Numerous Gothic novels depict women – whether they are the protagonist or simply plot fodder – exposed to a variety of physical and psychological abuses before the narrative is resolved. Such cruelties include, but are not limited to: rape (Matthew Lewis’ *The Monk: A Romance* [1796]), live burial (Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘The House of Usher’ [1839]), confinement (Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper*

[1892]), humiliation (Jean Rhys' *Voyage in the Dark* [1934]), stalking and kidnap (John Fowles' *The Collector* [1965]), intimidation (Angela Carter's *The Magic Toyshop* [1967]), demonic insemination (Ira Levin's *Rosemary's Baby* [1967]), mutilation (Thomas Harris' *The Silence of the Lambs* [1988]), torture (Brett Easton Ellis' *American Psycho* [1991]), beatings (Julia Leigh's *Disquiet* [2008]), psychological manipulation (Chloe Hooper's *The Engagement* [2012]) and ruin (Jill Alexander Essbaum's *Hausfrau* [2015]).

And yet, not only is the Gothic heroine subjected to such treatment from others, she is also accused of masochistic tendencies, intentionally seeking out those who will cause her pain and even inflicting it on herself (Fleenor 11-12, 15; Massé 2; Meyers 60; Moers 107). Gothic literature reveals a pattern of heroines who suffer from feelings of self-hatred often manifested in self-punishing disorders such as anorexia, self-mutilation, substance abuse, suicidal ideation and actualisation (Fleenor 11-12, 15; Gilbert and Gubar xi; Moers 107). Cathy's self-imposed starvation in *Wuthering Heights* (1847), Jean Rhys' heroines' alcohol abuse, Alison Langdon's removal of her own nipples with a pair of gardening shears in Carson McCullers' *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (1941), Esther Greenwood's suicide attempt in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963), and Bella Swan's propensity for placing herself in life-endangering situations to gain the attention of her brooding vampire beau, Edward, in the *Twilight* series (2005-2008) are but a few examples of this prevailing theme. The reward for such trials is often death, madness or marriage, the latter not necessarily the preferred outcome. As Michelle A. Massé suggests: 'what characters in these novels represent ... is the cultural, psychoanalytic, and fictional expectation that they should be masochistic if they are "normal" women' (2).

The Female Gothic is a subgenre and critical area of study that focusses on the trials, torments and anxieties of the Gothic heroine (Baldick and Mighall 285; Brabon and Genz 5; Fleenor 15; Hoeveler 7; Kędra-Kardela and Kowalczyk 24; Wallace and

Smith 2; Williams 136). The term was originally coined by Ellen Moers in 1974 in her essays for *The New York Review of Books*, entitled 'Female Gothic: The Mother's Monster' and 'Female Gothic: Monsters, Goblins, Freaks'. The essays were later consolidated into a chapter for her book *Literary Women* (1976), in which she defined the Female Gothic simply as 'the work that women writers have done in the literary mode that, since the eighteenth century, we have called the Gothic' (*Literary Women*, 90). Moers speculated on the nature of the Gothic as produced by women and the recurring themes and concerns found in texts spanning centuries and continents by writers and artists as varied as Mary Shelley, Christina Rossetti, Emily Bronte, Carson McCullers, Djuna Barnes, Sylvia Plath and Diane Arbus. She suggested that the fears and anxieties, along with the images reflected in these works were considered 'perversities' as they countered the more familiar 'clichés about women being by nature ... gentle, pious, conservative, domestic, loving, and serene' (100). The 'freakish' female subjects and thematic concerns of these works generated unease and discomfort among readers and critics as they challenged traditional perceptions of women. The depictions of uniquely 'female experiences' such as motherhood and pregnancy, as well as the exploration of repressed/oppressed sexuality, and the 'compulsion to visualize the self' (107), provided a counter view of a world constructed by male authors.

Following on from Moers' lead, critics cemented the Female Gothic as a genre which dealt with women's fears, desires and anxieties, particularly in relation to their imprisonment or restriction within a patriarchal society. In their influential study, *Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979), Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar supported Moers' notion that works by women from Austen to Plath were connected by a 'coherence of theme and imagery' (xi). Though they did not specifically mention the 'Female Gothic' per se, the themes and images they identified were of a decidedly Gothic nature: enclosure, madness, physical and psychological discomfort and the portrayal of 'diseases like

anorexia, agoraphobia, and claustrophobia' (xi). They suggested that the defining theme was 'confinement' since a variety of texts dealt with 'enclosure and entrapment', often depicting protagonists with 'mad' doubles who functioned as 'asocial surrogates for docile selves' held in check by a patriarchal society (xi).

Gilbert and Gubar famously used Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* as an example of this divide. Bertha and Jane, they contended, were essentially two sides of the same person, reflecting the protagonist's struggle with her repressed and oppressed sexuality and desires. They state: 'Bertha ... is Jane's truest and darkest double: she is the angry aspect of the orphan child, the ferocious secret self Jane has been trying to repress' (360). The house, the 'secret room'/ attic, and Jane's subsequent journey beyond its walls represent both the protagonist's and the author's imprisonment and navigation of 'the architecture – both the houses and institutions – of patriarchy' (63, 85).

This division between the 'docile' and the 'monstrous' female self, reflected the conflict surrounding female identity connected to the patriarchal construct of 'Woman' (Gilbert and Gubar 362). This image dictated that women lacked the complexity of men and essentially fell into one of two categories: good or wicked. Defining attributes centred on, though they were not restricted to, sexual promiscuity. The 'good' woman was virtuous, faithful, altruistic, kind, sensitive and loving. Her realm was the domestic space and her role was to preserve the home for her husband and family as a moral sanctuary against the corruptive outside world (Clemens 43; Ellis, *Contested Castle* ix). The 'wicked' woman was wanton, selfish, cunning, immoral, and, above all, dangerous. She was most emphatically realised in the figure of the femme fatale. A deadly and seductive force, she 'is characterised above all by her effect upon men: a femme cannot be fatale without a male present, even where her fatalism is directed towards herself' (Stott viii). One is 'domestic angel', the other, potential home-wrecker (Federico 2).

This notion of the divided or fractured self was furthered by Juliann E. Fleenor in her collection, *The Female Gothic* (1983). In the introduction she argues that at 'the

center of the Female Gothic is the conflict over female identity' (24). In such narratives, heroines often navigate between examples society has constructed of acceptable womanhood and their own inner life, whereby they experience feelings, desires and thoughts that contradict the 'ideal' or 'good' woman. The theme of the split personality is the culmination of this struggle, as the heroine is divided by the uncanny notion she may be nothing more than 'a reflection' (12). This reflected self 'is a reflection of patriarchal values, not as [the heroine actually] is' (12). This crisis of identity is a key element in Female Gothic narratives, and, if not resolved, the heroine may face condemnation, alienation or destruction, even at her own hand (15).

Providing a far narrower thesis on the topic in *Art of Darkness: A Poetics of Gothic* (1995), Anne Williams suggests that the Female Gothic differs distinctly from texts written by men in the Gothic mode (the Male Gothic) because 'in patriarchal culture the male subject and the female subject necessarily have a different experience; each lives in a somewhat different world' (100). By tracing the literary conventions of each tradition back to distinct texts – Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (Female) and Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* (Male) (100) – Williams argues that the Female Gothic plot line is 'the more revolutionary of the two' (172). The heroine, exposed to 'the perils lurking in the father's corridors of power', experiences a 'happy ending' in the form of marriage, thus providing her with a 'new name and, most important, a new identity' (103). In contrast, the Male Gothic denigrates the heroine, indulging in a 'horrified fascination with female suffering' (105). And yet, when one considers *Jane Eyre*'s trials, female suffering would appear to be at the centre of both streams. Although suffering may result in a journey of self-discovery, as it does in *Jane Eyre*, it often leads back to the very cause of the anguish: the man she loves/marries.

However, in contrast to Williams' assertion that the Female Gothic is 'revolutionary', a number of critics have raised the concern that the subgenre promotes 'victim feminism' and the vilification of men (Armitt 17; Baldick and Mighall 227;

Brabon and Genz 7; Hoeveler 7). This is the premise of Diane Long Hoeveler's Gothic *Feminism: The Professionalisation of Gender from Charlotte Smith to the Brontës* (1998). Hoeveler argues that the Female Gothic has a history of portraying women in roles of 'wise passiveness' through which they overcome 'a male-created system of oppression and corruption, the "patriarchy"' (3, 7, 9). She suggests that 'Gothic feminism' is based on a system of 'female power through pretended and staged weakness' (7). Chris Baldick and Robert Mighall support this notion in their twice-published chapter 'Gothic Criticism' (2000; 2012). Referring to Williams' definitions of the Male and Female Gothic, they call for an 'abandonment' of what they consider to be a 'predominantly universalising category' (285-86). They argue that since its emergence in the 1970s, the Female Gothic has become the 'embodiment of some invariable female "experience"' in which '(wicked) "male Gothic" texts always express terror of the eternal "(M)other" while (good) female Gothic texts are revealed to be – as Anne Williams claims – not just "empowering" but "revolutionary"' (285). In their collection of essays, *Postfeminist Gothic: Critical Interventions in Contemporary Culture* (2007), Benjamin A. Brabon and Stéphanie Genz follow on from this proposition of moving away from the Female Gothic as a category. They assert that Moers identified the Female Gothic solely as 'the mode par excellence that female writers have employed to give voice to women's fears about their own powerlessness and imprisonment within patriarchy' revolving 'around an innocent and blameless heroine threatened by a powerful male figure' (5).

This assertion, it seems to me, is an oversimplification of Moers' intention in identifying the Female Gothic as a critical category. What was presented in her short chapter – designed to initiate discussion on the concept – was a brief but considered analysis. Even given its brevity, Moers managed to note not only the similarities but also the differences in the works that might be said to have been shaped by the era or social climate in which the work and artist had been produced. Moers' reading of Mary

Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), for example, focusses on the depiction of 'the emotions surrounding the parent-child and child-parent relationship', in particular, guilt and fear (98). *Wuthering Heights*, on the other hand, she reads as a reaction to the restrictive Victorian attitudes surrounding female behaviour, with a particular focus on Cathy's 'delight in the remembered brutishness of childhood' (100, 107). One reading can be considered a critique of the self, the other of society. Thus not only can the Female Gothic narrative be seen as a critical examination of women's fears and anxieties regarding the power structures in place, it can also be seen to have functioned as a critique of the self as woman and individual. As Moers correctly states, there is a 'long and complex tradition' in the 'Female Gothic, where woman is examined with a woman's eye, woman as girl, as sister, as mother, as *self*' (my italics 109).

Accusations of 'victim feminism' and the 'vilification' of men ignore the notion that the Gothic genre as a whole, written by men and women, reflects the theme of the female in captivity often tormented by a male villain (Davison, 'Knickers in a Twist' 40; Moers 137). Terms such as 'victim feminism' can also be dangerously dismissive. Historically, from a Western perspective at least, women have been in positions where their power and freedom has been undermined by the patriarchal structures in place, limiting their options and avenues for defiance and independence (Ellis, *Contested Castle* 1; Wallace 26). And, as Carol Margaret Davison writes of the Female Gothic, '[l]iterary critics must be scrupulous in ensuring that their own personal ideologies are not foisted onto texts of an earlier era, with those works then being extolled or attacked depending on how much they suit a current belief-system' ('Knickers in a Twist' 34). Even today, women, to varying degrees and depending upon class, age, culture, race, financial security, education and physicality, are often overrepresented in the most vulnerable sections of society (DeKeseredy 241-242). As Walter S. DeKeseredy writes: despite 'research showing high rates of male-to-female beatings, sexual assaults, and

other highly injurious forms of female victimization that occur behind closed doors’ there still remains a market ‘for belittling female crime victims’ (241).

One of the central aims of Helene Meyers’ book, *Femicidal Fears: Narratives of the Female Gothic Experience* (2001), is to contest the opinion of ‘many popular and academic accounts’ that ‘feminists do not report the Gothic experiences of women but rather create them’ (4). In her study she examines contemporary Female Gothic works written from the mid-60s to the late 80s, and asserts that these authors have ‘adopted and adapted the tropes of an already gendered literary tradition to address the sexual politics of their own time’ (19). In particular, she suggests, these works share common ground in their depictions of violence against women (20). The narratives do not simply demonstrate ‘scripts of male vice and female virtue’, but rather provide a critique on ‘heterosexual romance and its seductions’ (23). Heroines are not only threatened by male villains but they are also put at risk by their willingness to believe in, and rely on, ‘male saviours’ (23). Meyers suggests that the familiar Gothic romance plot is undermined by the heroine’s realisation that to survive she must reject ‘the belief that heterosexual romance constitutes the key to female identity’, and in doing so, the concept and expectation of a ‘male saviour’ or ‘Mr Right’ (23). Meyers’ reading is a critique of the structures that bind women *and* of women’s active participation in this cultural construction. Meyers also notes how these novels comment on the normalisation of violence against women: ‘femicide borders on a cultural norm’ (20).

In 2012, Diana Wallace and Andrew Smith’s collection *The Female Gothic: New Directions* included essays on a diverse range of areas relating to the subject – ‘national identity, sexuality, language, race and history’ (6) – and authors – Radcliffe, Toni Morrison, Angela Carter, Iris Murdoch and Iain Banks amongst others – to reinvigorate the field. Within, Marie Mulvey-Roberts asserts that authors such as Austen, Brontë, Du Maurier and Carter unsettle the notion of the heroine as passive by depicting her as a ‘psychological detective in pursuit of her own fulfilment’ (103). But

despite these feminist interventions to unsettle it, the trope of the victim-heroine remains inextricably linked to the Female Gothic in both fiction and the critical discourse surrounding the subject. Anna Kędra-Kardela and Andrzej Sławomir Kowalczyk's recent engagement with the term in their 2014 collection of essays reflects this: 'Female Gothic deals with women's role in society and voices criticism of male-dominated social structures, patriarchal relations, and sexual subordination of women, imposing on them an underprivileged position' (24). This is the case in, for example, Osgood Perkins' film *I am the Pretty Thing That Lives in the House* (2016), in which Lily, a live-in nurse, is so passive, meek and helpless that she literally – and ridiculously – dies of fright upon seeing the ghost of Polly Parsons, a woman murdered by her husband and buried in the walls of the house.

Although the Gothic heroine is harangued for her apparent role in propagating the dichotomy of female virtue and male villainy, the Gothic hero-villain – or anti-hero – is not subjected to the same criticism. The Male Gothic is defined by the 'complex hero/villain', an overreaching, morally ambiguous male character/protagonist who is in conflict with society. Often, throughout the course of the narrative, he is undone by his own hubris (Hume 285, 287; Kędra-Kardela and Kowalczyk 29-30; Wallace and Smith 3; Williams 103). Robert D. Hume states: these 'are men of extraordinary capacity whom circumstance turns to evil purposes. They are not merely monsters, and only a bigoted reading makes them out as such' (285). Critics have been fascinated by the flawed natures and ambiguous morality of such characters. In particular, their struggle and fallibility are deemed to make them recognisable, 'human' (Fiedler 128; Hume 285; MacAndrew 49; Martin 5; Punter, *Literature of Terror* vol. 1 10).

