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Silence and the Narrative Body:

Liberating Lost Voices in Narrative

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the degree of

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Lena Huia Fransham

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Abstract

How can words express a silence? How can the silence of the traumatised be put into narrative? How can language, generated by a given culture, give voice to perspectives that are erased by that culture? Language, as a regulatory social product centring the white, male, able-bodied subject, mutes those it correspondingly renders marginal; a silencing compounded in traditions of narrative that construct the non-white, non-male, differently-abled subject as Other, contributing to a real-world culture that amplifies the white male voice over all others. How can narrative, as a category of language, adequately express the experience of imposed silence?

Emerging from post-structuralist thought around the problem of resistance to the linguistically-structured monoculture of the centred male subject, Julia Kristeva's argument that the physical drives emerge in transverbal modes of communication gives rise to the possibility of the body as a transformative force in narrative. More recently, corporeal narratology has fostered inquiry into the body's role in both the perpetuation and the disruption of oppressive narrative conventions. With a focus on works by Kathy Acker and Angela Carter against this background of feminist post-structural theory and corporeal narratology, the critical component of this thesis explores silences imposed by language and examines how the textual body might tell a story otherwise untold.

The collection of short fiction that comprises the creative component approaches themes around silence, voicelessness, the body, and the world-making powers of language, with a range of exploratory narrative strategies inspired by fairy tales, Kristeva's semiology, post-structuralist discourse and the notion of the body as a text.

Keywords: Voicelessness, silence, language, body, Acker, Carter, Kristeva, feminism, fiction

Writing Silences	2
The Body in the Narrative.....	5
Works Cited	37
Voices.....	40

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Writing Silences

Is it possible to write a silence? Can fictional writing challenge the oppressive linguistic order from which it is constituted? If the body can be read as a text in the absence of full freedom of expression, as Spivak argues, (307-308) how might this occur in the composition of narrative?

Although these questions belong to the field of discourse launched by post-structural feminists - Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous and their peers – drawing on and critiquing Lacan's theory of the Symbolic - for me, they emerged organically in my writing practise, and kept showing up in various forms in my fiction. It was while struggling with writer's block that I began to focus consciously on what was stopping me from writing: most often the obstruction seemed to consist of the silences, the traumatic, inarticulate and unarticulated experiences that my everyday language was inadequate to capture, or that I had learned to repress; or the taboo, unacknowledged or unspeakable material that I felt was forbidden in the accepted rules of storytelling, or disallowed because of its proximity to painful real life experiences, unacceptable emotions or family secrets. I wanted to explore these territories of silence, to understand how to retrieve the stories that remain submerged under the collectively-sanctioned stories that families, communities and civilisations tell themselves. I wanted to articulate the inarticulacy itself, which I knew was likely to be ultimately unachievable, but which I was compelled to try.

This project was always necessarily a creative project and began as such, before I ever investigated its critical implications; the question of how to write silence in fiction should naturally be responded to in the writing of fiction. However, it was in the study of writers who have confronted similar questions, and the immense field of theory informing their

work, that I came to more fully understand the questions I was asking. Critical investigation helped to uncover the history of these questions, to situate my creative work within a larger field of inquiry; but my creative practise served to test and demonstrate their implications – given the fact that they concern the shortcomings of linguistic and narrative convention – outside of the conventions of theoretical language; just as Kathy Acker’s *Blood and Guts in High School* explores and embodies the arguments posed by post-structuralist theory, and Angela Carter’s ‘The Bloody Chamber’ serves as a creative demonstration of her thesis in *The Sadeian Woman*.

Examining ‘The Bloody Chamber’ and *Blood and Guts in High School* against a background of post-structural theory and corporeal narratology, the project that follows explores some of the ways the body signifies in a narrative context, and how the silences and repressions of conventional narrative might be resisted, altered, or shaken loose by the textual body’s signifying power.

My stories and essay focus on a feminist perspective, but the problem is an intersectional one, affecting many groups and individuals marginalised, othered and erased by the ways we use language. Evolving discourse around race and the nature of gender offers rich ground for the interrogation of the culture of dualism, white ethnocentrism and gender-normativity that pervades language and conventional narrative, while growing awareness of the prevalence and consequences of PTSD begs further investigation into the writing of trauma from both a literary and therapeutic perspective. These questions should and will continue to generate creative and critical discourse in service of renegotiating these shoddy terms; as subjects-in-process, we share a language-in-process. I believe writers will always need to keep loosening the floorboards of language to allow hidden voices into the world.

The Body in the Narrative

The Body in the Narrative

In her PhD dissertation *Women Writing Trauma*, Tanya Allport names a bind familiar to those who have experienced trauma or marginalisation. How is it possible to convey this experience, or to resist it, in language? Can the non-verbal, that which lies outside of accepted conventions of language, somehow be employed in narrative as a tool in turning up the audibility of that which is muted or inexpressible? Allport writes:

The circumstance of being rendered voiceless is a twofold condition, in that the occurrence of voicelessness through othering and violence is both a source of trauma, and a symptom of the wounding process. The trauma of voicelessness is built on the foundation of the other two elements . . . which provide a basis of experience which requires expression, while simultaneously rendering expression impossible (41).

The paradox of using language to try and address the condition of voicelessness, whilst language itself is a medium that serves the dominant group at the expense of marginal groups, invites the construction of narrative that interrogates its own endorsement of linguistic and literary conventions, that steps outside of the explicit.

