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Writing Women's Space: Changing Reflections on Gender and Identity

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Abstract

Woolf challenged her gendered lack of access to spaces through her writing and essays, becoming an important feminist voice who substantiated women's existence and questioned the social construction of identity. Challenging power dynamics that limit access to spaces by creating counter-sites and that press at the borders can produce new ideas and perspectives. Michel Foucault described these transformative spaces as *heterotopias*.

Using the concept of Foucault's heterotopias to explore Woolf's "The Lady in the Looking Glass: A Reflection" (1928) alongside *A Room of One's Own* (2015 [1929]) provides a useful lens for looking at how Woolf manipulated space to transform ways of seeing women and make us look at ourselves. In contemporary environments, social media has become a particularly powerful space for marginalised groups to not only share information and support each other but to imagine new worlds and create movements for change. In heterotopic spaces such as fiction and online environments, we can deconstruct gender binaries, substantiate the existence of marginalised people and choose our own identities. The usefulness of heterotopic spaces and their power to subvert dominant power structures allow marginalised narratives to be heard.

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Introduction

Early twentieth-century modernist writer Virginia Woolf's short story "The Lady in the Looking Glass: A Reflection" is an excellent example of how fiction can disrupt our expectations and change our thinking by reflecting how gender is constructed and performed. Virginia Woolf was a significant figure in literature using her modernist writing style, stream-of-consciousness technique and her unique point of view as a woman as transgressions against masculine dominance in writing. Revealing how women's identities were limited through oppressive societal expectations and control, Woolf wrote subjective perspectives that were at odds with how women were depicted in masculine writing. Woolf produced novels, short stories and essays that inverted the power dynamics that privileged men's stories as interesting and women's stories as irrelevant.

In Part 1 of my thesis "Writing Women's Space: Changing Reflections on Gender and Identity", I explore how Woolf used spaces in "The Lady in the Looking Glass" to create multiple points of view that challenge and disrupt societal norms applied to gender and identity. My research predominantly focuses on British society and literature in Woolf's era, how it oppressed women and denied them access to writing opportunities, how those writing opportunities have transformed over time, and how these concepts are being used in new spaces now. My research incorporates mid-twentieth-century philosopher Michel Foucault's concepts of heterotopias or "other" spaces. Foucault's ideas about how "other" spaces can invert or transform ideas was an interesting lens to retrospectively apply to Woolf's use of spaces in "The Lady in the Looking Glass". Woolf's use of spaces could be defined as heterotopic because they work to reorganise cultural and social norms and invert or transform how women are portrayed in fiction.

This thesis also draws on discussions about gender and patriarchy, which have developed from a feminist focus that sought to free women from oppression into a discourse examining

gender diversity. I found echoes of these issues in Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, where she identifies the need for women to have space to write women's fiction so they are portrayed diversely and can develop their own writing canon. By disrupting gender stereotypes in her fiction, Woolf created opportunities for discussion about accepted gender norms and deviations. In her work, she managed to subvert cultural boundaries that create and restrict identity and reinforce power dynamics in dominant groups.

The "Lady" in the looking glass is not young and beautiful but old and wrinkly, nor do her habits fit neatly with the expectations for women in early twentieth-century Britain. Woolf's desire for writers to be unconscious of gender interested me because it connects to current gender issues, such as the infiltration of pronoun use into mainstream dialogue that recognises more fluid and diverse gender categorisation. I use the term 'unconscious' here in a general way to infer a detachment from gender as signifier which is what I believe Woolf intended and not in the more complex psychoanalytical manner described by Freud, Lacan and Kristeva. Writing that disrupts gender categorisation has continued on a trajectory from Woolf to more contemporary writers such as Ali Smith. In *How to be Both* (2014), Smith writes gender in a way that seeks to be ambiguous, illustrating how gender is not always necessary to signify meaning to identity. Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1999) and Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* were excellent resources for observing the movement between spaces over time, from challenging the oppression of women to challenging categories and definitions of gender. During my research process, I also learned a great deal from writers such as Simone De Beauvoir, Sylvia Plath, Kimberlé Crenshaw and bell hooks about gender identity and intersectionality.

In Part 2, my creative thesis follows Woolf's directive to write women's stories and perspectives. I wrote a novella-length fiction, *Still Life*, which is a space that focuses exclusively on women and their unique experiences. In this fictional space, I attempt to

neutralise the dominance of patriarchy and produce a story that focuses on complex relationships between women by eliminating relationships with men. I intended that the absence of men in the story remains unnoticeable, as this ensures the significance of women's stories. Furthermore, I have chosen neutral titles for all secondary characters, such as police officers, or introduced them as “she” to reflect back to the reader their own social bias if they have imagined those figures to be male. I was inspired to create a space for women and about women which depicted women's thoughts, as I was sick of their identity always being attached to their relationships with men. However, I did not want this manless space to be a stated or obvious element of the fiction because their absence would also play an important role.

As a mother and wife, I wanted a room of my own to indulge in my thoughts away from the pressures of expectation assigned to my gender. Too often in the 26 years I have been an equal shareholder in business with my husband, I have been asked if I “help” him with his business. I have been overlooked by customers and business associates as “other” simply because of my gender. Confronting this invisibility and silencing drove my desire to write a space where women were the focus. This drew me to Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, which was a fascinating and relatable read all these years after it was originally written. I am grateful for figures such as Woolf, who have expanded the spaces I can now access as a woman and how she changed how people think about women.

While writing *Still Life*, I was surprised to find how often a male character crept into my story. Right up to the final proofreading, I found that males had slipped into my fictional spaces. This reflected back to me how I was affected by and enacting the male gaze, which I had read about and commented on in the critical portion of my thesis. Woolf's desire for future writers to be unconscious of gender rang in my mind as I considered how I had unconsciously written men into my fiction about women. In fact, I had to be vigilantly

conscious of gender to create a space for women free of the constraints of a dominant masculine power structure. When I discussed the space I was creating in my fiction with friends and family, there was a surprising and, at times, disconcerting response to the idea that a story would be written without men in it, with some people suggesting that there would need to be men for the story to be realistic. This response reinforced how heterotopic spaces—spaces that are “other” where rules can be inverted—are necessary to enact and exhibit the possibility for women’s stories to be significant in their own right. The concept of heterotopias as other spaces where transformations can occur opened my eyes to how specific spaces can enable otherwise marginalised or invisible people. By writing a fiction that was woman-centric and male-free, I realised how automatically gender is assigned and how easily the patriarchal tendency to construct authority figures as male occurred.

While writing *Still Life*, I found that my experience supporting a person with mental illness became a key part of the fiction. This merged productively with female relationships and their interpersonal challenges. *Still Life* explores multiple perspectives on identity and frames conceptions of mental health from internal and external points of view. By depicting the internal thoughts of characters experiencing poor mental health, and their actions from the point of view of strangers and support people, I show how mental illness affects relationships and how society at large can affect and marginalise mentally ill people. I hope this merging of perspectives will bring mental health issues from the margins into a shared space of social understanding.

I have drawn from my personal experiences as a support person for someone in my immediate family who has experienced poor mental health. Support for people suffering from poor mental health and their families is often ineffective and isolating. While hashtags and fundraising events bring visibility to the cause, it implies a level of personal support and understanding not experienced by those who need it. People who are mentally ill often

become isolated from society, especially when their illness pairs with destructive behaviour deemed socially unacceptable. Isolated and unwell people with poor mental health are marginalised by a society that doesn't understand their behaviour as an illness; however, marginalised people can create space or change spaces from the margins by writing their perspectives. The mental health storyline in my fiction seeks to provide multiple perspectives on the impact of mental illness on people and their families. I faced the delicate issue of depicting mental illness without causing harm. I discussed ways this could occur with people who experienced mental illness and ensured that my depiction felt true to life.

My critical and creative theses develop Woolf's idea that future writing will become "genderless". Although I have not written genderless fiction, I have created space for women's thoughts and ideas, adding to writing about and by women. I have also contributed to Woolf's way of reflecting back to society gender constructing assumptions by making authority figures feminine and allowing the reader to reflect on why this may be at odds with their assumptions. I hope my disruption of gender categorisation in authority figures in *Still Life* will contribute to the acceptance of more fluid gender categorisation by drawing attention to gendered language and how it impacts and marginalises people. Small changes such as referring to "police officers" instead of police "men" create inclusive spaces for all genders. Disconnecting terms like "doctor" from prompting associations with "man" seems more challenging because the connection is more implicit. Through writing these figures in my fiction, making use of implicit associations and disrupting them, I hope to challenge readers to reflect on such automatic stereotyping. My depiction of mental illness as marginalising is also an important story to allow people to explore the depths of what it looks like in real life to suffer from such things. This written narrative could enable people to recognise and understand behaviour outside of "normal" and support rather than marginalise people with mental health issues.

In my critical thesis, “Writing Women’s Space: Changing Reflections on Gender and Identity”, I explored how Woolf used both the space of her fiction and spaces within her fiction to provide multiple perspectives on women. Through her use of the mirror and fiction as a mirror, I found that she was able to frame and reflect that patriarchal society at large was the perpetrator of the construction of women's identity. Reading *A Room of One’s Own* alongside “The Lady in the Looking Glass” illuminated the larger gender vision Woolf had for the future. In my creative piece *Still Life*, I write about women’s lives from multiple perspectives and use Woolf’s ideas about being unconscious of gender to create space for women’s stories and to challenge implicit gendered biases. By ensuring all characters and storylines in my fiction are women, I both focus on women’s lives and allow readers to reflect on their social conditioning when they misgender a character. Will they or won’t they notice the absence of men? I hope not.

Further research on how the internet and social media operate as a heterotopic space that mirrors and distorts reality and has transformational powers would be interesting. The internet provides space where the boundaries of physically embodied and online experiences become blurred by allowing users to create online identities. For example, in an online environment, gender fluidity is even more accessible by allowing users to choose their gender and create alternative identities. Online environments create space for marginalised people to unite, create movements, and share their unique perspectives from the margins. These heterotopic online spaces merge fiction with reality, allowing people to write their own narratives in the online world through a physical device in their physical world. The Me-Too movement is an example of how marginalised and silenced voices were able to invert and transform their position as powerless through the use of heterotopic space, the internet, exposing hidden abuse and building a movement that made huge changes to how women are treated in the workplace. The online world of the internet removed barriers that previously

silenced them and allowed them to impact and make changes in their physically experienced world.

I recognise that my voice as a well-resourced cis white woman is not an important voice in this area. The time I have spent researching this has been a privilege. However, I hope that by entering the discussion on mental health through fiction and writing spaces for women and reflecting on gender, I, in some way, expand the dialogue and decrease the margins in these spaces for all people.

Writing Women's Space: Changing Reflections on Gender and Identity

In the early twentieth century, Virginia Woolf's revolutionary writing style and feminist perspective pushed for space in the patriarchal-dominated world of literature. Using fiction as a counter site, Woolf created spaces where perspectives on how women were perceived could be reframed and reorganised. In her essay *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf explained the critical importance of space and decried the societal limitations enforced on women. She presented the concept that women needed to have both space and money of their own to overcome gender-based oppression that prevented them from establishing a tradition of writing.

Woolf's fiction and essays created what might be called feminist heterotopias, spaces of transformation where she could rewrite and restructure societal rules so that women had more agency than in the *real* spaces they were confined within. Heterotopic spaces become counter-sites where revolutionary and transformative ideas germinate because of the *other* space they create where different perspectives and ways of thinking can occur. They can provide refuge for marginalised people with limited agency in the spaces where they live. Within the *other* spaces (heterotopias) of her fiction and essays, Woolf produced different ways of looking and multiple perspectives of women to subvert and transgress on patriarchal power that limited their identity in fiction and real life. Using these other spaces like feminist heterotopias, allowed Woolf to imagine new worlds for women. In her short story "The Lady in the Looking Glass", spaces create new paradigms that disrupt the male gaze and challenge the idea of "women". By controlling how we see a *lady* and the spaces of her world, Woolf reflects the constructive power of our imaginations and our social and cultural biases in

oppressing women and limiting their identity. In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf imagined women writing in a space where they could be unconscious of sex, so the construct of “woman” was no longer an identity-limiting factor. “Sex” was commonly used in the 1920s to describe identity, but the more common term since the 1980s is “gender”. I will refer to Woolf’s claim about “sex” as “gender” because gender identity politics have evolved since the early twentieth century and recognised a distinction between sex (physical, biological attributes) and gender (performative). I also assume that Woolf intended to use the word “sex” as “gender”.

In this thesis, I will explore how the heterotopic space of fiction and spaces within her fiction “The Lady in the Looking Glass” enacted Virginia Woolf’s intent in *A Room of One's Own* to create space for women, challenge representations of women, and how her use of new paradigms to write gender have become part of a trajectory towards the inclusion of gender fluidity in fiction and society. This thesis is not seeking to explore gender politics broadly. Instead, it aims to focus on the oppression of women in the period before and during the early twentieth century in Britain when “The Lady in the Looking Glass” was written (1929) and how Woolf contributed to creating her vision for women in the future. I will embrace the theory of intersectional feminism by including transwomen, non-binary people and women of all ethnicities in the terms “women” and “feminine”. The terms “lady”, “woman/women”, and “female” will be used as quoted. I use the terms “male/men” and “masculine” for the dominant and power-holding gender privileged due to their identity. In this thesis, I will use author-specified pronouns, common usage or, when unknown, will use they/them.

Societal constructs that contain gender, identity and their spaces are transforming, emerging into new spaces, and facing new challenges. The feminist focus has changed in synchrony with temporal and spatial changes. As discourse about gender has evolved, the

subject of “woman” faces different political challenges than in the era when Woolf sought space for women. Woolf’s lifetime included periods of great societal change caused by WWI and the suffrage movement, both of which advanced women’s freedom and rights, particularly outside the home. Women emerged from the boundaries of their homes, gaining more access to public spaces. As women's infiltration into previously masculine-dominated spaces increased, the feminist focus on space for women and more diverse representations of their identity has faced the challenge of becoming an identity oppressor itself. While Woolf was focused on challenging representations of women in the early twentieth century, later in the twentieth century, in their popular tome *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler challenged feminists to consider how their politics may exclude women, enforcing the same identity-limiting oppression they were rallying against.

Aligning a fight for representation with the patriarchal construct of “women” became problematic because it accepted a category they didn’t choose, aligning itself with patriarchy, and oppressed and rejected people who didn't fit the criteria of 'woman' (6). The construct and reach of 'patriarchy' are explored by Catherine Nash in *The Encyclopaedia of Human Geography*, where patriarchy is defined as “a system of relationships, beliefs, and values embedded in political, social, and economic systems that structure gender inequality between men and women. Attributes seen as ‘feminine’ or pertaining to women are undervalued, while attributes regarded as ‘masculine’ or pertaining to men are privileged” (43). Since the balance of power in patriarchy favoured men, women fought to gain access to and create space where they could rebalance power inequality.

While Woolf and Butler both had an interest in marginalised identities, the temporal distance between their interests in gender modified the focus of their discourse. Although both sought to de and re-gender identity, the cultural spaces they operated from influenced their perspectives. Woolf's category as a woman in the early twentieth century, for instance,

denied her access to spaces; however, her class status offered her privileged access to spaces to which other women could not gain access. Woolf's 'white privilege' also gave her access to spaces where non-Europeans were marginalised. Later in the twentieth century, Butler's gender fluidity created problematic categorisation that excluded them from gendered spaces and ideas. In Butler's *Gender Trouble*, which explores identity and the difficulties related to gender categorisation, Butler frames the oppression in feminism's categorisation, stating that "Feminist critique ought also to understand how the category of 'women,' the subject of feminism, is produced and restrained by the very structures of power through which emancipation is sought" (5). Butler calls for "a radical rethinking of the ontological constructions of identity" (8) for feminism to liberate marginalised gender identities rather than perpetuate oppression. They go on to suggest contesting the category of "women", explaining the "political problem that feminism encounters in the assumption that the term *women* denotes a common identity" (6) and asking, "is there some commonality among 'women' that pre-exists their oppression, or do 'women' have a bond by virtue of their oppression alone" (7)? However, Woolf's prior work aimed at deconstructing boundaries that oppress women created space for future academics such as Butler to continue challenging oppressive boundaries for gender-diverse and fluid people.

While exclusion from spaces or existing on the borders of spaces marginalises people, it can also provide unique perspectives. Social activist and academic bell hooks, whose research focussed on racism, feminism, and class status during the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, saw possibilities for minorities to use their marginalised status as a "site of radical possibility, a space for resistance" that "offers the possibility of radical perspectives from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds" (hooks qtd in Clisby 2). Imagining new worlds creates space within which to substantiate existence. Suggesting inclusive ways to escape oppressive identity categorisation, Suzanne Clisby's *Gender*,

Sexuality and Identity of the Borderlands explores intersectionality, where identity is interconnected by culture, gender, status etc. A contemporary researcher in gender, equality and diversity, Clisby draws on Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality as “a critical lens through which to understand and articulate where power emerges, collides, and intersects. The key point of intersectional analyses is that our identities are not separate and cannot be understood as anything but interconnected and intersecting” (2). Drawing spaces together or removing boundaries between them allows interconnectedness between spaces, just as ending apartheid eventually stopped denying people access to public spaces such as toilets, shops and buses based on ethnicity, and a new interconnectedness emerged.

Woolf's imagination of a “new world” created space to challenge the restrictive category of “woman” and facilitated more profound storytelling that represented broader feminine subjective experiences. Woolf imagined a time when writers could be unconscious of gender so that women could be liberated from the normative categorisation exerted over them. The thread of Woolf's work to move the oppressed from the boundaries has been sewn into a tapestry of work that has grown as each subsequent researcher finds new perspectives to look from and challenge the categorisation of identity. From Woolf to Butler, hooks, Crenshaw and Clisby, to name a few, each creates something from the new space that has opened up before them. In the more than thirty years since Butler's thought-provoking work, the categorisation of gender and identity has found multiple discursive pathways from fictional and academic spaces into general society and become part of mainstream dialogue; a movement between spaces from a space of academia to a wider general space. As new perspectives emerge, the space that gender categorisation occupies grows like an ever-expanding universe. Contemporary gender identification includes changes to the language that categorises and imposes gender upon people. Zimman describes how trans-inclusive language can subvert patriarchal and normative categorisation by “avoiding gendering people

when the referent's gender isn't relevant or known, which can be addressed through the selection of gender-neutral or gender-inclusive language” (84). This use of gender-inclusive language aligns with Woolf's desire for writing to become unconscious of gender, although this transitional phase may temporarily cause the inverse. Discussions about pronoun use in the wider public domain have made people very conscious of gender as challenges to its categorising use in language emerge. Disconnecting gendered language through observing preferred pronoun use makes people conscious of their language, awakening their attention to how readily they use gender as a signifier. Although new spaces appear that are inclusive of gender-fluid and diverse people, not everyone welcomes the transition. Like the outcry against challenging tradition when women fought for access to new spaces, some people are unhappy to change how they apply their gendering language or create inclusive spaces for non-binary and gender-fluid identities. Harry Potter author J.K Rowling has been accused of being a Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminist (TERF) over her objections to using non-gendered language she shared on Twitter in 2020. However, as hooks described how spaces on the margins create unique perspectives, negative responses themselves create a space of discourse that can draw gender identity discussions into new spaces.

Spaces are imbued with societal expectations established through cultural, legal, and religious processes that form rules, traditions, definitions, and expectations about acceptable identity expression. In Britain during Woolf's era, the limited potential for women's identities was mirrored in fiction because of the patriarchal society they were subject to. Without the diverse representation of women's thoughts and concerns, limiting and oppressing ontological experiences for women in fiction and *real* life were reinforced. Canadian writer, feminist and human-rights activist Karlene Faith described how "women were (ideally) kept at bay in the private sphere, subject to patriarchal discourses and practises, and socialised into and restricted by class, race and gender classifications asserted through both formal and

informal social control techniques and mechanisms" (43). Disempowered identities are coerced to conform to societal expectations because of the lack of diverse representation caused by the power structures that marginalise them. As a result, marginalised groups face barriers to spaces where their voices and narratives can be heard. The confining of women to a "private sphere" limited the spaces and experiences women could have whilst controlling and distorting their representation in society. For example, a poor attitude towards women writers in Britain resulted in early nineteenth-century novelist Jane Austen publishing her works anonymously. Although Austen could write as a woman, she could not access the traditional space of publishing works without suppressing her identity. Woolf explains the impact the hostility towards woman writers had on their work: "the writer was meeting criticism; she was saying this by way of aggression, or that by way of conciliation. She was admitting that she was 'only a woman' or protesting that she was 'as good as a man'" (54-55). The space of writing limited expression based on gender category, elevating and empowering men while oppressing women.

Woolf created space for women to be seen as significant by exposing the barriers to space dominated by men, the public sphere of writing, bringing women's lives to the forefront of her fiction and essay writing, and breaking traditional writing styles. These transgressions of patriarchal control amplified the violation Woolf had already made into male-dominated spaces by being a woman writer (3). Woolf's writing style did not conform to traditional forms within the space of writing; at times, her style mocked those forms by "[p]arodying the halting manner in which Henry James spoke" and challenging patronising comments about female writers in her essays and reviews (Corbett, 31). Clisby explains how marginalised people can subvert barriers through such actions because "every rule contains the possibility of violation, a counteract to the norm itself, and as such, the act of transgressing those rules also serves to illustrate and even substantiate their existence". Woolf's marginal space as an

oppressed identity (woman) in her time was the position she wrote from “developing new ways of seeing and understanding” her experience of the world she lived in. By making the invisible visible through revealing ordinary women’s lives, Woolf exposed the marginal space in society that women inhabited. By imagining changes to society's perspectives, where women and their ideas are relevant, Woolf created a new space in fiction for women. By rewriting ways of seeing from women’s perspectives, Woolf enacted what Clisby describes as a way for marginalised people to show "unique ways of seeing and understanding the worlds within which they live" (1).

Describing unique ways of seeing the world in the space of storytelling allowed Iranian writer Asma Abdi to break down barriers by writing the world in which she lived into significance. Abdi describes how she faced barriers in literature where her language, gender, and middle eastern culture intersected to create multiple boundaries for her:

Language differences are usually understood as the only boundary in literature, and unfortunately, literary criticism has tended to pay scant attention to the ways in which racial, gendered, national, religious, sexual, and other intersectional boundaries inform the politics of creation, publication, reading and reception of literary texts. It seems imperative, however, to study literature from this perspective, especially because of the narrating power of literature, and the role that it has historically played in shaping our imagination of the global space and the subjects inhabiting it (74).

Breaking spatial boundaries with her fiction allowed Abdi access in the *real* world to spaces she previously found inaccessible. Reading Abdi in a fictional space created interest in her identity in a *real* space transforming her status from marginalised to substantiated. Abdi experienced a crossing from the *other* space to new space through her own narrating power, stating, "[i]ndeed, my stories travelled and crossed the borders before I myself did" (74).

Abdi's “imagination of the global space” connects nicely with the transformative mechanisms of the *other* space or heterotopia and how it can create space in the world for marginalised groups. Similarly, Woolf's stories about women violated societal expectations about how

women think, act and behave. These new narratives showed, as Howard notes, that "Woolf was more interested in writing the lives of the unknown and the marginalised" (45). By depicting diverse perspectives of women in her fiction, she substantiated her existence in a male-dominated field and women's existence on and off the page.

Other Spaces: Heterotopia's Power to Reorganise, Recategorise, Transform and Invert

French philosopher Michel Foucault used the term *heterotopia* to describe *other* places that can act like "counter sites". These spaces, or heterotopias, Foucault describes as found in all societies and civilisations and "outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality," and "absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about" (24). Foucault used cemeteries, boarding houses, theatres, prisons, cinema, museums, libraries and rites of passage such as honeymoon trips (25) as examples, describing how within these spaces, "all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (24).

Heterotopias are *real* places, whereas utopias are "sites with no real place" (24). Foucault's use of the word *real* indicates a physical space. Foucault describes how heterotopic spaces can contain "several sites that are incompatible" (25), citing how museums bring together eras and cultures in a space that wouldn't have existed together in reality. The *real* place of the museum, recognisable items inside the museum and the semi-mythic reconstruction of historical cultures alongside each other create "a sort of simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live" (24) that Foucault ascribes to heterotopias. The museum functions as a "space of illusion that exposes every real space, all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned, as still more illusory" (27) as well as "juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces" (25). Glass cased dioramas inside the museum that suspend life in a mythic state are an example of several spaces, partitioned, and creating an illusory space.

Illustrating the way rules, cultures and society's reaction towards spaces can change over time, Foucault defines the principle that "each heterotopia has a precise and determined function within a society and the same heterotopia can, according to the synchrony of the culture in which it occurs, have one function or another" (25). Foucault uses the changing placement of cemeteries in synchrony with changing cultural beliefs over time as an example of this change of function. A focus on the soul's immortality moved to the body's decay, "cemeteries then came to constitute, no longer the sacred and immortal heart of the city, but 'the other city,' where each family possesses its dark resting place" (25). The "other" space of the cemetery has remained the same, a place to bury the dead, but in "synchrony" with the culture it exists in, the functions and traditions within the space, and even the location of the space has changed. Across cultures, the heterotopic space of the cemetery varies according to the society it exists in.

The ability to defer rules and traditions in the rearranged "other" spaces allows new concepts and ideas to be explored and rewritten for the future (and even the past) because they are "different from all sites they reflect and speak about"(24). Therefore, heterotopic spaces can be germination sites for transformative, alternative ideas. For example, Butler's ideas about gender shared within the heterotopia of an academic text enabled intelligent thinkers to conceptualise these ideas through a logical and rational lens in an "other" place, promoting discussions to proliferate and appeal to a more general society. Society's rules and cultural expectations can be reorganised and recategorized within heterotopic spaces. Spaces that were gendered are changing in synchrony with our evolving cultures. In many developed countries, for example, women's increasing access to previously male-dominated spaces, such as access to politics and professional careers. Another example of evolving access to space is the changing use of categorised spaces, such as public toilets becoming unisex to be more inclusive towards trans, non-binary and gender-diverse people in line with changing attitudes

towards gender. These are society-specific changes. In many parts of the world, the oppression of women and gender-fluid people continues. The murder of Iranian woman Mahsa Amini for violating hijab rules and the new Indonesian law against sex outside of marriage reveals the oppressive power over identity governments can wield. Heterotopic spaces that empower the disempowered are important to neutralise this power.

Neutralising societal expectations of women by creating space where women could develop their identity and connections outside the home was enacted by creating women's clubs in early twentieth-century Britain. Evans observes how women's modernist fiction and the rise of women's clubs were connected, affecting their national identity through narrative (132), describing them as "sites of community, negotiation, and conflict, variously enabling and foreclosing the construction of new gender, class, and national identities" (133).

Described (by Evans) as a feminist heterotopia, these spaces were germination sites for feminist ideas where patriarchal control was neutralized and inverted through changes in the observation of societal rules and cultures. As a result, new freedoms and different ways of thinking about women in society grew from inside the physical boundaries of the clubs out into other *real* spaces.