Villainous male characters, ranging from sadistic sociopaths to 'misguided' individuals, are often lauded in popular and cult imaginations, achieving iconic status. Many literary 'hero-villains' have even been reimagined on screen, increasing their infamy. Lou Ford from Jim Thompson's *The Killer Inside Me* (1952), Tom Ripley from

Patricia Highsmith's *The Talented Mr Ripley* (1955), Humbert Humbert from Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955), Alex from Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange* (1962), Jack Torrance from Stephen King's *The Shining* (1977), Dr Hannibal Lecter from the Thomas Harris franchise (1981-), Tyler Durden from Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* (1996), Patrick Bateman from *American Psycho* (2000) and Anton Chigurh from Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men* (2005) are all examples of this influential phenomenon.

More recently, variations of this 'type' of male character have become central to a myriad of critically-acclaimed television series such as *The Sopranos*, *Mad Men* and, of course, *Breaking Bad*. The phenomenal success of Walter White/Heisenberg from *Breaking Bad* particularly reflects this appeal. His double life as a mild-mannered 'ordinary' chemistry teacher and increasingly ruthless criminal mastermind is a decidedly contemporary reinterpretation of the *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886). The impact of this character on the public imagination can be seen in countless podcasts, articles and webpages dedicated to the series along with ruminations on plot and character development, a mock obituary, funeral and headstone on Walter White's demise and countless awards and nominations for the show itself and Bryan Cranston, the actor who portrayed him (Hare).

In *Difficult Men: Behind the Scenes of a Creative Revolution*, Brett Martin suggests that the appeal of these characters lies in the combination of the protagonist's struggle to assert his identity and will against the power structures in place – real or imagined – and his wanton indulgence in even his most 'perverse' desires, regardless of the consequences (13, 88). Martin argues that the appeal lies in the audiences' identification with the character's struggle: 'unhappy, morally compromised, complicated', he is also 'deeply human' (4). And, he suggests, 'a life of taking, killing, and sleeping with whomever and whatever one wants [has] an undeniable, if conflict-laden appeal' (88).

Fears of feminization/domestication, dislocation and confusion regarding contemporary life and culture, are often articulated through the Male Gothic subject by way of violence and debauchery (Davison, 'Knickers in a Twist' 37; Helyer 739; Martin 13). Perhaps no other recent novel reflects this premise more acutely than Ellis' *American Psycho*. The novel is 'a satire on 1980s consumerism' (Storey 57), in which the protagonist describes murdering, dismembering and even, on occasion, eating women with the same dispassionate interest that he consumes food at a five-star restaurant, describes the designer wear of his associates, or discusses music trivia. Mark Storey considers the construction of Patrick Bateman as a reaction to 'contemporary life' or 'what we might call "the postmodern era"' (57) suggesting that *American Psycho* is a 'narrative deeply mired in the "crisis of masculinity"' stemming from this phenomenon (58). But the novel can also be read as a contemporary rendition of the Male Gothic (Helyer 740). Bateman's 'crisis of masculinity', his hyper-masculine, misogynistic response to society's changing gender expectations, reflects the protagonist's conflict with authority that epitomises the subgenre (Miles 96).

If wickedness and debauchery are such popular traits in fictional characters where, then, are the wicked women? What of female violence and villainy? What about a complex heroine-villainess? Over twenty years ago Atwood lamented this lack in her essay 'Spotty-Handed Villainesses: Problems of Female Bad Behavior in the Creation of Literature' (1994). She writes: 'were men to get all the juicy parts? Literature cannot do without bad behavior, but was all the bad behavior to be reserved for men?' (134).

Given the current popularity of difficult male characters, or specifically *white* male characters, this is still a pertinent observation. It is also a question that I have been drawn to asking myself about my own writing as a result of my work on the thesis. How do I write men and women? What sort of stories do I find myself telling from a male or female perspective? As a writer of dark speculative fiction who is particularly interested in character, I depict bad behaviour constantly. By posing such questions, I came to

realise that in my own fiction I have divided female and male protagonists into victims and villains. The short stories ‘Mother and Child’, ‘Jar Baby’ and ‘Blood and Tears’ all had female protagonists who were victims of the pressures of motherhood, rape and abortion. Whilst ‘Death on the Number 96’, ‘Bones’ and ‘Home Delivery’ had male protagonists who committed violent, terrible acts against women and children. In reality, my experience of men and women has not been so easily differentiated. After all, power is not only delineated through gender.

But writing about wicked women at this time is not without risks. Broaching the subject of the lack of villainesses, Atwood astutely asks: ‘is it not, today – well, somehow unfeminist to depict a woman behaving badly?’ (126). She argues, that following on from second-wave feminism, ‘Some writers tended to polarize morality by gender – that is, women were intrinsically good and men bad’ (132). In the context of scholarly criticism particular authors were examined to uphold certain notions surrounding feminism – the critique of the patriarchy – as opposed to those who chose to portray their female heroine in a less than flattering light (Aguilar 1, 2, 6; Atwood 132).

This trend can be seen in the critical treatment of Gillian Flynn’s *Gone Girl* (2012). In an article for *The Guardian*, crime-writer Joan Smith writes that Flynn exploits ‘the most egregious myths about gender-based violence’ (par. 3) particularly those related to women and ‘false allegations of rape’ (par. 8). Smith argues: ‘one of its key themes is the notion that it’s childishly easy to get away with making false allegations of rape and domestic violence. The characters live in a parallel universe where the immediate reaction to a woman who says she’s been assaulted is one of chivalrous concern’ (par. 4).

Certainly these myths are used and Amy gets away with exploiting them. But Flynn’s novel also comments on the type of ‘victims’ society is more sympathetic to and the power that privilege wields (Wilson, ‘What’s Missing’ par. 3). Amy is not just

any victim. She is a wealthy, white, beautiful, sociopathic prodigy, while her husband, Nick, is from a working-class family. As the inspiration behind her psychologist parents' successful *Amazing Amy* books, Amy's semi-celebrity also works in her favour. As Dr Lauren Rosewarne notes in reference to the much-publicised case of murder victim Jill Meagher and that of Tracy Connelly, a sex-worker murdered around the same time: 'the media plays favourites ... some victims are worth time, attention, vigils and tears and others are relegated to straight, just-the-facts-ma'am reporting at the back of the paper' (par. 5).

Like *Gone Girl*, Charlotte Dacre's *Zofloya; or The Moor* (1806) was 'deemed more "misogynist" than feminist' (Davison, 'Knickers in a Twist' 34). However, in her 2009 essay 'Getting Their Knickers in a Twist: Contesting the "Female Gothic" in Charlotte Dacre's *Zofloya*', Carol Margaret Davison argues against such a dismissive reading. Instead, she suggests that 'critics of the Female Gothic might take a lesson from the preponderance of studies devoted to the Female Bildungsroman, where the designation "Female" functions simply in a descriptive capacity to identify the sex of the protagonist' (34). Using *Zofloya* as an example, Davison argues that Dacre has constructed the femme fatale Victoria as a 'role-reversal' that engages with and disrupts 'cultural stereotypes' surrounding female passivity and sexuality (42). Dacre divests 'Victoria of any moral authority and position[s] her in the traditional hero-villain's role as a depraved, desiring subject' (37).

One would think that the extremity of behaviour, bordering on farce, in narratives such as *Zofloya* and *Gone Girl* would prevent them from being held up as general examples of female behaviour. But perhaps this reaction also relates to how we, as readers, approach stories about women and men or by male and female writers: Amy and Victoria's behaviour is generalised. Each is treated as being representative of women. By way of contrast, Patrick Bateman, the character, and the novel he inhabits, were both accused of misogyny, but not misandry, highlighting the preoccupation with

how female characters are portrayed, but less so their male counterparts. The male subject, in this context, can be considered as just that – a male subject. Not *the* definitive male subject. As Laura Sjoberg and Caron E. Gentry suggest, such interpretations contribute to ‘[t]he salience of women’s identity as *women*’ whereby their ‘violence is often discussed in terms of violent women’s gender: women are not supposed to be violent’ (2) with the assumption ‘that gender commonality makes life experiences similar’ (6). Reading Female Gothic narratives in the manner Davison suggests – focussing on the gender of the main protagonist, instead of focusing on gender-specific themes/concerns – moves away from universalising ‘women’s identity and experience’ (‘Knickers in a Twist’ 32). This allows us, as readers, critics and writers, to consider context and how a myriad of social/political/cultural factors such as age, class, disability, education, race, sexuality and an environment that enables a stable/secure upbringing that might intersect with gender to impact power dynamics. It also encourages a less dismissive approach to female characters that are less than likeable, a concern recently raised.

In 2013, Claire Messud’s novel *The Woman Upstairs* sparked a debate on difficult characters which revealed this aspect when an interviewer ventured the following point: ‘I wouldn’t want to be friends with Nora, would you? Her outlook is almost unbearably grim’ (Wilson, ‘An Unseemly Emotion’ par. 6). Messud responded: ‘For heaven’s sake, what kind of question is that? Would you want to be friends with Humbert Humbert? Would you want to be friends with Mickey Sabbath? Saleem Sinai? Hamlet?’ (Wilson, ‘An Unseemly Emotion’ par. 7). Author Rivka Galchen, offering her opinion on the matter, suggests: ‘we are well-trained to like “unappealing” male characters—so much so that I would imagine anyone who wanted their male character to be truly and deeply unlikeable would face quite a challenge ... Conversely, we are not well-trained to like anyone other than the basically virtuous and proficient female protagonist’ (‘Would You Want to Be Friends,’ par.10). Indeed, despite Messud’s Nora

coveting – at times to an unsettling degree – her friend’s family, she is not even the villainess of the piece, her indiscretion apparently being, for a woman, the unseemly articulation of rage and dissatisfaction. Palatability is a significant hurdle in the creation of the unlikeable or antagonistic female protagonist. What, as readers (and I would suggest publishers, too), we are willing to forgive in a male character, we might not be so generous with in a female one.

We are so often asked to align ourselves with protagonists – not just female – who, if not necessarily ‘good’, at least display socially ‘appropriate’ emotions correlating with their misdeeds or have been placed in circumstances that justify their actions (Carroll 174). In the Gothic, when it concerns a female protagonist, this expectation increases. We expect them to be sympathetic characters. Even when fallible to vices such as alcohol, infidelity, and child neglect, their ‘worthiness’ is demarcated by their struggle against oppression. Their ‘victim’ status should make it easier to empathise with them, and, their behaviour appears as a result not of active choices but as inevitable given their circumstances. If not victims, then, they are often heroines whose strength we admire and who, in the end, make the ‘right’ choices or feel the ‘right’ emotions. Eric Leake writes: ‘[t]his easy empathy does important work in helping us relate to characters and, by extension, helping us understand ourselves and our relations to the world’ (175). It affirms our understanding of the world that we are familiar with, despite the horrors that it might contain. As readers we are usually ‘prompted emotionally to embrace the good people as members of the generic “Us;” their opponents belong to “Them”’ (Carroll 176). Leake suggests that there are benefits to engaging with characters who are difficult to empathise with. He writes: ‘If we only empathize with those who reassure us and confirm our sensitivities, then we will be unable to understand through empathy a wider range of human actions, many of which are in particular need of greater understanding and address’ (Leake 184). This is an important point. Characters that disrupt the ‘us’ and ‘them’ divide – or ‘victim’ and

‘villain’ opposition – provide valuable opportunities to reconsider or interrogate accepted notions surrounding power and privilege. This is where the uncanny most often comes in to play, revealing the discord between what we believe to be certain, true or ‘right’, and the reality, fragility or malleability of such beliefs.

Taking my cue from Davison’s essay and its contestation of how the Female Gothic is determined, this exegesis examines three works of fiction that centre on a female anti-heroine: Shirley Jackson’s *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962); Lionel Shriver’s *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2003); and my own creative piece, ‘Irrelevant Bodies’, an original work of Female Gothic. These anti-heroines occupy the position of protagonist and antagonist. Like Victoria and Amy, they challenge the image of the Gothic heroine as passive, virtuous or even heroic through their violence, callousness, selfishness and self-motivation. However, they are not as easily recognisable or defined as their femme fatale counterparts. Not one of these characters, strictly speaking, takes up the position of the traditional Gothic villain/ess who is often depicted and defined as a ‘depraved’, devilish, sexually voracious subject (Davison, ‘Knickers in a Twist’ 37).

These novels have been selected because the protagonists are not opposites of the traditional heroine, but corruptions. Through close readings of each text I contend that these characters unsettle boundaries between ‘good’ and ‘bad’, victim and villain, ‘us’ and ‘them’. By drawing on elements of the heroine or ‘good’ protagonist the authors encourage reader identification, creating an unsettling space when the choices made, or the motivations, feelings and actions exhibited by an individual character, fall into the realms of the morally ambiguous.

In Jackson’s *Merricat* we are confronted by the isolated virgin-orphan. Shriver’s *Eva* is a woman alienated by motherhood. My own character, Vera, is a damaged individual, haunted by tragedy. In line with the parameters of the Female Gothic, each character is confronted with a crisis of/perceived threat to identity that she must resolve.

This requires the heroine to ‘navigate between examples society has constructed of acceptable womanhood and their own inner life’ (Fleenor 12). Each individual crisis triggers within these anti-heroines deplorable, often violent, acts to resolve the struggle: Merricat is a mass-murderess who manipulates her sister in order to maintain her ‘castle’ and fulfil her desire for solitude and freedom from society’s expectations connected to women, marriage and property; Eva’s fear and resentment of motherhood translates into the victimisation of her firstborn child; and Vera responds to unresolved childhood trauma with cruelty and violence, hurting those close to her in adulthood.

The anti-heroine’s journey is not an appropriation of the Male Gothic narrative or ‘role reversal’. Rather the protagonists in these works cross gender boundaries as they flirt with two traditions of Gothic writing: that of the Female ‘madwoman in the attic’, and the Male Gothic premise of the alienated individual in conflict with authority. Like her other more virtuous manifestations, this heroine is still subject to the power structures which surround her, but, unlike them, she provides alternative ways of perceiving these ‘obstacles’ and navigating the world around her. Her struggles reveal the fluidity and tenuous nature of classifications hero/heroine, victim/villain and explore, at the same time, how the power dynamic between individuals can shift and change depending on context. Each of these characters emphasises the ‘unpalatable and even repugnant qualities that are present in everyone’ (Bracher 55) – men and women – and, because they are female, they speak what is considered to be the unspeakable, in a language of violence, hate and anger (Russell 1; Seal and O’Neill 42; Sjoberg and Gentry 1-2).