How can writing challenge the oppressive linguistic order from which it issues? In ‘The Difference of View’ Mary Jacobus proposes a textuality that transgresses, rather than refuses, patriarchal structures. Addressing the trend among second wave French feminists that proposed ceding entirely from the patriarchal symbolic - which aligns femininity with lack and incoherence - she counters that refusal to work with the ‘masculine’ terms of discourse risks reaffirming women’s marginalisation in the realm of the unintelligible. Such an either-or approach is itself predicated upon the dualism of that phallogentric symbolic order. Jacobus suggests that difference as an opposition between male and female be redefined, and that writing become the site of ‘both Challenge and Otherness. Difference

becomes a traversal . . . that exposes these boundaries for what they are – the product of phallogentric discourse, and of women’s relation to patriarchal culture.’ (12)

In ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak recounts the story of the suicide of Bhuvaneswari Bhaduri, a political insurgent who waited until her menstrual period before she committed suicide – the suicide itself apparently an act of resistance, due to pressure from authorities to inform against her peers - in order to prevent assumptions that the act was due to illicit pregnancy. Spivak states, ‘Bhuvaneswari Bhaduri’s suicide is an unemphatic, ad hoc, subaltern rewriting of the social text of *sati*-suicide’, acknowledging the principle of the body-as-text within a socio-cultural narrative. (308) Abena Busia, in demonstrating colonial literature’s erasure of indigenous women’s voices, declares the value of the body as a mode of discourse by which women may inscribe themselves into culture on their own terms: ‘for women, “narrative” is not always and only, or even necessarily, a speech act. We women signify: we have many modes of (re)dress’. (104) How, then, might the discourse of the body *influence* narrative? How might the body make meaning in a text, in subversion of the silencing structures of traditionally accepted language?

Angela Carter’s revised fairy tale, ‘The Bloody Chamber’ demonstrates and usurps the function of the female body as a text in patriarchal narratives. She favours the approach of taking literary conventions and unravelling them, defying the normative strictures of representation of women and the body in order to disrupt phallogentric narrative traditions that silence female perspectives. Her fairy tales in the collection *The Bloody Chamber* revolutionise a canonical form in which representations of gender roles and ideals had been previously frozen, by interpreters such as Charles Perrault and Walt Disney, into a rictus of oppressive seventeenth-century norms. Carter’s fairy tale heroines are not eaten by wolves but are wolves themselves, or they best them by will and wile. “The Bloody Chamber” renovates the Bluebeard tale into a kind of Bildungsroman in which the heroine (with the

help of her mother) wrests from the villain the power to tell her own story. Carter's inside-job style of subversion takes apart the genderised workings of fairy tale while dialling down the fixity and indisputability of the male, normative gaze.

In Kathy Acker's *Blood and Guts in High School*, another subversion of the Bildungsroman genre, the body's presence in the narration displaces conventional narrative structures, generating a visceral and destabilising reading, throughout which it is necessary to surrender attachment to system and pattern. The text itself behaves as a libidinous, traumatised body, signifying its resistance to the confining structures of language in an array of transverbal 'symptoms': sequential derangements, obsessive repetitions, disorienting interruptions, plagiarised passages dropped into the narrative, pornographic drawings and hand-scrawled expletives; features as messy and system-defying as the bodily experiences of desire and trauma. The 'normal' functioning of the language and the reader's apprehension are disrupted in the sense that 'symptoms' disrupt a physical body's functioning.

In both these works, Carter and Acker offer approaches to the writing of the body in resistance to repressive, male-centred linguistic frameworks. Pertinent to my examination of these approaches are Julia Kristeva's theories of the semiotic and symbolic, which address the idea of the unspeakable aspects of language connected with the body, and Peter Brooks's theories, expounded in *Body Work*, about the semioticisation of the body – the way 'stories cannot be told without making the body a prime vehicle of narrative significations' – and the somatisation of text – the way a text itself embodies its meanings. (xii) In light of the evidence offered by these writers I will argue that the experience of imposed silence may be effectively conveyed in fiction by approaching narrative in ways that foreground the body's textuality, emphasising and interrogating the semioticisation of the body and the somatisation of the text, to destabilise the primacy of the explicit and draw attention to the silences and exclusions within, and wrought by, language.

‘The Twelve Wild Geese,’ an Irish folk tale, tells the story of a young woman who sets out to save her twelve brothers, who have been turned into geese due to a rashly-uttered wish by their mother. To return them to human form, she remains silent for three years, and during this time, she must weave twelve shirts out of bog down. She meets and gets married to a king, but she continues to weave in silence. The king’s step-mother begins to slander the heroine, stealing her children and accusing her of infanticide. The heroine, in keeping her silence, cannot defend herself. Finally, she is about to be burned at the stake when the three years come to an end. The geese fly down; she throws the shirts over them and they become human again.

I see ‘The Twelve Wild Geese’ as a narrative of resistance-by-refusal. The heroine refuses the language that has cast her brothers into bondage, fashioning instead a new way of signifying - weaving shirts from impossible materials - that will recast her brothers’ outward forms. Clothes are of the body and instrumental to one’s presentation to the world; in the weaving of the shirts, the heroine makes a new system with which to structure the identities of her brothers. Weaving involves a warp and a weft; the silent weaving evokes Julia Kristeva’s description of the expression of the extra-lingual bodily drives as transverse to verbal language, the warp to the weft of the symbolic. Kristeva’s theory states that the semiotic, the expression of the bodily drives repressed by the symbolic, is ‘transversal to and coextensive with’ the language system, (Smith, 18) and belongs to the domain of pre-socialisation. While subordinated, it nevertheless emerges into language: the non-verbal drives permeate semiotisable material such as voice intonation, rhythm and bodily gesture (Smith, 20); transversal to and inextricable from speech. The problem of saying the unsayable, of expressing in writing that which written language is constructed to exclude, might be addressed by foregrounding that which is subordinated in the linguistic system. The heroine who tries to undo the language that creates her adversity – casting her as other, as

absence or lack, the excluded term in the binary - might act by refusing the linguistic system in search of liberation from it; in doing so, however, she risks total disempowerment and exclusion from the economy structured by that system. As Mary Jacobus argues, it is futile to further emphasise the divide. Rather, we should blur the lines of difference, bring the subordinated term into the primary domain to destabilise the fixed dualistic paradigm, as both Carter's and Acker's texts attempt to do.