Foucault describes how access to heterotopic spaces may be freely available or have certain access requirements. For example, a public library is a heterotopic space where anyone can enter, but membership is usually required to borrow books. So, the access requirements are becoming a library member and observing the associated rules, such as returning books undamaged and on time. Access to entering the world of fiction is freely available if the requirement to be able to read and access a book is met. Foucault describes his interest in a particular attribute of heterotopias:

I am interested in certain ones that have the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect (24).

In the example of twentieth-century women's clubs, one of the access requirements was being a woman, inverting the dominant gender (male) in the environment.

Fictional Space: Imagining New Worlds

Fiction is a heterotopic space that stands in relation to “all other sites”, a “space of illusion”, a “combination of the mythic and the real”, and a space that can “suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect” (24). It is through fiction that the author, reader and narrator mingle or exist in the same “other” place; a sort of collusion occurs between them, where boundaries such as time, space, and self, become fluid creating a “space of illusion”. The container of fiction, a book, exists as an object in the reader's hands in a physical realm, but the fiction exists outside of the time and place in which the book is being observed by the reader. Within the “mythic and real contestation of space”, a reader experiences entry into different worlds, allowing them to access and experience different perspectives, potentially an inversion of reality that may not be accessible in *real* life. Within this *other* space, there are sites incompatible with reality, such as access to the internal dialogue of characters, expansion or contraction of time and personification of material items, to name a few. The *mythic* merges with *reality* via the recreation of the character and its worlds through both writer's and reader's imaginations and the physical reality of words on the page. This merging of the *mythic* and *real* through fiction provides a space with the potential to deconstruct boundaries and transgress against societal rules or morals, or at least blur the lines, writing worlds into significance and shaping and questioning the constructive power of the imagination. Nurturing new ideas and perspectives

in heterotopic spaces such as fiction builds momentum for ideas to travel across boundaries into *real* places, dismiss temporal boundaries, visit past places, and observe changes in function that have occurred in synchrony with culture.

Fiction acts as a mirror of society and is another space we stare into to search for ourselves. In *Mirror Gazing* comparative literature specialist Warren Motte describes how "reading can be conceived as a kind of mirror-gazing.... among the many things we 'see' in literature, one of the salient things is ourselves, writ large... In doing so, we construct a version of ourselves, one whom we may sometimes recognize immediately, sometimes by dint of effort, and sometimes not at all" (785–86). The mirror and fiction share reflective and constructive powers, so what we see reflected is interpreted through a societal, cultural and imaginative lens. As Schanoes explains, "[l]ike a text, the mirror changes and the reflection is rearranged with every new looker" (20). We can look into the mirror, an object in our physical space and experience the new space that opens up before us, and we can look into fiction, where we become part of a new space that is *other*. These spaces are heterotopic, "outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality". We project ourselves into the story as the story is projected into our minds. What we see in our imagination likely differs from the images the writer visualised, and our decoding of words and ideas is open to subjective interpretation. This creates spaces that combine and overlap: the author's perspective, our own perspective, the perspective of the fictional characters, and what is *real* on the page. As Foucault describes, heterotopia represents "all the other real sites that can be found within the culture". A lack of history about marginalised peoples' lives in fiction and historical literature is like looking in a mirror and seeing nothing, amplifying their spaces of oppression by reflecting their absence. But, like mirrors, fiction can become a "space of resistance" in which new worlds where the marginalised are substantiated can be created.

Mirror Space: Substantiating the Self

The reflection of ourselves in the mirror substantiates our existence in space, confirming our reality and connection to everything around us. Foucault described the mirror as a "mixed, joint experience" (24) because of its dual categories as heterotopia and utopia. He outlined how the heterotopic qualities of the mirror co-existed with the utopia of the mirror space by explaining, "the mirror does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy" (24) and "it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there" (24). So, the utopic qualities that the mirror provides as a "placeless place" exist simultaneously with the "other" space of the mirror, or the *real* and the *unreal* merging in one place.

The mirror then is both a "space of illusion", a heterotopia where we can have a "mixed joint experience" and a mixture of the *mythic* and *real* experiences Foucault describes when we look into its reflective surface. Recognising the self and placing oneself within the surrounding space is described by Lacan as a significant stage in infant development. Lacan explains the mirror stage as crucial "to establish a relation between the organism and its reality" (4). Observing the self as a physical body separate from consciousness creates a sort of duality and awareness of the projection of consciousness through the *other* self in the form of bodily enactment. Observing the self as part of the space around the self sets in motion an understanding that our actions affect the space outside us and the space (or society) surrounding us, therefore affecting our behaviour.

The mirror can also become a space of surveillance where societal expectations become part of identity construction. The mirror presents women, in particular, with society's expectations over their bodies and image and highlights her disempowerment. Schanoes

describes how when women look in the mirror, they experience "patriarchal hostility of the mirror to female subjectivity" (7). So, what women see in the mirror is how their bodies perform to the societal construction of their identity. Despite this forced self-surveillance, Schanoes claims that patriarchal power shows "derision and scorn for both women and their mirrors" (6). Like walking through a museum where time and space converge, we can also view ourselves, museum-like in fictional spaces, categorising ourselves in relation to others and seeing both potential and restrictions.

Schanoes investigates what a mirror in fiction can represent, revealing the mirror's power on the feminine sense of self and how mirrors have been inverted in the modern fairy tale to become objects of empowerment for women rather than hostile entities. The inversion of the power exerted over women by mirrors into objects of empowerment is the 'space of resistance' that hooks described as possible for marginalised groups. The ability to rearrange or invert gender-based identity and its subjective relationship with society through the mirror or fiction is what Schanoes describes as a "potential source of power [and] self-creation" (6) as well as a chance to fight back against the oppressive power of the mirrors. Schanoes describes mirrors as "a perfect metaphor for patriarchal subordination of women" (6) but explains that inverting the mirror "is essential to an understanding of femininity, humanity, and the self..." (12).

Mirrors in fiction create heterotopic spaces of contemplation and layers of resistance, as when a mirror is held up to reflect the image from another mirror to create infinite reflections. Howard describes how "the looking glass motif is a recurrent feature of Woolf's writing, and functions variously as a surface upon which the self – or alternative selves – might be reflected or envisioned" (44). Woolf uses the reflective imagery of the mirror in her first published story "The Mark on the Wall" to describe the endless possibilities of self-identity as "not one reflection but an almost infinite number" Her prediction of future

novelists realising “the importance of these reflections” (79) is illustrated in her later story “The Lady in the Looking-Glass”. In “The Mark on the Wall”, Woolf reveals this mirror-like search for the self, in which something as innocuous as a black mark on the wall is used as a launching pad for the narrator, who observes and imagines what it might be and how it got there. The story reflects the subjective nature of thoughts and Woolf’s search for more than skin-deep knowledge of identity. She writes,

Suppose the looking-glass smashes, the image disappears, ... only that shell of a person which is seen by other people—what an airless, shallow, bald, prominent world it becomes! A world not to be lived in. As we face each other in omnibuses and underground railways we are looking into the mirror; that accounts for the vagueness, the gleam of glassiness, in our eyes. And the novelists in future will realize more and more the importance of these reflections, for of course there is not one reflection but an almost infinite number; those are the depths they will explore, those the phantoms they will pursue, leaving the description of reality more and more out of their stories... (79-80).

It is not the image in the mirror that Woolf frames as more important than what other people see, but the act of looking into ‘the depths’ (a spatial element) she predicts future novelists will explore. Woolf’s mirror is to be used to search the depths of identity.

Finding Space for Women in *A Room of One’s Own*

In Woolf’s 1928 extended essay (originally two lectures), *A Room of One’s Own*, she outlined how the space of fiction mirrors *real* space, unfairly representing women and putting barriers in the way of their writing. Even when women had the liberty to write, their writing was affected by their oppressed status because “[m]en are the ‘opposing faction’; men are hated and feared because they have the power to bar her way to what she wants to do —

which is write" (44). In these lectures, she made radical claims about changing the future of literature not just for women but to allow literature to become what she thought of as *genderless* so more diverse identities could be portrayed. In this essay, Woolf famously claims, "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (3) and despairs over the "reprehensible poverty of our sex" (16) because of the constraints placed on women who were considered the "property of her husband" (33). These statements merge the status of the gendered "woman" with their lack of representation in fiction and illustrate the barriers women faced in gaining access to taking part in writing opportunities.

Woolf lists her frustrations about her access to spaces lamenting that the lives of women are only marginally represented, not just in writing but in historical records too, describing how the women she found historical accounts for were "[a]lmost without exception [...] shown in their relation to men" (60). Contrasting the limitations women experience with the exclusivity of access men held to all places, she described how "ladies are only admitted to the library if accompanied by a Fellow of the College or furnished with a letter of introduction" (6). Access to studying at university was restricted for women, and in her own life, Woolf was denied the level of education her brothers were afforded solely because of her gender. Despairing the lack of information available to substantiate women's existence, Woolf declared, "all these infinitely obscure lives remain to be recorded" (65). Woolf connects the *real* life oppression of women and their position in the *unreal* world of fiction, citing patriarchal control as the cause of their marginalisation in both places. She describes how the visibility provided to men in all spheres cast a shadow over women that rendered them invisible in those same spheres claiming, "he shall be superior, which plants him wherever one looks, not only in front of the arts, but barring the way to politics too..." (41).

Women confined to marginal spaces could not control their visibility in spaces such as fiction. Their notable absence in historical texts and fiction allowed men to dominate narratives about their identity. The importance of narrative and its effect on identity was explored by Boytos et al. in "Women Writers, Anonymity and Pseudonyms", where they claim, "a narrative identity shapes one's understanding of life experiences and provides a sense of meaning and purpose to one's life" (55). Woolf described the poor image women faced from men who had limiting and oppressive opinions about the abilities of their minds. Woolf explains, "there was an enormous body of masculine opinion to the effect that nothing could be expected of women intellectually" (40). A quote by W. L. Courtney, editor of the *Fortnightly Review* from 1894 until 1928, about the literary skills of women is an example of the hostility female writers had to confront. Courtney wrote:

still less is it possible to find any feminine successor to Scott, Thackeray, and Dickens. It is the neutrality of the artistic mind which the female novelist finds it difficult to realize, mired as she is in the data of personal experience and lacking the impersonality that Shakespeare or Dickens maintains "towards all his puppets" (qtd in Corbett 54).

Courtney suggests that the identity of "females" and their personal experiences are not interesting enough to be of great regard in literature. Woolf wanted to invert this male perspective by encouraging women to write and build a fictional canon to represent their subjective ontological experiences. She encouraged women to create their own storytelling style rather than follow existing masculine literary tropes because: "It would be a thousand pities if women wrote like men, or looked like men, for if two sexes are quite inadequate, considering the vastness and variety of the world, how should we manage with only one" (61). In her article about resistance to the aesthetics of the male gaze, Mary Devereaux explains how "[c]reating new artistic traditions provides an alternative to the passive

reception of dominant traditions. This strategy is most often described as creating a female voice or female gaze. It allows women to write their own texts, their own history” (346). By transforming ideas about women’s identity through narrative, Woolf becomes part of a new space from which to create new artistic traditions.

Without space, women find their bodies and minds are public property. So, a room of her own is what Woolf sees as essential to allowing women space to write, a *real* space, a heterotopia, and a “counter site” where the cultural and societal expectations of her gender dissipate into the space around her. What Woolf highlights in *A Room of One’s Own* is how little and yet how much is required for women to be able to take part in writing because underscoring the lack of access to money or a room of her own exposes the magnitude of a woman’s disempowerment and lack of agency. Space free from gendered expectations would allow women to substantiate their existence through writing, giving power to “shape imagination” to new ideas about women, what they can achieve, and the significance of their lives.

Woolf’s unique use of a modernist writing style explored ways to describe inner thoughts and express subjective experiences (Lypka 51). Corbett describes how Woolf uses “narrative techniques” that distance her narrators from characters and events and avoid “directing her readers to a particular position” (53). These distancing techniques include Woolf obscuring her personal agenda to avoid affecting her writing in the way she addressed in *A Room of One’s Own*, where she identifies how “aggression...or...conciliation...admitting that she was ‘only a woman’ or protesting that she was ‘as good as a man’” (54-55) leave a distasteful mark on women’s writing. Using spaces to provide multiple perspectives offers subjective experiences within the narrative without obvious interference from the writer. Taking advantage of implicit dispositions that categorise identity by gender subverts the invisibility of women’s oppression by disrupting it

with unexpected images, making it visible. This technique shifts the decoding of the story to the reader's unique position. Furthermore, Woolf's focalisation on feminine characters and a broad range of their experiences prioritised the normal lives of women, a transgression against the opinion that women's lives were mundane, boring and not worthy of appearing in fiction.

Enacting qualities of heterotopic spaces in her fiction by creating "spaces of illusion that expose every real space", Woolf used mirrors to refract singular perspectives, offering opportunities for new ways of looking at identity and reflecting society's construction of identity back at them. Woolf surmised that better quality of writing by women could be achieved if they weren't oppressed by their gender. Writing women's space into the future by making them visible and immortalising them in fiction, she imagined worlds where women's experiences were considered of equal importance to those of men. Envisioning a tradition of writing for, by, and about women, Woolf wanted to see the history of women told from their own perspectives, away from the constructive and deconstructive power of the male gaze. As space opened up for women, Woolf predicted that "in another hundred years' time" (68), they would be better writers and have an improved societal position. Woolf showed in the space of writing, women can represent, contest and invert concepts of their identity and suggest transformative ideas that can move from the "space of illusion" into reality.

Spaces in "The Lady in The Looking Glass"

In her short story "The Lady in the Looking Glass", Woolf creates the space she imagines for women in her essay *A Room of One's Own* by focusing on a woman and exposing the construction of the idea of a *lady*. In this short story, Woolf enacts her ideas to write women's lives out of obscurity and into new spaces. By using spaces to construct and deconstruct possibilities for the Lady's identity throughout the story, Woolf reflects the limits

of gender representation in fiction she described in *A Room of One's Own*. This depiction of a *lady* usefully demonstrates how "terribly hampered and partial in his knowledge of women..." (61) men and society in general are. It is precisely this knowledge of women that Woolf sets out to expand by writing this story.

Woolf's use of the mirror in "The Lady in the Looking Glass" creates a kaleidoscope of images to produce conflicting versions of a *lady's* identity viewed from an outsider's position. The precise placement of the mirror in space and as a focal point creates multiple perspectives by breaking through physical boundaries that separate the narrator and the Lady. The "looking glass" is transformed from having power over women to revealing the narrator and reader's power to construct her identity by enacting the male gaze. The looking glass also portrays the surveillance of women's image. In Carmen Bonasera's research on "Heterotopia and Liminal Spaces as Reconfigurations of Female Identity," she describes how "[m]irrors, thresholds, windows, walls, and other kinds of blurred boundaries represent the spatial equivalent of the subject's transition between conflicting versions of the self" (11) in Sylvia Plath's work and "the specific role of heterotopic and liminal spaces in the process of reconfiguration of female identity" (1). In "The Lady in the Looking Glass", Woolf's multiple conflicting versions of the identity of a Lady reconfigure ways of seeing women and society's construction of women.

"The Lady in the Looking Glass" is a short story about Isabella Tyson, who is being observed by a narrator through a conveniently placed looking glass as Isabella spends time outside in the garden. Using spaces as alternative paradigms that "suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect", Woolf created precise points of view that facilitate looking and reflecting. The key importance of spaces is signalled in the story's title, "The Lady in the Looking Glass: A Reflection". The separating effect of the colon creates space between the looking glass and the reflection. The title, then,

represents two spaces, the space inside the looking glass as well as the space outside the looking glass – the object and what it reflects. It, therefore, makes explicit the acts of looking and reflecting.

Also explicit in the title is that the Lady is the focus of this story. The story enacts what the title alludes to – both looking at and reflecting on a Lady. The narrator enacts the looking and relies on the reflection from the mirror to reflect on Isabella. This doubles the reflections that the mirror space provides. The spaces Woolf constructs in "The Lady in the Looking Glass" reflect and invert expectations about what a *lady* might be thinking and doing. As we travel through fictional space and all the spaces related to the Lady, the implied identity of the Lady is transformed, shattering the illusions constructed about her image. This use of space enacts heterotopia's functions as a "sort of simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live", a "space of illusion" and "different from all sites they reflect and speak about"(24).

Spatial paradigms play a prominent role in this story, and the viewing position of the narrator has been arranged by Woolf precisely in relation to the looking glass. The looking glass is in the hall, where it can be viewed by the narrator, who sits on the "sofa in the drawing room" (215). The looking glass present in the hallway, a different place to the narrator, is at just the right angle to allow the narrator to simultaneously exist inside the drawing room and to see out into the hallway and beyond into the garden so that it becomes a site "juxtaposing in a single real place, several spaces". The narrator cannot be in the drawing room, the hall, and the garden, yet, the mirror brings these spaces together to be experienced, simultaneously magnifying and expanding the space of their surveillance. The narrator claims that "[c]hance had so arranged it" that they arrived in the particular spot where they could view the looking glass, but the precision with which the narrator is placed indicates that this view has nothing to do with chance. This leaves the narrator in a space set-up so that "[o]ne

could not help looking" (215). While the narrator is held still in one place for the story's duration, Isabella leaves the house via the grass path at the end of the hall, enters the garden, where she is out of sight, and then returns to the hallway to the table opposite the looking glass at the end.

Woolf's arrangement of space puts Isabella, the narrator and the reader in specific positions where discreet views of Isabella overlap. Woolf distances herself from obvious claims about women's identity by creating space between the Lady and the narrator. Rather than write about women, Woolf uses spaces to withhold access to the Lady, offering her freedom of access to all spaces while holding the narrator in one space – an inversion of reality. Without access to the Lady, the narrator's reflections and the reader's decoding of the narrator's reflections illustrate the social construction of women. We don't know what Isabella's experience of these spaces is as she moves through them, only reading what occurs in each space from an externally reflected point of view – the watching narrator and their imagination of a *lady*. The narrator's knowledge about women informs their imagination about what Isabella could be doing. They can't see her, but as Isabella moves through these spaces, the truth disrupts expectations about her image and performance.

The spaces within this fiction fit the criteria of heterotopia that Foucault described as "a space of illusion that exposes every real space, all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned, as still more illusory". Using these spaces of illusion to house different perspectives on Isabella, the imagined, the social, the truth and the *real*, Woolf presents a broad palate of ideas and images to converge and reflect upon. Each space disrupts the narrator's perceptions of the Lady. The narrator reflects on the differences between the spaces when comparing the drawing room to the image in the looking glass, describing how "it was a strange contrast - all changing here, all stillness there" (215). Using space to create multiple points of view creates what Michèle Barret describes in her introduction to Woolf's collection

of essays *Virginia Woolf Women & Writing* (1979), as Woolf's project to "enable the reader to perceive social life from a variety of perspectives" (28). Using multiple spaces from which to view Isabella, and spaces where she cannot be viewed, causes the narrator to use their imagination to construct the "truth" about Isabella as they attempt to categorise her according to her gendered label as "Lady". The lower garden, the drawing-room, and the hallway are spaces placed precisely around the focal point, the looking glass, to facilitate watching.

The view of Isabella is through the looking glass. The narrator surveys their surrounding spaces and uses their ideas about a *lady's* identity to imagine Isabella's inner thoughts and feelings, creating an increasingly more unreal depiction of Isabella. The "truth" and the imaginative construction of Isabella's identity are fiction, but both have the feeling of reality, creating a "mixed joint experience" between author, narrator and reader about how elements related to the social construction of identity are also fiction. The narrator knows Isabella and yet also makes clear "how very little, after all these years, one knew about her" (216). This claim separates the reader's experience from the narrator's, adding to the variety of perspectives Woolf employed in her work. While readers are experiencing Isabella's identity through the narrator, they become aware of their own complicities when they discover that the "Lady" who left the house in her "thin summer dress" was "fifty-five or sixty" (216). This accentuates the distance between the spaces the reader, narrator and Isabella occupy and illustrates how the further away from Isabella we are, the less we know and construct using our imaginations of a *lady*. By comparing and contrasting the multiple perspectives of Isabella, Woolf exposes the reductive power of the male gaze over women's identity.

Woolf's use of the looking-glass space to create a focal point within the fictional space creates an alternative paradigm that inverts the power of the mirror over women's identity. The looking glass is a heterotopia, a space that is "other", a "mixed joint experience"

where Isabella and the narrator's existence interact in a way where normal rules are inverted. Using the reflection from the mirror to observe Isabella is an ingenious way of providing both a focalised space for watching and a space where Isabella is distanced from being watched and, therefore, unable to perform any part in the construction of her identity. Isabella is free from the confines of the mirror, while the narrator's view is restricted by it. Not only does the looking glass create an extra "space of illusion" within the fiction, but it both frames and inverts the fiction within it. Bookended by a warning that "[p]eople should not leave looking-glasses hanging in their rooms," the beginning and end of Woolf's story are mirror images, beginning with Isabella disappearing into the looking glass as a Lady before reappearing at the end as a Woman.

The choice of words "Lady" and "Looking-Glass" imply a young *lady* by preying on our social biases around youth and beauty—our own perceptions reflected and inverted back to us. The eventual deconstruction of Isabella's image comes as a significant disruption from the ideas of youth and beauty the word "Lady" and "Looking Glass" originally evoke when we find out she is "old and angular, veined and lined, with her high nose and wrinkled neck" (219). Isabella and the narrator are both outside the space of the looking glass, but their connection is through it in a placeless or "other" place. The narrator's position outside the mirror and out of Isabella's sight is what allures the watching. The narrator wants to see what Isabella does when she doesn't know someone is watching and describes the experience of watching Isabella as "like one of those naturalists who...lie watching the shyest animals...moving about freely, themselves unseen" (215). This indicates that the narrator has some understanding that when Isabella knows she is being watched, she is performing to socially acceptable norms. Watching someone without being seen changes the nature of our looking, just as knowing we are being watched also changes the way of our behaving. The images of Isabella that the mirror reflects are scant, leaving the narrator to imagine what

Isabella might be doing while she is outside of its confines. The turning of the mirror towards the reader and narrator inverts the patriarchal power of the mirror over the identity of women and reflects our own perspective. Although the mirror space provides access to other spaces, it doesn't successfully enact searching the depths of Isabella's identity. The transformation in this feminist heterotopia is uncovering that it is not a story about a *lady* in the looking glass. It is an inversion of this – it is *us* in the looking glass.

After watching Isabella in the mirror disappear down the garden path, the narrator decides Isabella is “presumably” in the “lower garden” (216). The lower garden has the heterotopic quality of being “outside of all places” because it can't be viewed through the reflections of the looking glass. The narrator cannot enter the lower garden space from their watching position. Just as Foucault describes how access to heterotopic spaces may be freely accessible or require certain entry requirements, access to the garden is freely accessible. The entry requirement for the narrator to enter the garden is becoming seen by Isabella or watched by the mirror. The desire to watch Isabella without being seen prevents their entry to the “other” place of the garden. Watching the garden through the “long glass that hung outside in the hall” (215), the narrators' reflections via the mirror represent both the *real* and the *unreal*.

The narrator witnessed Isabella's departure from the house into the garden via reflective images in the mirror in the hall, describing how she “had gone down the grass path in her thin summer dress, carrying a basket, and had vanished, sliced off by the gilt rim of the looking glass” (216). Trying to view Isabella in the garden where she remains unseen, the narrator describes the scene with dormancy, “in the looking glass things had ceased to breathe and lay still in the trance of immortality” (216). After she has been “sliced off” by the looking glass, Isabella remains “presumably” in the “lower garden” (216) until the end of the story. The garden is a “space of illusion”, becoming “simultaneously mythic and real”, where the narrator's loss of ability to observe Isabella after she leaves the confines of the mirror

results in them having to *reflect* on what Isabella might be doing and thinking. The narrator's *reflections* are drawn from their knowledge of Isabella and their expectations of what a *lady* might do in the garden. The narrator imagines Isabella has:

gone presumably into the lower garden to pick flowers; or as it seemed more natural to suppose, to pick something light and fantastic and leafy and trailing, traveller's joy, or one of those elegant sprays of convolvulus that twine round ugly walls and burst here and there into white and violet blossoms. She suggested the fantastic and the tremulous convolvulus rather than the upright aster, the starched zinnia, or her own burning roses alight like lamps on the straight posts of their rose trees (216).

The words “presumably” and “natural to suppose” accentuate how readily Isabella's imagined activities are attached to her gender and how that gender would function in a garden space.

The narrator expects Isabella to pick flowers, and they focus their thoughts on which flower might symbolise Isabella's identity.

Using floral images to represent Isabella's identity signifies how women are reductively categorized. Hu et al. claims "[t]he visible existence of a woman is uniquely constructed in a specific realm of culture" (2). One of those ways is through our image and especially for women. Hu et al. also describe how "[w]omen are supposed to be subservient in many aspects in order to become intelligible under the aggressive male gaze" (2). Woolf disrupts this subservience in "The Lady in the Looking Glass" by using the lower garden space to keep Isabella out of sight. This clearly frames who is responsible for the construction of women's existence. The looking-glass space does not reflect Isabella in the lower garden. Exhibiting the male gaze, the narrator's reflections on Isabella project what it is “natural to suppose” a *lady* would be doing. Despite the ideas about what she might be doing in the lower garden, Isabella remains free from surveillance by the mirror and the narrator.

Frustrated with the empty looking glass and lack of access to the lower garden, the narrator turns to a new space to find out everything about Isabella: Isabella's drawing room. In the drawing-room, the narrator attempts to capture fleeting images of Isabella, observes

her material items, and uses their existing knowledge to decode or construct Isabella's interior thoughts. The narrator decides that "one must prize her open with the first tool that came to hand – the imagination"(217). In fact, imagination plays the largest role in constructing an identity for Isabella. Imagination's role in searching for the truth is highlighted successively. The narrator describes the drawing room as "like a human being" (215) describing in contrast to the stillness in the mirror how movement in the room was "coming and going like human breath" (216). The narrator's imagination transforms the material items in the drawing room into animalistic creatures, personifying them and watching them come to life in a variety of ways:

pirouetting across the floor, stepping delicately with high-lifted feet and spread tails and pecking allusive beaks as if they had been cranes or flocks of elegant flamingoes whose pink was faded, or peacocks whose trains were veined with silver... the room had its passions and rages and envies and sorrows coming over it and touting it, like a human being (215).

This space, so full of life, is a social space both in its designation as a drawing room and in the imaginative rendering of human-like qualities to the material items in Isabella's drawing room. The drawing room operates as a space with the heterotopic quality that "suspects, neutralizes, or inverts the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect" by contrasting the power and limitations of imagination according to what they are applied to. Within the drawing-room space, where the narrator sits, the limited imaginings of Isabella's actions in the garden are contrasted with lively depictions of activity and human-like qualities endowed upon its contents.