Chapter One

‘Miss Wickedness’: Shirley Jackson’s Charming Mass-Murderess, Merricat

The world is a dangerous, violent place, but it is possible to exclude those elements from the home, and to keep women “innocent” of them.’ (Ellis, *The Contested Castle* 8)

Long before Flynn’s now infamous femme fatale, Amazing Amy, surfaced as a force to be reckoned with, Shirley Jackson’s Mary Katherine Blackwood – or Merricat, as she is referred to by her sister – was dispatching relatives and enemies whilst barely leaving the comforts of home. *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*’s (1962) peculiarly endearing mass-murderess obliterates the image of women as ‘domestic angels’ who provide a safe and moral haven for the family. At the age of twelve, Merricat poisons her father, mother, aunt, uncle, and younger brother in their home, Blackwood Manor. Although her Uncle Julian escapes death, albeit severely maimed, the others die painfully following the consumption of blackberries covered in arsenic-laced sugar served for dessert. Referred to in her day as ‘the “Virginia Werewolf of séance-fiction writers”’ (Hyman ix), Jackson was one of the most well-known female authors of the 1950s and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* is considered her most accomplished work (Friedman 135; Lethem viii; Showalter 409). At the time, it was a best-seller and critical success, nominated for the *National Book Award* and included on both the *Times*’ and the *New York Times Book Review*’s ‘Best’ lists of 1962 (Friedman 135; Hattenhauer 195).

Surprisingly, the novel attracted little critical attention until the past two decades (Lethem vii; Showalter 409). Recent reprints may have stimulated a renewed, if modest, interest, with prominent writers including Neil Gaiman, Jonathan Lethem, Joyce Carol Oates and Donna Tartt providing essays and endorsements for the latest editions, praising it as a Gothic masterpiece and marvelling at its relative obscurity. Lethem writes: '[Jackson's] most famous works – "The Lottery" and *The Haunting of Hill House* – are more famous than her name' (vii). And whilst *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* shares with 'The Lottery' the theme of small-town persecution, it has been 'less-celebrated' (vii).

The novel's omission from such consideration is perhaps connected to the perception that Jackson's writing was apolitical, revolving around 'domestic' affairs – as it does – and that her portrayals of women opposed the affirming role models sought by second-wave feminism (Friedan 50; Hague 76; Hattenhauer 192; Lethem vii; Nardacci 15). Michael L. Nardacci observes: 'one gets the feeling that the subject of Women's Liberation would have meant nothing to her' (15). As a murderess without a cause, Merricat certainly may have been considered a less than ideal portrayal of a female character for her times.

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, feminist critics have taken a new interest in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* recognising it as a 'perfectly constructed' example of the Female Gothic (Carpenter; Downey; Murphy; Rubenstein; Showalter 409). Lynette Carpenter, for example, argues that Jackson's narrative is 'her most radical statement on the causes and consequences of female victimization and alienation' at the hands of patriarchy (200): 'Merricat and Constance are seen as witches because they choose to live outside the boundaries of patriarchal society, because they choose to live with women rather than with men, and because they have challenged masculine power directly by poisoning' (204). Dara Downey suggests that the novel is a 'response to the problematic relationship between women and domestic space in mid-

century America' (295). Like Carpenter, Downey draws on the plurality of 'women' in her argument, arguing that in this context it refigures 'the Gothic house as a refuge, a site of control and safety for women rather than of exposure and imprisonment' (298). Yet, as Hattenhauer writes: Merricat is 'one of [Jackson's] few young female protagonists who are less victims than victimizers' (175).

On a superficial level, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* certainly does adhere to the tenets of the traditional Female Gothic formula. It centres on two seemingly vulnerable, orphaned sisters living in isolation on their father's ancestral estate. Merricat – eighteen-years-old and on the cusp of womanhood – at first appears to be the victim of her older sister's crime of six years earlier. Jackson initially leads the reader to believe that it was Constance who, on the night of the murder, served and abstained from the arsenic-laced sugar, and was ultimately acquitted of murder on the basis of insufficient evidence. As her younger sister, Merricat shares the mentally unstable Constance's fate: a life of suspicion, condemnation and alienation from an outside world which alternately fears, despises, and is intrigued by the mysterious Blackwood sisters. When their odious Cousin Charles appears in pursuit of the lovely – but apparently psychotic – Constance and, more alluring still, her fortune, Merricat fears a return to the overbearing rule of her father, of whom Charles is reminiscent in both appearance and nature. As Roberta Rubenstein comments: 'No wonder Merricat feels compelled to do all within her power to restore the security of her "castle" and to expel the man who threatens its idealized maternal order' (141). In this light, Merricat presents as the conventional Gothic heroine, battling with alienation, persecution and the patriarchy.

What makes *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* significant is that it is an exemplary example of the Gothic heroine-as-victim motif derailed. Jackson upsets expectations surrounding the conventional Female Gothic formula through the construction of her decidedly *unconventional* Gothic heroine and the relationship

between the two sisters. Rather than centring on Constance, who displays many of the characteristics aligned with Gothic heroines – beauty, fragility, selflessness, passivity – the ‘wicked’ sister is brought to the forefront. Merricat takes advantage of Constance’s trusting nature, manipulating and subordinating her older sibling. The narrator’s deeds – at times malevolent and always calculated – drive the action of the novel and her charming, but alarmingly warped, perspective frames it.

In this respect the novel is more ambiguous about its gender alliances than most feminist readings imply. Certainly the central character is female, and certainly the narrative revolves around Merricat’s struggle to secure herself in a world where as a ‘middle child who was neither a useful daughter nor a male heir’ she was ‘invisible’ (Carpenter 202-203). But it is this very ‘invisibility’ that allows her to commit the atrocity she does and *self*-preservation which drives her to do it. This becomes evident when the reader realises that Merricat has committed the crime she has allowed her sister to be accused of. Later, despite the threat Charles poses and his statement that he ‘was the cause of it all’ (143) – ‘it all’ being, he presumes, the fire, the death of Uncle Julian, and the sisters’ self-imposed ostracism at the end of the novel – ultimately it is another who is responsible for the series of events that culminate in the sisters’ rejection of wider society: Merricat. Her manipulation of events and subordination of Constance allows her to obtain the solitude she has always desired through retaining her castle.

From the outset, Jackson reveals an unusual narrator whose perspective unsettlingly intertwines violence and whimsy:

My name is Mary Katherine Blackwood. I am eighteen years old, and I live with my sister Constance. I have often thought that with any luck at all I could have been born a werewolf, because the two middle fingers on both my hands are the same length, but I have had to be content with what I had. I dislike washing myself, and dogs, and noise. I like my sister Constance,

and Richard Plantagenet, and *Amanita phalloides*, the death-cup mushroom.

Everyone else in my family is dead. (1)

Uncommonly morbid, Merricat's wish to have been 'born a werewolf', her professed affinity for Richard Plantagenet and the death-cup mushroom, and her dislike of bathing are at odds with normal romantic and aesthetic preoccupations of a girl her age. She eschews romantic love and any interest in her appearance. Descriptions of her person are limited to her dirtiness or untidiness: "Wash your face, Merricat," Constance said gently. "And comb your hair; we do not want you untidy at table" (98). Merricat mocks or is angered by those who entertain romantic desires and pursuits. When Helen Clarke visits, encouraging Constance in such matters – 'It's spring, you're young, you're lovely, you have a right to be happy. Come back into the world' (27) – Merricat is chilled (27). She imagines Helen Clarke set 'high in the hard branches of a tree in a dress of flimsy pink ruffles that caught and pulled and tore; she was tangled in the tree and screaming and I almost laughed' (29).

In contrast to the societal ideal of marriage and a family, Merricat prefers to imagine living in solitude in her imaginary house on 'the moon', a place she escapes to in her mind whenever she feels uncomfortable or threatened: 'I am living on the moon, I told myself, I have a little house all by myself on the moon' (14). She is depicted as liking nothing better than roaming the grounds of Blackwood Manor alone with her cat Jonas marking out its 'secret ways' (19), stealing away to her 'hiding places' (53) and listening to Jonas' stories (53). The feline aspect of her name befits her nature: independent, playful, cruel.

Jackson accords Merricat the ultimate subjective position, that of first-person narrator, providing the reader with direct access to the thoughts and desires of her young protagonist. In this respect, the reader is exposed to a character who is unequivocally remorseless regarding her past behaviour and motivated by a grandiose sense of

entitlement, echoing the privileged sentiments of her mother and father. Her affection for Richard Plantagenet calls to mind the 3rd Duke of York's rebellion and usurpation of Henry VI.

Merricat's father, constructed through Uncle Julian's reminiscences and the character of Cousin Charles whom it is said resembles him (57), is shown to be not only someone who liked to exact punishment, but 'a man very fond of his person' (78). Merricat recounts how her father referred to the villagers as 'trash' (10), a sentiment she enthusiastically supports: 'The blight on the village never came from the Blackwoods; the villagers belonged here and the village was the only proper place for them' (6). Mrs Blackwood, one garners, was particularly snobbish and determined to keep people she considered 'common' separate – even out of sight (18). Merricat recalls: 'Our mother disliked the sight of anyone who wanted to walking past our front door, and when our father brought her to live in the Blackwood house, one of the first things he had to do was close off the path and fence in the entire Blackwood property' (18). Mrs Blackwood extends such judgements to objects and places, even those built by her husband. Of the summerhouse he intended for his wife, Merricat tells how something had 'made it bad' and nothing could persuade her mother to go there: 'and where our mother did not go, no one else went' (94-95). Mr Blackwood is often noted for being forceful and authoritative – 'A redoubtable patriarch' (Carpenter 200) – and Mrs Blackwood appears to have been just as influential.

Merricat overthrows her parents' rule but continues their legacy when she exhibits the behaviours of both: the need to exact punishment and her propensity for designating what is 'good' or 'bad'. Symbolically, in a macabre mix of a child playing dress-up and a warrior enjoying the spoils of war, Merricat dresses herself in the garments of her victims: 'on Thursday, which was my most powerful day, I went into the big attic and dressed in their clothes' (41).

Merricat's tone and concerns here are more childish than her age would suggest.

Jackson further accentuates this childishness through the character's propensity for framing her life in terms of a fairy-tale or fantasy. The world is divided into 'good' and 'evil' and only she can determine which is truly which. Merricat and Constance are, in her view, the 'good' ones: 'I thought Constance was a fairy princess' and 'the most precious person in my world, always' (20). She positions herself as Constance's protector, emphasised through her weekly duties which involve securing and maintaining the world in which they live: the Blackwood Estate. This includes patrolling the grounds and checking safeguards – trinkets, jewels, money – that Merricat has buried or placed around the boundaries to protect them (41), as well as her visits into the village for supplies.

Merricat approaches these shopping trips as if they are part of a children's board game 'where the board is marked into little spaces and each player moves according to a throw of the dice', hoping to avoid dangers and get 'home' safely (4-5). The 'dangers' she fears are the people of the village. Perceived by Merricat as other-worldly and wicked, village men, women *and* children are all a source of danger. As she says of the children, 'I was afraid that they might touch me and the mothers would come at me like a flock of taloned hawks' (7). Jackson heightens this impression by depicting the men, women and children of the village as an irrational, malevolent mob in the climactic scene of the fire. Cousin Charles, too, is recognised as being a danger and has the distinction of being 'the first one who ever got inside' Blackwood Manor without permission once Merricat had taken control (57). Merricat refers to him as a 'ghost', a 'demon' and 'evil' (61, 70, 92), an entity to be wary of and ultimately defeated.

As the narrative progresses, Jackson reveals her narrator's *own* propensity for antagonism and violence. During a trip to the grocery store, Merricat provocatively recites a shopping list consisting of items from the fateful dinner, gleefully finalising it with the infamous ingredient: 'and sugar; we are very low on sugar' (8). Met with an unpleasant response from the villagers, Merricat fantasizes: 'I would have liked to come

into the grocery some morning and see them all, even the Elberts and the children, lying there crying with the pain and dying. I would help myself to groceries' (9). Callously, she freely admits: 'I was never sorry when I had thoughts like this; I only wished they would come true' (9). That she is fully aware of the effect her list has had on the villagers is evident: 'I should not have said it, I knew, and a little gasp went around the store like a scream. I could make them run like rabbits, I thought, if I said to them what I really wanted to' (8). Merricat displays the same wicked glee when she recites the toxicity, signs and symptoms of ingesting the death-cup mushroom to Cousin Charles when he threatens to punish her (72). Constance laughingly chides her younger sister 'Oh Merricat ... you are silly' (73). In contrast, Charles is unnerved, demanding Merricat 'stop that' and reproaching Constance, 'I don't think that's very funny' (73). Merricat's fantasies and petulance are not dissimilar to that of a young child and Constance reacts to them as such (Cavallaro 161). Juxtaposed with the odious behaviour of Charles and the villagers, Jackson encourages readers to take their cue from Constance's motherly response and treat Merricat with the same humour one would a child.

Jackson's reference to moving across a board is reminiscent of another precocious young lady: Alice making her way across the chessboard in Looking-glass Land. This connection draws on Victorian notions of the child being associated with 'innocence, simplicity and lack of worldly experience' (Cavallaro 135). By framing Merricat in this manner, Jackson creates the impression that she is much younger – and therefore more vulnerable – than her eighteen years. The absence of physical descriptions and the lack of concern about her appearance and any sexual or romantic inclinations, removes her further from womanhood. Thus the character embodies two of 'the Gothic family's favourite victims': women and children (Cavallaro 142). This strategy has the potential to work on two levels: it creates ambiguity around the

protagonist's position as her sister's oppressor; and encourages sympathy in the reader (and Constance) for her plight.

But Merricat is not 'childlike' in the 'romantic' sense, a concept relating to the child symbolising 'goodness' and 'innocence' (Bruhm and Hurley xiii; Cavallaro 150). Instead, she reflects a much more sinister association with childhood: 'the figure of the aggressive, sadistic, cannibalistic infantile ego' (Cavallaro 160). Drawing on the theories of psychoanalyst Melanie Klein, Dani Cavallaro suggests 'that children initially unaware of their separateness from other people and objects, gradually develop the concept of difference by splitting entities into "good" parts seen as supportive of the ego and "bad" parts seen to threaten the self's unity' (160). Through Merricat's eyes the 'ordinary' world and its occupants are rendered perverse and menacing. It is not only the reader who is given this perception from the narrator, but Constance herself is shown to have adopted Merricat's view of the outside world. As her sister's only connection to the this world, Merricat is able to assure Constance that it is a dangerous place and she 'wouldn't like it' (19). Like the looking-glass through which 'Lewis Carroll's Alice moves ... into a paraxial realm', her deviant perspective acts as a lens which distorts and deforms what is considered 'normal' (Jackson, *Literature of Subversion* 44). The reader is invited into an uncomfortable space where violence and discrimination are justified through the rhetoric of the 'civilised' and 'uncivilised', the 'good' and the 'bad', in order to maintain the sanctity of the home and the self. And, just as Constance does, we may find ourselves complicit in the charming murderess' actions, seduced by her narration.