One of the overarching features of Carter's writing is her approach of smuggling her agenda into the conventional literary form in a subtle feminist hijack. In the collection *The Bloody Chamber*, her stories assume the forms of fairy tales to the degree that they are recognisable as such. But from there they subvert the classic form, bringing in specificity of time and place and character, warping the genre's rigid gender rules, and refusing the traditional neat, stabilising return to order and comfortable norms at the end. In 'The Bloody Chamber', Angela Carter's writing assumes the recognisable form of the Charles Perrault fairy tale, and simultaneously subverts its conventions by, in particular, replacing the standard remote third person with the intimate, interior first person voice of the heroine, and layering the text with allusions and intertextualities – from the defiance of Eve in the Garden to the pornography of Felicien Rops - that illuminate the cultural strata at work in the old tale.

These elements combine in direct confrontation with the phenomenon of the female body-as-text, and the silencing effect of gender dualism in a layering of intertextual history. In usurping a tale that has, among many of its fellow fairy tales, affirmed centuries of the reductive, silencing normativisation Carter's story endeavours, like a bog down shirt, to reshape this incantation and give space to story hitherto submerged.

In addressing the female body as a text investing the traditionally patriarchal institutions of both fairy tale and pornography, Carter endeavours to expose the meanings with which it is inscribed and offers, through the self-reflexive voice of the protagonist, not

merely the female body as unacknowledged palimpsest written *on* by the male gaze, but a narration *from* an awareness of the shifting nexus of cultural discourses of the body, and thus an assertion of subjectivity-in-process. This mode of narration is one crucial departure from fairy tale convention that loosens the stranglehold of the phallogocentrism in the Bluebeard tale. If the body is readable as an extra- or pre-verbal component of language, it is worth investigating how it might be called on in the medium of fiction to rewrite social texts.

‘The Bloody Chamber’ opens as the heroine prepares to enter the ‘unguessable country of marriage.’ (7) At seventeen, she has given up her fledgling career as a pianist, for which her mother had sold all her jewellery to pay the conservatory tutelage. Her acceptance of the Marquis’s proposal was, it appears, partly driven by the looming poverty of her household. In the Marquis’s castle she has a music room and her own personal piano tuner. She discovers her husband’s predilection for sadistic pornography, and loses her virginity painfully in a ‘one-sided struggle’, as his predatory nature becomes increasingly apparent. (17-18) When he leaves on business, he gives her his ring of keys, forbidding her entry to only one room – he is, however, oddly specific about where to find it. Bored and lonely, she telephones her mother in tears. She plays piano and thanks the blind piano tuner. Eventually, she enters the forbidden room, where she finds the bodies of the Marquis’s three former wives. The third wife is newly dead, blood still pooling below the iron maiden in which she is imprisoned. In her shock, the heroine drops the key on the bloody floor.

On returning and finding the indelibly bloodstained key, the Marquis marks her forehead with it as if she is a sacrificial martyr, and goes to prepare his sword. While the piano tuner tries to console her in the music room, she sees her mother is riding toward the castle. Summoned to her execution, the heroine delays as long as she can. It is just before the sword comes down that her mother arrives at the gate, and in the ensuing confrontation,

shoots the Marquis dead. Gratefully widowed, the heroine uses part of her inheritance to start a music school in Paris, where she lives and works with her mother and the piano tuner.

The heroine enters her marriage as she is growing into a notion of herself as seen from her husband's perspective, as fixed object of desire; Carter's narration endeavours to guide her protagonist from *spoken* to *speaking subject*, in the terminology of Julia Kristeva, who posited the speaking subject as a *signifying process*, evolving with the evolution of language rather than a finite attainment of being. (37) At first, the heroine naively acquiesces to being the document on which her husband inscribes *his* subjectivity. Professor Kathleen E. B. Manley has written that the bride's lot, in the beginning of the tale, is to be a story told by her husband, in time-honoured patriarchal tradition. Discussing this in her essay 'The Woman in Process in Angela Carter's "The Bloody Chamber," ' Manley draws on Susan Gubar's analysis of Isak Dinesen's story 'The Blank Page', which tells of the custom of bloody sheets from the marriage beds of Portuguese princesses being hung out in public view and later framed and hung on the walls of the convent, a graphic example of the female body-as-text in service of a patriarchal narrative. (72) Manley notes that in 'The Bloody Chamber' the Marquis mentions the old custom, a reference that affirms a sense of an age-old narrative against which Carter's heroine must struggle to attain agency: 'Following the tale patriarchy wants to read in the bloody sheets, the protagonist's husband clearly considers her an object of exchange and plans to inscribe upon her his continuing tale of punishment for wives' disobedience.' (73-74) Manley cites his ominous gift of the ruby choker, which, as he later declares, prefigures her end, as indicating his agenda. (qtd in Manley, 73) The 'end' that threatens the bride is the potential for this patriarchal inscription to succeed in reducing her to a silenced, arrested subject.

A number of other intertextual gestures illuminate the history and culture that have written the bride's fate as much as has the Marquis. The castle walls are adorned with works

by Gauguin, famous for his objectifying eye, and Watteau and Fragonard, who depicted rituals of both idealised courtship and duplicitous seduction; (Carter, 20) the Marquis's Eliphas Levy books include *The Secret of Pandora's Box*, a reference to the myth that, like the story of Eve, has informed a tradition of casting woman and her 'disobedience' as the source of all misery. (16) Allusions to *Tristan and Isolde*, the opera based on the chivalric tale, align the story with the cult of courtly romance with which the character of many fairy tales is invested. (10) The traditional fairy tale romance upholds the tradition of the beautiful, idealised heroine as a fixture of the male gaze, and resolves by restoring the centrality and right order of the masculine perspective, with women's place as its auxiliary Other. Carter's narrator voices a process of emerging from idealised objecthood into her own desiring subjectivity.

The principle of the female body as text, as stage prop for the patriarchal theatre, is in tight focus throughout the story. There is the mention of the custom of hanging out the bridal sheets, the blood shed by the bride serving as document of a patriarchal transaction; (19) the Marquis's proprietorial approach to the heroine's apparel, clothing her in garments of his choice and in jewellery handed down through his family; and as if setting the stage for her death, his wedding gift of the ancestral ruby choker 'like an extraordinarily precious slit throat'. (11) Before announcing his intention to prepare his sword for her execution, he ceremoniously marks her forehead with the blood from the key, a literal inscription on her body of the story of abjection he wishes to make of her. (36) The text invokes a parallel with Eve and her marked nature as a troublesome woman (16, 37-38) – the punishment for whose defiance results, according to the book of Genesis, in women forever after suffering the pains of childbirth and subjection to their husbands' rule. (*King James Version*, Gen. 3.16) 'The Bloody Chamber' delineates with each of these elements an age-old script written on the female body.