The emotive and lively descriptions of material items rouse suspicion about the narrative, changing the perspective from a life-like descriptive piece about a *lady* to a more fantastical tale. This neutralises the confidence in the narrator's descriptions of Isabella. The narrator's imaginings of Isabella's identity are drawn from the idea the construct of women represents. In the mirror where Isabella has been "sliced off", the narrator's reflections are

limited by preconceptions about what a *lady* would be doing. By contrast, the drawing room seems to be a space of limitless inspiration. Imagination is primed for its constructing reflections with examples about how they should be applied by contrasting the *mythic* with the *real*: Material items can pirouette and experience passions and rages, while Isabella simply picks flowers. What Woolf illustrates by contrasting the space of the lower garden and the drawing room is the capacity of our imaginations and the restrictions applied to women. By personifying material items so lavishly yet limiting the imagination of Isabella's identity, Woolf makes visible the socially constructed lens that restricts our looking. At the end of the story, the narrator precedes Isabella's apparition-like arrival with "[o]ne must imagine - here was she in the looking glass." (219). This imploring of our imagination in an already imaginary space draws attention to our complicity and the subjectivity of our imagining. We are drawn into the imaginary space where Isabella's identity is constructed. Between the mirror images of the beginning and end of the story, we enter the drawing room space with the narrator and construct Isabella's identity. Inverting expectations about watching a *lady* in the looking glass, we are coerced to imagine her outside the looking glass – using the male gaze.

The hallway space is imbued with power, surveillance, and truth. In the hallway, the final transformation of the ways of seeing Isabella is revealed. It is our own crimes, not Isabella's, framed and judged in the "truth" space – the hallway. The looking glass is described as "hung" in the hallway, a word that might imply a space of judgement. As a space between the drawing room where the narrator sits and the garden where Isabella is, the hallway is "different from all sites they reflect". In the space of the hallway, "truth" is held still and accessible. The narrator describes the space of the hallway and its contents as "held there in their reality unescapably", accentuating its space as absolute and a space where the truth cannot escape. The hallway houses the looking glass, the portal for watching Isabella.

The mirror's position in the hall makes it a space of surveillance. Its "Italian glass" and "gold rim" give it a sense of grandeur and power. The hallway and the reflected pathway outside are the passage Isabella travels out of and back into the house. Through this passage, Isabella can disappear into the garden while the narrator simply watches the "stillness" that remains in the hallway from the drawing room.

Woolf's interest in depicting the depths of identity rather than the mirror image is portrayed by the narrator's focus on finding out the "truth" about Isabella. The narrator's obsession with finding the truth is revealed via their musings in three consecutive sentences: "there must be truth; there must be a wall" (216). Next, the narrator considers how after knowing Isabella for so long, "one could not say what the truth about Isabella was" (216). Finally, when the postman comes to deliver the mail, the narrator imagines them to be "tablets graven with eternal truth" (217). These musings on the "truth" indicate that the truth is important. The truth the narrator is searching for about Isabella is her "profounder state of being" (218). The "profounder state of being" the narrator seeks is "the state that is to the mind what breathing is to the body, what one calls happiness or unhappiness" (218).

However, the narrator describes how "it made one start" seeing Isabella enter the hall, in contrast to how "[s]he stopped dead" (219). The narrator sees Isabella in a new light when the looking glass "began to pour over her a light that seemed to fix her; that seemed like some acid to bite off the unessential and superficial and to leave only the truth" (219). The looking glass deflowers Isabella discarding all the imagined images of her, leaving her "naked in that pitiless light" where she was "nothing", "perfectly empty"; she had "no thoughts" and "no friends" (219). In this moment, the mythical nature of Isabella's identity has shattered, and her description as "nothing" draws on human fears about being invisible and of no importance in the world. Isabella existed in a variety of forms in the narrator's imaginings: she was considered like a flower, she was "filled with thoughts" and had "exquisite" clothing, but in

the hallway where truth and judgement are held in reality unescapably, the Lady with multiple possibilities of her identity becomes the “perfectly empty” old woman (218, 219). The stark truth undresses the imagined life of women and presents the reality. Subverting our expectations of how a *lady* looks and behaves in front of a looking glass draws our attention to the *lady* more keenly. By describing Isabella as insubstantial in the hallway scene where the truth resides, Woolf increases our focus on the Lady and substantiates women’s existence.

The considered construction of perspectives in “The Lady in the Looking Glass” indicates how central the act of looking from different points of view is to this story. By using spaces to offer and disrupt perceptions of a woman, Woolf resists what Devereaux describes as a women's "deep-seated inclination to adapt herself to the male viewpoint" and exhibits Devereaux's point that "the medium of art impacts the point of view if the gaze is male" (337-338). Devereaux states, "[f]eminism objects to seeing the world through male eyes. It equates the male gaze with patriarchy" (337). Woolf uses the “medium of art” to great impact showing how our perspectives are not only affected by our implicit biases but by our point of view. Through the looking glass, we have gained no information about the “depths” of Isabella. We don't know what Isabella was doing or thinking while she was out of our view. Our imaginings about what she was doing are scant because of the dearth of information about women’s identities. Through the looking glass, the Lady becomes the Woman. Functioning as a heterotopia, the looking glass has not only been a site of transformation for Isabella but a transformation of our point of view of her and a challenge to our preconceptions about a *lady*. In fact, in the *mythic* world Isabella resides in, nothing has changed, but our point of view of a *lady* has changed in our physical world. By using the space of fiction as a heterotopia that is “different from all the sites they reflect and speak about”, Woolf was able to reorganise spaces so we can see a *lady* from various perspectives and question what is *real* and *unreal*. Woolf shows the limitations of the mirror, which

reflects “only that shell of a person” (79) she describes in “The Mark on the Wall” for reflecting internal experiences and the subjectivity of perspectives. In fact, the mirror holds still that which is in front of it and allows another party to interpret the reflection. In the garden, Isabella is “fantastic and tremulous” like convolvulus; in the drawing room, she has “polite conversations” (218), and in the hallway, in front of the mirror, she is “nothing” (219). Isabella’s identity remains something the narrator cannot see, an element internal and hidden from view (as Isabella is). Isabella is only what the male gaze has made of her until Woolf exposes and subverts our reflections with the truth, showing her objection to seeing the world through a male viewpoint.

Words that inferred traits of Isabella's identity are inverted by facts quite different to our expectations. Using these carefully chosen words, Woolf exhibits how language itself can impact identity. The short story title "The Lady in the Looking Glass" conjures a different “space of illusion” than a title like “The Woman in the Mirror” might. They set us up to imagine Isabella in a particular way before having that image disrupted with the facts that erase the ideas those images originally conjure. This draws our attention to the language causing suspicion over the power they hold to make us complicit in constructing limited identities for women. Isabella's known identity is stated factually. Woolf writes, "it was a fact that she was a spinster; that she was rich; that she had bought this house", and "Isabella had known many people, had had many friends" (216). These facts are not found through the looking glass but come directly from the narrator's existing knowledge of Isabella. However, the narrator is not satisfied with these facts. In the narrator's attempts to construct an identity for Isabella, language reveals that these are imagined by their presumptive word use. The use of words such as “almost certainly”, “presumably”, and “supposed” reveals the imaginative construction of elements the narrator uses to try to understand the “truth” about Isabella. (217).

Woolf demonstrates how expectations about gender performance in certain spaces are constructed by using a narrator to predict how a *lady* will likely behave. By placing the narrator within the space of the story but obscuring their image and gender, Woolf reveals how the male gaze is not simply enacted by men but is a way of seeing women through a socially constructed lens. Remaining unconscious of the narrator's gender prevents the reader from looking at Isabella through a defined lens. This must have been a deliberate choice by Woolf in line with her vision for feminine writing to be unconscious of gender. The narrator remains in the same position on the sofa throughout the story and doesn't interact with anyone. Like Isabella's inability to perform to a watching audience, the narrator's lack of movement and interactions within the story prevents them from delivering any gender performance. The narrator could be any gender, but as readers, an assumption of the narrator's gender echoes and draws attention to the construction of Isabella's identity. Not defining the gender of the narrator interferes with the way we might expect Isabella to perform towards the narrator and how the narrator should perform towards Isabella or, in fact, us. It undercuts the male gaze but doesn't suggest a female gaze. It is simply a gaze.

Woolf challenges the patriarchal control over the body of women and creates a new paradigm for feminine identity in "The Lady in the Looking Glass" by creating spaces where the concept of a *lady* can be "represented, contested and inverted". From fleeting images of Isabella seen in different spaces, an identity within the range of societal expectations of her gender is constructed, one that is deconstructed at the end of the story. Using multiple focalised spaces: the looking glass, the lower garden, the drawing room and the hallway, Woolf draws together all the elements that construct our ideas about women: image, language, truth, and imagination. Often invisible, these oppressive gendered biases affect our identity constructions. Mirroring back at the reader societally produced images or cliches that inform our expectations and then discarding them challenges these implicit biases. As the

narrator reflects on images of Isabella viewed through the looking glass, we find that perhaps none of those perspectives is a true account of Isabella's "profounder state of being" but instead reflects the imagination of who is doing the looking and what society tells us to look at, and what we should see. Woolf uses the allure of the looking glass to reflect the male gaze back at itself, disrupting expectations for women's behaviour. The range of possibilities of Isabella's identity highlight how women in fiction and *real* life are portrayed with identities that conform to patriarchal ideas.

Isabella is not looking at herself or anyone else in the looking glass; she is being watched. By separating Isabella's attention from the looking glass, the construction of her identity is reflected back at those who do the constructing, revealing what is expected of a *lady*. These spaces can be defined as heterotopic spaces because they are "spaces of illusion" (fiction) that are "different from the sites they reflect and speak about" (they see women's lives as substantial) and have the quality of being "simultaneously mythic and real" (the *mythic* world of fiction and the physical world in which the fiction is observed). They "represent, contest and invert expectations" of women's identity and act as counter sites against a dominant power that exerted control over women and their writing.

Continuing Woolf's and Foucault's Work by Creating Inclusive Spaces

Woolf's use of heterotopic spaces and inversion of the use of the mirror to reflect back at us our entrenched gender biases and cultural codes formed part of a trajectory towards more inclusive writing and recognition of gender fluidity. In the one hundred years since Woolf envisioned a time where we would be able to write in a way that was unconscious of gender, huge inroads have been made in the world of fiction and reality for women and gender-fluid identities, as well as other marginalised groups. Woolf's influence on future generations of writers to create more inclusive spaces for women and other non-masculine

genders is notable. In Andemahr's research that connects contemporary writers' experiments blurring gender boundaries and disrupting conventional writing forms with predecessors, she links back to Brophy's gender-fluid fiction *In Transit* (1969) and Woolf as influential in this genre. Andermahr claims Woolf's focus on "the deconstruction or blurring of gender binaries...is characteristic of the work of contemporary women writers such as Angela Carter, Michèle Roberts, Sarah Waters, and Smith herself" (251) and describes how "Virginia Woolf's exuberant fantasy of gender transformation" influenced Brophy's work which has become "part of a longer tradition of experimentalism within women's writing, which continues today" (250). Writers such as Ali Smith have written paradigm-changing works that allow us to be more conscious of gender and reflect again on the concealed nature of our perceptions (Smith 249).

The power of heterotopic spaces to reorganise and shift paradigms is crucial to making changes in *real* places. Marginalised people's use of heterotopic spaces, such as fiction, where they can reorganise perspectives free from the constraints of the *real* world, provides an opportunity to substantiate themselves into existence in places where they are excluded. Abdi describes this journey into new spaces:

we are increasingly witnessing the inclusion of women writers from the postcolonial world, discursive, ideological, and institutional structures play a significant role in shaping the politics of this inclusion...more attention should be paid to the spatial paradigms of the artistic and fictional works. The same narratives that we repeatedly hear about certain geographies construct the way we imagine those geographies (82).

Modern heterotopic spaces can be found in social media, where people can mix in an *other* space, creating groups and discussions that transcend the limits of their physical world access to such networks. This is an example of how Foucault's own concept of heterotopia has changed in synchrony with the culture it exists in to include virtual reality spaces. The internet is "a space of illusion" that exposes *real* spaces and a space "inside of which human

life is partitioned, as still more illusory” (27). Like a mirror, the space of the internet reflects and distorts society back at us from an *other* space, a “space of illusion” where the boundaries between the *mythic* and *real* are blurred. The power dynamics of the physical world are inverted in the online world. Social media provides space where identity can be substantiated into existence by intersecting marginalised groups and transgressing on dominant groups (who themselves can create heterotopic spaces where problematic concepts such as racism and misogyny are supported) and power structures from a distance. It is a new heterotopic space from which dialogue about gender and identity proliferates, where barriers to marginal communities' participation are more easily overcome, making it difficult to suppress their voices. Raun's article on minority groups' use of social media to increase their visibility focuses "on social media users who actively draw on their own identity work as minorities" and use “online visibility as a platform for activist and commercial purposes” (3). In the ever-expanding metaverse, it is now possible to create a new identity, a pathway to experiencing different perspectives and creating discursive ideas about fluidity or recognition of identity without gender as the primary construct. Van Merwe claims, "In the contemporary climate, where physiological gender is itself in a state of flux, mere aesthetic representation of the user is far less important than the authenticity of interactions and relationships built in the metaverse space" (8). This new heterotopic space where identity can be what Woolf imagined nearly one hundred years ago is a space where people can be unconscious of gender.

The challenge to write in a form that is “unconscious' of gender” is being consciously crafted. Currently, writing and publishing opportunities for women and gender-diverse people are much more accessible than in Woolf's time, partly due to women like her who made space for those who followed. Feminine writing that subverts the male canon is investigated by Chris Steyaert in "Three Women. A Kiss. A Life", with interest in ways "to connect feminine

writing with queer(ing) life" (163). Steyaert resists writing in the conformist structure that is expected of academic writing and instead presents their chapter in a way that "reading it is (hopefully) like wandering through a hall of mirrors" (164). This connection with Woolf's use of the mirror and subversion of writing traditions and conventions links nicely with Steyaert's comment that "if writing takes difference fully into account, a queering of life becomes imaginable and something different and new can emerge" (165). Woolf also imagined something different and new emerging and contributed to paradigm shifts in how we think about identity through heterotopic spaces. Breaking temporal boundaries, Woolf continues to inspire different ways of thinking about gender through the heterotopia of her fiction. We can still look into her looking glass and see ourselves reflected.

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Still Life

Rachel Offord

Anthea

No, she wouldn't kill herself; yes, she had a safety plan. She was well-versed in what to say so the crisis team could tick all the boxes and send her back into the world. That's all they needed to hear – they had nothing else to offer anyway. They couldn't help her. She just needed to go home and sleep it off. Anthea was sick of talking. She was sick of going through the motions in a tired system of worn-out, emotionless people.

She watched the old lady wearing the floral robe lying alone on her hospital bed through a gap in the curtains. She was an unusual colour. In the next cubicle, the drunk woman with messy hair and dirty feet moaned as she detoxed. A nurse stared into her computer's blue light, pressing keys and reading the screen with an outstretched finger.

'Just waiting on your medication, then you're free to go,' she said to Anthea with a wan smile. Anthea stared back impassively.

Leaving the eerie yellow light of the hospital, Anthea breathed in the fresh night air—her body and mind felt like a cold, wrung-out rag. The light glow from her phone illuminated her little space in the dark. It was 4 am. The Uber was waiting at the loading zone.

'The Museum?' The driver looked at her with a raised eyebrow. She nodded as she slipped into the back seat and hunched into the shadows.

Her car looked lonely in the empty museum car park. After ten hours in the emergency room, Anthea felt she had finally reached a getaway car. Leaning back into the driver's seat, she watched the headlights of the Uber slice the darkness as it drove away. Anthea felt still and quiet inside. Fumbling in the dark, she found the familiar feel of her cigarette packet on the passenger seat – her hand relaxed around them. She wanted to text Sarah to explain what had happened as if she could retell it in some way that made it seem

like it made sense or that having her understand would somehow feel better. She checked her phone, but nothing from Sarah. This was what drove her crazy.

Everyone was probably asleep, blissfully oblivious to what she had been through. It was perhaps best that way. Right now, it seemed too much to try and articulate the crisis. She felt more alone than ever. She drove towards the Golden Arches shining in the night sky. McDonald's was always there in the dark hours.

'Welcome to McDonald's; please place your order.' It felt soothing to hear a voice, even though she wasn't sure if it was a robot or a real person.

'Sweet and sour sauce with the nuggets?' A different voice to the one who welcomed her; the first one must have been a recording. Why did she always say yes to the sauce? What were the other sauces? She wouldn't use it. She'd only liked the mustard sauce they used to have, but they'd stopped offering it years ago. She would eat her nuggets while driving, without sauce.

A worker materialised, a ghost in the dimly lit booth behind the sliding window. The night shift at McDonald's was different to the day shift. It seemed like they were all paused in the shadows until customers arrived. The window slid open, and a hand reached out, offering a white paper napkin wrapped around a plastic rectangle of sauce, followed by the eft-pos machine.

'Morning, long night?' the worker asked. They looked past her into the night as if there was something more interesting to look at than her.

'Yeah,' Anthea said with a nervous laugh that made her hate herself. She swiped her card and drove to the second window. The light within the building glowed out onto her. The noises of machines whirring and people moving about were reassuring. Anthea wondered

how many people came through here during the dark and desperate morning hours, feeling shattered and alone like she did.

The reliable normality inside the restaurant was something she could see, something she could smell, something she could taste, something to bring her back. The uniforms with black hats and red shirts had an air of authority and reliability, like a police officer or firefighter. The McDonald's smell wafted from the drive-thru window and into her open car window. Salt, hot oil, meat, fries. Here a cheeseburger always tasted the same. She had split away from herself, a separation of the body and spirit, but now the two could mingle over a meal. She'd only had cups of tea for the last eight hours. Hospital cups of tea tasted ill.

Another hand came out and passed her a hot chocolate. Anthea moved her mobile phone and some rubbish out of a cup holder and slotted it in. She'd made a space on the passenger seat to place the brown paper bag which held her nuggets and cheeseburger so she could reach into the bag and eat the nuggets while she drove somewhere to stop and eat.

Parked where she used to play on the swings and slides with Sarah while their Mum watched from the car, Anthea ate her meal in the darkness. It was a shame she only got to see this time of night during emergencies. The houses were sleeping, the roads quiet, and traffic lights lazed at their job. There was a beauty about the stillness. On an ordinary night, she might not appreciate what this moment held.

The museum hadn't appreciated her 'psychotic episode'.

She felt like her insides had been excavated, and her mind struggled to process it. There would be consequences. She had been a 'public nuisance'. These things were supposed to happen in another place. Unseen. She could still hear the police reporting her status, 'it's a 1M'. Mental. A data point. As usual. Even her friends were tired of hearing about her crisis moments and had dwindled away. They posted positive mental health

affirmations on their social media with #mentalhealth, but that wasn't any help. She could feel their presence only thinly, like a memory whispering in the distance.

All this handwringing and discussion about mental health problems drove her crazy. No one could know what it was like to be her, but they talked about mental illness as if it was an identity that would be useful to wipe out. It was fine in psychological thrillers and dramas, as if being mentally unwell was part of a plotline that would soon be resolved or a quirk you could be rescued from by a sane person who becomes the hero. But in real life no one wants to see it, especially when they realise it won't be cured by good intentions.

Anthea stared blindly into the dark as she unwrapped her burger and dropped the wrapper back into the paper bag. She checked her phone, but didn't want to read the many notifications lighting up the screen. She knew Sarah wouldn't have commented. It was like existing in another place, in a body she wasn't in charge of when she was like that. How could she piece the story together when she didn't know what was real and what wasn't? Afterwards, when she'd been processed by the police and medicated by the crisis team, there was this emptiness, guilt, fear, and attention she didn't want. People looked at her with pity, wondering, 'what shall we do with her?' 'why does she do this?' Shame and defeat followed, a sucking feeling like someone had pulled a plug out of her soul. The fractured story would sound crazy. She *was* crazy, but Sarah would be robotically kind and understanding. It was a role she fell into automatically. They'd run out of words for this stuff.

The birds started singing their usual morning chorus. It was those things that happened every day she counted on. The sun always came up, the birds always greeted the day, 'hope was the thing with feathers'. . . . If she could just rewind the day and do things differently...But some things couldn't be undone. You couldn't rewind your life and grow up differently. She had dreamed and wished for it many times, but it wasn't possible.

Sarah

Being woken by a Fairy Queen made them think they were still asleep and dreaming; their mum looked so beautiful.

‘Wakey, wakey, rise and shine,’ she said, waving her wand over them as she sprinkled fairy dust on their pillows. Anthea leapt out of bed first and jumped up and down, clapping with excitement. Sarah, half-smiling, was wary and watchful.

‘Let’s not muck about my fairy princesses; I have a royal breakfast for you,’ mum said.

‘Why?’ Sarah asked. Mum laughed.

‘Do we have to have a reason to have fun? It’s because I love you, and every day is a good day to be a fairy princess,’ she said with a wink.

Sarah had a bad feeling in her tummy. She kept one eye on her mum, the ‘Fairy Queen’. She got frightened when her mum was too happy; things didn’t feel like they usually did. Sarah felt like a rabbit frozen with fear.

‘I thought you didn’t believe in fairies,’ Sarah said.

Anthea wriggled into her fairy dress, blowing kisses and giggling with the Fairy Queen. Then, she danced out of their room after the Fairy Queen.

The house had changed overnight. Light bounced magically around the lounge, where flickering candles in jars were set in a circle. Cushions and pillows on the floor were arranged like a sleepover party. Dolls and teddy bears sat together happily. The table where they usually ate their meals had been transformed. The chairs were elaborately decorated thrones, and a feast of their favourite foods was spread enticingly around the table with a beautiful fairy cake in the middle.

Anthea jabbered away to the Fairy Queen breathlessly while bouncing up and down on the tips of her toes. Sarah followed quietly, her fairy dress drooping sadly on her thin

body, her mouth a tight line. She noticed some of the fabric on the thrones was the same as her favourite dress, the chairs were painted bright blue, and all the cupboards in the kitchen were open. It looked like someone had thrown everything on the floor, she thought.

Anthea kept looking at Sarah with twinkling excited eyes. Sarah could tell Anthea thought she was being a stick in the mud.

They sat down to the breakfast feast and minded that they were on their best behaviour by not spilling any food on their pretty dresses as Auntie June had taught them. Good little girls don't get in trouble. They just needed to be good girls; that would make mum happy. Sarah picked at her cake, and Anthea devoured hers greedily.

'Don't be so greedy, Anthea,' Sarah said disdainfully. A handful of cake smacked into the side of Sarah's head. Sarah looked up and saw her mum in her fairy queen outfit climbing onto the table and stamping all over the food.

'We can be greedy if we want, we can get dirty if we want, we don't need to be good girls,' she yelled and smeared cake all over her dress. Anthea and Sarah stared at each other wide-eyed. Sarah left the table, pounding her feet angrily as she went.

Anthea jumped up on the table with mum. She lay down in the food and rubbed her face in it. They had food in their hair and smeared over their clothes; still, they ate, licked and laughed their heads off.

Anthea chased the Fairy Queen into the lounge. Feathers filled the air like snowflakes and stuck to their sticky bodies as they pounded each other with pillows. They jumped over couches and chairs and spun around and around in dizzying circles. Anthea stared into her mum's eyes, watching them crinkle at the edges, her skin shining in the candlelight, her smile directed at Anthea as they laughed together. Anthea felt they were connected in a special way as if her mum was smiling into her insides. She felt bursting with happiness; she would never

be sad again, she thought. She imagined this was what it must feel like to be drunk. This was the happiest day of her life. She never wanted it to stop.

‘Let’s fly,’ Anthea said as she scrambled up on the back of the couch.

‘Yes, let’s fly,’ the Fairy Queen said, throwing fairy dust over them. They held hands and prepared to jump.

‘STOP’. Sarah was standing with her fists clenched by her sides, her eyes blazing and black. Anthea and the Fairy Queen looked at each other and laughed.

‘You can’t stop us, Sarah; we’re going to fly,’ Anthea said. She was so happy; she felt sure she would be able to fly. She would not let Sarah stop her.

Anthea launched herself from the couch. She flew like a bird high above her house. She swooped down over it, then looped back up into the sky. Her wings felt strong and reliable. The sensation of flying was like swimming; she felt like she was floating but, in the air, instead of water. She wanted to fly down next to the window so the Fairy Queen could see her flying past. She pointed herself towards it and flapped her wings. She could see the outline of the Fairy Queen standing in the window. She got bigger the closer she got. Anthea wondered when she would notice her and if she’d recognise her in her bird shape. The window was very close now, and the Fairy Queen’s shocked face loomed large in front of her. Why did her face look so scared? She was so happy just a second ago. Anthea didn’t know how to stop. She hit the window headfirst with a sickening thud.

Her eyes felt too heavy to open. Her head felt sore. Was she a bird? Did she fly into a window?

Auntie June’s worried face was the first thing she saw when she opened her eyes. She wasn’t at home. She was in a strange, bright white place, in a bed surrounded by curtains. Anthea lifted her hand to touch her head and found it had been bandaged and that she had hands, not wings.

‘What happened to my head?’

‘I told you not to do it,’ Sarah said. Sarah’s angry face reminded her.

Auntie June explained, using her calm voice, that Anthea had cut her head open when she hit the windowsill while trying to fly. She was in the hospital now, where they had fixed her.

‘Where’s Mum?’ Sarah and Auntie June looked at each other.

‘She’s seeing the doctors,’ Auntie June said.

‘Did she cut herself too?’ Anthea asked.

‘No, she’s just feeling unwell. She’ll be okay soon. We’ll go to McDonald’s when we’re finished, okay?’

Regina

Regina splashed cold water on her face and stared at her dripping visage in the mirror. She often found herself staring motionless into the mirror. What was she looking at, and why was she so mesmerised by her reflection? It was a strange manifestation of her spirit and soul, her body looking back at her. Her skin was breaking out again. People said she was beautiful, but they never saw her looking like this, raw and unmade. What was it worth in terms of life - to look pretty? It wasn’t something she had achieved; it was worth nothing.

There was toothpaste smeared in the basin, a stray hair lazing across the white bowl made the porcelain look cracked, towels lay in a crumpled heap on the floor, and she stood unevenly on the bunched-up bath mat that was wet and emitting a musty smell. Cleaning the dirty bathroom loomed over her. She’d been thinking about cleaning it for weeks. Last week she’d brought the bleach, a bucket and some rags in, but she got distracted by the mirror, so the bucket still sat in the bathroom corner. She lived in fear of an unexpected guest knocking at the door. What would people think if they saw the state of her bathroom? If everyone left

her alone, she wouldn't need to worry about what she was supposed to be. She felt so tired and thinking about cleaning made her feel exhausted.

Regina picked at the frayed thread on the sleeve of her dressing gown. The sun's angle hitting her windows revealed a haze of dust; it was irritating. So she stood in the kitchen staring out the dirty window while she chewed salty, crunchy pretzels from the handful she had grabbed. God, she hated herself sometimes, but not as much as she hated everybody else.

She watched the neighbour pruning her roses. She chopped wayward branches and discarded blooms that weren't perfect. Her decisiveness was intriguing. Regina couldn't decide if she should kill a fly, how to do it, or if it was normal to grieve for the fly. She couldn't decide whether she wanted to weed her garden or let it grow wild, so she did nothing and kept wondering time away and hating herself. The neighbour's garden was as manicured as she was. Regina hated her. She nicknamed her Birdhead because of her piercing eyes and beak-like nose. Regina imagined her stalking around the garden, savagely pecking bugs and worms. Why did she look so content? Why was she so productive at this time of the morning? Why did she have make-up on and perfectly coiffed hair? The early 'bird'. Why were people so fond of her? It made Regina want to smash Birdhead's brains in.