Despite the 'dangers' presented by the outside world, Merricat's 'jest' regarding the death-cup mushroom presents no empty threat. In spite of her physical restrictions – gender and age – the reader learns, though it is perhaps already obvious, that as the real poisoner, she has already managed to exert power through violence. This is suggested from the outset when she says: 'I have often thought that with any luck at all I could

have been born a werewolf, because the two middle fingers on both my hands are the same length, *but I have had to be content with what I had*' (my emphasis 1).

Poison is often thought of as 'a woman's weapon' due to the perception that women, unlike men, have a natural 'distaste for violence' (Hallissy xii) and that it provides a 'gentler' means of murder. Jackson contradicts this notion through the descriptions of people dying in Merricat's fantasies, and the figure of Uncle Julian. Chillingly, towards the end of the novel, Merricat says to Constance 'I am going to put death in all their food and *watch them die*' (my emphasis 110). Constance responds: 'The way you did before?' (110). This interaction not only removes any doubt concerning who the real culprit is, and whether or not Constance was aware, but also that Merricat's fantasies are based on reality: she is aware of the agony suffered by her victims, having been witness to it.

The only survivor of the poisoning, Uncle Julian, acts as a link to the past and a testament to the violent nature of the crime. This is conveyed verbally and through his mental and physical disintegration. Consumed by the need to remember and make meaning of the events of that fateful day – at least a meaning that suits his sensibility, one where Constance is innocent and the only other suspect, Merricat, is dead – Uncle Julian constantly discusses his memoirs and memories on the subject. He authoritatively tells the visiting Mrs Wright: 'I assure you the pangs were fearful; you say you have never tasted arsenic? It is not agreeable. I am extremely sorry for all of them. I myself lingered on in great pain for several days' (37). Thus Jackson removes any misconception of this being a 'gentle' method of murder (Hallissy xii). Instead of brute strength and the ability to transform her appearance as a werewolf, Merricat had to be content with poison and maintaining the illusion of innocence that her youth, gender, whiteness and class suggest.

Throughout the novel, Merricat is never considered by the other characters as the potential 'homicidal maniac'. Oates writes: 'Why no one seems to suspect – as the

reader does, immediately – that the unstable Merricat, not the amiable Constance, is the poisoner is one of the curiosities of the novel’ (par. 12). In Merricat’s case, it is only the reader that has complete access to the narrator’s instability. On the surface she appears to the other characters as simply a young girl: odd, naughty, perhaps, but not malevolent. Berenice Murphy observes that in an earlier novel, *The Sundial* (1958), Jackson presents a similar crime as an anecdote (119). Harriet Stuart, fifteen years old, murders her family with a hammer. As was the case with Merricat, ‘[t]hey couldn’t prove it on her, see, because no one knew *why* she did it’ and ‘no jury in their right minds could see her sitting there, quiet and sad and looking like any young kid, and really *believe* she did it’ (Jackson, *Sundial* 71).

These sentiments are echoed in relation to Constance. Uncle Julian and Helen Clarke refuse to believe Constance capable of the act regardless of the evidence that she was at least complicit in sealing the fate of her family members by discarding evidence and withholding medical treatment (37). Mrs Wright, an amateur aficionado on the subject, also has difficulty reconciling the crime with her host. Initially adamant that Constance is the culprit (37), she confesses: ‘I cannot seem to remember that that pretty young girl is actually...a homicidal maniac’ (38). This appears to be Jackson’s point in regards to both Merricat and Constance: we expect a murderer to fulfil certain criteria; we rely on them to look and behave a certain way. That these perceptions have a gendered lens, is, perhaps, reflected in the repeated observation of the people who try to get a glimpse of Constance: ‘Doesn’t *look* like a murderess, does she?’ (55). But what do we expect a murderess to look and behave like?

The recent film *Stoker* (2013) offers a heroine reminiscent of Merricat. An odd, sheltered adolescent on the cusp of womanhood, India is shown masturbating following her first exposure to murder: her uncle’s brutal killing of a boy who attempts to rape her. Female sexuality and violence are here intimately entwined. By the end of the film, under her psychotic uncle’s tutelage, India has made the transition from sensible

brogues and piano practice into stilettos and murder: a femme fatale, the internal and external reflect one another. Merricat never makes this sexual transition since Jackson does not use sexuality as a strategic tool or implicate it as a driving desire for her character. Instead, Merricat occupies a liminal space, combining the sexual purity of the traditional Gothic heroine and the ruthlessness/violence of the femme fatale (Fleenor 12). Whilst Merricat performs the function of the femme fatale in that she disrupts the romantic narrative between Charles and Constance, it is not as a rival for Charles' affections. Rather she needs Constance's nurturing and approval. An asexual and amoral figure, the narrator rejects 'the institutions of the traditional family, heterosexuality, and reproduction' (Fedtke 139).

Nor does Jackson offer the reader the relief of a reason for Merricat's mass murder of her family, a decision that sharpens the character's amorality. Lenemaja Friedman suggests that Merricat's status as 'the black sheep of the family' made her 'the target of abuse' (141). But despite access to the character's interiority, the only 'abuse' and motivation for the crime one can ascertain from the text is that she was sent to bed without dinner as punishment for being a 'wicked, disobedient child' (34). Given the character's propensity for citing wrongdoings against her person, we must presume that this is the totality of the grievance that has triggered such a drastic and violent response. Discomfortingly, then, Merricat's crime appears to have been prompted by a narcissistic whim as opposed to what we might consider a 'normal' reason for such behaviour. Such a deviation from the norm is not only unsettling but potentially alienating for a reader. And yet we are seduced by Jackson's construction, responding to Merricat's childlikeness and the threatening nature of her enemies: Charles and the villagers. We want to see Merricat succeed.

Merricat's narcissism and deviant morality is further emphasised when Charles threatens to punish her. This triggers Merricat's memory of previous 'wrongs' done to her. She says: "Punish me? You mean send me to bed without my dinner?" (94). The

altercation between the two characters prompts a psychotic episode in the neglected summerhouse. Merricat envisions her family, including her murdered relatives, pledging their allegiance and affirming her actions, past and present, and self-perception: “Mary Katherine must never be punished. Must never be sent to bed without her dinner. Mary Katherine will never allow herself to do anything inviting punishment.” “Our beloved, our dearest Mary Katherine must be guarded and cherished...Bow all your heads to our adored Mary Katherine” (95-96). In this scene both Constance and their deceased brother, Thomas, are ordered to serve their deluded and power-hungry sister (95).

Although Merricat’s illusions and reactive behaviour lend themselves to descriptions of ‘madness’, she avoids the traditional ‘mad woman in the attic’ appellation because she does not display the self-destructive behaviour that has come to be associated with Western literary depictions of ‘female insanity’ (Anderson 57; Massé 1). Such portrayals reveal women who lack control over their minds and/or lives (Anderson 59) as epitomised, for example, in the haunting classic, Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892). Sarah Anderson observes: ‘Why is it that madmen can appear indistinguishable from sane men, whereas mad women tend toward the other end of the spectrum – dysfunctional, destructive, dangerous’ (57) and ultimately ‘without control over either their lives or their minds’ (59). Even given Merricat’s visions, the actions that follow are purposeful and considered: knocking the burning pipe into the wastebasket cleanses the house of Charles, frames him for the act and causes him to reveal his intentions and character. In direct contrast with notions surrounding women and their role in Western culture as compliant, selfless and nurturing (Hallissy 4; Massé 14), Merricat strives to maintain the world she has created, since usurping her father’s rule, in order to protect her sense of self.

If Jackson had constructed Constance as the murderess this would have been a more reassuring choice. One could surmise that Constance was triggered by her position

in the household following a life of servitude under a domestically inept and manipulative mother and a forceful father. As Uncle Julian reveals: 'We relied upon Constance for various small delicacies which only she could provide' (35). Despite her complicity in the murder, Constance displays the 'appropriate' responses of guilt, remorse and regret, all of which are absent from the narrator. This is evidenced in a comment made to Uncle Julian and overheard by Merricat: 'Sometimes I feel I would give anything to have them all back again' (23). Given the 'fragility' of her nature, articulated through her agoraphobia and passivity, hers can be considered a conventionally 'feminine' form of madness. In such a context, madness is often 'recognised as a motive for transgression' but also "mitigation for having transgressed" (Seal and O'Neill 84).

Given that Constance is included in Merricat's summerhouse delusion, serving and cherishing her younger sibling with the rest of the family, suggests that she is not omitted from threat. Merricat considers Constance subordinate to her will. Jackson makes it clear that Constance's willingness to support Merricat, indulging her younger sibling's 'eccentricities' instead of punishing her, keeps her safe. Merricat may profess love for her sister, but there are hints that this love is not without limits. Charles' presence highlights this. His arrival alters the dynamic between the two sisters. Merricat is aware of the change: 'always before Constance had listened and smiled and only been angry when Jonas and I had been wicked, but now she frowned at me often, as though I somehow looked different to her' (78). Sensing Constance's sympathy shifting, Merricat reminds herself: 'I could not allow myself to be angry, and particularly not angry with Constance, but I wished Charles dead. Constance needed guarding more than ever before and if I became angry and looked aside she might very well be lost' (79). This is ambiguous. We are unsure whether Merricat is suggesting that without due diligence, Constance may be lost to Charles or, alternatively, lost because when Merricat gets angry bad things happen and people die. As she says following Uncle

Julian's death: 'bow your heads to our beloved Mary Katherine, I thought, or you will be dead' (111).

The ending, in which Constance and Merricat are ensconced within the remains of Blackwood Manor, has divided critics. Often it is addressed in terms of whether it is a 'happy' or 'sad' ending. Do we feel sorry for the Blackwood sisters or have they got what they deserved? Hattenhauer views it negatively, writing that '[i]n the end, the sisters become part of the social text of the mad-women in the attic' (182). In contrast, Alexis Shotwell observes that the destruction of the house and a life of isolation 'are small prices to pay to be safe from surveillance and "normal" heterosexual pair-bonds in intact country houses' (132). For the anti-heroine of the narrative, it is undoubtedly the ending she desired. Unlike traditional heroines, a new identity is not desired by this protagonist as she does not deem it necessary. Resolution is enabled once Constance is subordinated and accepts that alienation from society is what will retain integrity of the self – at least for the asocial Merricat. The destruction of Blackwood Manor, with the roof removed by fire-damage, and the witchlike mythology created by the terrified villagers, allows the sisters to establish Merricat's secluded 'house on the moon' (133). Repentant and fearful, the villagers bring offerings of food to placate the sisters, thus allowing them to maintain their hermitage.

But the repercussions conflict with Constance's desires. Although terrified of leaving the Blackwood property, she repeatedly reveals a longing to be part of the world that Merricat detests in her comments about taking steps to return to society (19, 27-28, 39), and later in her receptivity to Charles. Constance's agoraphobia and sense of duty to her sister has restricted her access to these possibilities offering only the greedy Cousin Charles as a potential suitor. She is trapped by her sister's manipulation and her role as carer. Constance's acceptance of her sister's perspective is reflected in her comment at the end following Charles' final attempt to gain access to the sisters: "The

least Charles could have done,” Constance said, considering seriously, “was shoot himself through the head in the driveway”” (146). A comment worthy of Merricat.

Jackson’s charming mass-murderess subverts conventional constructs of both the Gothic heroine and the femme fatale, upsetting expectations about victims and villains. Merricat’s childishness creates a vulnerability that seduces her sister (and potentially the reader), encouraging complicity in her unscrupulous methods for retaining her ‘castle’. Through the lens of Merricat’s deviant but whimsical perspective, her actions (mass-murder) and the absence of guilt and remorse appear less monstrous than Cousin Charles’ and the villagers’ greed and fear, unsettling our moral judgement of what would otherwise be a clear-cut case.

Chapter Two

Monster-making: The Power Relationship between Mother and Child in Lionel

Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin*

[B]y the dim and yellow light of the moon, as it forced its way through the window shutters, I beheld the wretch – the miserable monster whom I had created. (Shelley, *Frankenstein* 59)

Both sexes can do one thing specially well: women can give birth and men can kill.
(Banks, *The Wasp Factory* 118)

Like *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, Lionel Shriver's controversial novel *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2003) is set in the aftermath of a mass murder. Unlike Jackson's anti-heroine, the protagonist of Shriver's character study is not the murderer, but rather mother to one. Female Gothic narratives often reflect the notion that women who become mothers embark on a life of pain, servitude and loss of identity (Davison 211; Fleenor 16, 24; Homans 262). Both Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) and Jill Alexander Essbaum's recent *Hausfrau* (2015) reveal women struggling with the roles of mother and wife, a conflict that for each ends in suicide. In *Rosemary's Baby* the protagonist gives birth to the son of Satan and in Doris Lessing's *The Fifth Child* (1988), the protagonist's fifth pregnancy rewards her with a monstrously wicked son, Ben, whose presence tears the family apart and leaves her alienated. Maligned, martyred and victimised, to be a mother in Female Gothic fiction is an unrewarding and alienating venture. *We Need to Talk about Kevin* explores this view of motherhood, but unsettles it by examining these issues through the lens of a protagonist who defies the

notion that violence and abuse is only the domain of the “mad” or “bad” mother (Shelton et al. 1; Stangle 707).

Told through a series of letters written by Eva to her seemingly estranged husband, Franklin, the narrative is a detailed and damning exposition of her son Kevin’s history. It is quickly revealed that at the age of fifteen with a crossbow as his weapon of choice, Kevin slaughtered nine of his fellow students, a teacher and a cafeteria worker in the school gymnasium. In the novel’s devastating final revelation, Kevin is shown to be responsible for the deaths of his father, Franklin, and sister, Celia, with Eva alone spared. Through the act of confession that the writing provides, the protagonist tries to understand how this tragedy could have taken place and what her role as mother was in the course of the events. Eva’s reflections on the past address from a very personal perspective the nature/nurture question: ‘Maybe it seems unfair, but you really gotta wonder about the parents’ (32). The narrative also explores ‘the return of the repressed’ (Clemens) in Eva’s revelation about her troubling, and at times violent, relationship with her son.