Carter's story, in itself a refutation of old story forms, appears to be in the business of messing with the age-old, pre-written script, subtly rewriting the standard readings of the Pandora and Eve narratives. In the reference to Eve in the garden, Carter again draws attention to the long history of narrative casting women and their desires as inherently errant and wayward, a threat to right (patriarchal) order, evident in Perrault's first reductive summary of his own tale: 'Curiosity, in spite of its appeal, often leads to regret. To the displeasure of many a maiden, its enjoyment is short lived. Once satisfied, it ceases to exist, and always costs dearly.' (Lang, 295) In a conversation between bride and piano tuner, Carter shifts culpability from Eve to God, as omniscient creator, implicitly undermining the related, age-old narrative that normalises the idea that Bluebeard's wife's 'disobedience' is the cause of the trouble.

‘ ‘I’ve done nothing; but that may be sufficient reason for condemning me.’

“You disobeyed him,” he said.

“That is sufficient reason for him to punish you.”

“I only did what he knew I would.”

“Like Eve,” he said.’ (37-38)

In her article on liminal experience in ‘The Bloody Chamber’, Cheryl Renfroe observes, furthermore, the relationship the traditional readings of the Eve story have with the pronouncements of Paul in 1 Timothy:

‘Let a woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I do not permit a woman to teach, or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression.’ (*King James Version*, 1 Tim. 2.11-14)

Renfroe argues, ‘statements like the one in 1 Timothy show that readings of Eve’s story from the patriarchal point of view have also had the effect of an assault on the character of women

with the directly stated purpose of silencing and subjugating them'. (91) Carter's 'disobedience' of convention and of traditional framing highlights and dislodges the confining, male-centred story written on the bodies of women.

In this process of coming to her selfhood, the bride in 'The Bloody Chamber' observes herself being seen and reflects on her response to it, in her process of transformation from naïve girlhood to womanhood, and in the subversion of fairy tale conventions that represent woman as arrested subject. She begins by witnessing herself being seen by the Marquis, and in doing so sees a new version of herself. Her youth and naivety – 'I was seventeen and knew nothing of the world' (9) - suggestive of the blank page ready for inscription, that virginal emptiness so prized in patriarchal economies – and its attendant self-doubt, make her vulnerable to assuming the Marquis's gaze as the arbiter of who she is, as Manley notes. (74) The bride is perhaps too naïve to grasp that her burgeoning sexuality need not be inscribed with her husband's virgin-whore fetish. 'I seemed reborn in his unreflective eyes, reborn in new shapes. I hardly recognised myself from his descriptions of me and yet – might there not be a grain of beastly truth to them? . . . I blushed again, unnoticed, to think he might have chosen me because, in my innocence, he sensed a rare talent for corruption.' (20) The pornography adds another dimension to her awareness of male desire and its inscriptions on the female body. The bride, watching in the mirror as the Marquis undresses her, again observes herself through his eyes, and finds herself identifying with the naked girl in a pornographic image by Felicien Rops. (15) In acquiescing to a view of herself as object, it is as if she tries on the idea of herself as her husband's creation.

The iron maiden in this story's context of fairy tale and pornography is suggestive of the entrapping nature of the male gaze and the attendant cultural canon that traditionally fixes and objectifies women into idealised or dehumanised positions. It also alludes to the mediaeval context from which fairy tale conventions descend. Pertinent to fairy tale and the

themes associated with *Tristan and Isolde* is the idealised figure of the Lady from the cult of courtly love, a figure discussed by Slavoj Žižek in ‘Courtly Love, or Woman as Thing’ as depicting a ‘traumatic Otherness’, a necessarily inaccessible object of desire:

This traumatic Otherness is what Lacan designates by the Freudian term *das Ding*, the Thing . . . This idealization of the Lady . . . is therefore to be conceived as a strictly secondary phenomenon, a narcissistic projection, whose function is to render invisible her traumatic, intolerable dimension. (90)

An article by Baiqing Zheng elaborates on the othering of the fairy tale Lady in the essay “From Courtly Love to Snow White” - in which she examines Carter’s ‘The Snow Child’ and other revisions of the Snow White tale - on the way the Lady, as portrayed in the classical “Snow White” is constructed as an inhuman, unattainable ideal furnishing the Other to the masculine. She is immovable, unattainable and incapable of progression or change as a function of the male identity. (Zheng, 10-11) In the torture chamber, in true gothic style, Carter’s protagonist witnesses the traumatic, intolerable dimension of a relationship built around such narcissistic projection. The dead wives are displayed like trophies: one laid on a catafalque, rather reminiscent of Snow White in her glass coffin; one a skull, suspended for effect; one pinned in place in the iron maiden. So displayed, they are subjects reduced to literal objecthood; (27-29) permanently silenced, arrested, the completed texts of the Marquis’s fairy tale romance. The iron maiden as symbol suggests in its very name the notion of Woman as Thing. The ‘irony’ of its virginal connotation is pertinent to its role in Carter’s illumination of the culture of romance as modelled on a tradition that requires woman to embody and be limited to the virgin-whore inscription of male desire.