The girls ran into the front yard, disrupting her quiet disapproval. Birdhead waved and gave a condescending smile when she caught Regina watching. Regina turned away. Birdhead undoubtedly noticed her dusty windows; she'd probably talk to the other neighbours about it. Well, fuck them if that's all they've got to talk about.

June would be arriving soon, so Regina scooped up the dirty dishes from the sitting room, half-empty cups from the dining room table, and wiped the surfaces. Then she grabbed a box, stuffed in all the mess and debris she could find, and hid the box in the hallway cupboard, where it would silently condemn her, waking her in her sleep. Her sister, June,

visited Regina and the girls regularly. She always came on the same day, at the same time, because she knew Regina didn't appreciate unexpected visits. She used the word 'struggling' to describe Regina's state – a kind way of saying she was useless.

Being a mother was supposed to be fulfilling, but Regina felt terrified from the moment she held her baby daughter for the first time. She was scared she would drop her, or hold her too tight because she was scared of dropping her. She worried that every move she made would hurt her girls. She couldn't look after herself properly, yet she was in charge of two precious young lives who relied on her. She was tired all the time. She just wanted to sleep. People thought she wasn't trying, but she tried so hard, way harder than what most knew was possible.

June helped, but even she got frustrated sometimes. It was a look on her face or a particular word that grew and grew as it took flight from June's mouth and nestled into Regina's brain. When Regina couldn't stop thinking about it, she'd ask June to explain herself, and then new words would take flight. 'Obsessed, didn't mean it like that, why do you do this, calm down, stop overthinking.' Regina wondered if June understood what it was like to be her. She wished she could be a good sister. Sisters were supposed to support, be friends, or hate each other. What June and Regina had was more like a mother-child relationship – Regina resented the imbalance.

She ruined times that should be happy times for June, like her last birthday when they planned to go out for dinner with the girls, two sets of sisters. She told herself she could do it, sweeping away the heavy feeling that she couldn't. Her head became a clock, slowly and terrifyingly ticking down the days till June's birthday for two weeks. Then, when the time came, something in her brain detonated. She dragged her body through the motions of getting ready and stood at the door dressed in going-out clothes, her make-up an impassive mask, like a mannequin in a window. She stood still as if, through not moving, she could stop her

mind from racing. But the phone trilled and made her body jump with every incessant ring; the phone rang forever, getting louder and louder.

Was it the trill that was loudest now or the moment between the trills that was more agonising? Regina stayed still and stared at it, waiting for it to stop. The girls looked at her and talked, but she couldn't understand what they were saying. They moved as if in slow motion; their edges were blurred, and their voices echoed and distorted like a different language heard over a loudspeaker. They clawed at her. She felt like a zebra being dragged down by a pride of hungry lions. She needed June. She stood still, her ears listening for the sound of June's car. She even stood still when Birdhead materialised in front of her looking at her with her beady eyes as if she was a fat worm and babbling away at Regina as if she should be able to understand her bird language. She was passive while June hushed the girls before leading her quietly into her bedroom. Her silent tears blurred her vision, so there were multiple ghost Junes dispensing medication and wiping her hair off her face.

'It's okay, Gina, it couldn't be helped. I know you tried,' she whispered, but Regina remembered June's disappointed face. They never talked about it later.

Anthea

Anthea stared into the steamy bathroom mirror. In movies, women look slick and sexy when they get out of the shower. Anthea looked pink, sweaty, and blotchy. Her hair was stuck down to her head in places, like a bird's nest in others. The steam created a mildly helpful soft focus. Better lighting would accentuate all her worst features. She'd be able to see every pore and wrinkle line that lazed across her face.

Anthea could feel her cells ticking away like a stopwatch. She watched like a helpless spectator in the cruel yet alluring mirror that held her gaze; it was a bitter relationship. It was

right there. The unbearable truth of the slow descent of the human face. And Anthea stood in front of it as if at an altar, making deals. Her eyes were still nice. She scanned her face for imperfections. There was a dent forming halfway between the middle and the corner of her lower lip. Eventually, it would become a deep wrinkle, but at the moment, it looked like a gangster scar that only revealed itself in particular lights with specific movements. She traced her finger over it. For now, she was fond of it. The midline of her face had what beauty columns described as ‘patchy redness’. Recently it had been the reason she’d started using a light foundation to ‘even her tone.’ There was a faint silver scar on her forehead.

The youthfulness serum she’d bought sat in its bright blue glass bottle. *Immortelle Precieuse Crème*. Anthea hoped it would work like a magic potion and make her immortal and precious. ‘Gently pat it onto your skin,’ the smooth-skinned beautician had instructed. Anthea patted it on, added an extra dollop, and smoothed it upwards from her jawline to her cheekbones. Her face felt itchy and greasy, like she was melting. It was nothing like the smooth, matt faces of the women in the ads she’d seen. She despised herself for thinking she could look like the flawless women sensually moisturizing their faces on billboards, in magazines, and on TV. Probably none of them looked like that in real life either. Why did she buy the expensive bottle of greasy lies?

She’d re-dyed her hair three weeks ago. The colour on the box said ‘Plum Lovely’. It would be at peak lushness when it dried. It was always a bit meh the first week after getting her hair coloured – too fresh, a bit obvious with tell-tale dye marks around her hairline, and then a week before re-colouring, it started looking lifeless and drab. Everyone looked weird when their hair was wet.

The morning routine in the bathroom was not a luxurious beauty makeover moment; it was more like a wrestling match between her private and public face. Big things that were socially disastrous were the most important. Was there a bogey sticking out of her nose, an

unattended pimple waving its white flag, visible ear wax, were her pores too big. . .? Then things like whether her hair was sitting right, would she need to cover her tell-tale grey skin with make-up, were her lips too dry? What about that hair she always had to pluck out of her chin? Every day she made sure she uniformly looked like herself; everyone did. If they didn't, it was a way to know something was wrong. Anthea didn't want people to know something was wrong.

She smiled at herself and inspected her teeth. She had good teeth; some were yellowing, but they were nothing to complain about. It was her weak chin that let the whole face down. She wished she had a stronger chin; hers was lazy and lacked definition. She looked at it from various angles. The side profile was the worst; her jawline sagged down from the chin and lapped against her neck. It gave her head a shabby appearance. She sucked her tongue up to her top palate and lifted her head slightly; that was better. She wondered how other people saw her and which of her features stood out. Did people think of her as 'Anthea with the weak chin'? Her sister had bought a rubber ball-type exercise tool called *Jawsercise* that she had to bite on rhythmically to tighten up her jaw and chin area. It looked like a sex toy in her mouth. Anthea thought about her chomping on the rubber toy jaw-tightening device and imagined it squeaking like halloumi cheese. Stupid. But, if Sarah's chin stayed tighter than Anthea's, she'd secretly get one.

The bathroom fan started grinding. It was a temperamental piece of machinery that fluctuated, seemingly without reason, between quiet and angry. Anthea covered her ears with her hands and switched it off quickly; she hated it. It was an assault on her senses. Loud extractor fans made her think of bad things like horror movies, where a dirty, noisy fan was usually an ominous sign of things to come. It gave her a bad feeling inside. It reminded her that she'd had the dream again last night.

There was the glossy woodgrain casket surrounded by lilies. Her Mum, at rest, looked beautiful and ugly at the same time. Regina had an unreal look, like she was one of the tan-coloured plastic mannequins that stared out at the world from inside department store windows. Anthea was looking down at her. Was she breathing? Did her eye flicker just slightly? It could be just a trick, she might leap out at her soon, and they'd all go home together laughing. A tear dropped from Anthea's face onto her mum's bright red mouth, and Anthea saw her lips move. Like in the movies, this was the part where a droplet of despair and longing could bring a person back to life. Finally, what Anthea fervently wished for, was coming true. She watched her mum's eyes open as if awakening from a dream. She looked confused on her face as if she didn't recognise Anthea. 'Mummy,' Anthea said as she threw herself towards her. But her voice sounded different, and when she looked down at herself, she was not wearing the little white funeral dress Auntie June had dressed her in that she said made her look like one of Mummy's angels. Instead, Anthea had adult hands and feet. She could see herself as if through a haze; she looked like her mum, except older and lumpy. But how could a mum not recognise her own child?

She had woken in a cold sweat, her heart pounding in her ears, and the full feeling of loss in her chest that only lay dormant for brief periods. She knew this dream like a bad friend. Maybe she should visit the museum today, she could visit her friends. They were always there for her.

Her phone vibrated on the bathroom windowsill. She checked her notifications: 'up to 50% off selected beauty products, TODAY ONLY.'

A disappointing niggles tugged at her insides. The first communication of the day was just a preprogrammed sale notification from Farmers Department Store.

She looked around her for an 'Insta' worthy scene. She pushed debris on her bathroom shelf out of the way. A bottle of perfume toppled off the shelf and shattered in the

bath. Anthea felt her body surge with rage. ‘FUCK!’ This day was already against her. She stared down at the shards of glass lying in a puddle of pink-tinged perfume. She needed a change. A change would make her feel good. Maybe she’d paint the bathroom at the weekend, buy some new towels and accessories, and finish the look with plants and Moroccan-looking things. She could do a before and after photoshoot. She could become an interior decorator just from the popularity of her Instagram renovations. In a new bathroom, she would feel better.

She took several snapshots of her moisturiser, serum, and lip balm and scrolled through to see which one looked best. She tried several filters before posting it on Instagram with #morningroutine. At least here, she could decide what parts of her life people could see; she could be the person she wanted to be. Someone with a clean shelf, expensive beauty products, and an interior decorator with healthy morning routines. Why not? Everyone else curated their lives.

Regina

Regina smiled while watching Birdhead shoo away the stray cat that dug holes in her garden and defecated around the roses. Making hissing sounds and spraying her plant mister, Birdhead chased the cat off her property. Regina noticed how the sun shining through the misty water created little rainbows. The cat was nonchalant, taunting Birdhead by staying just out of reach in the tree on the street. Sometimes, late at night, Regina tucked food scraps quietly over her fence into Birdheads yard to entice the cat back. A cat would beat a bird. Regina wasn’t very fond of cats, but this cat was on her team; they had a common enemy. Once, she convinced June to take the cat to the vet when it was sick. You can tell a sick cat when you see it. The sagging way they walk, the dishevelled fur, acrid smell, and cloudy, defeated eyes. When June visited, Regina felt she was being assessed like a sick cat.

She leaned into the mirror, quickly applying some lipstick and brushing her hair back into a ponytail as June and the girls came tumbling through the front door together. It was nice to see June. She always enveloped Regina into a warm embrace and kissed her cheek. It was that consistent homely warmth and her distinctive *Bluebell* perfume that she and the girls melted into.

‘Hi Gina, I found these darling little girls outside and couldn’t resist popping in to play with them.’ ‘I’m sure the girls are delighted, aren’t you girls?’

Why did they talk in this artificial-sounding way in front of the girls? It felt like a performance, curated discussions accompanied by larger-than-life smiles and facial movements. Did June ever think about it and wonder why they did it? The girls didn’t know what day of the week it was, so they were yet to figure out that June came at the same time every week, yet for some reason, June kept up the serendipitous facade that she had popped in because she saw the girls playing outside. Regina felt guilty for being an accomplice in creating this unreal world for her daughters. She didn’t want to hurt them.

Regina switched the kettle on, avoiding June’s eye as she appraised her, the girls, and the house. She was subtle, but Regina knew what June was looking for. It was a routine that Regina narrated in her mind; *hair washed and brushed, clothes on, girls clean and happy, dishes done*. She felt like an animal at the Zoo. She was used to being looked at and performing to expectations. June would notice her skin too. Sometimes she said, ‘your skin looks healthy,’ and other times, Regina noticed June’s eyes lingering on her face briefly before she dropped them away and said nothing. Regina tried as hard as possible to appear like she was coping so June wouldn’t have to worry so much. She poured boiling hot water into the shiny metal teapot and watched the steam rise from the spout and disappear into the air. She arranged vanilla wine biscuits on a pretty plate.

‘Shall we play housemaids today, girls?’ June said.

‘Yes, yes,’ the girls jumped up and down with delight.

Regina stared at her distorted reflection in the teapot and imagined herself inside it like a genie in a bottle. She thought about how she could disappear out the spout like steam and float away. ‘I was thinking you could play mechanics,’ Regina said, turning to challenge June’s plans. June’s face hardened as she turned to Regina tight-lipped.

‘God, Regina, why do you have to do that?’ she said in an angry whisper.

‘Why do ‘you’ do that?’ Regina said.

‘What?’

‘Make my girls believe it’s fun to be housemaids. They’re smart girls.’

Regina was a fly in June’s rose-scented ointment, but she got a sick sense of satisfaction from plucking out the sister she used to fight with as a child from beneath June’s happy adult veneer. She wasn’t so different from Regina, really.

‘Well, even smart girls need tidy houses, and no amount of feminism will ever change that,’ June said.

Regina felt anger inside her growing uncontrollably, rising like expanding dough and stretching her skin to its limits. She took a deep breath and tried to maintain her composure, but she was seething. What was June saying? What did she mean? Regina’s mind processed the words rapidly and churned out ideas like a telegram machine: Girls should tidy houses, her house was untidy, feminism is stupid, Regina is a feminist, so she is stupid. Why did June say that? It was to hurt her. But is that what June really thought? Was it the truth? Was she a dirty, stupid feminist? Regina had started this, but June always pushed back too hard. It wasn’t a fair fight. It would wash off June like water off a duck’s back, but she knew it would ruin Regina’s whole day.

Why was June always so happy while Regina felt angry and full of despair? Why did life just work out for her, as if it was easy? Everything was so unfair. She wanted to see June

lose her composure just once. She wanted to watch her come apart like a tree losing its leaves in Autumn. She wanted June to fall into a pile and for Regina to scoop her up and put her back together. She wanted to look at June sympathetically, rub her on the back, and tell her everything would be okay. She wanted June to feel the feeling deep inside her, like a black acorn growing roots into her bones, that everything would not be okay. She wanted June to discover the monster under the bed was real. She loved June, but she didn't understand.

Her heart was racing. She couldn't get a proper breath in; her legs felt like they couldn't keep holding her up. She was so tired. She needed to escape this space before she lost control.

In her bedroom, she watched the sun streaming through her windows and listened to the sound of June and the girls' playing housemaids in the background. She threw herself back onto her bed and bit down on her clenched fist, the pain of her bite satisfyingly physical. She watched the red crescents from her bite bloom on her skin. She could hear June, her voice was high and well-paced, like a schoolteacher when she talked to the girls, but Regina could hear the smile in it. She sounded genuinely happy. Regina screamed into her pillow, sat up, and beat her fists into the mattress. The effort to empty herself of too much of everything was exhausting. Her skin and soul seemed stretched thin, so she felt constantly on the verge of bursting like a dam that breaks and empties itself forcefully onto the earth.

At least here in her room, nobody could hurt her. Nothing was expected from her here. She would lie on her bed in the half shade, half light, and sleep the anger away. Sleep was peace. She was so tired. She selected Emily Dickinson's poetry collection from her bedside table. She leafed through the poems, hoping the answers she needed would magically appear even though she wasn't sure what her question was. She stared out her window at the birch tree outside and watched the birds jumping from branch to branch. *'Hope is the thing*

with feathers,' she repeated. She thought about stormy nights, their small defenceless bodies, and toothpick-like legs clinging to the tree for dear life. *Hope*. She pictured the stray cat stealthily crawling up the branches under cover of darkness, trying to get the warm baby birds and the frantic mother bird trying to save them, blind in the dark with only wings and a beak to defend them with.

She retrieved a pencil from her bedside drawer and wrote underneath, '*Hope is the thing with feathers,*': '*Terror is a half-dead bird beating its wings against the dirt*'.

Anthea

Anthea balanced her coffee cup in one hand, steering her car and managing the indicator with the other hand. A blackbird swooped in front of her, causing her to tap the brakes. Coffee sloshed up the sides of her cup, and she felt frustrated that there was always something that caused her to spill coffee on herself or on the car interior. She always meant to clean it up later but never did. Instead, it would congeal over time with dust and leaves sticking to it, adding to the unpleasant aroma.

She didn't care about cars. She liked a cheap, reliable one she could drive until it died. McDonald's wrappers, stray socks, dog poop bags, hair ties, pens, and dog hair littered the inside of her car. There was also a thriving colony of spiders with their webs set up in strategic areas. She only made an effort to clean and freshen her car up when she knew someone else would be in it, and even then, it depended on who it was. She noticed how Sarah's lips smoothed into a thin line when she looked at Anthea's car. It gave her a bad feeling in her guts, knowing that Sarah was judging her, but not as bad as when someone who didn't know her so well saw it. She considered getting her car windows tinted but couldn't afford it. She made a habit of parking her car somewhat removed from where she was going, especially when it got too covered in bird shit. Sometimes she had to duck down below the

window if she saw someone she knew so they wouldn't know it was her car. Time spent cleaning a car was a waste of life anyway.

Anthea walked briskly through the sliding doors at the Four Square shop and went straight to the flower stand that occupied a place between the door and the counters. Inside, the shop was familiar; she knew where everything was and how everything worked. Cellophane and coloured waxed paper gave the flower bouquets a cheap look; florists' bouquets sat more proudly. Sometimes the people at the Four Square seemed not like people but like props that moved about. The glass doors at the entrance to the store slid open and closed as people approached them. Every time the doors slid open, a person popped in or out. Inside, they shopped; outside, they arrived and departed. It was all very transactional. Anthea often watched and tried to imagine all the different lives they were returning to with their shopping.

She recognised some familiar faces shopping there but didn't 'really' know them. They were locals who maybe recognised your face, your car, perhaps even which street you lived in. Or was it just her who noticed these things while other people didn't see her? What if she was known as 'the girl with the dirty car'? If someone looked familiar, should she smile, or would they think she was weird? It was hard to figure out what the rules were.

She saw the woman who lived at the end of the street's dog tied up outside the shop. It was the third dog the family had had since Anthea lived in the neighbourhood. The last one was a golden labrador. They'd painted their house recently. They owned a cleaning company – Anthea had seen the vans parked outside. At one stage, she'd seen the woman and her husband at Weight Watchers, which, as it had turned out, had been a temporary solution for all of them. They seemed to be friends with everyone at Weight Watchers, while Anthea slinked in and out with her unrecognisable face. She saw the dog woman at the

counter chatting animatedly with the checkout operator. The woman was turning away from the checkout and in her direction.

Should she make eye contact and smile, or just ignore her? She didn't know what to do, so she just stared intensely at the flowers, touching the cellophane with her fingers as if doing some sort of quality check while the woman walked past. She felt like a rude, moronic bitch. This would join the list of things she thought about repeatedly, like dumb things she said to shop workers or strangers she bumped into that got stuck constantly replaying in her head. She could already feel the red tide of shame colouring her skin.

Sometimes thinking about all the interactions and how she would manage them stopped her from going to the shop. Why did these loose social interactions have to be so complicated? It was exhausting. Sarah would have known what to do. She was naturally good at social things. She could enter any place and take charge. When Anthea was with her, she felt protected and powerful. A definitive rule book that answered these social questions once and for all was what Anthea wanted.

Jan and 'itching' Jill were working the counter. They moved as if in a trance, like ghosts moving around in a computer game. Anthea didn't bother trying to catch their eye or say 'hi'. She used to try and engage with them and build a friendly relationship but had given up after many 'how are you doing?' enquiries had resulted in one-syllable answers, making her feel small, stupid and rejected. She fantasized about arriving at the shop to a chorus of 'hi' like a scene from *Cheers*. It didn't feel good to go to a shop for twenty years and feel invisible.

But why had they been so friendly to the dog woman? What was so special about her anyway? Why were neither of them friendly to Anthea? It annoyed her that they liked the dog woman more than her. Maybe she should become friends with her, and then the shop workers would include her in their friendly chat. What was the dog woman's name? She

could look her up on Facebook and see what sort of life she had. Who was she friends with. . .? This was her local shop. What gave other people a larger sense of belonging here than her? She just couldn't figure it out.

Cream-filled doughnuts displayed under translucent plastic domes sat on the counter. Anthea couldn't see clearly through the cloth covering them, but she knew what they were. Lightly dusted, caramel-coloured, light and airy doughnuts filled with fresh cream and a garnish of raspberry jam in the centre like a bright red kiss. Whenever Anthea bought one, she always managed to drop a splodge of cream in her lap that left a grease stain and a dusting of icing sugar over the front of her clothes that was impossible to brush off. She stared at them under the dome, half delighted and half annoyed. If she hadn't seen them, the mental turmoil of whether she did or did not want one wouldn't be happening in her mind.

The Four Square uniforms were rusty orange, making any person wearing them look washed out. Itching Jill had eczema and scratched all the time. The skin flakes that floated around as Jill scratched and scratched made Anthea shudder, and she found herself stuck between wanting to look away and not being able to. She needed to monitor the situation. Where were the skin flakes landing? Someone eating a pie in their car might also eat a piece of Itchy Jill's skin, or was there a light dusting of her skin on the doughnuts? Did accidentally eating someone's skin make you a cannibal? What amount of skin ingesting tipped the scale towards cannibalism? Was it related to intent? If you were to eat a person, you'd want it to be a healthy, young one, Anthea thought.

Jan had a sinking pale face, dark circles around her deep-set eyes, and wispy brown hair. Anthea thought Jan probably ate plain dinners and watched *Coronation Street* from the comfort of a brown velvet Lazy Boy recliner she'd scrimped and saved for. She pictured Jan living in a two-bedroom, spotless unit with neutral carpet, sensible homemade furnishings, and a soft cover on her toilet seat. She probably knitted while on her breaks, but not in a cool,

hipster way – in an old-fashioned nana way. A yuck way. Jan’s perfectly ironed smock and well-clipped nails made Anthea wonder if even the insides of her ears were clean and why she would be so detailed about these aspects of her appearance while seemingly skipping any style or joie de vivre. Anthea only ever imagined Jan’s private life at home, and her public life in the Four Square as if she were a doll getting moved between a house and a shop, simply lying dormant the rest of the time. Then, one day, she felt worlds colliding when she saw Jan at the supermarket doing her groceries. Anthea smiled, nodded and subtly glanced in her trolley as she walked by. Cornflakes, white bread, and sausages confirmed what Anthea thought – Jan was boring and had bland, unsophisticated tastes. Anthea carefully arranged her groceries in her trolley just in case she ran into someone who knew her. Healthy food on top, guilty pleasures hidden underneath.

Maybe some people would think Anthea was judgmental if they knew how she assessed people, but Anthea felt she had a gift. She was right about Jan. It was a gift she couldn’t use on herself, though. When she tried to assess herself, it was like looking into a mirror and seeing nothing. She could not pin herself down. What did Jan think of her? Did Jan think of her at all? Did she wonder about the furnishing of Anthea’s home, what her friends were like or how she spent her free time? When she walked through the sliding doors, did Jan see her and feel a comfortable sense of familiarity? Did other people notice her? The dog woman? Maybe they didn’t think like she did, but what else could they be thinking about?

It was very frustrating to not be able to see and assess herself clearly. How could Anthea know if she was a good or bad person? Was she ugly or pretty? She’d settle for average – please let it be average or slightly above average. People lie to make you feel good about your appearance or because they’re just cowards or dishonest. Her Instagram selfies got

good feedback, but people mostly only commented if they had nice things to say or they said abusive things because they were trolls. She looked good in selfies unless she intended not to. She could physically see and judge herself, but her discretion was faulty and unreliable.

She was overweight, but did she look enormous, slightly overweight, or just fat? Whenever she saw a large person, she mentally compared herself but couldn't get perspective. Was it because she couldn't face how fat she was or because she was thinking the worst and imagining she was bigger than she was? She couldn't know herself properly, either inside or out. She'd like to find a book about herself and read all about the subject of Anthea.

Regina

Regina lay with her eyes closed in the comfortable space between sleeping and awakening. She kept her eyes closed to delay facing the day. On the other side of the bedroom wall, she could hear the girls' voices murmuring quietly. The muffled effect the wall created between them filtered out all the intensity, emotion, and worry and just let what was true and pure come through. She could not hurt them from a distance, and they didn't jar her nerves so much. Regina pulled her blankets up to her chin and curled into a tight ball. She wished she could stay in bed all day where she felt safe.

She'd noticed Birdhead watching again. Sometimes Regina had to crawl around the house so that Birdhead couldn't see her, so she couldn't monitor her. She arranged little vignettes with the girls in front of the window for Birdhead to see. She curated happy scenes, laughing or tender moments when she hugged the girls in a motherly way. She preferred standing by the window watching the girls play outside. If only they never left the glassed-in nursery at the hospital. She would have been perfectly devoted to visiting them every day from her safe spot behind the glass. Nothing would have hurt her girls if they had stayed

safely in the nursery. That was the problem with relationships. They always wanted too much, more than you could ever give. Someone was always getting hurt.

She was feeling low about the accident. If it hadn't happened, it would have been the magical memory she had intended, but now it was a lifelong scar and more evidence she was a bad mother. Everything went wrong when she was involved. Often, she thought the girls would be better off without her, but she didn't want someone else to hurt them. When she hurt them, it was by accident, and she felt remorseful. No one would ever love them as she did. But there was a painful love you had for your children. It was like an infection or like rabies. It made you go mad.

Regina felt the heaviness of her extra medication as she tried to wake up properly. She felt pinned to her bed; she couldn't imagine ever having the energy to get out. The freedom she had begged June to get for her left her feeling scared. She wanted to be at home and not at the institution, but it still worried her that no one was watching, even though she hated being watched. But, the doctor signed her out, so she must have passed the assessment to be safe for discharge. June would come soon to make sure she was okay. Trying to think about how to appear that she was okay was exhausting. What should she do? First, she needed to get out of bed, but the thought of it was overwhelming. The blankets were too heavy to push off, her eyes wouldn't stay open, and her muscles did not want to move. She wanted to die.

The bang of the girls' bedroom door and their voices getting closer made Regina jump. They were like homing pigeons, always finding their way to her. It should be romantic, powerful mother-daughter love, but it felt clawing and parasitic to Regina. Regina wanted to be on the other side all the time. Breathing space, how she yearned for space where she could just *be*. And *time*. She needed time and space because space with a time limit wasn't comfortable; it was something running out, like a stopwatch. They didn't really love her; they wanted to be loved over and over. She did love them, but they were too much.

She didn't have enough love for herself. She was empty. It was too heart-wrenching to meet their sincere looks with her well-meaning ones. Maybe she wanted to be a little girl just like them with her eyes open, always looking up expectantly for love, like little birds in a nest with mouths wide open. One goal, eat.

Anthea

At the car park, the clouds looked menacing and pregnant with fluid. The darkest parts threatened ominously, like the feeling of grief blooming inside your chest. Anthea parked next to Sarah's gleaming car. Sarah was the touchstone in her life – Anthea knew all the shades of her being. Even fighting with her was familiarly traumatic. Sarah paced back and forth in perpetual movement, smiling and laughing as she chatted on her phone. She was sensibly clothed in a North Face rain jacket. Anthea hadn't considered bringing a jacket. If she got wet, it was no big deal; leaving the house without thinking of everything you might need for any situation was easier. But Sarah always had the appropriate gear.