In this context, the novel has provided feminist scholarship with a text that richly lends itself to discussions of contemporary anxieties and social pressures that surround motherhood (Almond; Jeremiah; Latham; Messer; Muller; Robbins; Webb). Winner of the Orange Prize in 2005, *We Need to Talk about Kevin* was commended ‘by the all-female judging panel who agreed the novel was “very courageous” in its depiction of the “worst case scenario” of “motherhood gone wrong” (Latham 141). And indeed, it is. The character’s ambivalence over motherhood, for many critics, marks the novel as a feminist text. Monica Latham observes ‘[t]hrough Eva’s experience, Lionel Shriver dwells on the fears, exasperations and doubts that women and mothers are reluctant to admit. The author smashes a taboo by imagining a narrator who says out loud what women in reality sometimes think but never confess’ (141). Eva’s experience offers an alternative to patriarchal constructs of ‘ideal motherhood’

challenging stereotypes of mothers as self-sacrificing and passive (Muller 52; Robbins 95; Webb 134). Ruth Robbins asserts that the novel ‘offers a corrective vision that modifies [this] cultural ideal’ (95). While Jan Webb suggests that it may be considered a ‘feminist novel’ because it not only ‘rehearses issues explored by feminist writers throughout the twentieth century’ but ‘Eva’s deepest satisfaction comes in equal parts from her professional engagements and from her sexual relationship with Franklin, rather than motherhood and domesticity’ (134). This is certainly true. However, Eva not only ‘voices’ her fears and reservations, but acts on them.

This chapter examines the relationship of ‘power and domination’ that exists in the text between this particular *female* narrator and this particular *male* child (FitzRoy 89). In her work on offending mothers, Lee FitzRoy argues that ‘the view that masculinity is the primary problem has meant that mainstream feminism has been unable to critically engage with the relationships of power and domination that exist between women and their children’ (89). She contends that such a position can lead to the assumption of ‘an essential “truth” about women’s use and abuse of power’ (86) that renders the ‘offender – her intention, ability and choice to “act” – as well as the crime and the victim ... invisible’ (88). Fitzroy writes:

In acknowledging the construction of women within a phallogentric discourse, it is not a difficult step to recognise that women could abuse power in the private realm of the family. In reality, the family may be the primary place where many women can feel both a sense of power and have the opportunity to enact power against an “other” – a child. (89)

The home, the private space, is where women most often commit violent acts against themselves and/or their children (Fitzroy 89; Robbins et al. 565-566; Shelton et al. 13; Stangle 706). Shelton et al. suggest that female violence is seen as unfeminine’ and

shameful in contrast to ‘male aggression’ which ‘is often encouraged, accepted, and/or condoned’ thus males are less likely ‘to hide their aggressive impulses and many of their acts of violence are committed in public (13).

Although not a conventionally Gothic novel, the text’s engagement with abuse of power within the home and a seemingly monstrous child whose final act of retaliation is so extreme the narrator finds herself at a loss as to how to refer to it (14), *We Need to Talk about Kevin* readily lends itself to a Gothic reading. Robbins writes: ‘[t]his could, after all, be a horror story because we are reading about bad parenting, bad mothering particularly, and thus it could be a tale of family dysfunction rather than one about a monstrous child’ (102). But the ambiguous nature of this specific mother-child relationship places it in the realm of the Gothic. For Shriver only constructs Eva as behaving ‘badly’ to her son and not her daughter thus simultaneously complicating accusations of both ‘bad mothering’ and ‘monstrous children’.

Shriver offers the reader a complex protagonist full of contradictions. For instance, seemingly progressive, her attitude towards her husband is somewhat conservative: ‘Sometimes I would hear you call my name from around a corner – “Ee-VA!” – often irascible, curt, demanding, calling me to heel because I was yours, like a *dog*, Franklin! But I was yours and I didn’t resent it and I wanted you to make that claim’ (24). Educated, independent, successful, intelligent, witty and loving, Eva is also judgemental, insecure, vain and cold. Vivienne Muller asserts that because of her negative personality traits, ‘Eva runs the risk of being, and in many instances is, an unlikeable narrator – one that many reviewers have quite happily found guilty of bad mothering’ (39). But it is not only what Eva *says*, or her ambivalence towards her son and motherhood, but what she *does* to Kevin that makes the novel and its protagonist unsettling. Eva’s frank and cutting narration reveals not only apathy but violence and emotional abuse against her firstborn, particularly when he is a small child.

Through the confessional nature of the epistolary narrative, the authority that the narrator's intelligence and success lends to the narrative, coupled with Eva's, at times, brutal self-criticism, Shriver creates a sense that the reader is engaging with a reliable/rational narrator – or as 'reliable' as one can be – and that what is offered about Kevin is the 'truth'. Eva asserts that 'the last thing I've wanted is to whitewash my own part in this terrible story' (84). She is 'determined to accept due responsibility for every wayward thought, every petulance, every selfish moment, not in order to gather all the blame to myself but to admit *this* is my fault and *that* is my fault but *there, there*, precisely *there* is where I draw a line and on the other side, *that, that*, Franklin, *that is not*' (84). And yet, even here, Eva's language downplays her past actions. After all, 'wayward thoughts', 'petulance' and 'selfish moments' seem, in retrospect, an extraordinarily understated way of referring to the verbal abuse and physical violence she directs at the child in question.

Gothic narratives such as *Frankenstein* (1818) and Iain Banks' *The Wasp Factory* (1984) depict male 'monster-makers' that trap their progeny in the stories they create for them. Doctor Frankenstein's immediate revulsion and abandonment of his creation condemns the 'monster' to a life of alienation, loneliness and resentment that results in murderous revenge. Banks' violent protagonist Frank – or as it is finally revealed to the reader and character, Frances – is the result of a gender manipulation experiment conducted by his/her father. Following an early attack by the family dog, Frances is brought up to believe that she is a castrated male. As a consequence of this belief, and influenced by his/her father's misogyny, 'Frank' forges an identity of overt masculinity to overcompensate for what he lacks: 'I believe that I decided if I could never become a man, I – the unmanned – would out-man those around me, and so I became the killer' (242-243).

We Need to Talk about Kevin's 'monster-maker' is female and in her account, Eva rarely allows her son to be viewed as a 'victim' or even a 'child', her narration

rendering him ‘invisible’ in this context. As she, herself, states: ‘I was on record assuming the opposition when Kevin was seven weeks old’ (113). Shriver reveals that power is asserted not only through her protagonist’s actions, but also through her voice. Latham observes that although there are a ‘multiplicity of tones of voice which transpire from Eva’s letters’, ultimately the reader is ‘faced with one account’ that is ‘all controlled by the unreliable first-person narrator’ (134). Shriver signals the narrator’s awareness of the power her position grants her: ‘I intend to take ruthless advantage of the fact that this is my account, to whose perspective you have no choice but to submit’ (270).

As founder of a series of budget travel guides – *A Wing and a Prayer* – Eva is a successful and wealthy entrepreneur and the main income earner in her family. In stark contrast, Eva’s mother is the apparent opposite to her daughter. An Armenian immigrant who survived the 1915 genocide of her people, and has borne the tragedy of losing her husband in the Second World War, Eva’s mother is a Gothic figure confined to her house by agoraphobia. Neurotic and fearful, Eva tells us, her mother ‘sees chaos biting at her doorstep, while the rest of us inhabit a fabricated playscape whose benevolence is a collective delusion’ (59). In this respect, Eva’s mother acts as a living spectre who haunts the protagonist and motivates her to succeed where she feels her mother has failed. Not understanding her mother’s position, she rejects and ridicules her mother to her friends and Franklin revealing through this her fear of becoming ‘imprisoned’ or ‘inheriting’ the role of ‘mother’ in the same capacity (Davison, ‘Monstrous Regiments’ 211).

Eva prides herself on her independence and competence, and fears the effect that becoming a mother will have on her hard-earned sense of identity: ‘I wasn’t only afraid of becoming my mother, but *a* mother’ (37). She resents ‘the prospect of becoming hopelessly trapped in someone else’s story’ (37). Pregnancy and Kevin’s birth are framed by the narrator as a form of usurpation and dissolution of identity. Eva states: ‘I

couldn't shake the sensation of having been appropriated' (73). She compares the experience to Gothic-horror and science fiction films: 'Ever notice how many films portray pregnancy as infestation, as colonization by stealth?' (69).

In spite of her apprehensions, Eva also considers herself 'exceptional' (92). In the narrator's mind (pre-Kevin, at least), motherhood is another 'foreign country' to be traversed and conquered which as a successful, 'enlightened' individual she should be capable of (22, 127). Shriver reveals through her narrator's reflections on motherhood and her desire to achieve and control in this area that in part, Eva is a victim of her own hubris, a theme commonly associated with the Male Gothic.

Through the birth of her son Kevin, Eva is confronted with her limitations and vanities and consequently the disintegration of the identity established before motherhood began. Shriver exacerbates this confrontation by constructing the child as the mother's double. Kevin reflects those attributes Eva is sensitive about: my 'closed, stony nature, my own selfishness and lack of generosity, the thick, tarry powers of my own resentment' (37). Just as Eva feared, the infant appears to have begun usurping her identity: 'Kevin's features were unusually sharp for a baby, while my own still displayed that rounded Marlo Thomas incredulity, as if he had leeches my very shrewdness in utero' (105).

Whilst the narrator reveals her inherent fear about losing control of her identity, Shriver simultaneously shows Eva subjecting her first-born to the same treatment. Because the narrative is told in retrospect, framed early on by Eva's partial revelation of the events on that 'Thursday', the reader can only view Kevin as the child destined to become a killer. Like Jackson, Shriver begins the narrative by introducing Eva in the aftermath of the crime. Unlike the Blackwood sisters' idyllic domestic space, Eva's home is a prisonlike abode, a duplex with temperamental heating, a precarious stairway, floors that creak and windows that leak. It is a suffocating Gothic space that reflects the 'very quality of barely hanging on' (5). Furthermore, we are informed that she has

chosen to stay in Gladstone because ‘I felt I should stay within driving distance of Kevin’ and for as much as ‘I crave anonymity, it’s not that I want my neighbors to forget who I am; I want to, and that is not an opportunity any town affords’ (4-5). And her neighbours certainly have not forgotten. The mother of one of Kevin’s victims smashes her eggs in the supermarket (4) and, when she was still living in the ‘family home’, vandals splashed crimson paint over the front porch (8). Eva is portrayed as being physically and psychologically imprisoned by her son’s actions: ‘I wake up with what he did every morning and I go to bed with it every night. It is my shabby substitute for a husband’ (15).

Eva’s selection of episodes in Kevin’s life and her observations of him create a sinister figure. At birth, he is presented as abnormal both in appearance and temperament: his features are ‘unusually sharp for a baby’ (105), and his ‘disgruntled’ expression and ‘inert’ body are interpreted by Eva ‘as a lack of enthusiasm’ (96). She imbues the newborn with an aura of cunning and agency, constructing Kevin as something other than a child. Eva says: ‘To me he was never “the baby.” He was a singular, unusually cunning individual who had arrived to stay with us and just happened to be very small’ (103). Kevin’s crying is read by Eva as a manipulative tool deliberately turned on for her with ‘precocious force’ and only relieved when Franklin returns home (105). Although she admits he would ‘sometimes fuss a little like a *normal* baby’ until fed or changed in Franklin’s presence (106), once he was alone again with his mother, ‘he hurled his voice like a weapon’ driven by an ‘infinitely renewable fuel of *outrage*’ (106). On his third birthday he disassembles his cake: ‘spreading its whole body apart in a single surgical motion...He had ripped its heart out’ (138). She describes the execution of an otherwise benign act in violent, clinical terms. A litany of vindictive incidents are relayed: Kevin ruins Eva’s ‘special’ wallpaper with ink and a water pistol (185); entices a girl with chronic eczema to scratch her inflamed skin (218); and tampers with a boy’s bike (242-243). Shriver plays

with the evil child narrative as her narrator frames her son's behaviour and motives as being malevolent even though many of 'the stories from his early childhood' on closer consideration 'are very mild' (Shriver, 'Shriver in Interview' par. 8). As combative as their relationship appears, Eva states: 'It's not as if we fought all the time. To the contrary, though, it's the fights I remember; funny how the nature of a normal day is the first memory to fade' (222). There is also a significant portion of Kevin's childhood that is absent from Eva's account. She admits: 'while I can remember how we spent every one of Celia's birthdays during those years, my memories of Kevin from the age of eight to about fourteen tend to blur' (277).

Shriver counterbalances Kevin's behaviour with that of Eva's. Whilst professing that she has 'no end of failings as a mother' she insists 'I have always followed the rules' (46). But even the 'rules' that Eva claims to follow or maintain are often broken or bent by the narrator, subconsciously or otherwise. For instance Eva professes: 'I would never reveal to anyone on earth that childbirth had left me unmoved' (98). And yet, whilst she never directly tells another adult, she lets the child know through her words and actions. At one point she taunts Kevin as he cries in his playpen: 'Mummy was happy before widdle Kevin came awong, you know that, don't you? ... Mummy's life sucks now, doesn't Mummy's life suck? Do you know there are some days that Mummy would rather be dead?' (125). Overheard by Franklin, Eva dismisses this tirade as 'kidding around' and 'blowing off steam' (125).

Eva not only oversteps the 'rules' verbally, she also does it physically. Her most violent articulation of frustration and anger directed at her son occurs when she throws her six-year-old across a room into a stainless steel changing table, breaking his arm. Shriver's depiction of the incident is unsettling for several reasons: the extremity of such violence towards a small child; the language used by the narrator to simultaneously indicate an admission of guilt and justify the act; and the potential derived in Shriver's

considered approach to the incident of eliciting in the reader the same contrasting feelings of horror and satisfaction as the narrator.

Prior to the event, the narrator has primed the reader with a series of misdemeanours: the breaking of a little girl's tea set (212); Kevin's ambivalence over Eva's painstakingly crafted storybooks (214); the eczema incident; the embarrassment caused by Kevin's refusal to be toilet-trained and insistence on wearing nappies (223-224); and, finally, a personal slight made by the child about his mother looking 'rilly old' (229). Eva's frustration is palpable. At this point, she begs Franklin – and the reader – 'to understand just how hard I'd been trying to be a good mother' (231). Whilst acknowledging that 'trying to be a good mother may be as distant from being a good mother as trying to have a good time is from truly having one' (231), Eva offers the reader the excuse that the violence allowed her to feel 'like Kevin Khatchadourian's real mother' (232). She says: 'I felt close to him. I felt like myself – my true, unexpurgated self – and I felt we were finally communicating' (232). Disturbingly, Eva states: 'It isn't very nice to admit, but domestic violence has its uses' (232).

This scene reflects the power of the narrator's position. Indeed this incident in the novel has instigated some uncomfortable responses from critics. Muller asks: 'Does she cross a line here as many say she has? Can this one act of physical violence have turned Kevin into a "violence-prone individual"?' (46). Suzanne Heagy concedes: '[t]hrowing a six-year-old child across the room is not acceptable discipline in anyone's book' (159). But she also suggests: 'Eva's problem is that her six-year-old son owns all of the weapons' (159) because '[c]ulture locates few, if any, instances where violence against a child, even those born to become school shooters, is sanctioned' (160). The incident and Eva's accountability are not considered in the context of an adult caregiver and a child, but a 'rational' character that has been pushed to 'the brink of human endurance' by her son and the monster he is 'born to become' (Heagy 159). The 'child' is forgotten and only the 'monster/mass murderer' remains.