While ‘The Bloody Chamber’ focuses most overtly on the body-as-text, the semioticisation of the body, the body-in-the-text manifests distinctly in patterns of desire which resonate in those of the plot, and it is the bride’s movement from object of desire to

desiring, inquisitive subject that drives the narrative. Peter Brooks discusses the ‘erotics’ of narrative in Freudian terms, aligning the desire of protagonist – and of reader – with the pleasure principle, which drives the narrative in a protagonist’s quest to realise her desire; but the closure she, and the reader, hope for is aligned with the death drive. In his book *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* Brooks writes,

the paradox of the self becomes explicitly the paradox of the narrative plot as the reader consumes it: diminishing as it realizes itself, leading to an end that is the consummation (as well as the consumption) of its sense-making. If the motor of narrative is desire, totalising, building ever-larger units of meaning, the ultimate determinants of meaning lie *at the end*, and narrative desire is ultimately, inexorably, desire *for* the end. (52)

The Marquis’s imperious postponement of the consummation of their marriage mirrors the pattern of the narrative, in which he appears to be the arbiter of all desire and consequently of his wife’s own narrative. (15) It is not until he leaves her alone that the bride begins to follow her own impulses to discover her husband’s true nature (although her destination, too, seems part of his design). Her impulses lead her to the dreadful (dis)closure she finds in the bloody chamber; a death for her innocence, but a liberation from the figurative iron maiden of the Marquis’s inscrutable power over her identity.

Tanya Allport discusses in *Women Writing Trauma* the role of othering in the silencing of women. She observes the traumatic impact of othering, which freezes the marginalised person into a cultural position in which they are not heard, or are dismissed, diminished or misunderstood. (28) The artefacts of culture, from fairy tale to pornography, traditionally reproduce the othering narratives that perpetuate the silencing of women. In the west these narratives are built into a cultural framework of hierarchically-valued dichotomies – primary and subordinated terms: mind and body, reason and passion, self and other and so

on, that equate masculinity with the qualities of mind and femininity with those of the body, the body being a thing subordinate to and needing to be controlled or contained by the mind.

Elizabeth Grosz states:

The subordinated term is merely the negation or denial, the absence or privation of the primary term, its fall from grace; the primary term defines itself by expelling the other and in this process establishes its own boundaries and borders to create an identity for itself. Body is thus what is not mind . . . It is implicitly defined as unruly, disruptive, in need of direction and judgment. (3)

The culturally embedded idea that ‘women are somehow *more* biological, *more* corporeal, and *more* natural than men’, (Grosz, 14) relegates women to a position cemented by these fixed notions of the body in which they may be contained, regulated and muted.

Carter has sought to disrupt these narratives with her infiltration of the ‘Bluebeard’ tale, entering the tradition of epistemophilic writing on the female body, but with the aim of shining a self-reflexive light on the bones of the tradition. In ‘The Bloody Chamber’, while establishing the fairy tale scenario – beautiful, innocent maiden is desired by rich and powerful man, accepts his proposal and lives in a castle – the narrator’s first-person reflections steadily expose the intolerable dimension of the romantic plot. The heroine’s position as self-reflexive first-person narrator moves the fairy tale from the standard fixed stylisation into a richer, moving process of character. It is significant that she has a strong relationship with her mother, who has supported her in establishing for herself a means of independence and self-expression – her musical career - and therefore has a ground for another narrative of self. While Charles Perrault’s ‘Bluebeard’ has the heroine rescued by her brothers, upon which she promptly marries a ‘worthy man’ and is then obliquely admonished in a postscript to the effect of ‘If you weren’t so nosy, your marriage would have been fine’, (Lang, 295) men and marriage appear to be secondary to the destiny of Carter’s heroine. She

makes slow steps into her agency, from being a body inscribed upon by her husband and her culture to becoming the teller of her own story.

‘The Bloody Chamber’ and Kathy Acker’s *Blood and Guts in High School (BGHS)* connect in their feminist examinations of the body-as-text and its role in the oppressive structures of language. On this front, they differ in that the former examines, in particular, writing on the body – the semioticisation of the body – primarily through rewriting old texts, while Acker’s emphasis is on somatisation of the narrative and writing *from* the body, a strategy that bears reading with reference to Anna Kérchy’s claims in *Body Texts*, a corporeal-narratological response to Carter’s novels focusing on somatisation of text. A number of Carter’s novels, such as *Nights at the Circus*, tackle gendered representation as a site of challenge to the boundaries of difference, and Kérchy argues that these slippery representations shape the nature of Carter’s texts, which slip the fixing, silencing normative gaze to centre voices of Otherness: ‘Otherness, in turn, becomes enabled to make a ‘different’ difference, precluding the scapegoating othering of difference, and enhancing new, alternative ways of reading the world and ourselves.’ (2). Drawing on Daniel Punday’s corporeal narratological model, Kérchy says of the represented body in Carter’s novels, ‘the *body in the text* eventually subverts the *text on the body*’. (27) While Kérchy cites Peter Brooks’s theory that modern narrative is driven by a ‘*scopophilic, epistemophilic* urge, and as such seeks to see and know the body . . . strives to bring the body into language and write stories on the body’, she diverges from Brooks’s phallogocentric position to suggest that Carter demonstrates that the body can be written *from*, not just inscribed upon, allowing her fictional bodies to challenge fixed notions around femininity, body norms and gender as a fixed binary. (28) She notes that Carter’s metamorphosing bodies ‘mock the objectifying epistemophilic gaze’ (28) bringing shifting multidimensionality to the text, evincing the principles of subject-in-process, body-in-process and ‘meaning-in-process’. (2, 28-29) For

Brooks, she says, the somatisation of the text ('the embodiment of meaning') refers to the desired body's becoming a key signifying factor in the text: 'The knowledge of the body implies an exposition of truth, an access to the Symbolic order and a mastery of the very creation of significance in the text' (qtd in Kerchy, 28) However, Kérchy sees somatisation of text as dramatising, firstly, 'how the semiotized body composes meaning and secondly, how it decomposes it.' (28) As is evident in 'The Bloody Chamber', and as noted by Kérchy, the semioticization of the body in Carter's work interprets the body as a 'discursively controlled, socially contained entity', its usual representations shaped by the historic domination and control of women, including textual representations through the ages; however, she claims that this controlled, repressed body is able to subvert, from within, its 'mandatory narrative, due to its translinguistic materiality – manifested in various freakish forms'. (29) In Carter's *Nights at the Circus*, as Kérchy claims, the 'corporeal presence' of the chimeric bird-woman Fevvers is represented in the somatised narrative in the proliferation of onomatopoeic verbs and the sonance and vocality of the text; in the contradictory fusing of opposing terms – such as the profane imagery and sophisticated language in the poetic, alliterative description of bodily functions: 'she let a ripping fart ring round the room'; (qtd in Kérchy, 159) and the irreverent, iconoclastic name-play: 'Cockney Venus'; (Carter, 7) Fevvers' ambiguous body, which confounds binary distinctions and fixed notions of femininity, shows its presence in this 'carnavalesque' text that marries opposites, mocks hierarchies and tramples boundaries, (Kérchy, 159) and somatised language – onomatopoeia, alliteration and vocality - calling attention to and destabilising the orderly, normativising, exclusionary conventions of narrative in order to liberate anti-normative perspectives.