Anthea wore a classic little black dress made from organic bamboo fibre that Sarah had given her. She made sure she wore it on days when she saw her. It had shoestring straps. Her bra straps were thicker than the straps on the dress, a common problem she'd noticed for most large-breasted women. Anthea carried excess weight around her breasts and abdomen so that her upper body was soft and sack-like, while lower down, she still had enviable legs for a woman of her age. She used to have great legs – long, slim and tanned. They were still long but also a bit off-white and loose-fleshed now. It made her conscious of her walking style. She worried about whether she should walk with her hands in her pockets or out. She was naturally a lumberer; why did people want to walk so fast anyway? Perhaps her walking style was wrong.

Sometimes Anthea made adjustments to see how a new walk would work out. Maybe her legs might 'tone up' again if she used them differently. Maybe if she focused on

activating her long thigh muscles while walking and visualised slim legs, she would manifest her young legs back. Some people let their arms swing straight and rhythmically like a ticking metronome when they walk. She didn't want to tick like a metronome. But how could she know what she looked like while walking? Nobody walks in front of a mirror. They stand still and look at a one-dimensional, stationary reflection, only moving from one pose to another in stop motion. They know where to look and where not to, almost like looking at Google maps and seeing the blurred-out areas nobody is allowed to look at.

Maybe her breasts and stomach wobbled comically when she was walking. Maybe people looked at each other and raised eyebrows when they saw her. No matter how many fat-positive accounts she followed or how many beautiful, strong, confident women's pictures she liked, she still hated herself. She liked and commented supportive things about anti-diet culture and fat positivity on Instagram, but secretly she tried every new diet.

Her fat armpits were unacceptable; she chose to be blind to them whenever she looked in the mirror. The fat had nowhere else to go and was coming out of her armpits like stuffing from a Teddy Bear. She got dark shadowy regrowth between waxing appointments that contrasted menacingly with her plump white skin. She wanted slim armpits that hung deeply back into the hollows under the arms – they looked like a rubber sheet being sucked back in by an internal body vacuum. If only Anthea had appreciated her armpits when they were like that. On older, slim women, she noticed their armpits didn't fall back tightly into the hollows but had more of a draped look. When they lifted their arms, it looked like a string was attached to their skeleton, pulling the skin inside their body and puckering towards the centre like an armpit pout. She couldn't decide whether fat armpits or draping armpits were preferable. She wanted to be preserved in her most beautiful state or immortal like a Greek goddess. It was weak-minded to be so in love with youth and beauty, to want to be adored. The pursuit of it was disgusting. But she wanted it desperately.

Sarah waved at Anthea and mouthed 'hi'. Anthea waited while she said a long farewell to whoever was on the other end of her phone.

'Okay, got to go; Anthea's here...I will...you too...okay, talk soon...byeeee.'

'Finally', Anthea said.

'This is what a phone is meant for, talking, not texting and social media,' Sarah said as she slipped her phone into her Lulu Lemon tights pocket. Anthea felt winded like she always did when Sarah talked to her like that. Was it better to talk on the phone than by text? How could Sarah be so sure?

'I prefer text because it's not so intrusive. Calling someone and expecting them to be available to talk just because you are, seems rude to me. With texts, it's like leaving a note,' Anthea said.

'No!' Sarah said emphatically, 'texting is so impersonal and open to interpretation. It's better to talk. If you can't answer, you can call back when you're free. It's simple; people just don't want to face up and say stuff directly these days.'

Sarah's confidence in her opinion, made Anthea feel like a silly child being scolded. Maybe she was 'overly sensitive' like Sarah always said, but Anthea thought Sarah didn't realise how harsh she could be. She wasn't sure if her opinion was right or why Sarah was so sure of hers. Was she just confident in her opinion, or was she right? And yet Sarah's decisiveness was helpful a lot of the time. Anthea often got lost in a sea of indecision. Things like this didn't matter anyway; Anthea could exercise her preference for texting, and Sarah could keep talking instead.

'Okay, boomer', Anthea said and rolled her eyes. Sarah laughed.

'Let me see if I've got a jacket you can borrow; it's going to rain,' Sarah said while popping her car boot open. Inside, her car looked brand new.

‘It’s fine, I’ll be fine, honestly; what’s a bit of rain?’ Anthea said. But Sarah was already pulling out a plastic poncho she’d found in her emergency kit in the car. Anthea put it on just to appease her.

The weekly barefoot forest walk was like therapy for them. Whatever was happening, even if they were fighting, they always met here every week and reconnected. It was a neutral space, a place that didn’t belong to them other than together, and it didn’t exist when they weren’t there. They needed to be there for it to be what it was. It was like a magic place. When they left, it was simply a bush track. When they were there, it was their world. It brought back memories of the smells and sensations from when they were girls running around outside, their feet covered in grass stains. The forest sheltered them. It was better in the rain. There were added sensory elements to enjoy — the sound of raindrops filtering through the leaves, the earthy aroma that was so grounding, and the softness of moist dirt. Even the colours of the forest were brightest in the rain. On the odd occasion, when they saw another person, it felt like an intrusion, as if someone had shattered the glass of their snow globe.

Sarah listed her plans for the day, counting them off on her fingers one by one as she habitually did. She planned to take the dogs for a walk, clean her house, bake a sugar, carb and dairy-free cake, and visit Auntie June... She had everything neatly planned, as always. While Anthea listened, she was painfully aware that Sarah had avoided the one subject Anthea wanted to discuss. Did Sarah think she was dumb enough to be distracted by idle chit-chat? Anthea let her go on, her voice becoming background noise. She was distracted thinking about the path they followed on autopilot.

There were woods on either side of them, a whole other world to explore, so why did they follow the path? They limited their experience by walking only this narrow slice of the vast wooded area. Why did it seem so rebellious to consider leaving the path to venture into

the wilder unexplored space and not follow the path set before them? What would it be like to go and settle into a hidden spot where she could watch other people walk through, or even just take a moment to lie down away from the path and stare at the sky through the trees and be invisible in a secret space? If she saw someone in the bush watching her, she'd think they were dangerous and weird. She wasn't dangerous and weird, though. She only wanted to see who walked past and observe what they did and said. She could get some neat pictures and ideas to post on Instagram. She looked around, suddenly aware that someone could be out there watching her.

A fantail darted around in front of them, twittering away. Sarah and Anthea stopped, mesmerised by its little show of friendliness.

'It's not really friendly; it's just trying to eat the bugs we stir up; we're flushing out their prey like accomplices,' Anthea said. She tried to catch a picture of the fantail as it flew acrobatically in happy circles.

'It's still cute to look at,' Sarah said. Sarah had that look on her face that told Anthea she was being pessimistic again, but she wasn't being pessimistic; she just liked sharing information, but she didn't want to fight about it, so she just let out a long sigh of resignation.

'Are you coming to the cemetery with me?' Anthea asked quietly. She watched Sarah's face harden and felt her heart beating like it was preparing to fly out of her chest.

'Why do you do this?'

'I don't know; I just need to. Part of her is there. I feel closer,' Anthea said.

'I can remember her from anywhere,' Sarah said.

Anthea wished Sarah would go just for her. It had a hold over Anthea, an uncontrollable urge like an itch in an unreachable place. But she knew deep down that Sarah would not come. Sarah had taken on a measured and controlled ambivalence towards their mother since that day when they were just girls playing at the museum.

Anthea stared into the water of the giant fountain with the naked stone lady in the middle. She could see her own face, a shadow person, and she wanted to jump in and get below the water to join them. She wanted to see what the world looked like from down there, looking up. What would it be like to see herself looking down at her from above the water? What would it be like to live inside the stone lady's fountain?

Usually, Auntie June took them to visit the museum, but today, Mum was out of the house without Auntie June, and they'd snuck out while Birdhead wasn't looking because Mum said she was mean and dangerous and only pretended to be kind. Mum hardly ever took them places, so it felt like a birthday or Christmas because the day wasn't like all the other days, and everyone tried to be on their best behaviour.

The last special day they tried to be good was Auntie June's birthday. Mum tried to be good that day, but she got stuck as if her batteries had run out, and nobody except Auntie June knew what to do. Birdhead, who was actually called Miss Grace, told Auntie June she'd keep an eye on mum, so Auntie June could still take them to a nice restaurant where they could pick something off a menu. The waiter thought Auntie June was their mum, and they all giggled but felt happy about the mistake. Mum stayed in bed very sleepy, and Miss Grace made a cake to surprise Auntie June.

The strangeness of the day made Anthea's tummy feel funny. She could smell the water and the damp dirt around the fountain mixed with a burnt smell from the people's drinks sitting at tables nearby. Sarah walked around the stone edge of the fountain, wobbling on one foot with her arms stretched out on either side of her. Anthea liked being outside. When she put her head back and looked up into the blue sky, she felt small but happy. Sarah kicked her foot in the water and splashed Anthea in the face.

‘Sarah, don’t!’ she yelled. Sarah laughed at her like she always did.

‘Don’t be a baby,’ she said. Anthea ran to where mum had been sitting.

‘Mum, Sarah splashed me,’ Anthea wailed.

Her tears and the water dripping from her face mixed, blurring her vision, so she thought she might be in the wrong place. She wiped the tears away, but Mum wasn’t where she’d been sitting before. Only her bag and sunglasses were on the table, with her cup of coffee and a slice of banana cake with chocolate icing. Anthea stood next to them with her arms crossed and her head tucked down on her chest. Sarah spun her around to face her.

‘Don’t be a tattle-tale,’ she said. Anthea turned her back on her. ‘Anthea, c’mon, I just thought it would be funny.’ Anthea started crying loudly. ‘I’ll let you splash me, okay, okay, you splash me, and then we’re even.’

Anthea could hear the panic in her sister’s voice and knew she was winning.

‘You don’t want to make mum angry, do you? This is the first time we’ve been out in ages, c’mon Anthea,’ Sarah pleaded.

‘It’s you she’s gonna be angry with. You splashed me,’ Anthea said.

‘Well, she will be angry at you because you’re making lots of noise and not doing what she asked,’ Sarah said. ‘Remember, she said, “no matter what happens today, I want you to be kind to each other”’.

Anthea looked at Sarah and could tell from her wide eyes that she was scared. But could Sarah be telling the truth? Would she get in trouble? She turned her back on Sarah and yelled at her to ‘leave me alone.’

‘Please, Anthea, I’ll let you have my share of the cake,’ Sarah said. Anthea tried to stay still so Sarah wouldn’t see that she wanted more cake. It was a good deal. She dropped her arms and turned towards Sarah.

‘Okay, but I get two splashes or no deal,’ she said.

They ran back to the fountain together, and Anthea splashed Sarah two times, and then Sarah splashed some more. Soon, they were splashing and splashing, squealing and laughing until a guard came and yelled at them to GET OUT AT ONCE.

The plume of tar-smelling smoke arose from her like an anti-social shadow. She always started her visit with a cigarette. It was a ritual. The journey to her mother's plot was a flat walk from the car park to the back of the cemetery under the big birch tree, but it felt like she descended into it. The change from colour to greyscale at the cemetery made Anthea feel she'd entered a scene on a black and white TV. A sort of bad nostalgia.

She dragged deeply on her cigarette. The feeling of smoke filling her lungs was satisfying. She wished smoking was healthy so she could do it without guilt. She woke up and smoked in her bed every morning in her younger years. Her room had been strewn with coffee cups filled with cigarette butts – she looked back on it romantically. Knowing her friends' preferred brand of cigarette and long smoking conversations had been a special type of intimacy. It was socially unacceptable to smoke now and not allowed in most public places.

Being dead was simply the completion of life. You went from a neighbourhood of living people to a neighbourhood of dead people. It shouldn't be so shocking; everyone was partway toward dying. Some people got there sooner than others. Was it necessarily a bad thing? Surely, being dead was preferable if you knew the rest of your life would be hopelessly terrible. That was the only problem. You don't know for sure. You knew for certain you're going to die, but other than that, everything was unknown.

She paid her respects to some of the dead she'd come to know while visiting her mum's grave. There was a baby buried at the foot of a family plot who died at just five

months old. Its plot was a small concrete rectangle, smaller than a microwave oven. A little bit further down the footworn path, Maggie had died when she was eighteen, drowned.

Anthea sometimes brought her flowers because she was buried alone with no family.

She had the familiar lump in her throat when she sat next to her mum's grave and arranged the flowers carefully in the built-in stainless steel vase. She thought her mum would like lilies, but she wasn't sure. Nobody had ever figured out what would have made her happy. Anthea put her hands on the ground and leaned forward to kiss the cool gravestone. She yearned for the possibility that somewhere in the dirt was a piece of her mother, one atom, something that she could touch and connect with. She hoped every time she visited that she touched more and more pieces. She ached to feel her close by. She longed for her scent.

She couldn't remember ever seeing her mum smoke, but she could remember the smell of cigarette smoke on her clothes and her breath when she kissed her goodnight. Back then, she couldn't imagine a world without her mum in it; now, she couldn't imagine what it would be like to have her here. Her mum never got old, so she was permanently preserved in her youthful state in Anthea's memories, making Anthea feel like she had no future to look forward to. Now Anthea was older than her, but she still felt like her little girl, and it didn't make sense to think of a young woman as your mum when you were older. She could tell that Sarah looked more like Auntie June, but Anthea knew she took after their mum, so when she looked in the mirror, she sometimes felt she was watching herself and her mum age simultaneously.

Crying rolled in from deep inside her and streamed down her face. Anthea surrendered to it, curling up on the gravestone while the grief silently convulsed from her soul. Why was she alone? Why wasn't Sarah here?

Although she was used to this ritualistic pain, it never got easier. Eventually, as always, she wore the feeling out and got up off the ground, leaning forward to kiss the headstone again. She traced her mother's name with her finger. REGINA 1951 - 1979. She fumbled in her pockets for her phone and cigarettes. She sat leaning back on the headstone to snap a selfie, taking a few photos while she released smoke from her mouth. She had the crying hangover feeling and tried to dampen it with whiskey from the hip flask she kept in her handbag.

She scrolled through the photos. The headstone and smoke made an arty, sombre picture with her mascara running down her pink and blotchy tear-stained face. She put a black and white filter on it and captioned it 'visiting Mum' #grief #heartbroken.

She got up and dusted herself off, brushing grass and dirt off the back of her clothes. Her throat constricted with the familiar 'leaving feeling'. She felt like she was brushing the specks of her mother away. She noticed a snail slowly gliding along the concrete surrounding the plot. She looked at its tiny eyes protruding proudly on the thin jelly-like stalks that held them up. She poked one, watched it retract, and wondered what it felt like for the snail. What was this snail's life all about anyway? It probably amounted to chewing vegetation, shitting, and reproducing.

The endless battle to extend life was exhausting and puzzling. Was her life any more complex than a snail's, she wondered? Anthea put her foot over the snail, her heel on the ground, the front of her shoe casting a shadow over it. The shell sounded like an egg as it cracked. When Anthea lifted her foot, all that was left was a sticky pile that looked like glue with shards of broken shell sticking out of it and a few white bubbles like sea foam.

Sarah

The dogs darted in and out of the trees, their noses indulgently caressing the ground. They lolloped along like rocking horses, intoxicated by the smells they discovered while exploring every inch of ground. Watching their exuberant body language and happy, wagging dog tails always cheered Sarah.

Anthea had pissed her off earlier. She knew what today was; how could she ever forget? But Anthea always wanted to talk about it, knowing that Sarah did not. Why couldn't she just leave it alone? Dogs were so easy. They just required food and walks to be happy. Even though they were excited to be out walking, they always ran back to her, checking that she was still there.

'Hi, are you having a good time?' she asked in her high dog talking voice. When she heard other women talking to their dogs, she thought they were silly, but she knew she probably sounded silly too.

It wasn't just Anthea. Lately, she'd been feeling in a bit of a funk. She had some breast pain, and now she was convinced she had cancer. It would serve her right for not going to check-ups. Cancer was her adult monster under the bed. Sarah was too scared to look. If she didn't look, it wouldn't be there. So, when she saw pink breakfasts for breast cancer, she avoided them. She turned the page when she saw cancer survivor stories in magazines. Why did everyone want to talk about it?

The doctor insisted on swabbing her vagina every three years to ensure there was no cancer, and the week between the swab and the results made Sarah tense. Now she was being pressured to get her breasts out every few years to be squashed and x-rayed to check for cancer in there. She couldn't help but wonder what happened to cancer if nobody knew it was there. It was the worst game of 'hide and seek' imaginable. So, she drank her green smoothies and tried not to think about all the ways she could die.

The smell of dog shit caught her attention, and she looked around to catch sight of her dog squatting. Fuck's sake. She didn't have bags to pick it up, but at least it was off the path. She looked around to check if anyone had seen her. There was someone, but they weren't looking her way. She kept walking, increasing her pace to distance herself from the other walker. A lot of life seemed to be about dealing with shit.

Every morning she picked up her small shovel and cleared the dog poo off the back lawn before breakfast, so she didn't have to gaze out the window at it while eating. She slid the shovel underneath and scooped it up as cleanly as possible. On a bad day, she couldn't scoop it neatly and pushed it along the grass, getting angrier and angrier. Because of that daily chore, she knew more about the quality of her dog's gut health than she did about her own. She'd never realised that growing up meant owning a toilet brush and regularly cleaning the toilet. Nothing could have prepared her for the fact that much of her adult life would be spent dealing with her own and others' shit. People didn't appreciate how much effort went into managing shit. Sarah did. She was always curious about the sewage when she watched history documentaries about past civilisations. She thought about the sewerage system when she saw cities with large devastating earthquakes, like Christchurch. For a while, people had to bury their shit in the backyard. Shit flowed beneath every city.

At home, Sarah poured her green smoothie into a tall glass and sat down in her window nook. Her windows were sparkling clean, so it looked like there wasn't even a pane of glass between her and the backyard when she looked from the right angle. She felt comforted by the process of housework when everything felt in order. It was anchoring, controllable. She wasn't 'mindful' but more 'mind full' most of the time. While doing the dishes, she thought, what did that person mean in that comment on Anthea's post? Why does Anthea do things like that? And she thought of other things like how the bathroom window was going rotten and needed to be fixed. It was an interminable dialogue going round and

round in her brain like a washing machine, as well as things that were just sad and couldn't be fixed that she tried to drown out.

Sarah assessed the fridge's contents and considered what she'd make for dinner. She had some chicken breast stored in a glass container that she needed to use before it went off. She wanted something fresh, maybe slightly spicy with a bit of crunch. She liked to recreate recipes she'd seen on *Masterchef*, but only if they didn't require too many steps or too much time to make. Anthea was disdainful about her guilty pleasure, saying that First World countries with so much food that they can play with it on TV were embarrassing and elitist. Sarah used Anthea's smoking and drinking to hit back. Watching *Masterchef* was as comforting as slipping into a pair of pyjamas. Maybe it was the reliable sounds and images. It made her think about the prominence of branding and whose job it was to help you build a relationship with a brand. Still, watching a show like *Masterchef* and expanding your culinary skills was definitely a better hobby than smoking and drinking to relax.

She clicked on her Instagram app to browse some *Masterchef* recipes. At the top of her Instagram feed, Anthea's story made Sarah tense up. Why did Anthea need to document her life in Instagram stories? She was so attention-seeking. Sarah avoided looking at her posts because they affected her mood too much. It was like being held hostage or dragged into Anthea's emotionally unstable state. It reminded her of how she felt around her mum, waking every day wondering what the day would be like. The bad days had been scary, but the happy ones were worse. Their mum didn't have a comfortable kind of happiness. She was more like a person acting out happiness. It was overdone and used up too soon.

Happy days with her mum had felt like life lived in fast forward. They made plans for the future that would glow on the horizon with promise as if they'd lived all the bad times and the rest of their life would be different. It would be a good life. Sarah couldn't remember precisely when she realised these moments were just temporary, like a dream you

woke up from and wished you could return. She thought it probably crept up on her slowly, but once she realised that her mum's promises were simply fantasy, she lost the ability to enjoy them. The disappointment had broken her trust and grew slowly into anger and hatred. Why couldn't her mum have been like the other mums? She wished Auntie June was her mum. She had found other things to count on as a little girl; the sound of a plane flying low overhead on a sunny morning, a harmony of lawnmowers in the distance at the weekend, the familiar feel of her bed as she climbed into it each night, and her diary with Auntie June's phone number hidden inside it, for emergencies.

She clicked on Anthea's story and felt her heart sink. She didn't want to visit her mum's grave, but now she was dragged into it. Anthea and her mum, all the grief and ugliness of it right there in her face. Did Anthea really feel that grief-stricken after all these years? Sometimes she couldn't tell which of Anthea's emotions were real and which ones she was performing. She'd become guarded around Anthea, too, like she was with their Mum. So, she was just as guilty of performing her emotions differently from how she felt. Sarah worried that maybe she had become so disconnected from her feelings that she couldn't feel them anymore.

This was one of the things she disliked about social media. Looking into other people's worlds could make you see and think things you didn't want to or never would have thought about. She was sometimes looking at people and sometimes looking through other people's eyes. It was like they were outsourcing their thoughts and memories; anyone could look at them. And when you knew the person, there was often a disconcerting difference between the person you knew and the person portrayed online. Anthea's stories were not an accurate reflection of her life. She certainly hadn't posted any pictures of the inside of her car.

God, Anthea drove her crazy. Why couldn't she just move on? It seemed like she wanted to bathe in the grief forever, not even on her own. She wanted everyone to see it and feel sorry for her. One of her friends had commented, 'aw babe, big loves,' and Anthea had responded with a love heart. Sarah rolled her eyes. It was sickening. Sometimes she felt like Anthea thought a heart or comment on Instagram meant more than the real-life attention she got from Sarah. Anthea hadn't even met most of her 'friends' on Instagram.

Regina

Regina looked at the clock again. She could feel time ticking down to when June would return with the girls. Her heart raced while she searched through her box of brushes. Why was the one thing she needed always so hard to find? She looked at the clock; they'd been gone for an hour. Where was her flat angular brush? Where would she have put it? She put the box aside and sifted through the jar of brushes for the fifth time; perhaps she wasn't looking properly. Her neck and shoulders radiated with tension; she reached up to rub them, knocking the jar of brushes and watching it roll swiftly off her desk to smash on the floor. She stared at the angry shards of glass scattered around her feet; this sort of thing always happened to her. Just her. She felt too tired to clean it up.

She looked at the clock with a sense of defeat. The sunny chair by the window beckoned, so she opened a bottle of wine and grabbed her cigarettes from the hiding place in her wardrobe. Her hands trembled as she scraped the match against the box. It took several strikes before it sparked into a flame. She closed her eyes and inhaled the smoke deep into her lungs so her chest felt full and warm. She could hear the quiet crackling sound of the cigarette paper burning and see the orange ring glow brighter as it travelled down the shaft. She watched the blue-grey smoke dancing and swaying away from the tip as it dispersed into the air.

She took a deep gulp of wine and thought about its passage through her body, mingling with her blood and relaxing her from the inside out. The sun draped across her face while Regina drifted away into serene nothingness. These small moments were her favourite. This is what she really wanted to do. Why did she have to come up with a 'good' reason to have some time without the girls? She was nobody's child, nobody's sister, nobody's mum. She was here and now, just breathing. She looked at the clock and wondered how long she had left. In the quiet, she could hear it ticking.

A car door slamming jolted her awake. She could hear the girl's feet pounding happily up the path. She was trapped between sleep and alertness, like trying to run in a dream but making no ground. Why did she have to wake up? Why did they come home? She was so tired. Her heart pounded frantically in her chest; she couldn't breathe properly.

The girls rushed in with pink flushed faces, full of smiles. They both babbled away excitedly, trying to share their adventures without missing anything. Regina smiled and looked at them intently to avoid making eye contact with June, whose disappointment radiated towards her and squeezed Regina's breath tight in her throat.

'How did the painting session go?' June asked.

'I couldn't find the right brush.'

'You've got so many brushes. Why didn't you just use a different one?' June's eyes settled on the broken jar of brushes, the wine bottle and the ashtray Regina had tried to hide behind her on the windowsill. She turned to Regina and gave her a sharp look. Regina held her breath to hide the smell of wine and cigarettes lingering inside her mouth. She wondered whether her teeth and lips were stained with telltale reddish brown from the wine. June was moving quickly around the house, almost like it was her house and Regina was her child. Sometimes she liked feeling like June's child, but today, she hated it.

June sent the girls off to clean themselves up in the bathroom and hurriedly cleared away the broken glass. Regina sat paralysed in her chair, feeling the tension building and pushing in on her chest. She could hear the girls in the bathroom. She pictured them standing shoulder to shoulder, splashing about with water at the hand basin, chatting loudly and enthusiastically about their day, like she and June used to when they were young, and every day dawned happily like a blank slate. There'd be water on the floor she'd have to clean up later.

'Two hours to do nothing but paint, a precious thing when you have two girls to look after, an utter indulgence, but no, you "can't find the right brush", so you just decide to get pissed and smoke. Why can't you sort this out?'

Regina stared out the window.

'Thanks for looking after the girls,' she said. She felt June's sigh of exasperation painfully.

Sarah and Anthea came tumbling into the room. June patted their heads and gave them hugs before making her farewells. Regina watched June's car leave while the girls settled in front of the TV, their eyes quickly glassing over as their tired bodies slumped towards each other. Regina could see their passive faces reflected in the glass of the television screen. Outside, a blackbird turned its head sideways and eyed the ground on the grass verge. Quickly it pierced the earth and dragged out a wriggling maroon-coloured worm, bare and glistening. Clasped in the bird's beak, it had little chance to escape but thrashed wildly for its life anyway.

Anthea

The moment of stepping from the outside world into the museum was a crossing-the-threshold moment. It felt like a shift in Anthea's body, like the difference between waking

and sleeping. The portal between past and present ever so slightly opened. Time stood still in the gentlest way.

Her footsteps on the stone floor made a perfect sound – warm and dusty. But today, there was also a clicking noise. Anthea tried to ignore it, but it kept clicking with every step: click, click, click. Was it loud enough for only her to notice, or would other people hear it too and look at her? It was the toe of her shoe where the click, click, click came from, so she walked on the heel of her foot to stop it.

Now the click stopped, but she was doing a funny walk. She stopped and pulled her phone out of her bag, staring at the blank screen while considering what to do. She didn't want to walk funny or with a click around the museum. She wanted to drift around comfortably, unseen. Her clothes felt moist and clingy. She returned her phone to her bag and checked to ensure no one was looking before inspecting the bottom of her shoe.

A blob of sticky goo was with bits of crushed shell was stuck on the bottom of her shoe. She tried scraping it off with her fingernail, but a sharp piece embedded itself between her thumb and nail when she tried to remove it; causing a droplet of blood to rise up from between them. Why did these things happen to her? Anthea couldn't help but think her day was cursed. There had already been the fan, the broken perfume bottle, and now this. All the signs were there; they kept popping up, reminding her that things never went right.