Shriver anticipates these attitudes, reflecting them in the response of her narrator to the situation. Overriding her concern for Kevin is Eva's worry about having 'to submit to mortifying monthly visits from some disapproving social worker' (233). As she waits for her son to finish with the doctor, she concocts alternative scenarios: '*Oh, doctor, you know how boys exaggerate. Throw him? He was running headlong down the hall*' (233). Boys, children, lie, exaggerate. A professional, educated, white woman does not. Or at least this is the scenario Eva plans to exploit.

Shriver offers a vision of the alternative scenario in the character of Loretta Greenleaf, the 'black mother' whose son is in the same juvenile facility, Claverack, as Kevin. Loretta commiserates with Eva over the blame placed on mothers for their children's actions: 'It's always the mother's fault, ain't it? ... That boy turn out bad cause his mama a drunk, or a she a junkie. She let him run wild, she don't teach him right from wrong. She never home when he came back from school. Nobody ever say his daddy a drunk, or his daddy not home after school' (195). From the language and examples used, Shriver intimates not only a disparity in race, but class. Loretta's description is a long way from the experience of Eva who has had the advantages of money, education, and – despite their faults – a stable relationship and home. Her mothering only becomes subject to such scrutiny when her son does 'something bad' enough to make him, and her, visible in the eyes of the law (192). Both the hospital and Franklin unquestioningly accept the story offered by Kevin and his mother: 'Mommer went to get more wipes. I fell off the changing table' (235).

Shriver mirrors the hospital scene later in the text. While Kevin, at age fourteen, is left alone to mind Celia, an accident occurs whereby Liquid-Plumr, a caustic drain cleaner, ends up in her eye. But how it does is never fully resolved. The reader is not privy to the actual event, alienated as we are from Kevin and Celia. Thus Shriver creates ambiguity around the incident: did Celia do it herself, as Franklin suggests, because

‘kids are not only dumb but creative and the combination is death’ (342), or did something more sinister occur? Is Kevin the culprit as Eva suspects?

These suspicions are aroused because the scene is potentially familiar. We know what can happen within the privacy of the home between a child and carer. The reader is encouraged to believe that Kevin did do it, because we *know* that Eva broke her son’s arm and avoided taking responsibility. Yet the horror is enhanced for the victim in the second instance because she has been framed as an innocent.

Indeed Shriver engages with the script of ‘male villainy and female victimhood’ through Eva’s relationships with and attitudes towards her children. Through Eva, Celia is depicted as an innocent and Kevin’s opposite. Kevin is dark and cunning; Celia is blonde, ‘tentative, bashful’ (265). Even Eva’s experience of Celia’s birth is portrayed as completely different from Kevin’s: ‘In Kevin, the note was the shrill high pitch of a rape whistle, the color was a pulsing, aortal red, and the feeling was fury’ (260). Of Celia’s birth she says: ‘her aural color was light blue ... As for the ascendant emotion that exuded from this blind creature ... it was *gratitude*’ (260). Jane Messer argues, ‘[u]ntil Celia’s birth and her pleasure in her daughter, she is profoundly aware of how “unnatural” mothering feels to her, questioning whether she is not, after all, a “freak”’ (16).

But Shriver does not offer easy answers, not for her protagonist or her readers. Instead, she creates further ambiguity around the Kevin/Eva dynamic. It is not simply Celia’s birth and Celia’s nature that are different from that of Kevin’s, but also Eva’s attitude towards the arrival of her second child. This time Eva *wants* the baby, not just to prove her own capabilities and tackle a new challenge, but for the company of the child. She is, she admits, ‘lonely’ (242). Despite Franklin’s consternation – ‘Eva, what gives you the idea that even if you do have this fantasy daughter everything’s going to be different?’ (245) – she falls pregnant without his knowledge (252). In contrast to the fear, paranoia and resentment during her first pregnancy, Eva is elated (252). Instead of

feeling usurped, she feels 'less lonely' (259). This difference is noted by both the narrator and her son: 'pre-broken-arm Mommer had not made a reappearance: the brisk, rather formal woman who marched through the paces of motherhood like a soldier on parade. No, this Mommer purred about her duties like a bubbling brook' (253). Celia is wanted and welcomed by the narrator.

Even pre-motherhood, and in spite of her own relationship with her mother, Eva admits to being allured by 'tempting little imaginative packages like movie previews' that involved a girl not a boy: 'I confess I always imagined a daughter' (28). Eva confesses: 'when Dr Rhinestein pointed out the blip between the legs, my heart sank' (73). She admits: 'if I enjoyed the company of men ... I wasn't at all sure about *boys*' (74). Speaking to 'women' the narrator states: 'any woman who passes a clump of testosterone-drunk punks without picking up the pace, without avoiding the eye contact that might connote challenge or invitation, without sighing inwardly with relief by the following block, is a *zoological* fool. A boy is a dangerous animal' (74). From this, it is implied that boys are equivalent to animals – unreasonable, irrational, dangerous – and Eva's suspicion of her son is warranted. She would, after all, be 'a *zoological* fool' not to treat him with caution. And our narrator is no fool.

In contrast, Eva considers Celia a born victim: her 'girlishness' is expressed 'in a larger weakness, dependency and trust' (267). And although Eva is presented as a strong, independent woman, in her mind Celia's life is mapped out with unrequited love and emotional abuse by lovers (330). Not only does the arrival of Celia problematize the notion that Eva is not 'maternal', but reveals her to be vulnerable to the very gender biases she suspects Franklin of.

Regarding *Frankenstein*, Karen F. Stein observes: 'Much of the force of this brilliant work lies in the shift of the reader's sympathy from the scientist to the monster' particularly through the embedded narrative in which the monster is given a voice (127). As unsettling as the position might be for the reader, *The Wasp Factory* is told

entirely from the ‘monster’s’ perspective ultimately rendering the scientist/father a less sympathetic character than his murderous offspring. In *We Need to Talk about Kevin* Shriver grants her female narrator the role of ‘monster-maker’, but denies the child/monster a ‘voice’.

Although we are never allowed into Kevin’s world directly, Shriver admits small glimpses through Eva of the ‘child’ as opposed to the ‘monster’. Significantly, the moments recalled are those when he affirms Eva in her role as mother. The first is when Kevin contracts meningitis at the age of ten. During this period, Eva is shocked to find her son ‘a completely different person’ (279). She observes: ‘Call it rage or resentment, it was only a matter of degree. But underneath the levels of fury, I was astonished to discover, lay a carpet of despair. He wasn’t mad. He was sad’ (280). Kevin *is* a different person, revealing himself in this time as vulnerable, compliant, grateful and affectionate. The apathy he has sustained for so long dissipates and ‘little islands of shy desire began to emerge’ as to Eva’s – and the reader’s – surprise he requests favourite foods (clam chowder and *katah*), company (that of his mother and sister, but not father), toys (a stuffed gorilla) and stories (chillingly, given the nature of the mass murder, *Robin Hood*) (281).

The second instance is at the end of the narrative just before Kevin’s eighteenth birthday when he will be moved to Sing Sing prison. Eva notes: ‘Three days from adulthood, Kevin is finally starting to act like a little boy – confused, bereft’ (462). When they part he clings to her ‘childishly, as he never had in childhood proper’ (465). She says: ‘I’m not quite sure ... but I like to think that he choked, “I’m sorry”’ (465). Again, Shriver challenges our perception of the portrait drawn of the callous killer, encouraging us to consider the complexity of this mother/son relationship.

Shriver also reveals Kevin’s awareness of his mother’s dislike for him, even when he is a small child (205, 258). For instance upon hearing that he will soon have a little brother or sister to play with, he asks: ‘What if I don’t like it?’ When told by Eva

that he will ‘get used to it’, Kevin responds: ‘Just cause you get used to something doesn’t mean you like it ... You’re used to me’ (258). Post-Thursday, on one of Eva’s visits to Claverack, Kevin asks his mother why she kept the maps on the wall that as a child he spoilt with ink. She responds: ‘I kept them up for my sanity ... I needed to see something you’d done to me, to reach out and touch it. To prove that your malice wasn’t all in my head’ (205). Kevin’s response is most telling: ““Yeah,” he said, tickling the scar on his arm again. “Know what you mean?”” (205). Through these interactions, Shriver reveals an alternate interpretation of events to the narrator’s depiction. The voice of the ‘child’ is allowed through.

Despite the assertion that Shriver’s narrator ‘breaks the taboo of motherhood gone wrong and talks about it truthfully’ (Latham 130), this ‘truth’ is tainted, coming, as it does, from a woman who has suffered grave losses. Through the relationship between Eva and Kevin, Shriver reveals the contextual and shifting nature of power. Although, like the narrator, we struggle to see Kevin as anything but the killer he becomes, delineations of ‘victim and villain’ are inadequate when discussing the complex relationship between these characters. With the theme of ‘accountability’ running through the novel – the narrator’s personal gripe, and one later echoed by her son – Shriver invites dissection of both Kevin and Eva and their actions and motives: ‘Look, one of the things about this country I really can’t stand? It’s the lack of accountability. Everything wrong with an American’s life is somebody else’s fault’ (325).

To view Eva as the villain of the narrative is to dilute the heinous nature of Kevin’s actions and devalue the lives of his victims by placing blame on the mother. To consider Kevin simply as a villain or monster is to ignore the literally voiceless child and dismiss Shriver’s careful construction of a complex female character who, when confronted with her limitations, resentments and vanities through the form of her firstborn, exacts a revenge only acknowledged at the end of the narrative: ‘As that infant

squirmed on my breast, from which he shrank in such distaste, I spurned him in return – he may have been a fifteenth my size, but it seemed fair at the time’ (467).

Shriver unsettles us with a heroine who subverts the notion only ‘mad’, damaged or persecuted women in the Female Gothic act out in violent and deviant ways. Educated, successful and self-reflective, Eva’s professional façade lends the narrator a certain authority. Fluctuating between guilt, remorse, anger and rejection of responsibility throughout the narrative Shriver’s heroine exhibits many of the ‘appropriate’ emotions given the circumstances. Her unsettling ‘honesty’ and rational tone regarding her feelings/or lack thereof towards her firstborn may potentially repel the reader but it also contributes to a perceived authenticity of her account. This creates an ambiguous/disturbing space where as readers we may find ourselves supporting the persecution of a child.

Chapter Three

Self-Harm and Callous Behaviour in 'Irrelevant Bodies'

Wrapping my black coat round me like my own sweet shadow, I unscrewed the bottle of pills and started taking them swiftly ... The silence drew off, baring the pebbles and shells and all the tatty wreckage of my life. Then, at the rim of vision, it gathered itself, and in one sweeping tide, rushed me to sleep. (Plath, *The Bell Jar* 142)

'Irrelevant Bodies' is a Gothic novel that examines the impact of a traumatic event and its repercussions on the identity and behaviour of the protagonist, Vera. The previous chapter of this exegesis discussed how Shriver's narrator blurred the boundaries between victim and villain, initially acting as a perpetrator of abuse and then falling victim to the violence of her victimised son. In loose parallel, 'Irrelevant Bodies' charts the protagonist's progression from child victim to adult villain as Vera's behaviour in the narrative becomes increasingly callous and vindictive. Like Merricat in Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, her actions are destructive and even, at times, malevolent: Vera is guilty of infidelity, lying, coercion, physical assault, and, ultimately, murder. Like Eva, Vera suffers from traits that lend themselves to distinctions of 'unlikeability': she is self-absorbed, critical, calculating, morally ambivalent and lacking in introspection. As such, 'Irrelevant Bodies' combines the horrific actions of Merricat and the caustic personality of Eva, making Vera a character difficult to empathise with. In this way Vera offers an alternative to the self-destructive patterns exhibited by heroines in the Female Gothic, challenging the notion that victims of traumatic upbringings/experiences are easy to sympathise/empathise with (Leake 178) and behave in ways that are determined by gender.

In the first draft of the novel, this was not the case. Vera's domineering mother, an emotionally absent father and an early romance ending in tragedy had shaped the protagonist into a fairly standard Gothic heroine: neurotic, passive, self-loathing and sensitive. As a result of my critical and literary reading, I realised that 'Irrelevant Bodies' was a conventional Gothic work in terms of gender construction. Indeed, the character of Oswald was also closely aligned with the traditional Gothic male villain. The relationship between Vera and Oswald reflected that of the victimised woman persecuted by a male figure.

This dynamic was exemplified in the original draft when, prior to his demise, Oswald forced himself on Vera while she was recovering from a migraine. This rape scene emphasised his abusive nature. In this context, the reader was encouraged to view Oswald's death as retributive and liberating for the central character. Vera's role in Oswald's death was also portrayed as unintentional. Instead of hearing and actively refusing to respond to his cries of help as she does in the final draft, Vera left the water under the assumption that Oswald had already returned to shore. The roles of victim and villain were clearly delineated.

In subsequent drafts, many of the original elements remained, including the domineering mother, the emotionally absent father and the early romantic tragedy. What changed significantly was the construction of my protagonist and her response to past traumas and her present circumstances. Vera had altered and developed in unsettling ways. I realised that while she was strong-willed, intelligent, resourceful and even at times humorous, she was also manipulative, insecure, arrogant, self-centred, and cruel.

Initially, I had approached the narrative as the dissolution of Vera's present-day relationship. However, whilst the novel remains framed by Vera and Oswald's 'romantic' relationship, it is no longer the main focus. This separates it from recent Gothic contributions depicting female anti-heroines such as *Gone Girl*, *The Silent Wife* (2013) and *Fates and Furies* (2015). These novels focus on the shared (albeit disturbed)

lives of heterosexual married couples and accord equal consideration to the perspectives of the male partners, which 'Irrelevant Bodies' does not.

Rather, it is Vera's story that is at the centre, and her reflections on the relationships (romantic and familial, male and female) and events that have influenced her changing perception of herself, as she develops from child into adult. These shifting perspectives are examined by Vera in the context of her relationship with Oswald, but unlike the original draft, her response and attitude to her circumstances and past wrongs, is aggressive and entitled. Instead of internalising her guilt and shame as she had previously, Vera acts out, violently and callously. She rejects responsibility and places blame elsewhere, either on those who have hurt her or those who are the direct recipient of her actions.

For instance, Vera originally ended her affair with Enoch because she was overwhelmed with guilt and the fear that he would leave her for someone younger. In the final draft, guilt is absent and, instead, indifference and the fear of having her life complicated if the affair is discovered drive her to terminate the relationship. Not only is this change demonstrated in her attitude towards Enoch, it is also visible in her actions. When he attempts to establish greater intimacy by sharing his own traumatic experiences, Vera strikes him, interpreting this as an attempt to 'trump' her story: 'I don't want to hear about your trauma ... We're talking about me. Not you. It's always a competition, isn't it?' (196).