Kérchy writes that the semioticisation of the body begets the somatisation of the text; however, I am interested in the ways Carter's story and Acker's novel focus respectively on each principle. Kérchy states that in Carter's fiction, 'the normalising writing on the body

fuses with the transgressive (re)writing from the body' (29) – a pattern gestured toward in 'The Bloody Chamber' with its strategy of adopting the trappings of fairy tale representation while querying and shifting the lines of that representation. In Acker's *BGHS*, on the other hand, the somatisation of the text dominates the storytelling, with its jarring disruptions, explosions of libidinous language, derangement of linguistic norms and seemingly irrational sequencing. Rather than just querying the discursive system - that text on the body that controls and contains it - Acker's narrative embodies both discursive system and systemic disruption of the controlling discourse. Like Carter's novels as discussed by Kérchy, *BGHS* eludes any final interpretation, inviting multiple modes of apprehension with its maps, poems, plagiarisms and competing/chorusing voices, and defying any comfortable, monovocal certainty of meaning.

The concept of *body text* - as Kérchy terms it – draws on Brooks's and Punday's thinking on corporeal narratology, which springs from the concept that narrative is shaped by ways of thinking about the body. Furthermore, it aligns with Kristeva's proposal that in poetic language, the repressed instinctual drives and corporeal rhythms emerge within the symbolic system to produce heterogeneity of meaning. (Kristeva 125,133) These drives permeate 'semiotisable material', for instance, voice and gesture: 'faced with real restraints, [the drives] enter into a subjective economy which can be perceived as processes of condensation and displacement. In the literary text, these processes take the form of metaphor and metonymy.' (Smith, 20-21) While communicating purely 'instinctive glossolalia' associated with the semiotic (Kristeva, 58) would achieve nothing on its own, challenging the boundaries of sense versus non-sense, and likewise blurring the lines of order established in narrative and linguistic conventions, are a function of the emergence of the repressed aspects of language into the Symbolic system. These disruptions can serve to bring forth the revolutions of new and shifting perspectives and polysemic meanings; shaking loose the

certainties wrought by convention. If this doesn't exactly remedy the repressive, unequal nature of language, it loosens its absoluteness.

BGHS narrates *from* the body in a different sense than Kérchy's observations on Carter; Acker writes trauma and desire in the derangement of the conventions of narrative sense-making, and at the same time narrating horrifying situations without moral or affective mediation in the text. For the reader, the disorientation and shock of processing this narration might be said to mimic the experience of trauma. According to Kristeva, rhythm, alliteration, onomatopoeia, tone and wordplay are among the manifestations of the unspeakable; much as in psychoanalysis, a person's unarticulated emotion might be detected in gestures or the pitch and modulation of her voice. (22) With its agitations and disruptions – obscene drawings and sudden exclamations, jumps to all-caps and back again, repeated paragraphs, threads interrupting each other, changes in form, voice and tense - and its moral and affective *silence* on the outrage of much of its content, Acker's mimetic narration constitutes a voice – semiotisable material - laden with the unspeakable.

The novel follows the adventures of ten-year-old Janey Smith, beginning with her life with her father, who is sexually abusing her: 'Never having known a mother, her mother had died when Janey was a year old, Janey depended on her father for everything and regarded her father as boyfriend, brother, sister, money, amusement, and father.' (7) Janey's father wants to be rid of her so he can pursue Sally, 'a twenty-one-year-old starlet':

Janey: You're going to leave me.

Father (*dumbfounded, but not denying it*): Sally and I just slept together for the first time. How can I know anything? (7)

Janey is heartbroken. He sends her to school in New York, where she joins a gang called the Scorpions. She gets pregnant and has two abortions. She goes to work in a hippie bakery, feeling as if she is ceasing to exist in the drudgery of the role. She is addicted to sex, as it is

the closest thing she knows to love. When she is attacked, she ends up going home with the attacker and falling in love with him. After surviving a car crash, she leaves high school and lives in a tiny apartment in the slums. Janey's story is here interrupted by a fairy tale, 'How Spring Came to the Land of Snow and Icicles', in which a bear falls desperately in love with a house and but can't get inside it. The fairy tale is in turn interrupted by a series of dream maps including intricate diagrams, notes and captions. Subsequently, Janey is abducted and delivered into sex slavery. While in the captivity of the Persian slave trader, she undertakes to learn Farsi. Her diary converges and intertwines with a book report on *The Scarlet Letter*, as if the book report is her diary. This is interrupted by 'The Persian Poems', a series of Farsi translation exercises, and followed by Janey's agonised poetry when she falls in love with the slave trader:

Every time I want someone

it's just a dream

Everything I want is a dream

And dreams stink more than anything

Heart disease syphilis pregnancy

All you creeps on the street get away from me

No No No No No No NO NO NO (109)

At the age of fourteen she finds she has cancer. She is released and goes to Tangier where she meets Jean Genet, and the ensuing 'scenes', as they are entitled, follow the travels of the two in a pastiche of Genet's play 'The Screens'. He treats her badly, but she stays with him because she wants him to love her. She works in the fields of a rich man, but he and his friends – 'the capitalists' – believe she is an agitator:

Mr Knockwurst: The slave Janey stinks. My God. Workers are pigs, women are worse, but she's something else. I arranged to have her steal something from that

homosexual she lives with so I could have her locked up . . . but now she's convincing criminals and prostitutes they're people. (135)

She is sent to prison and Genet soon joins her there. An uprising occurs in Alexandria. Janey is ejected from the city and she and Genet travel to Luxor where he leaves her. Janey dies, and a series of abstract anecdotes, drawings and maps, under the headings of 'The World' and 'The Journey', resembling myths related to the afterlife, conclude the novel.