Anthea always took the same route around the museum, just like she always parked her car in the same spot at the supermarket. She counted on some things to always be the same, waiting for her when she needed them: the museum, the cemetery, Sarah, their walks, Auntie June, her cigarettes, and hipflask. It was very unsettling when the things she relied on weren't where she needed them to be.

The museum was always the same; she knew every part of it. It was made up of three levels, with one main corridor through the middle. On all levels, a space to the left and right

crossed the main corridor, so the building was shaped like a cross. There was an outdoor area at the far end where a Venus-adorned fountain stood in the centre of a circular garden space where people could eat or simply sit and chat by the fountain to the soothing sounds of water falling gently into the pool at the base. Inside, the displays changed from time to time, but some old regulars were always there, waiting inside drawers or behind dioramas with their steady stares paused in time. This museum felt like home, but Anthea dreamed of travelling the world, skipping from museum to museum.

She'd been intrigued about Museum Vrolik in The Netherlands, where specimens of deformed fetuses were preserved in jars. Was there something wrong with her because she wanted to peer through the murky solution into the stilled and unbloomed life of the child, or was it the fault of the person who made the collection so that she could look and wonder? If it wasn't there, she couldn't look at it. Maybe she wouldn't have even imagined it. She probably thought of things in jars and checked whether there was a museum of curiosities that had some on display. She can't be that weird; if there's a museum full of them, there must be other people who want to look at them too.

Thoughts seemed to sneak up on her out of nowhere. They were like people at parties who linger just outside your conversation and join in as if they were always a part of it. How can thoughts be trusted if you don't know where they come from? And where do they go? Anthea frequently lost thoughts she was sure she'd remember. Brilliant moments arrived in her mind like a spotlight on stage and then, just like that, gone as if they had never existed. And yet everything she felt and experienced was real in the moment. Sometimes she wrote thoughts down or made a note in the memo section of her phone, even though she didn't know what she was saving them for. She sometimes didn't believe she'd thought of them when she read them later. Sarah journaled things every day, but Anthea didn't like doing that.

When she tried, it seemed very forced and pointless. She felt like an imposter and suspected she couldn't trust herself to be genuine in her journal.

She'd discovered some of the old journals that Sarah had given her over the years. Journalling would help her understand her emotions better, Sarah had said. In each journal, Anthea had written only on the first few pages. Reading back over them, she didn't recognise herself at times, and other times she recognised herself too much and realised she was thinking the same thing over and over like a type of *déjà vu*. Her handwriting wasn't consistent, sometimes smooth and swirly, sometimes jagged and messy. She'd like to read Sarah's journals.

Anthea wanted to know everything about the babies in jars. Who were their parents? Were there any siblings? Did their families know that they were there? What went wrong? Did anyone ever love them? How did the person who slid their bodies into the jars and put them on a shelf feel when they sentenced them to a life on display? What would it feel like if she dipped her hand in and touched the baby? Would it be firm to touch like a raw chicken thigh, or would her finger push through the flesh like a rotten cucumber? It seemed important to know how solid they were.

Where do the babies go if they're not kept in a jar? Normal dead babies were probably cremated or buried. Being different, not normal, had spared the babies and made them a treasure worth displaying. Some of them had perfect, angelic faces with bodies that looked like they'd been attacked by demons. Others had normal bodies and deformed faces. Suspended in a pseudo amniotic fluid, they appeared paused, sleeping beasts. Their lives never changed over time. They were paralysed, on display. She imagined having one on the coffee table in her lounge. She loved things in jars and had a growing collection.

@deadthingsmadepretty sold preserved animal foetuses, and Anthea was gathering a menagerie.

Her lifelong fascination with things in jars had started with a school trip to the hospital. Anthea found it a sterile, unwelcoming place with a haunting scent of shit and death not entirely obscured by the noxious odour of disinfectant. She would rather die than have to go there. The suspense of finding out whether healing or dying was the order of the day was an agonising space to dwell in. The pathology room had a warmth that was a relief from the smell of the hospital. The tranquillity of the pathology room felt safe from the tenuous space between life and death the hospital held.

Anthea could still visualise the stacked shelves. The fluid in the jars glowed green and brown in the low light. The murky contents held deconstructed humans, just like modern versions of classic foods—deconstructed apple pie. Anthea wanted to stay there all day, looking at jarred body parts, brains, severed hands, lungs, and a foot cut through the middle. She thought of them as ‘human preserves’, all bottled and lined up on shelves in shadowy places. Why couldn’t they put a picture of the person and a description of what happened with each one? Like on a jam jar – boysenberry jam, pickled foot, preserved lung...

After seeing the body parts in the pathology room, Anthea became obsessed with her own body. Was her toe changing colour, had her breathing changed? She wrote a letter, so the hospital would know she wanted her body parts put in jars and on display if something was wrong with her. Most people seemed to like skeletons, but Anthea thought of them as just bones, the scaffolding on which everything else was built. What could a room of skeletons offer? They had no stories to discover unless you were an archaeologist. Body parts were everything. She wanted to get inside the skin of things and feel the things they felt. She thought all knowledge boiled down to this.

The calm dead things in the pathology room were reliable. You could look at them from all angles, stare without shame, and always know they were waiting to be viewed. A lack of certainty was a dreadful thing. Anthea’s mum would always be at the cemetery; the

museum, with its reliable cataloguing of life, the bottled body parts, and the dead babies, would stay this way forever.

Regina

The yellow night light illuminating their bedroom made the girls' skin look like it had an inner glowing light. They lay perfectly and peacefully in the golden glow, like sleeping angels. Their eyelashes draped gently onto their rosy cheeks, and Regina imagined delicately painting every eyelash. But this was not a still life she could hang on the wall and admire. They would awaken from the peacefulness of sleep and start marching headlong through life again, leaving all the worrying and deciding to her – their mum. They were so perfect it seemed impossible to believe that she was their mother.

Regina stifled a sob of sorrow. Why had she yelled at them when they were slow getting their pyjamas on? The looks on their faces were torturous to remember. The tears were evidence that she had broken their hearts. And yet, when she came to kiss them goodnight, they had snuggled into her neck and wrapped their tiny soft arms around her. Regina told them they were good girls, tickled them, and showered them with kisses, but she knew that, like her, their hearts were bruised, and it was all her fault. Why wasn't loving with all your heart enough? The constant cycle of accommodating everyone's needs meant nobody ever got what they wanted. What did the girls want from her?

'They'd be better off with you as their mum,' Regina had told June.

'Oh, no, you'd be such a fun Auntie. I could never compete with that,' June had said. It had made her smile briefly. Poor June, she shouldn't have to hold her up all the time, like she always had, the lifeboat to stop her sinking. Regina was a burden, and she didn't want to be. She wanted to be fun and creative, but life was too hard; it did not want her to be fun and creative. It wanted her to be serious and productive; it squeezed her till she was breathless. It made her tired.

‘Just keep trying,’ her doctor said with a sympathetic smile.

She was trying for her daughters and for June. She wondered what the girls thought about her, how their young minds sifted through all the things they saw and heard and tried to make sense of it. She was probably destroying their innocent minds. Maybe she was making them ill; what if the doctor said they were unwell due to insufficient mothering? She could imagine it in their files.

Diagnosis: Insufficient Mothering.

But every time Regina took them to the doctor to check a funny reflection she saw in Anthea’s eye or a fingernail growing crooked on Sarah’s finger, the doctor assured her that her daughters were perfectly healthy. She couldn’t stop worrying. She felt a strong and urgent need to make some good memories with them.

By morning Regina was exhausted and eager to wake the girls to show them she had created a dream day. She had put on her best dress and fashioned some wings using a pair of old white stockings and some wire she’d clipped off the clothesline. She’d made a wand with a big glittery gold star and attached a ribbon to the stick so that as she cast spells, the ribbon would wave magically through the air. The kitchen table was set with wine glasses, teacups, and saucers, and in the middle sat the fairy castle cake she’d made overnight with the little marzipan fairies decorating it. It was a perfect little girl’s dream. The beginning of a happy new future. Birdhead will be gobsmacked.

Anthea

Anthea’s phone vibrated in her pocket. She tried being nonchalant about it, as if she could fool herself about her relationship with her phone, but it was like trying to avoid scratching an itch. She got a rush of excitement like a kid ripping open a letter that compelled her to check it straight away. She pulled it out of her pocket and smiled at the full screen of notifications from Instagram. The cemetery picture had fifty story views and fifteen

comments already. She scrolled through the list of people who had seen it. Her eyes scanned the broken heart emojis and comments of love and sympathy.

Sarah had seen the picture but not commented. Anthea stared at the screen as if something might change before her eyes; a sick feeling kicked her in the gut. Why didn't Sarah comment? Of all people, how could Sarah be so cold? What would it cost her to send a broken heart emoji? Sarah didn't understand how aggressive she came across on social media. She didn't seem to understand the rules of the game, or if she did, she was deliberately being a bitch. Anthea thrust her phone back into her pocket and continued into the museum.

The butterfly collection was down the first corridor on the left. Pulling out the big wooden drawers they were kept in, Anthea looked at their brightly coloured wings and fat thoraxes pinned in place and mounted under glass. Caught in butterfly purgatory, they were dead but still looked alive, here but not here. Why weren't they alive if their bodies were here, intact in this real place? What more needed to be added to signify life? Anthea watched for a wing or antenna to twitch under the glass. She used to worry about their families and whether they wondered where they had gone. She found out that butterflies don't live in family groups, but then she felt sad that nobody missed them. If no one missed you, what did your existence mean? The winged phase of their life cycle was around two weeks. What kind of life could one have in just two weeks? How long are two weeks in butterfly years?

The thing about aging is that it is always happening, like breathing. You don't notice it until something happens, like when you're sick or get something stuck in your windpipe. That's when you notice your breath, when your body reacts with violence, recruiting every resource to keep breathing. So, Anthea hadn't thought about aging until she noticed it happening to other people. She'd become morbidly obsessed with the aging of the décolletage.

She watched the deterioration of other people's chests like a time-lapse project. She thought how interesting a photography project documenting the decline of perfect breasts would be over thirty years. Faint lines appeared first, creeping down from the collar bone towards the cleavage like a necklace of wrinkles. Then, the skin thinned as if stretched and tanned into leather, taking on a crepey-looking texture. Anthea started a regime of exfoliating and moisturising her chest to try and immunise herself from the same fate, rubbing the dying parts off as though aging started on the outside and worked its way in. She wondered if bony thin-skinned chests were genetic, and she paid close attention to Sarah's chest.

She knew she was doomed when the faint lines appeared. Wispy, like the lines on the palm of your hand, they crept slowly, invasively. Like the first grey hair or a spot of mould on the skin of a nectarine, this was a sign of her descent. Much further down, her breasts slumped lazily like bean bags. They settled into the cup of her bra and collapsed softly in on themselves. She couldn't remember what her young breasts looked like, but she thought with regret that they were probably fucking amazing. Now she had matronly breasts, large, translucent, white breasts with pale pink nipples. If she got breast cancer, she wouldn't mind having them chopped off. They were annoying attached to her body, superfluous, not attractive, not functional, just evidence of a body in decline. They were the old fruit that everybody avoided in the fruit bowl.

Anthea wondered if she could keep her breasts if she had a mastectomy, so she could preserve them and keep them on her coffee table in a jar. Backlit with the right light, they would make a beautiful piece of art, breasts floating in golden fluid, nipples pressing against the glass, skin wrinkling from the pressure. She would enjoy watching her guests' reactions while they stared at them while visiting and enjoying a cup of tea.

Anthea wanted to be reborn into a youthful body with a healthy mind. Or maybe without a mind. If she could have a metamorphosis while swaying from a plant in a lush garden with the celestial scent of flowers permeating her gold-threaded cocoon, she would emerge rested, fresh, and angelically winged. But would it be worth it if she could only live for two weeks? Would she trade years of her life for youth and beauty? What if metamorphosis was painful? How could anyone know whether caterpillars spent their time in the cocoon silently screaming, as if trapped in eternal hell, while their bodies melted and re-formed? What looked like a beautiful, transformational, natural process over a short time from the outside might be completely different from the inside. Maybe it wasn't like a rejuvenating health camp but more like a claustrophobic exorcism. How could anyone know?

She remembered her friend Lisa's joy at being pregnant and how she had loved her pregnancy. Every month, there was a new bump progress picture, her growing belly glowing in the ring light she'd arranged. She had a gender reveal party and a baby shower that Anthea couldn't attend, but she saw it on Instagram anyway. Childbirth is a natural process, and Lisa had a natural outlook, but there was nothing calm and beautiful about her birth experience or her transformation to motherhood. She was a mummy blogger now, whose content did nothing to reveal the reality of her postnatal depression or how she felt nothing when she looked at her baby. She didn't post any pictures of her sad, empty, wrinkled-up belly either.

The butterflies had been taken in their prime, snatched in a net. Their wings were carefully protected, thorax pinched between a thumb and forefinger just enough to kill without causing visible damage. Only the most beautiful butterflies were selected for this treatment. It would be safer to be old and discoloured, have a broken wing or have another visible flaw. The whole process of life seemed to be about transformation from one painful stage to another. Why did people want to live through it? The certainty of death felt

comforting, yet this was supposed to indicate something wrong with Anthea. But there was something wrong with everyone else.

Sarah

Diary Entry

I had the dream again last night. Mum and Anthea looked like twins. They appeared similar and wore the same clothes, but it wasn't just that. It was a feeling; they felt the same. They were dancing and singing near the edge of a cliff, whirling around without a care in the world, and I wanted them to stop and come away from the edge. I was trying to yell at them, plead with them to 'please, please STOP,' but no sound came out of my mouth. I felt helpless. I watched in terror and cried inconsolably. I tried to ring Auntie June, but I couldn't find the right page in my diary with her number on it, but I kept searching and searching and trying to remember her phone number. Why didn't I memorise it?

Then it was nighttime, and I was running, searching everywhere for them, knowing they would die if I couldn't find them. I could hear screaming from different parts of the woods, and I didn't know which one to run to, so I was frozen, paralysed in the night alone, surrounded by haunting screams. Then, a new feeling washed in and replaced the fear. It dawned on me that maybe it would be easier if I died. That's how I could escape all this.

Anthea

Anthea stared into the glassed-in diorama at the colonial section, watching for something to change. She yearned for the family behind the glass to give her a sign by moving something slightly that only she would notice. The colonial family from the nineteenth century were so familiar to Anthea that they felt like friends. She had visited the diorama scene for years and could describe every part from memory. Behind the glass was a tiny parlour with a mother in Victorian dress serving tea to two little girls. They were clothed

in long dresses from their ankles to the top of their necks. The silver tea set shone proudly. What would they have discussed while they had their tea?

Anthea wondered if this family ever existed or if they were simply characters to reflect the living conditions of that era. Why did they use real butterflies but pretend people? If they can use fake people, why not use fake butterflies too? How much would you have to squeeze a person around the middle of their body to make them die? What if this family had been real and were somehow paused at the precise moment they were frozen in and moved into the glass diorama? Anthea would like to unpause them now and watch them take a long-awaited breath before carrying on with their day. Maybe they had been waiting for her to rescue them all this time. She should still her mind and listen. They could be trying to send her a message telepathically. Would they be aware of the passing of time, or would it be like blinking, an imperceptible pause? What happened if you didn't notice time? Was she looking at them, or were they looking at her? They were on opposite sides of the glass but both in the museum.

Anthea pressed her face against the cool glass. What would she feel like wearing the nineteenth-century woman's clothing? Did it feel different from being a twenty-first-century woman? Were they exactly the same on the inside? Not even she and Sarah were the same on the inside. Sarah was content and in control. Anthea was angry and out of control. That's how Sarah would describe her. Her looks and silences screamed her disapproval. Sarah wanted her to 'get over' being depressed. It made Anthea feel a gulf between them. She pulled her phone out of her pocket and rechecked her Instagram story to see if Sarah had commented. She felt hope flood over her like a rush of warm water when she noticed she had new comments, but the names blurred into nothingness as she looked through them. Sarah had been silent. She threw her phone into her bag and looked back at her friends in the diorama.

She would like to be inside the glassed-in diorama – watching people watch her, hearing what they say, watching the world go by without averting her gaze. She would like to pick a moment and suspend it inside this diorama so she could look at it from all angles. She could take her time exploring it, checking where everything was, and have one comforting moment preserved forever, with only the world outside the glass changing.

Would people look at Anthea if she was in a museum diorama? Would someone be as intrigued by her as she was about this woman? What would they see? Her clothes, the furniture, the setting? It would be intriguing to hear how people interpreted an ‘Anthea from the twenty-first century.’ Would they comment on the faint dent descending from her lip, or would they wonder about her forehead's almost imperceptible silver scar line? Would those things remain a feature of her face if she were made into a mannequin? Mannequins were smooth, hard, and of consistent colouring, so potentially her weak chin, scars and patchy redness wouldn't make it to the diorama. So, what would the essence of Anthea be? Did the nineteenth-century woman have hairs under her armpits? On her legs? How would she have managed her body hair? These were the things she wanted to know.

The only thing to know about the nineteenth-century woman was that she was serving tea. But Anthea wanted to know what she was thinking about. How did she spend her days? Did she secretly smoke or have a drinking problem? Would anyone think that about Anthea if they looked at her in the diorama? If her handbag was visible with its reassuring packet of smokes and hip flask inside, then maybe someone would think she was a risky girl; someone else might think she needed them to soothe herself from time to time.

What Anthea often felt was fear. She was acutely aware of the march of time, that of all the women who had lived before her; this one was here in the museum, not necessarily ever a real woman but an idea of one, and such a small idea. Anthea was concerned both about being that woman and not being her. She wanted to crack her open like a nut, see inside

her, and find out what her inner world was like. She wanted to turn out her secret lovers, find out about her backstreet abortion, or whether she was an anarchist. She might have been scared too, or maybe she was content and simply enjoyed tea parties. Maybe she was more like Sarah.

A clanging of dishes and the hot whistling of the espresso machine distracted her. The smell of hot food and coffee wafting through the museum made her feel angry and nauseous. Voices of people peering into food cabinets and making their orders murmured in the background and buzzed in her head. Why did people need to eat at the museum? Eating was a desperate sort of fascination. The whole world was enslaved by it. Lives were built around getting money for food, shopping for food, making food more enjoyable, mixing food together differently, storing food... Anthea visualised the long tube that extended from mouth to arsehole and thought about the food that passed through it in a lifetime. She was no more than a worm with arms and legs, mindlessly consuming. She was a food processing factory, part of a chain. Anything else in life was simply window-dressing around this bitter reality. Food was everywhere; at the petrol station, garden centre, the mall, in coffee carts on the side of the road... Every day was a routine of doing things around food. It was a ritual of eating and shitting that went on and on. God, she hated food snobs.

Why had people become so scared to go anywhere without a bottle of water? Was there a higher risk of dying of dehydration these days? People clung to their water bottles as though they were worried they'd be found in gutters or puddles, slowly dying like a gasping dry fish. Why were there so many different kinds of water? You were defined by the type of water you drank. There were Instagram influencers who promoted their particular water brand.

But why did people drink so much anyway? Anthea was not good at drinking water. She drank from the smallest glass possible because it seemed less intimidating. There was a

lot of wasted time getting water to drink and then releasing it into the toilet. She felt like a water-transporting animal. Sarah got five-litre mineral water containers delivered every week to avoid chemical contaminants in tap water. Elite acts like buying better water helped Sarah believe she deserved the happy, healthy life she had. It was as if she believed Anthea's issues all boiled down to a lack of planning and healthy water.

Anthea tried ignoring the clinking of forks on plates and scraping of chairs along the floor from the cafe and turned back to the diorama that contained her friends from the nineteenth century. She took a sip from her hip flask to help calm her jumping brain. How did the colonial family get enough water to drink? What did they eat? Anthea got her phone out and searched Instagram for #nineteenthcenturyfood. It came up with just four pictures. Two were portraits of occasion food, a Christmas spread that consisted of cake, ice cream and berries, and another of cookies, cake, coffee and vermouth. One post was about a nineteenth-century marmalade recipe; the last one was about some farmers trying to revive classic recipes as part of a community project.

She changed her search to #19thcenturyfood, which offered many more results. It didn't have the glossy, colourful grid effect on her phone like food these days. Mostly brown colours, and a lot of bread, milk, cheese and beer. If only these diorama people could see this, their food had made it to Instagram. They had travelled through time to the future, and so had their food. Anthea looked around before tilting her phone screen towards the glass to show the diorama family.

'Is this what you ate?' Anthea asked quietly. She watched the woman's face for a response staying as still as possible, hoping that her stillness would accentuate any movement the diorama woman made. She felt more connected with her than the rest of the diorama family. Was that a slight flicker in her eye? Maybe Anthea had blinked and imagined it. She

closed her eyes and listened for a telepathic message, but the café people were so noisy she couldn't concentrate. Why did they make so much noise?

'I'll show you what food is like these days. You won't believe it,' Anthea said as she quickly searched #food and turned the phone back towards the colonial family. It dawned on Anthea that more bizarre than seeing the food would be the experience of seeing it on the device in Anthea's hand. They wouldn't know what it was. How could she explain that it was a phone, a mailbox, a bank, a camera, shops, the news and space to get together and socialise all in one place, right here in her hand?

It dawned on Anthea that she could take a photo with her diorama friends. She turned her flash off so it wouldn't create a blinding glare by bouncing off the glass. Then she stood in front of the family and took a selfie. Maybe they could become the first nineteenth-century family on Instagram. She posted the picture on her story with the hashtag #friendsfromadifferentcentury. She wished she could take the family back to her house for a visit or even a short-term stay. It would be lovely to entertain them at her place for a change. They could try on each other's clothes. Maybe she should ask the curator if she could take them back to her place for a while.

Still nothing from Sarah...

A piercing sound of children running and yelling in their high-pitched voices penetrated Anthea's thoughts. Lately, she had developed something verging on hatred towards children. She pressed her eyes closed and gritted her teeth. 'Use your *inside* voice,' said the woman strolling along serenely behind them with a baby in a push chair. She looked at Anthea and gave her an apologetic smile. Anthea looked away without responding. She didn't want to smile back. Instead, she listened to Sarah's voice in her head telling her to 'stay calm'. She bit her tongue and didn't say, 'your kids aren't cute; they're fucking annoying'.

Sarah

Sarah grabbed the brown paper bag containing the two McDonald's Filet of Fish off her passenger seat. Filet of Fish was Auntie June's favourite burger, and Sarah chose it because it seemed like the healthiest option. A healthy body equals a healthy mind, so why choose to be unhealthy if you could be healthy? Sarah kept a defined sleep schedule, practised yoga, exercised regularly, meditated, and maintained a balanced diet. Anthea made fun of her crystal collection, but Sarah liked how they looked. She didn't need to understand or explain everything, especially not to Anthea.

Once, Sarah took Anthea to a yoga class, hoping she would take up a good habit. They argued about whether Anthea could have a smoke before class, and somehow Sarah struggled to argue her case against it. Instead, Anthea convinced Sarah that she was the one being ridiculous. So Anthea leaned casually on the wall outside the yoga hall, smoking and scrolling on her phone. Sarah stood a little to the side and tried to act relaxed as she greeted all the regulars arriving at the class.

Inside, the cigarette smell on her breath and clothes mixed with the smell of essential oils and incense in a cloying way – she saw the looks her yoga class members shared amongst themselves. The smell that lingered around Anthea reminded Sarah of her mum, and she felt her anger towards her building and intensifying with only Anthea to direct it at. Anthea stayed glued to her phone between poses, not even bothering to try some of the more challenging positions, instead photographing the yoga studio and posting pictures on Instagram with #self-care, #mindfulness.

Anthea always gave up when things were hard. Sarah glared in her direction. Why was Anthea so oblivious to the unspoken rules of society? She seemed to march heavy-footed

through life without noticing she was trespassing on acceptable etiquette. Anthea didn't sleep properly, didn't exercise, ate junk food, and relied on drugs and alcohol heavily. But when Sarah approached those issues with Anthea, she became upset or angry. She was always walking the tightrope of triggering Anthea. Why couldn't she talk to her without her being so reactive?

Auntie June was waiting in the lounge area of the retirement home. Seeing her was like a hug for Sarah's soul. The greyness of retirement home life had not descended over Auntie June; rather, she had brought colour to it. Today she wore a white mohair jersey that created an ethereal softness around her. Her wrinkles draped across her face in soft happy lines. In her old age, she had become plump, but her roundness was beautiful. She was chatting with some residents when she saw Sarah arrive. Sarah leaned into a hug and inhaled the sweet smell of her. It was the reliable scent of her Bluebell perfume, the familiar feeling of safety like curling into bed at the end of a long day and a place to rest her heart.

'How are you, my darling?'

They linked arms and walked outside to the garden, where they liked to sit and eat when the weather was good. It was a small private garden with a bench and a birdbath in the middle. They noted each plant and flower as they emerged and died off over the seasons and watched birds washing in the birdbath. The soft steamed burger buns stuck to the insides of their teeth, like always.

Auntie June rubbed Sarah's leg with her warm, reassuring hand. Sarah blinked back tears. Why was she crying? She was fine. She could feel her lips trembling and tears pooling in her lower eyelids. She looked up and tried to take some secret deep breaths, exhaling her breath up towards her eyes in hopes it would dry the tears away. Why was this happening? It made her wonder if she was really in control of herself; which parts could she consciously

drive? Maybe her life was like a theatre, and she only controlled the stuff on stage; everything behind the curtain remained a mystery.

‘It’s okay, dear,’ Auntie June rubbed her back.

Sarah’s shoulders shook. She dropped her face into her hands and slumped into the warmth of Auntie June.

‘I don’t know what’s wrong with me,’ she said, laughing as she tried to wipe her tears away.

‘That’s okay; everyone needs a good cry sometimes,’ Auntie June said. A blackbird landed on the lawn and tilted its head to the side, searching for worms with its little beady eye.

‘Burying feelings is not the same as having no feelings; they’re still in there festering away,’ Auntie June said.

Sarah’s phone pinged in her pocket, and she rushed to pull it out and check it. She sighed with relief; it was just a text from the yoga group chat.

‘Every time my phone goes, I panic. I worry, is this it, have I failed, is it my fault, I don’t know how to save Anthea, and today is the worst; I don’t think about mum, I think about what Anthea might do, and I feel scared and angry.’

Sarah felt her worries spill out in a torrent around her. She crossed her arms over her body and leaned forward into a ball as if she could stop any more emotional outbursts by making herself small and tightly contained.

‘It’s my fault mum died’, Sarah blurted out. In the split second after the confession left her mouth, Sarah lost her breath and felt the single deep thud of her heart stopping in her chest. She thought she might vomit. She felt grateful she was outside so no one could see her. Auntie June looked like she’d been slapped. Sarah stared down at her feet like a child waiting to be punished.

‘I didn’t call you to tell you something unusual was happening when mum took us to the museum’, Sarah explained.

Relief shuddered out of her in choking sobs. She had finally confessed. She felt disoriented, as if she had escaped a darkened room and stumbled into the light.

‘Oh, Sarah. That is not why your Mum died. It was not your fault.’