Despite being subjected to circumstances and events that warrant and potentially elicit sympathy in a reader, Vera is not an 'object of pity' (Leake 180). In this respect Vera shares much with Patricia Highsmith's Tom Ripley. Highsmith presents the reader with the destitute, orphaned and alienated Ripley. Because of Highsmith's use of the limited third-person perspective, thus denying us access to the character's every thought, '[w]hen we first meet Tom Ripley ... we do not suspect that he is a serial killer in the making' (Koehn 63). But neither is Ripley what one would call a 'likeable'

character, even from the beginning. A paranoid, self-pitying, petty criminal, he appears to those he meets as genial enough, but the reader is aware of his neediness and insecurity when he ingratiated himself with Dickie Greenleaf, coveting his friend's wealth and self-assuredness. Kern suggests that what drives Ripley to murder Dickie is not just the threat of 'financial ruin' when his friend tries to sever contact, 'but more importantly loss of identity' (321). Ripley's alienation, his feelings of worthlessness and his disturbed sense of identity translate into a sense of entitlement that culminates in violence. 'Irrelevant Bodies' similarly explores perceived threats to identity, with murder offering – at least from Vera's perspective – an opportunity to reinvent herself and gain control of her life. Ultimately, it is a narrative about a woman's violent assertion of the self.

As a writer who has always been drawn to darkly humorous, morally reprehensible characters – Lou Ford in Jim Thompson's *The Killer Inside Me*, Alex in Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange*, and Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho* – Vera appealed to me. Yet at the same time I also began to feel uneasy and strangely ashamed of my creation. She was so unpleasant. Surely she must have a good reason for being this way? Had I given her one? Should I give her one? Could I have a character, particularly a female one, whose malicious actions are unjustifiable or disproportionate to her circumstances? Or, alternatively, had I given her too much of an 'excuse' for her bad behaviour?

On the subject of female wickedness and the lack thereof in fiction, Gillian Flynn asserts that 'we demand stories about violent, terrible women ... be rendered palatable' with 'somber asides on postpartum depression or a story about the Man Who Made Her Do It' (na). My research showed that in Gothic fiction the 'violent, terrible' *male* protagonist whose behaviour appears to occur in a vacuum is also rare. In *Wuthering Heights* Heathcliff is an orphan and outcast, an object of cruelty for his adoptive-brother; in *The Killer Inside Me* (1952), Lou's nanny sexually abuses him

when he is a young boy; Ripley is an orphan brought up by his emotionally and physically abusive aunt; in *Psycho* (1959), Norman Bates suffers from schizophrenia and is the product of an overbearing mother; and in *Hannibal Rising* (2006) it is finally revealed that the infamous Dr Hannibal Lecter's reign of terror stems from traumatic childhood events when he witnessed the cannibalisation of his younger sister.

Childhood traumas, in these instances, produce dysfunctional adults. In Kern's view: 'Ever since Freud, psychologists, criminologists, and novelists have been unable to resist the temptation to explain adult behavior, especially pathological or criminal behavior, as a result of some simple and visualizable cause from deep in an individual's past' (107).

As reductive as Kern's statement appears, research shows that childhood is a particularly vulnerable and impressionable time when traumatic victimisation can severely impact on emotional, social, biological and psychological development and well-being (Ford et al. 13; Kerig and Becker 181). Patricia K. Kerig and Stephen P. Becker state: 'A wealth of research attests to the significant role that childhood abuse and neglect play in the development of criminal and antisocial behavior' (181).

According to Julian Ford et al. '[w]hen a child's self-respect and sense of control is stripped away – especially if this is done on purpose by a trusted person – this is traumatic victimization' (17). In 'the research on criminal and antisocial behaviour (CAB)' forms of abuse identified, were: 'physical abuse ... sexual abuse ... psychological or emotional abuse ... neglect ... exposure to domestic violence ... and exploitation' by which a child may be burdened 'with demands beyond his or her developmental capacities' (Kerig and Becker 181-182). When abuse or neglect is instigated by a 'caregiver' this is termed 'betrayal trauma', victims of which often 'demonstrate the most negative outcomes' (182).

Novels such as David Ballantyne's *Sydney Bridge Upside Down* (1968), Thomas Tryon's *The Other* (1971) and Patrick McCabe's *The Butcher's Boy* (1992) demonstrate

this transition. In these essentially ‘coming of age’ narratives about boys who become killers, each of the young male protagonists is exposed to events beyond his control during childhood and betrayed by a beloved relative. Harry Baird is abandoned by his mother who rejects her family for her lover, Mr Dalloway. Niles’ psychotic twin brother, Holland, accidentally dies while torturing a cat. Francis Brady grows up exposed to his alcoholic and abusive father, his mentally fragile mother and the social stigma associated with their low economic status, mental illness and overt domestic violence. Furthermore, he is molested by a priest when sent to an ‘industrial school’ as a disciplinary measure and blamed by his father for his mother’s eventual suicide. Like Merricat in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, Harry, Niles and Francis all respond to their circumstances by retreating into fantasy worlds that violently engage with reality.

In the case of young girls, experts in psychopathology and criminology have noted the limited representations and understanding of the connection between what has been termed ‘callous unemotional traits’ (CU) and traumatic victimization in women (Belknap and Holsinger; Ford et.al; Kerig and Becker; Lanctôt and Le Blanc; White, Gordon and Guerra). Belknap and Holsinger state: ‘it is interesting and somewhat disturbing ... how little attention the child-abuse-victim-to-offender link has received and how [this kind of research] has often focused on boys’ (4). This gender discrepancy has been noted as recently as 2015 in Kerig and Becker’s overview of research carried out on the significance of childhood abuse and neglect as risk factors ‘in the development of criminal and antisocial behaviour (CAB)’ (192, 181).

Research has revealed subtle differences in the behaviours of males and females that may explain the under-representation. Kerig and Becker suggest that ‘CAB in girls may take a more covert form, such as relational aggression, which does not lead to legal sanctions and the identification of misbehaving girls as “antisocial”’ (192). They propose that a focus on ‘other outcomes than overtly criminal behaviour may be more relevant’ (192). These include ‘perpetration of violence against intimate partners ... or

other forms of impulse under-control, such as those implicated in self-harming behaviour and borderline personality traits' (192). Ford et al. write: 'Suppression of aggression may interfere with a girl's development of assertive social competence ... potentially leading to both "internalized" problems with anxiety, depression, or eating disorders and "acting out" in the form of hostility, rage, and extreme violence' (22).

In Gothic literature, internalised self-harming behaviour has been overwhelmingly represented as a 'normal' or common *female* response to abuse, oppression and alienation giving rise to the masochistic heroine (Fleenor 11-12,15; Masse 1; Meyers 60). Thus, representations of violent or 'callous-unemotional traits' (Kerig and Becker 193) in female characters, even in response to abuse, are often perceived as 'abnormal' or uncommon even when they would be perceived as 'normal' or acceptable responses in a male character (Gay 88). In 'Irrelevant Bodies' Vera experiences "'internalized" problems' such as anxiety and depression and these are represented in language that reflects her feeling as if she is 'nothing' (114) or has been dismissed (123). But she also 'acts out', expressing her suppressed rage and grief through violence and hostility directed at others.

In *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, Jackson offers little in the way of a back story to explain her heroine's psychotic behaviour. Shriver offers small insights into Eva's character when Eva discusses growing up fatherless with an agoraphobic mother. However, the focus in *We Need to Talk about Kevin* is on the mother-son relationship and how this may have impacted on the male character's development into a mass-murderer. In contrast the narrative progression of 'Irrelevant Bodies' is more squarely centred on the forces that lead the protagonist to commit murder. The shame connected with Vera's traumatic experiences in childhood is expressed through violent and manipulative behaviour in adulthood as the character is unable to process and transcend her negative emotions. Suspended between past and present, Vera occupies a liminal space between victim and perpetrator, although she can only view herself as the former.

To reflect this transition, 'Irrelevant Bodies' interweaves Vera's disturbed and disturbing 'coming of age' storyline with her present-day adult one: fragments depicting Vera's past are interspersed between the core or present-day narrative. The core or linear narrative on which the novel hinges is that of Vera and Oswald's holiday at the farmhouse of Vera's childhood vacations. The farmhouse is the site where Vera's suspension between childhood and adulthood comes to an impasse. Fantasy and reality converge as reflected in the figure of the child that appears when Vera and Oswald arrive and in Oswald's death. The uncanny figure of the child is both strange and familiar (27) representing Vera's ambivalence to her relationship with Gary and his suicide.

Past events are written in the present tense to convey the sense that Vera's connection to them is raw and unresolved. The past is as alive and pertinent to her identity as her present life is, if not more so. These moments detail significant relationships in Vera's life: with Annie, her father (referred to only as Father), her sister (Emmeline), Oswald (earlier periods in the relationship), Enoch (the young man she is having an affair with), and, most significantly, her friend Gary. Not necessarily presented in a linear fashion, these fragments are often evoked by something that has occurred in the present-day narrative between Vera and Oswald at the farmhouse, thus reflecting how her identity and sense of self is keenly tied to and influenced by the past.

Playing with the conventions surrounding the Female Gothic, I introduced Vera to the reader in an enclosed space (the car) with a man controlling her movements (Oswald's act of turning on the child-lock) heading to an isolated location (the farmhouse on Yorke Peninsula) thus encouraging the reader to assume she is to be a Gothic heroine in a conventional sense: a victimised woman triumphing over male/patriarchal persecution. Or, as the novel itself suggests at one point, the narrative may lead to a tragic ending for the protagonist: 'Perhaps, to keep it interesting someone

needs to go mad, someone needs to off themselves, some tragedy should befall someone? Think Virginia Woolf. Think Sylvia Plath. Think Gothic heroine' (140).

Oswald's construction, too, remains linked to the stereotypical Gothic male enhancing this notion. No longer the malicious brute of his earliest incarnation, he is still selfish, unfaithful and controlling. Obliquely referencing his infidelities (109), Oswald nevertheless warns Vera, 'I'm not good at sharing' (156). On several occasions his physicality is emphasised in threatening ways: when Vera does not comply with his suggestion of sex Oswald grabs her by the arm, holding tight, only to then release her without further altercation (76); when they are at Innes National park and Oswald punches her on the arm with a 'hit that was playfully hard' (89); and when Vera tells him of her abortion through the story of her 'shoebox baby', he 'squeeze[s] her knee' hard, warning her 'I love you ... But no more games' (169).

At times, Vera even purports to be fearful of him. For instance when she decides to go to the beach without him, the reader is told: 'Vera felt tight, tense, her body filled with anticipation. A little fear. But fear from what, she was not sure' (45). But the real cause of fear is the effect his presence will have on her enjoyment of the beach (46). Vera has, after all, already indicated that he is a 'taint on her otherwise perfect memory of the place' (24).

Told from the limited third-person perspective, Oswald is entirely constructed through Vera's perception, which, of course, reveals as much about her as it does about him. This is particularly evident in the ways in which their sexual, emotional and physical indiscretions are differently framed. Following the section that describes Vera's 'escape' to the beach and 'fear' of being caught, the narrative shifts to Vera's first discovery of Oswald's unfaithfulness, two years into their relationship. This section changes from third to second-person point of view, separating it from the rest of the narrative and inviting the reader to share Vera's experiences, her betrayal, directly: 'it is a thing that you can't even bear to think of in terms of "I", so that when you think of it,

it is only in terms of “you”, as if you are slowly and gently explaining it all to a small child’ (52). I chose to construct this moment in this manner to enhance sympathy for Vera early on in the narrative and alienate the reader further from Oswald.

The framing of Vera’s own affair contrasts significantly with that of Oswald’s. When the topic of his unfaithfulness is first introduced the reader is informed that Vera also ‘has secrets but she is careful with them. Vera is a diligent secret-keeper. Enoch is a secret’ (25). Enoch is Emmeline’s young student friend to whom Vera is introduced at a party in Oswald’s absence. As the reader discovers, it is Vera who initiates the affair, offering him her number, which she justifies under the pretence that it is ‘to help him out with that story’ he is working on and nothing to do with his physical appearance which is reminiscent of Gary (26). The act of kissing him is described as an unavoidable compulsion created by his presence: ‘She has to. With skin that soft and inviting, Vera has to touch’ (35). While she considers Oswald responsible for his infidelities, in the case of her own, she transfers blame onto Enoch, the object of her desire revealing her lack of self-reflection and refusal to take responsibility for her actions.

Part of Enoch’s attraction is that he reminds Vera of Gary. Initially it is purely a physical connection with particular reference to ‘that lip’ (26, 35, 79), but she continues the affair because of the impact it has on her perception of herself. The relationship is entirely self-serving. Young and beautiful, Enoch flatters her fragile ego, but because of his submissiveness she is the one in control, unlike her relationship with Gary.

At the beginning of the relationship Vera nicknames Enoch ‘Boy’ (78) and initially it is constructed as a term of endearment. But the name is also used patronisingly. For instance when Enoch asks her to imagine for ‘fun’ what having a baby together would be like, Vera thinks: ‘For fun? But for fun is all that you are, Boy’ (68). As this particular narrative strand continues, Vera’s objectification of, and behaviour towards, Enoch becomes increasingly callous. When Enoch expresses his desire that their relationship become more serious, Vera starts to feel threatened,

examining him coldly and surmising: ‘He’s like a doll. A pretty, porcelain doll’ whose skull she ‘longs to rap her knuckles against ... just to see, just to check, if he’s hollow’ (105). These insights highlight Vera’s inability to move on from Gary and her anger and resentment connected with that relationship and its outcome.

Due to the stigma attached to female sexuality, particularly when it results in teen pregnancy, and abortion, Annie takes Vera for the procedure and then forbids her to discuss the matter with anyone else, including her father and Gary. Research suggests that difficulty coping with an abortion is strongly linked to the control one feels they have over the decision and the support they receive throughout the process (Needle and Walker 143). In *Abortion Counselling*, practitioners Rachel Needle and Lenore Walker identify a series of factors that increase a woman’s vulnerability to problems associated with the procedure (143). These include: ‘Feeling extreme guilt, shame or loss’; ‘[f]eeling pressured into having an abortion for someone else’s benefit (usually male partner or parent)’; and ‘[f]eeling no emotional support from her male partner or parent if they know about the pregnancy and having little or no support from any other friend or family member’ (143). Vera’s experience reflects these factors.