The gestures, expressions, tone, rhythm, pitch and cadence with which, as Kristeva says, unsayable emotions and impulses might be expressed by a body are approximated by the body of Acker's text. The symbolic - as moral code, 'intersubjective social product' - (Smith, 21) serves both to enable and to regulate human relations and maintain power-structures. Kathy Acker's physical, interpretation-defying, slippery approach to narrative in *BGHS* attempts to renovate body-repressive language, to bring desire and trauma into the behaviour of the text, to loosen the hold of that regulating system, alluding to her purpose as she goes, as in the conversation in the chapter 'Tangier' when the capitalists discuss 'the Janey question':

Mr Fuckface: You see, we own the language. Language must be used clearly and precisely to reveal our universe.

Mr Blowjob: These rebels are never clear. What they say doesn't make sense.

Mr Fuckface: It even goes against all the religions to tamper with the sacred languages.

Mr Blowjob: Without language the only people the rebels can kill are themselves.

(136)

Language being owned by the capitalists (Mr Blowjob and Mr Fuckface et al), Acker does not refuse to engage with it in fairytale, ladylike fashion; nor does she merely use the same system to rebut or challenge the controlling discourses it generates; she attempts to refashion

it in mockery of Mr Fuckface's and Mr Blowjob's rules, bringing the traumatised, sick, desiring body as the transverse thread to the loom. The text groans, shouts, vacillates and gesticulates in all-caps, italics, oversized fonts, scrawls, pornographic drawings, expletive-laden stream-of-consciousness rants, bizarre interjections and obsessive repetitions, effectively and affectively evoking the nightmarishness of Janey's experiences where representational language fails.

Janey's longing for and pursuit of sex, love, and ultimately death is at the forefront of the narration throughout *BGHS*, and overtly libidinous language regularly intrudes into the linear story. Desire, love and death are linked in the narrative, as in the passage in which Janey laments, in capital letters and obscene language, her nihilistic longing for President Carter, emphasising love as a destructive force:

'I KNOW YOU'RE A SECRET TERRORIST

'CAUSE LOVE LEADS TO DEATH

I WON'T EVER BE UNHAPPY AGAIN

. . .

THE WORLD'S ABOUT TO EXPLODE

TERRORISTS NEED NO MORE COVER

OH YES LOVE LEADS TO DEATH. . . .

PRESIDENT CARTER, it isn't sweet and it hurts. Pain is the world. I don't have anywhere to run. I want to go out in a blaze of light and scream. (122-125)

Interestingly, in contrast to 'The Bloody Chamber', the unreliable disorderliness of the narration of *BGHS* mocks and thwarts the conventional desire-driven narrative arc as defined by Brooks in *Reading for the Plot* - the dilation and closure pattern that he equates with Freud's pleasure principle/death drive. (52) Certainty and closure remain unattainable as the plot's tenuous linearity and reliability is repeatedly undermined, in part by the repeated

intrusions of the destructive desire Janey alludes to in this passage. In its continual frustration of the reader's impulse for certainty and closure, the narrative succeeds in embodying its protagonist's experience of continually frustrated, destructive longing. The somatisation of Acker's text, then, is vital both to the telling and to the comprehension.

Janey's trauma manifests firstly in a disjunction of tone and content in the representation of her relationship with her father. In the novel's opening chapter, 'Parents stink', the account of ten-year-old Janey's father's role as her 'boyfriend' is rendered in normalising, emotionally distanced language as she takes the role of needy girlfriend while he contemplates abandoning her in his quest to sleep with someone else. (Acker, 7-31) The traumatic nature of the represented situation remains explicitly unacknowledged. The dialogue positions Janey as if she is an equal and consenting partner in the sexual relationship, albeit co-dependently trying to accommodate his behaviour as an adult woman might:

Janey: OK. (*Getting hold of herself in the midst of total disaster and clenching her teeth*). I have to wait around until I see how things work out between you and Sally and then I'll know if I'm going to live with you or not. Is that how things stand?

Father: I don't know. (9)

She goes on to consult with Bill, who has also had sex with her:

Bill: I understand what's happening now. Johnny is at a place where he has to try everything.

Janey: The first level. I agree.

Bill: You've dominated his life since your mother died and now he hates you. He has to hate you because he has to reject you. He has to find out who he is.

The incongruity of ten-year-old Janey's being positioned as an adult needing to compensate for her father's childishness, in conversation with two adults who have had sex with her,

amid the silence of any moral voice, and the lack at this stage of any conventional exposition of the psychological consequences for Janey, amplifies an aura of shock and cognitive dissonance that arguably speaks louder than an explicitly-stated position. This unreliability is compounded by a number of betrayals of narrative rules, from the linguistic dissonances of grammatical and punctuational slips - ‘Never having known a mother, her mother had died when Janey was a year old, Janey depended on her father for everything’ (7) – to textual anomalies such as obscure exclamations in all-capitals:

Johnny left her, telling her he’d be home later.

ANNOUNCE THE RUINS PROFOUND OF THE CHRISTS WITHIN (US). OF
SOME BELIEF CHERISHED WHICH FATE CURSES, THESE *LASHES* BLOODY
SOUND THEIR CRACKLINGS OF A LOAF OF BREAD WHICH IN THE VERY
OVEN DOOR BURNS US UP.

Janey: Sometimes I think we’re star-crossed lovers. (24)

Subsequently, the repetition of the passage about the beginning of their final day together, told as if they live through the same day six times, confounds the reader’s attachment to linear sequence and the reliable sense of time passing. (21-25) This in combination with the jarringly unreliable diegetic narration is disorienting enough to be somewhat paralysing for the reader. Moreover, the reader must navigate the surreal dissonance between tone and representation by deciding how much credence to accord the narrated events. Being so positioned as a reader, with a high degree of responsibility for the making of meaning in such disorienting narration, provokes sensations reminiscent of hypervigilance and derealisation, symptoms which, along with emotional detachment, are commonly suffered by traumatised individuals. (DePrince et al, 1) It is the casual, emotionally detached tone in this passage, in conjunction with a moral silence around the represented events, that replicates with an implicit horror the mute powerlessness of an abused child who has no language with which to

resist, or even conceive of, what is happening to her. In her writing on Holocaust literature, Shoshana Felman suggests trauma induces disintegration of both witness and narrative; (171) the narrative of *BGHS* embodies this claim, beginning with the first chapter's mimetic rendering of the ruptured reality of an abusive relationship.