Auntie June’s eyes reddened, and she sniffed into her handkerchief. It seemed a lot sillier now that Sarah had said it out loud, as if the secret had had its disguise ripped off and lay exposed and ridiculous, no longer able to hold any power over her.

Sparrows darted around the silk tree and landed in the birdbath, beating their little wings joyously in the water. The leafless silk tree stood somberly in the garden like a memorial of what it used to be. It was hard to believe it would come back to life in spring, fresh and beautiful. Her attention was drawn to the weeds sprouting throughout the garden making the shrubs look untidy.

‘Who does the gardening here?’ she asked, surveying the weeds more closely.

‘They need to clean this up,’ Sarah said, pulling some weeds out.

‘Leave that.’

‘It would only take ten minutes,’ Sarah said.

She assessed the small garden. It was an easy problem to solve; she’d have this garden looking tidy in no time. She looked back at Auntie June, understood the look on her face, and returned to her position beside her on the wooden bench.

‘Did you ever get angry with Mum?’ Sarah asked. Auntie June reached out and rubbed Sarah’s hand gently. She looked at her with tenderness.

‘Of course, I did, Sarah. I’m only human. People said I had to handle your mum with tough love; some said I was too patient and should just walk away, but I couldn’t walk away from her. Some people thought she was making it up for attention or that I was as if we were a

couple of dramatic sisters with poor self-control. They didn't understand how hard it was; for both of us. I felt sad, angry, lonely, scared.'

Sarah felt lonely when she was a child, knowing they couldn't trust their mum, scared when their mum deserted them, lonely keeping her secret, lonely when people didn't understand Anthea and scared she would lose her.

'Afterwards, people were horrified, they didn't know what to say, but they were sad for your mum and me; they realised too late,' Auntie June said. She was rubbing Sarah's arm comfortingly and watching her, concerned.

'I'm sorry. This must be a tough day for you too; I'm just tired of trying, of having no control,'

Sarah watched a range of emotions cross Auntie June's face.

'Your mum wanted to be well. No one would choose to feel the way she did. If you could choose happiness, why wouldn't everybody choose it? I know it's frustrating, but you mustn't think Anthea is trying to hurt you. And you must not think you can fix her. Anthea is Anthea. Love the best parts of her and your mum, don't define them by their challenges and bad times. You're not in control of Anthea or her illness. She is not a project for you to fix. She is your sister, who loves you, and you love her. You're different. Unburden yourself from thinking you can change the trajectory of Anthea's life. That's what I would change. I would have just let Regina be herself and enjoy every minute with her rather than worrying about something I had no control over.'

'So, I should just let Anthea kill herself. Is that what you're saying?' Sarah snapped. She couldn't believe Auntie June. Maybe she was losing her mind. Maybe she didn't realise how bad Anthea could be.

'Do you believe that it's your job to stop her, that it's in your power to?' Auntie June asked.

Sarah breathed in and closed her eyes. Maybe she could contain her frustration if she kept her eyes closed. She could feel Auntie June looking at her.

‘We’re all dying, Sarah; you’re concerned about the timing and the method. Are you as concerned about Anthea getting killed in a car accident?’

‘If I knew that Anthea was at great risk of getting killed in a car accident, then yes, I would do everything to save her,’ Sarah snapped. ‘I wish she did have a car accident’.

Sarah felt mortified at herself.

‘People survive car accidents, and doctors can fix them. Afterwards, it’s just a tragic survival story in the past. I want that for Anthea and me. At the moment, I feel all the stress and responsibility to take care of her. It’s as if I’m finding out Anthea has had a car accident every month, and the ambulance isn’t coming; only I have to figure out how to stitch her back together’.

‘You’re right,’ Auntie June said. ‘Perhaps I’m in denial about my role in your mother’s death.’

Waiting for Auntie June to explain herself, Sarah felt chilled. She touched Auntie June’s hand tenderly as if to waken her from a trance.

‘The day Anthea cut her head open. Remember how your mum reacted?’ Auntie June asked.

Sarah wished she could forget it, but the memory of Anthea’s lifeless body and bleeding head and the sound of her mum wailing combined to create a nightmare memory.

‘I’ll never forget it.’

‘Well, your mum thought she’d killed Anthea; she lost herself in that moment; she was always close to the edge’.

Thinking about Auntie June’s experience of the event rolled around in Sarah’s head. Auntie June hadn’t been there in the moments leading up to and right after the event, only

Sarah had been, and Birdhead after Sarah ran to her door and burst into tears. They each had their own version of it, and they weren't the same. She'd believed her version of events was complete and definitive. But it dawned on her that there were whole chapters of her mum and Auntie June's life she didn't know about. Even her conception of the event had changed as it grew up with her.

'When I visited Regina the next day at the ward, all she wanted was to be back with you girls, to see Anthea was alive and take care of her. She begged me to convince the doctor that she was fine so she could leave. The psychiatrist said she was a suicide risk. They wanted her to stay. I convinced the psychiatrist that I could supervise her at home, make sure she had her medication and contact them if I noticed any concerning signs.'

Auntie June inhaled a sob.

'I signed a disclaimer to say that I had made the decision against their advice. I never told your Mum. I lied and said that the psychiatrist agreed she was well enough to go'.

Auntie June looked up at Sarah with guilt in her eyes.

'I thought she was managing okay. I'd talked to Miss Grace to let her know to contact me if she saw anything unusual. I made excuses to pop in every day. I missed the chance to save her by an hour. It's my fault this happened; it has always been my fault. Maybe it's my fault that Anthea is the way she is. I wish I could turn back time.'

Sarah hugged Auntie June. This day was a nightmare. She felt the familiar anger towards her Mum grow inside her like cancer. Why had she done this to them? Auntie June didn't deserve this. She had to live with guilt; her mum had checked out. She had to watch the aftershocks flow through her nieces. She hadn't appreciated how hard things had been for Auntie June. She wanted to hold her tight forever.

Inside the retirement home, Sarah could see the residents moving slowly about, the carers weaving deftly amongst them, ensuring they found a seat safely, bringing cups of tea.

How many lives had ended invisibly in this place? Did they usher a dead body out and replace it with a new dying body by the end of the week? Time marches on, but everything is the same, she thought. It's just the scenery that changes. She felt helpless like she was simply cast to play a part she didn't choose.

Regina

In the sun-filled yard under the washing line, a starling held a snail in its beak. Regina could hear the snail shell's click, click, click as the bird bashed it against the concrete to release the chewy inner contents. She couldn't stop thinking about the cruelty of the situation, the traumatising death of the snail at the savage beak of the bird. It seemed a more violent act than she would ever commit, yet she was nothing more than an animal. What would she really be capable of if she didn't have the relative comforts of civilised society? And how much birdseed would she need to provide for these birds to live without the survival bloodlust for murdering snails? It was scary to think about being around so much primal need.

The girls were playing happily outside. Anthea's stitches were covered with a bandage, but they were healing well, and she was back to normal in every other way. Of course, the neighbours would have their stories, but Regina hated them anyway. What she hoped they thought was that Regina was crazy and dangerous. She hoped the busybody bird-headed bitch next door slept with one eye open and jumped every time she heard a noise at night. It was a powerful feeling to be feared.

But she was feeling low about the accident. If that hadn't happened, it would have been the magical memory she had intended. Now it was a lifelong scar on Anthea's head. More evidence she was a bad mother. Things always went the wrong way. Often, she thought about how the girls would be better off without her, but then she didn't want

someone else to hurt them either. No one would ever love them as she did. When she hurt them, it was by accident. It seemed a painful love you had for your own children. It was like an infection or like rabies. It made you go mad.

Regina saw Anthea catch sight of her watching them play through the window and beckoned to her, 'come outside, Mum, come play with us.' Regina smiled and waved. Out there was not where she wanted to go. Out there in public, where she wasn't in control and where people could watch her. She watched Sarah grab Anthea's hand and pull her away to look at the broken snail pieces under the washing line. It pained her to see Sarah mother Anthea. It reminded her of her deficiencies, that Sarah saw them clearly, and tried to fill the space for Anthea. Sarah's girlhood had morphed into something different, something she shouldn't be. Regina sensed that Sarah monitored her even more closely since the accident. Sarah was lost to her now. Why were these invisible bonds so oppressive? Regina was free to choose what she wanted, but it felt like she didn't have a choice.

Regina looked around the lounge at the dust bunnies nestled in the corners of the room. Being stuck in the same place all the time gave her too much time to face herself. She felt sweaty, dirty, and bored. She didn't want to do anything. Her body felt weird. It was a feeling in her chest, chin, and eyes. She was going to cry even though she wasn't conscious of why. The frustration was so overwhelming. Regina couldn't breathe. Her throat squeezed shut, making her eyes liquid.

She swallowed her glass of wine in one gulp.

Anthea

Anthea felt the burn of whiskey travel from her mouth to her throat. It got her attention like a slap in the face. She'd stumbled into the new mirror exhibit seeking a private space to catch her breath away from all the noises and smells searing into her brain. Inside,

the display glittered enticingly with mirrors of all shapes and sizes. Small, round, large, rectangular, decorative, and simple mirrors hung around her, reflecting the soft light in magical, enchanting ways.

She took some photos to catch a new artistic view of them, which would let people know she saw things differently. At the right angle, she could catch the light just the right way to create an ethereal glow around herself, so she looked less solid, as if she was dissolving away. From another angle, she looked sliced to bits and disjointed. In another picture, it was difficult to distinguish which image was Anthea and which was her reflection. In another, she stretched away to infinity as if she was more than one person, a whole line of carbon copies. How many likes would this picture get? she wondered.

A mosaic of shards of broken mirrors on the floor created a menacing pathway. Anthea stared at them and saw her many dimensioned reflections broken into pieces. It looked like an army of herself in miniature, staring accusingly. As she moved around the mirrored room, her reflection changed and morphed into different versions of herself. In one, she was tall and thin; in another, short and round; from some positions, she could see herself as both simultaneously. Which one should her eyes believe?

Now that she could see herself from different perspectives, she hated it. She wanted to see the version of herself that she'd made up in her mind in collusion with her mirror. The version reflected back at her by friends and photos—how she looked with a Snapchat filter smoothing out every flaw on her face. These things she had collated and negotiated with to form the acceptable version of herself. Flawed but satisfactory. This onslaught, these cruel shards of honesty, was unbearable.

Anthea felt light-headed and swayed on her feet. She crept slowly towards the opening to the next part of the mirror exhibit, but when she reached it, she found her reflection standing in her way. She stared at herself. Her heart pounded in her ears, she felt

breathless, and her throat throbbed as she searched for a way out of this kaleidoscope maze. What had at first appeared enchanting now felt menacing. All around, she could see herself, parts of herself, distorted versions of herself or reflections of other mirrors. Where did her body end and the images of herself begin? She was everywhere and nowhere. Light was reflecting blindingly, her throat throbbed with nausea. Her weak chin, the back of her head, the patchy redness on her face, everything distorted. Her vision blurred, and she felt cold, clammy sweat crawl over her body. She needed to sit down quickly and catch her breath. She could hear voices coming and felt filled with dread. She wanted to hide, but where could she hide in a room of mirrors? She had to get out of this awfully full void.

Sarah

Sarah couldn't focus properly on the words in her book. She felt annoyed because she had prided herself on her exceptional vision. She thought others' sight deficiency was a weakness and a sign of ill health. Over the last year, she noticed that text had become smaller and dimmer. At first, she blamed millennials for poor font choices. Eventually, she realised her eyes were deteriorating, and she felt angry at food manufacturers and product label makers for discrimination against sight-impaired people. She gave up trying to read labels. She'd succumbed to buying a pair of x 1.5 glasses from the \$2 shop, but she could never find them when she needed them.

She stared at the book she was reading and tried to reread the last sentence. It wasn't just her eyesight that was the problem. Her mind drifted to Anthea at their mother's grave site and the image she'd posted on Instagram. Why was Anthea so relaxed about sharing that stuff for everyone to see? Was it her version of a diary? She could make it private, but she obviously wanted it to be public. She shared her emotional state widely, and people went for it like a feeding frenzy.

But Sarah's mum had died too, yet Sarah had to grieve quietly, unnoticed. Anthea behaved like it was just her mum who had died and only her that grieved like she had a monopoly on grief. She tried to imagine what it would be like to be Anthea, to wear her emotions like costumes on the outside. Sarah wondered if her own feelings had flatlined from too much exertion. Now there was simply a blank place where her emotions were meant to be.

In the middle of a crisis, Sarah was like the eye of a storm, everything around her was chaos, but she was the still place – unblinking, passive. Once, in the aftermath of a crisis, she went to the top of Pork Chop Hill, feeling like she needed to scream her torrent of emotions out to the sky. But, instead, she simply stood there and watched people below walking their dogs, cycling, and pushing strollers and worried that she'd scare them if she were to release the primal scream thrashing to escape from her chest. She retreated back to her bed with a fresh journal page and black ballpoint pen and wrote all her thoughts and feelings on evenly spaced lines. She cried quietly in the shower.

Sarah was a closed book – everything was ordered neatly inside her. It was a place of absolute order, solitude and privacy. It was a place where it wasn't even necessary for her to exist – she became the universe in which the book existed. She could stop reading and close the book when she wanted to. She could put it back on the shelf and never open it again, and nothing terrible would happen. She could neglect a book without consequences. Nobody knew about your private life with books if you didn't want them to.

She plumped up the pillow on her bed and lay back in the sun to reread the paragraph.

Anthea

Anthea stood in the shelter of writer's corner, trying to compose herself. She positioned herself out of sight, hoping the person who had discovered her crawling in the

mirror exhibit would walk past without seeing her again. She had seen them materialise in front of her in the mirror room and crawled towards them as fast as she could, hoping she'd find the exit. They had looked at her with something verging between disgust and fear. Anthea briefly considered biting them on the leg as she shuffled by on all fours, but she heard Sarah's sensible voice in her head negotiating with her own wild feelings.

She peered around a column and saw the person coming in her direction. Why won't they fuck off? She quickly pulled her head in and turned her back. She heard their footsteps get louder and clenched her fists by her side as she thought angrily about the possibility they would come to this exhibit. In her mind, she willed them to go away. The footsteps got quieter and quieter, and Anthea felt relief that they had finally passed her. Maybe her day had turned a corner; perhaps she would be okay after all. Probably not, though; her life wasn't like that.

Anthea turned her attention to the brightly lit display cases. She thought that the current exhibit in the writer's corner of the museum could also be called 'suicidal writers' because it was an exhibit of Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath. Maybe being a woman and a writer was a lethal combination. Sylvia's letters were on a table covered with glass, some written on a typewriter and some handwritten. There were photos, a lock of her hair, and poems she worked on.

They were preserved and perfectly lit. It was something of a breathtaking feeling to look at items that belonged to a real person who was now dead. It was a different feeling to the colonial family diorama, almost like a haunting. That lock of hair. Who had cut it off? Was it cut off when she was dead or alive? It was different from the mannequins because the lock of hair was a real part of Sylvia's body, which had started inside and grown outside. Something she had eaten and broken down inside her body that got remade into hair. It must have been something brown.

Her Mum had been prettier than Sylvia. She was creative, too and shared that darkness that bruised their lives. A smudge, a shadow, a dark place. There was something about her that made them seem so similar. It gave Anthea a childlike feeling towards Sylvia Plath like she was her mother. Perhaps because she was used to seeing her mum through glass, she wished she could come to the museum and see a display about her life instead of Sylvia. She didn't like how her mum always seemed on the other side of the glass, just watching, but Anthea would love to be watched by her again. What kind of mother had Sylvia been in real life? Was her poetry like social media, where people created a different version of themselves for the public eye? Did she really love her children? It was difficult for Anthea to reconcile the idea of motherly love with someone who would desert their children. It was easier to hate Sylvia than her own mum. She pressed her hand against the glass, gave a photo of Sylvia Plath the finger, and mouthed 'fuck you.'

Like Virginia Woolf, Anthea liked figuring people out and trying to see what was inside them. She felt more friendly toward Woolf. She didn't leave children behind. Looking at a page of Woolf's essay, '*A Room of One's Own*,' Anthea noticed a line that made her feel like she was experiencing *deja vu*. '*Describe under what conditions women lived, not throughout the ages, but in England, say, in the time of Elizabeth*'. This thought out of Virginia Woolf's mind, through her hand, onto the page, seen by Anthea's eyes, and now transcribed into her mind, felt like time travel. A message from the dead.

She could hear dead people's voices in her mind by reading their books. She could see the world through their eyes, like a zombie. She could be part of the diorama. She could write a story that would live beyond her own mortal life. Why had she not realised that books were more than just books? They were time capsules, different spaces, a chance to commune with the dead. That's what Anthea so desperately wanted, to commune with the dead. She felt a new door had opened in her mind that she just needed to walk through to discover a new

place. How many of her thoughts had other people thought too? What if she wrote something and a future person read it and felt how she did now? She put her hands up to her head and covered her ears, rocking back and forth to try and deal with the overwhelming feeling that a new place in her brain had come to life that she didn't know how to drive. She was scared to lose this thought and never be able to find the door again like a dream that slips out of your memory as soon as you wake up.

Anthea

Bare feet pounding on packed dirt matched the sound of Anthea's beating heart. Ahead of her, Sarah's hair streamed out, just far enough away so Anthea couldn't reach it. Anthea was running faster than her legs could carry her. Reaching out as far as she could – she almost felt she could fly. Now and again, Sarah looked over her shoulder to check how close Anthea was and then she'd shout something or sneer to make Anthea even more determined to catch her. She'd been close enough to graze Sarah's tee shirt with her fingertips twice, but Sarah always arched away from her grasp.

They ran round and round the house, jumping over the bikes, they'd dropped on the front lawn and ducking under the washing line.

Anthea saw her mum watching from inside as she ran past. She wished she would come and join in. 'Come and play,' she shouted and waved. Anthea's mum looked like a barbie doll in a box when she stood inside looking out at Anthea and Sarah playing. Her Mum was pretty. She was very pretty. She was most pretty when she was happy. Mum didn't like coming outside, but Anthea thought she would like it if she tried. Was it because she was too busy inside? She was always sleepy. She said 'one day' or 'later' or 'not now' whenever Anthea asked her. But she'd seen other mums outside. And Auntie June was happy inside or outside.

Sunshine on the window stopped Anthea from being able to see through from certain angles. Sometimes she could see herself reflected back and sometimes her mum. Was she looking through the glass at her mum, or was her mum looking through the glass at her? It was hard for her to imagine what she looked like from where her mum was or what her mum thought she looked like from where Anthea was looking. How could both things happen at the same time? However, she felt sure that if her mum came outside and ran as fast as her legs could carry her, she'd have the flying feeling and be happy. That's what her mum needed, to come outside and run around the house every day.

Sarah collapsed on her back on the ground, and Anthea lay down next to her. They stared at the sky, puffing from their red flushed faces, inhaling the comforting smell of the earth. Their feet were stained green and brown. Anthea loved playing with Sarah. Sometimes they had fights, and Anthea didn't know when they would happen and what caused them. She didn't really know how they stopped fighting either. It seemed like they went to bed and a new day started. It was like watching cartoons on TV when the characters would get crushed or run over, but the next time the show came on, they were there like they always were. Coyote always chased Roadrunner.

Anyway, when they weren't fighting, Anthea just forgot all about it, and she thought, probably Sarah did too. Sarah was bossy sometimes because she was the 'big' sister, and sometimes she acted like she thought she was Anthea's mum. That was one of the things that made her mad when Sarah tried to boss her around. And Sarah got angry at her when she copied what she was wearing or accidentally did something to upset mum. But the rest of the time, everything was fine.

Anthea jumped on Sarah to tickle her, but Sarah threw her hand up and hit Anthea in the head where her cut was. Anthea shrieked because it hurt but mostly because Sarah's eyes went wide, and Anthea knew something bad had happened to her head.

Regina

Regina hurriedly stubbed out her smoke and rushed into the kitchen when she heard the sound of the girls playing change from happy noise to panicked shrieks. She hadn't seen what happened because she'd seized an opportunity to go to her bedroom while the girls were distracted looking at the snail shell, to have a calming cigarette, blowing the smoke out the window.

Anthea ran inside first, crying. Blood flowed bright red down her face. Regina's eyes fixed on the leaking red bandage. She could hear the drip, drip of blood bouncing onto the kitchen floor and splattering on Anthea's dirt-stained feet. Anthea smeared dirt, hair and blood across her face as she wiped it with her dirty hands. Her t-shirt bloomed with red storm clouds.

Regina felt she was being punished over and over. What had she done wrong? It was the cigarette. She was being punished because of the cigarette and the momentary lapse of supervision.

'Sarah hit me,' Anthea wailed.

'I did not!'

The girls both surged towards her like an attacking flock. Two sets of eyes bored into her soul, both seeking opposing reassurances. How could she give them both what they wanted? What should she do first? She was a useless mother. Her vision narrowed; she felt breathless. The girls pushed each other as they fought to reach her and monopolise her attention. She shouldn't have let Anthea run around outside. Birdhead would have seen it, and she would be able to hear the girls crying. Regina backed away, trying to find space. The primal cries and yelling from the girls made her lightheaded. She slumped down in the corner of the kitchen, bursting into tears. Her body felt too heavy to control. Should she call an

ambulance, change the bandage, send Sarah to her room? She needed June. June would know what to do, but Regina didn't want to call her. The girls burrowed into her emptiness, oblivious that she had nothing to offer them. They came closer and closer like she was a mountain they needed to conquer until they were piled in a heap, crying and smeared with blood and snot.

'What on earth?' With her hands on her hips, looking annoyed and exasperated, June was there like an apparition. The girls ran to her, and June deftly turned them away. 'To the bathroom first, please. Clean yourselves up,' June said sternly, making the girls pay attention. So, the girls went crying and sniffing but now with a task in front of them to get through.

'Good grief Regina, what is going on?' Regina's stomach clenched at the tone of June's voice. Curled in the corner, looking up at June's stern face, Regina felt like a child too. She couldn't stand it when June thought of her as pathetic. She wanted to crawl into bed and die. Regina's body convulsed under the strain of trying to control herself, but she couldn't stop crying. She couldn't breathe. She could hear herself gasping, going through the motions of trying to breathe, but it wasn't working. She stared intensely at June, hoping she would realise and call an ambulance. She reached out desperately for her. June crouched down beside Regina and held her hand.

'It's okay, Gina, you're okay, just breathe, okay, just breathe, everything's fine.'

Regina could feel her whole body pulsing. Everything inside her body was so loud that she couldn't hear what June was saying; she could only see her lips moving. June guided Regina off the floor and gently led her toward her room. Regina looked down at the colourful flower design that danced on the grey carpet while June pulled her to her bed. She sat next to her and pulled her into a hug. She couldn't breathe pressed into June; she needed space, cold air, and water. She wanted the thrashing feeling in her body to go away. She pushed June

and yelled, 'go away.' June moved away but held her hand, squeezing it rhythmically.

Regina squeezed back like she had when they were girls. Their secret hand-squeezing code.

'It's okay, Gina, it's okay, you're safe, you can breathe,' she said. Regina felt her heart slowing and air going into her lungs easier. The relief burst into a fresh set of tears, and she collapsed onto June's lap.

'I'm sorry, I'm sorry.'

June ran her fingers through Regina's hair.

'It's okay, Gina, everything is okay.'

After laying her down and kissing her forehead, June slipped quietly away, pulling the door closed gently. Regina lay with her eyes closed, listening to the girls and June. Why couldn't she have dealt with the girls the way June did? She could have told them to clean themselves up and tended to the blood calmly; why didn't she? Now, things were even worse than before, and it was all her fault, as usual. Instead of getting the attention she needed, Regina had taken all the attention and let Anthea down. She was hurting her girls. She wished she could always stay in her bed and just hear June taking care of the girls in the distance. She was too exhausted to imagine ever being able to cope like June.

Lying in her bed, every pill she swallowed from her bedside drawer felt like a step closer to the best solution for everyone. She closed her eyes and listened, smiling about her decision to finish this way, with her loved ones safely nearby. Her eyes grew heavy, her body relaxed and uncoiled. She was drifting quietly away.

She found a snail shell just the right size to crawl inside, and it felt like she had found her perfect state of being. She was warm and peaceful, womb-like, as if the concept of time didn't exist anymore. She had her own space, here but not here, muffled, soothing noises in the background. Her body floated lightly like a sheet dancing gently on the clothesline on a sunny day. In the distance, she could hear a tick...tick...tick. It got closer and closer. Was it

ticking or a clicking, cracking sound? Her body jolted with every click; everything was getting louder. She thought with horror that a bird was trying to crack her snail shell open to tear her warm, soft body out. She thrashed around, but there was no exit; she was trapped. Something violent happened to her body. Something smooth but hard forced its way into her mouth. Clanging noises, movement and action around her gained intensity.

June's face. Tear-stained and red-eyed, full of relief. Regina stared at her. She was in the hospital, not in her room. She hated herself. Every move she made hurt someone.

Anthea

The carpet runner that stepped up before her was secured by brass rods and was a regal red print that bloomed with ovarian-like flowers. What was so special about red that it had its privileged place above all the other colours. Why was it used for VIP carpets, stop signs and royal cloaks? What would a yellow stop sign look like, or a yellow cloak?

Anthea looked across the museum from the landing and noticed the lights shining down from perforated industrial metal trays that carried the electrical cords snaking their way around the museum. How many lights were there, and where were all the light switches? Who changed the bulbs? How many spare bulbs did they need? So many things must happen here to keep the museum in order. Someone must clean the floors and polish the glass, but she never saw anyone doing that. Where were they? Anthea stood still and looked over the bottom floor, carefully searching for signs of the people who maintained the museum. There must be some secret passages hiding them all, she thought. When did they do it? Maybe they were magic, like fairies. How much work did it take to keep things the same, or was it fairy dust that suspended everything always as it should be?

The vastness of the stairs made her feel small but grand, and as she ascended them, she felt like she was the leading lady in a movie. At the top of the stairs, she was separated

from the noisy kids and their trail of destruction, the woman with the apologetic smile, the noisy café and the mirror room person. She wished they would all just fuck off. Her body and mind felt aggravated, on edge, and she knew someone would set her off soon if they didn't stay away from her.

The range of wedding dresses from different eras and cultures stood proudly behind glass on headless mannequins to the left of the stairway. Anthea strolled quietly in front of them. They seemed impossibly small. Were women back then a different species? The dresses were too beautiful. Anthea wondered what the average woman wore on her wedding day back then. Ordinary people probably didn't even have wedding dresses. This warped depiction of other eras gave the impression that things from the past were always more classy than they probably were, like the Egyptians. Most of them probably didn't wander around pyramids draped in jewellery and wearing ornate headdresses. But people thought of Egyptians that way because of how they were depicted in museums and libraries.

It wouldn't be her Kmart shoes in the museum in 200 years – it would be the Manolo Blahnik's that only celebrities wear. People don't want to look at ordinary people. But most people were ordinary people. Museum-going was just an elite version of reality TV. It wasn't any different than being a fan of *The Kardashians*. It was watching how people behaved, what things they had and trying to imagine their life being just like it. Nothing had meaning – it was all pointless.

The flawless finishing on the wedding dresses indicated hours of work. Anthea tried to imagine the painful fingers and sore eyes of the women who stitched their way into a marriage. She couldn't think of anyone who made their own dresses these days.