Not only is Vera forbidden to speak about her experience with anyone else, but Annie refuses to discuss or acknowledge her daughter’s feelings surrounding it: ‘Some things are best forgotten because we can’t do anything to change them. Let sleeping dogs lie, as they say ... It’s just, people wouldn’t understand’ (154). Even in adulthood, the topic remains taboo between mother and daughter. This is demonstrated in a scene near the beginning of the novel when Annie asks Vera about when she plans on having children (28-29). Vera is incredulous over her mother’s tactlessness, but neither mentions the abortion.

Other reactions in the narrative to Vera’s pregnancy and abortion cement the notion that she has been guilty of a shameful act and the responsibility for it and the outcome fall on her. This is most acutely articulated through the ‘anonymous’ letter.

The author – who, given the religious connotations, it is implied is either Sue or Rod – places the blame solely on Vera (184-185). The initial effect this has on Vera is to ‘contain’ herself (185). Vera’s experience of the abortion and the responses to it detrimentally impact on her ability to manage and understand the event, thus adversely affecting her sense of self-worth.

Instead of sharing and processing her feelings, Vera holds on to them, only to have them emerge later through violence. This is evident verbally when she is with Gary and sees something in one of his notebooks ‘[s]omething useful. Something that coolly and calmly came out of her mouth’ (195) that may or may not have contributed to his decision to commit suicide; or physically, when she pinches her father (171) or punches Enoch (196-197); or through manipulation when she creates the circumstances that result in Oswald’s drowning. Kerig and Becker note that ‘individuals who have been maltreated may cultivate a mask of callousness and withdrawal of empathy as a kind of protective shield against their own painful emotions’ (193). The incident with Oswald reveals her capacity for cognitive, if not affective, empathy as she is able to pre-empt his response to her behaviour and thus manage the situation without incriminating herself (Roszak 151). Vera plays Oswald’s weaknesses for alcohol and sex against him, as she appears to comply with his desires by pretending to drink and then instigating the skinny dip once he is drunk.

Whilst the relationship between Gary and Vera may appear to follow the Female Gothic script of male vice vs female virtue, the narrative reveals that Gary, too, has suffered from traumatic victimisation though in a different form: sexual abuse. Just as there are gendered preconceptions surrounding ‘normal’ or ‘appropriate’ responses to victimisation for women, so, too, are there for men. Boys/men do not always ‘act out’ but may, instead, exhibit more covert behaviours often connected with female sufferers (Ford et al. 22). Male sexual abuse has a particular stigma connected with masculinity that may contribute to the silencing of male victims and how they respond. This is

thought to relate to the perception ‘that being a victim’ in this context is ‘un-masculine’ (Easton 245; Easton, Renner and O’Leary 381), violating ‘many socially sanctioned gender expectations in Western culture which include dominance, winning, heterosexuality, emotional control or stoicism, and pursuit of status’ (Easton 245; Easton, Renner and O’Leary 381). Indeed, sexual abuse in boys has been linked with ‘identity confusion, self-blame, and shame’ (Easton, Renner and O’Leary 381) resulting in depression, suicidal ideation and attempts (382).

Initially, Gary responds to the violation with ‘hypermasculine’ behaviours. Easton, Renner and O’Leary suggest that male victims may ‘adopt a hypermasculine persona’ embracing hegemonic masculine ‘norms such as emotional control or restrictiveness ... risktaking and violence’ to combat feelings of shame and confusion and compensate for the lack of control they have over their own circumstances (382). In the text, this is demonstrated through Gary’s obsessions with violence, death and bodies (73), his promiscuity (120-121) and objectification of women (123). As the narrative progresses he becomes increasingly withdrawn and antisocial, internalising his anger and guilt. This behaviour and his active withdrawal from friends and family results in his further alienation and, unlike Vera, he ultimately directs the violence inwards through body mutilation (149, 175) and by taking his own life (149, 175-176).

Unlike Vera, Gary never speaks about his experience and the abuse is never fully articulated or acknowledged in the narrative. Instead it is hinted at through the children’s storytelling. For instance the tale about Squawky Mohawky features a monstrous man who eats children (57) and another is ‘about a stone boy’ who is chipped away by a man until he shatters (130). In these stories children are preyed on by an adult, a common theme in the narrative. They also indicate the unreliability of Vera’s perspective as her understanding of what happened to Gary invades her memory of their time together pre-knowledge or comprehension of his abuse.

For instance, when Gary tells her the tale of the stone boy and the man who uses a chisel to take '[c]areful little chips that no one could notice, no one could see' (130) the episode is interrupted by the notion that this is an incident that may never have happened: 'This is not right. Gary does not tell this story ... when she tries to hear his voice ... she wonders if she didn't make it up herself' (130). This ambiguity reflects the painful nature of the abuse and Vera's uncertainty surrounding what was happening to her friend. Her understanding is limited by both her age at the time it occurred and Gary's inability to talk about it. But it also alerts the reader that events and people are being conveyed through a skewed perspective.

Indeed, Vera has trouble confronting disturbing or traumatic situations and often resorts to fantasy or play to deal with them. Storytelling and game playing are therefore significant themes/motifs in the novel. The reader learns early on that 'Vera is a storyteller, a game-maker and a game-player' and '[s]he likes nothing better' (39). This is not only a forewarning of her unreliability, but also reveals a strategy that Vera uses to manage her perception of herself and manipulate those around her. As a child she loves to write and create games and stories with Gary and other children. It is a defence against her own social reality: 'Because this is a different world, a different place, where everyone wears a different face, and social hierarchies are forgotten and new ones made, and when it's your game, it's your rules, and you get to say who lives, you get to say who dies' (40).

This preoccupation with story-telling follows Vera into adulthood not only through her desire to write, but also in her day-to-day interactions with the world around her. In regards to her liaison with Enoch, it presents her with opportunities to craft stories explaining her whereabouts which 'give her more joy than the affair itself' (106). Painful events are also managed or communicated in the framework of stories and games. When Vera finally tells Oswald about the abortion she couches it in fantasy, describing a 'shoebox baby' she hid under the bed and brought out at night to read to

(167-169). But Vera's own manipulation and violence are also often framed in this manner. Midway through the narrative and foreshadowing events to come, Vera imagines that Oswald has drowned and begins to fantasize about how 'compliant' and 'sensible' he would be as a corpse (101). For Vera this seems to be a good solution to their conflicting desires. She thinks: 'they would chat about his giving up the band thing and Vera focussing on her writing' (101). In her fantasy the pressures of becoming a mother and working in a conventional sense would dissipate with Oswald's death: she could become the artist.

The fragments focussing on Vera's childhood do not depict her merely as an 'innocent' who is corrupted by the actions of others. Instead they further complicate the portrait developed of the protagonist, hinting that some of her unpleasant traits have always been there, but were perhaps exacerbated by events/circumstances beyond her control. In the text this is emphasised when Annie admonishes Vera for scaring her sister by pretending to be a monster. When Annie tells her to stop, Vera responds: 'I'll try...But sometimes I can't help it' (181). This follows on from the present-day scene in which Vera ignores Oswald's cries for help. This approach was taken to increase the moral ambiguity of the character and notions around victims and ideas of 'innocence'. Instead of revealing her behaviour to be the product of 'some simple and visualizable cause from deep in an individual's past' (Kern 107), I wanted to indicate that the result was more complicated: a combination of personality and events.

The concluding scenes of the narrative play with the notions of madness and alienation that occur at the end of such Gothic murderer-centred narratives as *Sydney Bridge Upside Down*, *The Other*, *American Psycho*, and Kaaron Warren's *Slights* (2009). Such conclusions are often connected with the protagonist's feelings of guilt, remorse or disconnection from society or from their own humanity – particularly in the case of *American Psycho* – because of their inhumane behaviour. Leake suggests: 'to

victimize another is to victimize oneself in a simultaneous denial of one's own humanity' (178).

In 'Irrelevant Bodies' this is depicted by the presence of Oswald and Gary's ghosts. Uncompliant, these spectres represent Vera's guilt over their deaths and follow her on her path back home. But in the final paragraph, Vera insinuates that rather than subject herself to guilt and sorrow she considers Oswald's death to be the chance for the freedom she has longed for. She reassesses her goals and desires: 'she would move in with Emmeline. It was the only sensible thing to do. Emmeline would take care of her, she always did. And Vera would be able to write ... It was no longer the story of Gary and Oswald and Vera. It was now the story of Vera and Emmeline and Marid and New Baby' (202-203). This shift and its connection with freedom is emphasised by the depiction of her physically leaving the farmhouse that links her to the past and moving out into the Australian landscape to continue her journey: 'And with each step she took along the shore ... Vera repeated to herself ... I am coming, Emmy. I am coming' (203). Vera rejects the feelings of shame and guilt, though this time they are warranted, and instead decides to pass them (the spectres/secrets) on to Annie, whom she holds responsible for her decisions and actions.

'Irrelevant Bodies' confronts the reader with a female character, who in many respects is a victim, and yet behaves in a manner we associate with male villainy. My aim was to encourage the reader to consider assumptions about the role of 'victim' and whether it is necessarily a sympathetic position or one that is easy to empathise with. Vera rejects the common female scripts of motherhood and romance and is ultimately driven by her desire to succeed as an artist. Violently asserting her identity in this respect, she offers an alternative portrayal of the damaged female character, just as the character of Gary offers an atypical portrait of the damaged male.

Conclusion

Unsettling Reflections

This much should be clear by now: the Gothic novel offers no conclusions. In its fully developed form it attempts to involve the reader in a special world in whose atmosphere of evil man is presented under trying circumstances. It emphasizes psychological reaction to evil and leads into a tangle of moral ambiguity for which no meaningful answers can be found. (Hume, 'Gothic versus Romantic' 288)

By examining themes and works from the Female and the Male Gothic I have demonstrated that the Female Gothic and the authors who engage in the mode do not restrict themselves to scripts of 'male vice and female virtue' (Meyers 23), though they may exploit reader expectation in this regard. Close readings of the three primary texts reveal character constructions of female protagonists that challenge the notion of the Gothic heroine as being passive or proficient and admirable. If considered on a spectrum of 'good' to 'bad', these characters sit on the murkier end (some more so than others), yet they also defy the boundaries of the traditional antagonistic female foil, the femme fatale. These characters unsettle because they resist dichotomies and moral certainties. We could say that ambiguity is the very core of Gothic; so in complicating the gendered codes of Gothic fiction, these characters capitalise on/heighten the ambiguities that are already a familiar part of the Gothic mode. As Hume writes of the 'villain-hero': we are left 'with great ambiguities; good and evil, love and hate are intertwined until they are inseparable ... We are brought to see the hurts of Ahab and

Heathcliff, to appreciate their complexities, and ultimately to decline judgment on the damage they do to themselves and others' (288). Much is the effect of the anti-heroine.

As I argue in my discussion of *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, Jackson's construction of the murderous Merricat creates the potential to disarm the reader through the character's whimsy and childlike vulnerability. The character challenges the perceptions surrounding female villains as we are confronted with a 'likeable' or charming narrator despite being denied an 'understandable' reason for her actions. Thus we are encouraged to support or sympathise with the malicious endeavours of a character who, if we were only aware of her deeds and motives, we would unequivocally condemn. Merricat is a complicated character who defies easy categorisation as 'bad' or 'mad'.

In contrast, Eva's personality is crafted in such a manner that whilst her responses and actions are reactive rather than calculated, she remains unlikeable. Yet the narrator's brutal 'honesty' and 'reasonable' tone combined with her status as a professional, educated and seemingly progressive adult increases the possibility of the reader's emotional complicity in the acts of violence – emotional, physical, verbal – she directs at her son. We are challenged not only by the notion that 'domestic violence' is not restricted to male perpetrators, but also by the imbalance of power between a child and their caregiver, regardless of gender.

Finally, 'Irrelevant Bodies' unsettles the perception that female and male victims of trauma or abuse will respond in ways specific to gender: that women turn the pain and shame inwards, men inflict it outwards. Through Vera's journey the reader is exposed to the protagonist's transition from victim to villain, one that has often been reflected in Male Gothic narratives. These female 'character studies' offer portraits of deeply flawed subjects, disturbing gender stereotypes and divisions between 'good' and 'bad' women, 'villainous men and virtuous women'; or, from a feminist perspective: 'us' (women) and 'them' (men).

Limited by scale, this study only offers a small cross-section of anti-heroines: white, Western, educated female protagonists. I focussed on such representations, in part, because I viewed them as direct corruptions of the traditional Gothic heroine in Western literature. The two case studies I chose outside of my own were those that were most influential on my own work, but I struggled to narrow down my options. These included, though were not limited to: Fay Weldon's *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* (1983); Elizabeth Jolley's *The Well* (1986), Zoe Heller's *Notes on a Scandal* (2003); Kaaron Warren's *Slights* (2009) and Chloe Hooper's *The Engagement* (2012). Since *Gone Girl* appeared, wicked women narratives have become increasingly popular – though I would suggest of a particular type: the devastatingly beautiful, exceedingly intelligent femme fatale – *Maestra* (2016) being one of the latest additions. If, as Martin suggests, difficult male protagonists have arisen out of 'a cultural landscape still awash in postfeminist dislocation and confusion about exactly what being a man meant' (13), what type of female protagonists might emerge in a cultural landscape that features Donald Trump and the rise of the conservative Right in the West, particularly when those conservative values are being used to shape and contest what being a woman or a member of a minority means? One can only imagine that there will be plenty to interrogate regarding difficult or antagonistic characters as writers and their protagonists react to these political developments.

To end on a personal note, my experience of reading and writing female protagonists whose behaviour exposes them as 'something other than innocent victims' (Russell 2), or actually the complete opposite of this, has been a confronting and guilt-ridden exercise. As a woman who identifies as a feminist, it has, at times, felt like an act of betrayal. This work was driven by the need to challenge myself and my complacency as a writer and a feminist, in particular, to challenge the ways in which I read and write male and female characters. The Female Gothic was the appropriate mode for this examination: firstly because it deals with anxieties and fears associated with female

identity; and secondly due to the assumption that writers and critics working in this field encourage the binary of female victims and male villains. Prior to engaging with this topic, patterns had emerged – unintentionally so – in my own writing that reflected this dichotomy. But it has also been influenced by the arrival of my nephew and my growing awareness of how I speak, or the generalisations I make about ‘men’. As the characters in these texts attest, it is not only women who are vulnerable to being trapped in the language or stories told by men or the patriarchy.

When Moers suggested that the Female Gothic is a ‘complex literary tradition’ in which ‘woman is examined with a woman’s eye: woman as girl, as sister, as mother, as self’, the examination was effected by a critical eye, one not restricted to examining the ways in which women respond to the pressures of patriarchy and not only about fear. Rather, the Female Gothic is a literary genre that has enabled an exploration and articulation of female identity, including women’s *human* flaws. So that the ‘girl, sister, mother, self’ under examination may not necessarily be ‘innocent and blameless’, or even ‘good’ or inspiring. Indeed, she may be petty, ruthless, self-absorbed and violent. She may even be a murderer.

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