'Oh, wedding dresses! I love wedding dresses!'

Anthea turned her gaze on an older teenager, probably university age, a bourgeois quirky intellectual. She'd undoubtedly take some videos for her TikTok account and write a

one-word caption to showcase her ‘edgy’ personality. And yet here she was swooning over wedding dresses with her intellectual-looking friend.

‘This one is so fit,’ her friend said, standing jaggedly in front of the glass.

Anthea noticed they made a lot of noise but said nothing of significance. The pitch and intensity grew and grew, forcing its way into her ears and squeezing her brain. They were so dumb; it was grating. Like the eras of wedding dresses on display, they were cookie-cutter females churned out and decorated until they were consumed and discarded. How many young women had stood before this display and thought they were unique and different? On the other side of the glass, the wedding dresses watched.

The girls droned on and on, assessing the dresses.

‘I like the pearl detail on this one.’

‘But the lace on this is divine.’

Anthea rolled her eyes. Who did they think they were – fashion designers?

‘This is quite vintage.’

‘Mm, I love the vintage look.’

Anthea closed her eyes, but she could feel her insides rising, her spine extending, her hands clenching by her sides, then her chin jutted forward ‘til she could no longer contain her rage.

‘I think wedding dresses should be black,’ Anthea blurted out.

The girls whirled around as if a ghost had entered the room.

‘Woah, you scared me,’ one of them said.

They giggled nervously and looked at each other. Were they scared, or were they laughing at her? Anthea wondered. They should take her fucking seriously. She moved closer to them, close enough to make them step backwards.

‘Wear a black dress at your wedding. It more accurately symbolises the ending of your childhood and the last day you are cherished. We should all cry tears of fucking grief at weddings, not tears of joy.’

The girls covered their mouths with their hands and looked at each other wide-eyed. They think I’m crazy, Anthea thought. Everyone thinks I’m crazy for thinking genuinely true things. Was she crazy?

‘We’re not getting married,’ they said proudly as they backed away from her.

Why didn’t they just shut up and fuck off? They were going to make her go crazy; she could feel it tapping on her insides. She would burst soon. They were just like all the girls at high school who hated her and always laughed at her.

‘Bullshit!’ she yelled.

The girls looked like she’d slapped them, and Anthea felt a stimulating thrill of power surge through her. She pulled her hip flask out and took an aggressive swig while staring them down.

‘Woah, okay, you weird old lady,’ one of them said as she rolled her eyes and grabbed her friend to walk away.

‘Fuck you, you stupid bitches!’

Anthea turned towards the wedding dress display and spat at it before swinging her head back to glare at the girls.

‘There’s no such thing as happy ever after!’

Her spit blurred on the glass, distorting the view of the wedding dresses as it slid towards the red fibres of the museum carpet. She watched the girls scramble for the staircase. Look who’s laughing now, she thought as she stumbled towards the next exhibit, smiling to herself.

The Frida Kahlo display was to the right of the staircase, tucked into a moody room with dim lighting. There was no one else in the room, which was refreshing. Anthea took refuge in the shadows. The big blue house, La Casa Azul, where Frida had grown up in Mexico, covered one wall. Her bed, or one like it, was tucked into a quiet corner. The room was full of self-portraits of Frida, more alive in her death than most living people. She had reproduced her own image over and over, and now she was a dead tourist.

There were photos of her, too, after becoming a muse and pop-culture icon. She seemed to be the most beautiful miserable person Anthea had ever seen. She would be on Anthea's list of dead people to have at her dinner table. People seemed to know exactly which dead people they'd like to revive and have at their dinner table, but Anthea worried the people she chose might not like her. Maybe it was part of the fantasy that they would want to be at your dinner table too, or that you'd somehow be interesting to them. First on Anthea's list would be her mum.

She'd love to have Frida Kahlo at her dinner table, but she had a feeling that Frida wouldn't like her. Hardly anyone liked her. Maybe Frida wasn't a very likeable person either. But horrible people can get away with being not very nice if they have something else to offer. She could have Frida and her mum at her dinner table, but maybe neither would like the other. Perhaps it was best for Frida to stay dead. Dead perfection. Anthea's foot caught on Frida's bed leg as she walked by, swigging from her hip flask. She stopped to steady herself and checked her bag for moisture. Was her hip flask leaking, she wondered; it was nearly empty.

In a roped-off section with a sign that said 'do not touch,' a mannequin had been dressed up as Frida, or was it really Frida, preserved like the butterflies? A fake flower garland sat in the dark hair piled on her head. Anthea looked at her bright red lips, the beauty spot, the thick dark eyebrows that touched at the centre of her forehead. She leaned over the

rope and stretched her hand to touch Frida's bright orange skirt. She laughed aloud, thinking about a future person who might get a thrill by touching her clothes in a museum. She wandered back to a big, close-up, brightly coloured photo of Frida's face. She touched her lips and then leaned forward and kissed them. She kissed Frida Kahlo. What would it feel like to kiss Frida in real life? What would her breath smell like? Cigarettes and coffee? Rotten teeth?

She returned to the mannequin and checked that no one was watching. She climbed under the maroon rope and stood in front of Frida, staring into her painted eyes. She touched her hand, hair, face, and breasts and leaned in to kiss her. Then, unbuttoning the shirt, she exposed her breasts' smooth brown plastic lumps. No bra, nice one, Frida. She unzipped the skirt and lifted it gently over her head. Frida stood naked but showed no sign of embarrassment. She stood proudly with the flower garland on her head. Anthea removed her black dress with the shoestring straps and pulled it over Frida's head. She pulled Frida's clothes on herself and removed the flower garland from Frida, placing it on her own head. Frida was an ordinary girl now, and Anthea was Frida.

She waltzed away dreamily and lay down on the bed where Frida did her art, where she died. Staring at the canopy above the bed, Anthea felt the room spinning. Bright colours coalesced before her eyes. The colours swirled in big circles, forming into different shapes and then unforming like clouds. Thick and lumpy like paint on an artist's palette – rich, pumping, veined. It formed into a red and purple uterus and ovaries, like a heart with arms reaching out from it. It had bright orange flames around it, a flaming uterus. It got brighter and brighter in front of her eyes and pumped faster and faster like a heartbeat until, white-hot, it exploded. Anthea rolled over and vomited.

'There she is.'

She rolled towards the voice and saw a blurred object approaching. Another person followed, shouting, 'what are you doing? You're not allowed in here!'

'Not allowed, okay? What are you? Museum police? I'm museuming', Anthea said.

A security guard tried to grab her, but Anthea vomited again.

'You filthy bitch!'

Anthea looked at the guard with vomit dripping from their shirt.

'That is a work of art by Frida Kahlo herself. I donate it to the Museum Police; you're welcome!'

The guard looked comical, paralysed in position, wondering what to do first. She looked at Anthea with a mixture of disgust and outrage. Anthea took the opportunity to launch herself from the bed and escape the room. She ran down the grand ovary blooming staircase with Frida's bright orange skirt billowing out behind her. She was Frida. A living exhibit, misbehaving in the museum. Not standing obediently in her assigned place. Free Frida.

She saw the two teenage girls talking to another security guard at the bottom of the stairs.

'Grab her,' the upstairs security guards yelled.

Anthea watched the faces of the teenagers freeze as they saw her running towards them. She could see their brains working, trying to make sense of what they saw. They looked terrified, as if she were running at them with a knife. The guard stepped in her way with arms outstretched as if it would stop Anthea like a traffic light. Instead, Anthea screamed at them as she burst through their huddle, pushing the security guard out of her way. Her world was in slow motion now.

Anthea flicked her Instagram onto live and recorded the guards, Frida's skirt whirling, her face laughing. This was fucking epic. Fuck everyone!

The sounds from the cafe drew her attention. The guards' footsteps clapped angrily on the stone floor behind her as she reached the cafe. People turned as though they were one organism, their sudden silence like a cool breeze. She took a mental snapshot of their craven faces turned towards her with their mouths hanging open. The noise of the chase reverberated throughout the museum, along with sickening screams. Was it Sarah? She looked around, trying to locate the source of the noise; maybe Sarah was there. Then, she heard it again; it sounded like her mum. She sounded scared and sad, her screams echoing all around.

'Mum! Mum!' Anthea yelled, searching frantically for her.

She charged through the cafe into the outdoor circular space of the garden area. That's where her mum would be. Anthea desperately searched the faces of the people who sat in the sun with their drinks and food. She rushed over to the table where she had last seen her mum and yelled, 'where's my mum,' angrily at the woman sitting there. The woman stared at her, confusion and fear painted on her face. Anthea turned to the fountain, its circular shape, and the stone lady, the centre of her madness.

Was her mum in there? She ran around the whole perimeter of the venus-adorned fountain, screaming 'mum' at the top of her voice. She leaned in towards the water at the fountain, searching for her mum underneath. There she was, distorted by the ripples of the water; she could just make out her mum's face.

'Mum', she sobbed, reaching into the water to touch her. The image dissipated, but Anthea would not lose her again. She climbed onto the side of the fountain and stood Christ-like with her arms out wide.

'Get down right now,' the guard yelled at her.

Anthea saw the police burst through the cafe door. Grief hit her in the guts with a force like she'd been punched. One of them started moving the people away as if Anthea was

a dangerous wild animal. The other approached slowly, motioning with their hands that she should calm down.

She didn't want the police and the fountain. She wanted to erase this whole place. All the feelings, the smell of the water and the dirt. The coffee and the fear. She wanted them to leave her alone. She wanted her mum. As the police lunged to grab her, Anthea let herself fall serenely back into the fountain.

Sarah

Underneath, the light streamed through the baby blue water, painting shadows on the bottom of the pool. Sarah enjoyed the water's muffling effect on light and sound, so the world flowed gently around her. Her body felt weightless and relaxed – womb-like.

When she surfaced, the shrill sound of a pool guard's whistle, water splashing, and children's high-pitched voices echoed around her. She put her head back under the water, where it was peaceful. Hair floated like wispy jellyfish tentacles, a bandage lay on the bottom of the pool, and blackened leaves littered the lanes. The chlorine made it safe. In her lane, a slow swimmer thrashed away without making much progress. Sarah passed carefully to avoid touching them. She didn't want a gnarled toenail digging into her water-softened skin. She put the whole concept of sharing a pool of water with so many bodies out of her mind.

She had such an affinity with water. Sarah turned to breathe as she pulled her arms through the water, gently re-entering her fingers with each stroke. Swimming was simple and repetitive. It had a ritualistic sacredness that got her in a space where she could let her mind swim too. Her body would feel heavy when she finished twenty lengths, and she got a different kind of tiredness from swimming, which helped her sleep.

Auntie June's words were in her head: 'she was an intelligent woman, your mum...she was an amazing artist... she liked writing like you do'. Sarah stopped and tipped

the water out of her goggles. She needed some new ones; they were useless, either fogging up or letting water leak in, forcing her to stop and mess around with them. She pulled them back on and shifted them until she felt them suction onto her face. Then, ducking beneath the water, she pushed off the pool wall with her feet and stretched out, gliding into the momentum.

‘She was an excellent cook’, Auntie June had said.

Sarah thought about the meals her mum had prepared. Sometimes she’d made heart-shaped pancakes for them, and they’d sat down under a blanket and watched TV together while eating them. Sarah and Anthea would snuggle into each side of her, and she would kiss their heads and murmur little things like ‘my wonderful girls’. At bedtime, she would lie down next to them and make-up stories. They were never exactly the same, and she always made Sarah and Anthea part of the story. They rode dragons, found portals to new places in the woods, became mermaids, and had a palace under the sea when they got in the water. She remembered feeling warm and loved in those moments.

Sarah reached out to touch the wall at the end of the lane. She stopped and leaned against it, puffing. Tipping her head to the side, she jumped on one foot to shake the water out of her ear. Had she done ten or twelve lengths? She always forgot so she’d estimate ten so she didn’t swim less than she intended. She watched people walking around the pool. Did the muscular woman in the navy bathing suit have a mother who was dead or alive? Was she a good cook?

Sarah pushed off the wall and started swimming length 11, 9 to go. Her mind was trying to grasp something just out of reach. She turned to breathe. Left arm, right arm, left arm, roll and breathe. What she thought wasn’t the truth. She could see and experience the same things as Anthea and Auntie June but put them together differently, creating another meaning, like an anagram. Sarah pushed the water in her nose out, making two smooth jets of

bubbles underneath her. She turned and breathed, taking in a little water that made her want to cough, but she kept her rhythm and eased the water out gently. Why had she held all the bad memories so close? She had archived them and locked them away in an impenetrable part of her brain. It was labelled 'Mum' and was leaden.

Anthea

They stood dripping by the fountain. The guard cast an angry shadow over them and asked where their mother was. They looked over to where their mum's bag sat at the table.

'She was just there,' Sarah said.

Out of the fountain, they shivered in their wet, cold, heavy clothes. Blood from a scrape on Sarah's knee mixed with water and flowed down her leg, bright red. Anthea rubbed a snot drip with her sleeve, but it made her nose burn, and she knew she wasn't supposed to wipe it with her sleeve. The cut on her head felt tight and sore.

The guard waited with them for their Mum to come back. Sarah and Anthea stared at each other's worried faces. They knew Mum would be disappointed when she found out they had both been naughty girls. The shadows seemed to get bigger and colder. The longer they waited, the angrier the guard seemed to be. Finally, the guard asked their names and left them standing next to the fountain with strict orders to 'stay here.' Soon after, they heard an announcement asking if 'the mother of two girls called Anthea and Sarah could come to the cafe please?'

The guard returned with a grim smile and stood beside them, facing the cafe door. Anthea noticed Sarah was trembling. Her skin had a faintly bluish tinge. The guard kept looking at her watch. A woman reading nearby came over and spoke to the guard. She left and came back with a blanket for each of them and a warm chocolate drink that warmed their

cold hands. They both said thank you, like good girls, and tears squeezed from the corners of their eyes.

‘What does your Mum look like? What was she wearing today?’ the woman asked in a kind voice.

‘She had a soft jumper on.’

‘It was blue.’

The woman went back into the museum and returned to talk to the guard.

The cafe staff came and cleaned up all the tables except the one with their mum’s bag on it.

‘The bird’s eating our cake,’ Anthea said, pointing it out to Sarah.

‘Shut up!’

Anthea started crying. Banana cake was her favourite. Why was everyone so angry? Why did it always happen that a good time turned into a bad one?

The cafe door swung open, and their hearts swelled with dread and hope, but it was the police, not their mum.

The bright Frida Kahlo clothing, drenched with water, clung heavily to her. Anthea’s vision was blurred, so she felt in a dream-like state as if she had become the main subject in a beautiful watercolour piece of art. Who would peel these clothes off her and pop her out of her Frida cocoon? Maybe she would come out transformed. She didn’t really want to be different; she wanted the world to be different.

Anthea could hear her sobs echoing in her ears as if they weren’t coming from her but from the sky itself. She wanted the sky to cry for as long as it took for grief to be washed away. Pouring rain and roaring thunder would be the theme song of her grief. With her own

primal screams, it would create a concerto of despair that people could recognise, like a pop song repeatedly played on the radio. It would become a part of their life, and she would never have to carry the weight of it on her own again. If everyone could understand the burden she was carrying, the world wouldn't be hard anymore; it would be soft and warm.

She had become childlike again and demanded attention for the invisible wound that hurt all the time, like a giant bruise that spread all the way from her heart to just under the surface of her skin. Now everyone could see the size and shape of her pain. She didn't know how to live without it. She hadn't found her mum under the water. She had only seen her other self, the one that looked up at her from just behind the water's surface, to remind her what she used to feel like. The one she had stared at long enough to lose sight of her mum. She didn't find her. The pain was still there. This was still life.

She could hear cutlery clinking as cafe patrons returned to their seats – they were eating again. The shrill ding of a teaspoon tapped on the side of a cup made her clench her fists. A sparrow stood on the edge of a side plate, pecking at crumbs left behind. The police, with their backs to her, were talking to the woman sitting where her mum had once sat. Anthea turned her head away and wailed her despair. She winced at the 'click, click' of the belts that secured her to the stretcher. They matched the sparrow's beak pecking against the plate. They wheeled her through the cafe doors into the museum. The teenage girls from the wedding dress section stood with another guard and a police officer. One reached out and placed Anthea's phone near her hand on the stretcher. Anthea's hand curled around it.

'I grabbed this for you, it got a little wet, but it's still working; I just thought you might need to call someone,' she said.

The girls looked at her with sympathy, and Anthea sobbed inconsolably at their generosity and with deep shame.

People retreated from her as she was pushed towards the museum's exit. The sound of hushed talking increased as though someone was turning the volume up slowly behind her. The paramedics were upbeat, describing each step of their journey as they had since they arrived. Only now were their voices beginning to assemble into words.

‘Okay, Anthea, we’re getting out of here now...we’re going to take you to the hospital in the ambulance...you’ll feel better soon... it’s good those nice girls got your phone for you.’

When the museum doors swung open, and Auntie June arrived, Sarah and Anthea burst into tears. She wrapped them firmly in her arms and kissed them on their faces. The familiar smell of Auntie June made them feel safe. She was crying, making her body shake, so they quivered together in the hug. She took them back to her place and helped them out of their clothes into a warm, nice-smelling bath. Auntie June cried the whole time, making whimpering sounds and wiping away tears, making her look more like their mum. Where was mum? They’d never seen Auntie June cry before, and they didn’t know what to say, so they just watched her quietly and said nothing.

After the bath and some phone calls Auntie June had to make, she bundled them into her car and took them to the McDonald’s drive-thru. They both got a happy meal with a small tube-shaped plastic toy. Anthea pointed one end of it at Sarah and looked through the other end. She could see lots of colourful Sarah’s fanned out like magic, and she giggled with delight. They took turns looking at each other and enjoying how different the world looked through it. They felt the day hadn’t been so bad after all, just the part with the angry guard, not being able to find mum, and Auntie June being sad.

They asked Auntie June where mum had gone, and she said mum had gone somewhere else so that she could be happy; her voice sounded wobbly, and her shoulders

shook while she said it. Maybe Auntie June didn't want mum to be happy. She'd brought her handbag and glasses home from the Museum, so she didn't need those things wherever she was.

'The birds ate our cake,' Anthea said.

'That's okay; we can have cake another time,' Auntie June said.

Miss Grace visited with flowers and a pot with food for Auntie June and looked at the girls sadly. She kept saying, 'I'm so sorry,' and hugging Auntie June. Anthea wondered if Auntie June was sad because she wanted to go to the happy place too.

Anthea cradled the cup of homemade herbal tea Sarah had harvested from her garden. It felt warm in her hand and had a soft greeny-yellow colour and a pleasant aroma of lemon. She appreciated Sarah's resourcefulness and connection to nature but didn't appreciate how it made her feel like she was failing at everything herself. Why couldn't Sarah have an Uber eats habit or chew her nails? It felt so contrived at times.

They sat in a conversation nook that Sarah had carefully curated near a window overlooking the garden. The chairs were placed perfectly to encourage conversation and reflection—facing each other but angled slightly towards the view outside. There was a birdhouse with homemade feeders attached where every now and again, a sparrow would perch. Why didn't people feed rats to encourage them to their backyards? What made birds more appealing?

Sarah was reclining in a relaxed position as she talked about meditation and letting go of repressed anger and ancestral guilt. Anthea inwardly rolled her eyes. She couldn't think of someone less likely to be in touch with their feelings. Sarah had explored every healing modality she could think of. They danced around Sarah's façade that it was for herself, but Anthea was under no illusions about what was driving the interest; she was looking for

answers to Anthea's problems. Anthea understood why, Sarah had been dragged through many 'episodes' with her.

She calmly managed the police, the psychologists, psychiatrists, doctors, and her bosses. It wasn't fair. But Sarah's idea that she was well because of all this healing stuff was bullshit. It was like a naturally skinny person telling an overweight person what they do to stay slim. It was just good genes. Sarah droned on and on about healing and wellness as if she could change yesterday's narrative, like reformatting a hard drive. She always tried to distract Anthea's attention away from her problems with trivial things. This was their post-crisis ritual. A mopping up and putting away of all the out-of-control things.

'Why didn't you come with me? Why didn't you comment on my picture or even just heart it?' Anthea said.

Sarah

Sarah closed her eyes as if to block out the world. She inhaled deeply into her nostrils as if the fresh air would act like a bucket of cold water over her inflamed brain. When she opened her eyes, Anthea sat crouched like a cat waiting to pounce on a bird, assessing Sarah's every move.

'FUCK YOU,' she screamed at Anthea as she leapt out of her chair and ran outside, away from where she felt Anthea was the puppeteer of her emotional life. Tears streamed down her face, and she wiped them away unashamed. Too many thoughts and emotions tumbled around in her head.

She hated Anthea.

Sarah walked blindly, directionless. Why did Anthea say that? Was she blaming Sarah for what happened at the museum because she didn't like her Instagram post? If she had just liked the post, would none of this have happened? Was it her fault? If she'd been a better sister, would Anthea have avoided this breakdown? Why was she always left with all these

broken pieces? Loud sobs shook her body. She didn't care who could see. She kicked a stick, but it caught between her feet and scratched her ankle. She yelled 'fuck' into the sky and shook an enraged fist.

She turned into a park on her left and realised she was adjacent to the cemetery. Her feet moved towards it, and she felt carried as if merely a passenger. She felt lighter, like a place for her was just ahead, a place where she could go. A new feeling burrowed into her, the feeling of an upset child seeking the reassurance of their mother. She ran, crying towards her mother's grave and threw herself down on the cold concrete, letting her hurt spill forth unchecked. She curled into a foetal position and closed her eyes. Here with her mum, It was the first time she hadn't felt scared since she was a child.

Anthea

Anthea stared at the homemade crackers, and hummus Sarah had set between them on a small table. She'd used her homegrown garlic in it – the nutrient value would be superior to supermarket garlic, she'd said. Anthea felt guilty about the container of hummus Sarah had given her that was slowly going mouldy in her fridge. She'd chuck it out when she got home so she could forget about it and pretend she had used it all.

She looked around Sarah's house from her seat by the window. Was Sarah really gone? What should she do? She felt spat out of yesterday's chaos and into a calm, eerie space in the eye of the storm. Was she calm, or was it the medication? Where had Sarah gone? She usually tiptoed around Anthea in the aftermath of her 'episodes', careful to smooth her way back to normality. She needed Sarah to do the things Sarah always did.

Outside, the birds went about their day leaping from branch to branch, pecking seeds from the bird feeders. She watched them puff out their feathers, peck and squawk at each other as they fought over food. Sarah's collection of crystals and geodes glinted in the sun.

Anthea reached out and touched them. A rainbow of colour from amongst the crystals caught Anthea's eye. A prism.

She picked it up and held it in her palm. She remembered playing with these with Sarah and her mum by the window on a sunny day when she was a kid. It was just a 3D triangle of glass, yet it made rainbows from white light, proving that you can't see what is right in front of you unless you look at it differently. Anthea held it up to her eye. It was like looking through the kaleidoscope toys they used to have. Things looked different through the prism in an enticing way, like living in a different dimension. She remembered how she had sat upside down on the couch with her head hanging over the edge as a child and how the ceiling began to look like the floor. Her face got heavy as it filled up with blood, but it was like discovering a new place only she knew about. The prism was another place too. She could make her own rainbows and see the world differently whenever she liked.

Sarah materialised. A many-dimensional Sarah not in one particular place but in a range of places. Anthea dropped the prism into her lap and looked at Sarah standing in front of her, tear-stained and rumped, making her almost unrecognisable.

'Sorry,' Anthea said. She felt guilty for wanting to see her sister's weaknesses; now that she saw them, she didn't like it. She felt frightened.

Sarah collapsed into her. 'I'm sorry,' she said and sobbed into Anthea's chest.

They cried together in a heap, taking turns to wipe away each other's tears and tell each other that everything would be okay.

'You're a mess,' Anthea said with a smile.

Sarah pushed the heels of her palms into her eye sockets.

'I thought it was my fault Mum died because I wasn't a good daughter, and then when you asked why I didn't come with you or like your post... I always feel frightened, I don't understand my own feelings, I don't know all the right things to do'.

‘I wish I’d known,’ Anthea said. ‘It’s not your fault; we are both trying to find our way, I guess, just differently.’

Anthea kissed Sarah’s cheek and rubbed her back, she had never felt this feeling before, and her thoughts about it were mixed. It felt scary that Sarah wasn’t in control but holding her in her arms and reassuring her that everything was going to be okay felt nice like she had something to offer.

Anthea returned to the prism she had been looking through before Sarah walked in. ‘Remember mum showing us these?’ Anthea said.

Sarah picked up a velvet bag from amongst her crystal collection and tipped more prisms into Anthea’s hand.

‘This is Mum’s collection of them,’ Sarah said.

Anthea stared at the collection of precisely shaped glass pieces and picked one up. Something in her hand that had been in her Mum’s hand. Something they had all touched. A memory of something nice. They pored over the prisms, looking through them and holding them up to the light, remembering the special features of each different piece, like how small changes of angle created better refraction. They positioned them in the evening light, so little rainbows scattered the room.

There was a cloud in the sky that looked like a butterfly. Anthea tried to capture a picture of it with a leaf in the foreground. The bright blue sky and the green leaf came out vividly in her photo.

‘ANTHEA,’ Sarah yelled.

Anthea smiled, listening to Sarah searching for her through the woods. She could hear her walking along the path peering behind trees, trying to find her. Anthea stayed quiet and edited her photo tracing around the outside of the butterfly cloud to highlight it. She

captioned it 'cloud gazing', posted it to her story, and sent it to Sarah's phone. She heard Sarah's phone get the notification; Sarah always had the sound on.

Anthea held her breath and felt her heart start pounding in her ears like when she used to hide from Sarah when they were kids. She wanted to lift her head and see if Sarah was nearby, but she felt too scared to move and blow her cover. She had gone off the path and through the trees to a moist, shady spot with enough underbrush growth so that when she lay down, she was completely obscured. It was as good as she had imagined, quiet, still, and private.

Sarah had been surprisingly open to the idea of a game of hide and seek after their walk. She heard footsteps nearby and the sound of the underbrush rustling closer and closer. The suspense was killing her. She lifted her head slightly to assess how close Sarah was and was surprised to see her closer than expected. She leapt up and ran.

'Hey, I found you,' Sarah yelled after her.

'You didn't catch me, though,' Anthea yelled.

A look of anger crossed Sarah's face, followed by the determined look she used to get as she started chasing Anthea. Their feet pounded the ground and thumped like the sound of wild horses running. Sarah was gaining on her, and Anthea could feel excited fear growing inside her as she inched ever closer. They rushed through the woods pushing branches out of the way and getting sticks stuck in their hair and scratches on their arms and legs.

Sarah was within touching distance, and she lunged forward to touch Anthea. Anthea arched her back and kept running as Sarah fell into a heap on the ground. Anthea pulled up, allowing her legs to slow down and stop before turning and slumping on the ground next to Sarah. They lay together in the coolness of the bush with the sounds of their puffing breath and laughter as they stared up through the tree canopy to the sky. The clouds would come and

go, sometimes noticed and sometimes not. What they looked like depended on who was looking.