Trauma, as Allport states, robs the sufferer of the ability to articulate the traumatic experience. (41) Language as a system does not adequately encompass the experience of traumatic memories; trauma is experienced as something beyond assimilation in symbolic terms, and is therefore an assault on the sufferer's system of meaning, 'outside the range of associatively linked experiences, outside the range of comprehension, of recounting and of mastery'. (Felman and Laub, 69) Trauma theorist Cathy Caruth writes that trauma 'is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor'. (4) The traumatic experience, then, remains an event outside of language:

One of the hallmarks of psychological trauma is its inability to be contained within conventional linguistic and narrative structures . . . Trauma takes place precisely when our ordinary narrative abilities fail us – when an event not only goes beyond but actually destroys our schematic understandings of the world, disabling our ability to create and trust the stories, categories, and time-space delineation necessary for normal functioning. To experience trauma is to experience a world in which the body and self are always, potentially, unsafe; a world that is ultimately incomprehensible. (Zaikowski, 176)

In her incisive article 'Reading Traumatized Bodies of Text', in which she applies trauma theory to the narrative of *BGHS*, Carolyn Zaikowski writes of the need to be able to 'navigate language when we are attempting to articulate not only the unsayable, but its very

unsayableness – when we are inscribing on the space and time of the page’s body, events which transcend and shatter normal containers of space and time’. (179) In the absence of verbal articulation, a traumatised body signifies: trembling, panic attacks, tunnel vision, dissociation, speechlessness. How can a text, consisting of words, signify the unspeakable experience of trauma, or do the signifying work of a traumatised body? What, Zaikowski asks, does a text look like when it displays the symptoms of a traumatised body? (179)

The problem of adequately representing the disintegration of meaning induced by a person’s traumatising experience invites a narrative that embodies such disintegration. Zaikowski proposes meeting trauma on its terms – witnessing it ‘in all of its chaotic stuckness . . . enacting a dynamic and contradictory narrative from the very places of narrative’s defeat’ and she goes on to claim that *BGHS* accomplishes this by presenting as a *traumatised body of text*. She argues that a text can display the symptoms of a traumatised body, ‘vacillating between painful states of intrusion, repetition, fragmentation, dissociative identities, numbness, timelessness, disorientation, lack of reference, and explosions of meaning.’ (179) She parallels aspects of Acker’s narration with symptoms of post-traumatic stress, in particular the symptoms of hyper-arousal, intrusion and constriction. The text displays hyper-arousal in passages in all-capitals without punctuation – ‘I’M RIPPING UP MY SKIN I HURT PAIN OH HURT ME PAIN AT THIS POINT IS GOOD DO YOU UNDERSTAND? PAIN AT THIS POINT IS GOOD. ME ERICA JONG WHEE WOO WOO I AM ERICA JONG I AM ERICA JONG I FUCK ME YOU CREEP’ (90), or words in all-capitals interspersed like forceful ejaculations through a paragraph – ‘This MENTAL DISORDER and his ALCOHOLISM have turned HIM at this point into an IMBECILE’. (120) Intrusion manifests in threads interrupting other threads, such as the passage in which Janey undertakes Persian language exercises in the middle of a book report about *The Scarlet Letter*, (71) the book report itself being intertwined with Janey’s self-narration:

HAWTHORNE SAYS PARADISE IS A HEART THAT OPENS UP AND
BECOMES A HEART.

Everything takes place at night.

In the centres of nightmares and dreams,

I know I'm being torn apart by my needs,

I don't know how to see anymore.

I'm too bruised and I'm scared. At this point in *The Scarlet Letter* and in my
life politics don't disappear but take place inside my body. (97)

Other intrusions abound in *BGHS* - sudden exclamations; (28, 31, 123) sexually explicit drawings; (8, 14, 19) sudden shifts in tense and person, and plagiarised passages from writers such as Joseph Conrad invading the text. (38-39) What appear to be meta-narrational shifts, such as apparently authorly marginalia or notes-to-self, also invade the narrative: 'If the author here lends her 'culture' to the amorous subject, in exchange the amorous subject affords her the innocence of her image-repertoire, indifferent to the properties of knowledge. Indifferent to the properties of knowledge.' (28) Constriction, or emotional numbness, another feature of PTSD as observed by Zaikowski, (177) is expressed in the often distant, off-hand reporting of traumatic situations in the novel: 'My father told me the day after he raped me that security is the most important thing in the world'. (67) Injustice after injustice is recounted in a similar detached fashion: 'One of the landlords burned down his building so he could collect the insurance money. Two families and one pimp were sleeping in the building when it burned down. The landlord sold the charred lot for lots of money to McDonalds, a multinational fast food concern. This is how poor people become transformed into hamburger meat.' (56) This constriction in describing callous abuses, besides evoking traumatised numbness, reflects the callousness of a social system that centres masculinity and wealth and normalises exploitation of the not-male and not-wealthy. This effect in this

context underlines the thrust of Acker's subversion: her narrative confronts capitalism and patriarchy, institutions which are the sources of Janey's trials and are constituted and structured by the conventions of language.

Other manifestations of trauma noted by Zaikowski are fragmentation, explosions of meaning and disorientation. Janey's story becomes increasingly fragmented as the novel progresses, involving digressions such as a page of apparently unrelated description of Mexican/Mayan villages and their residents, (21-25) through to the fairy tale 'How Spring came to the land of snow and icicles' and a series of dream maps, (44-56) the handwritten 'Persian Poems', (71-93) scrawled obscenities and doodles (106-108) and the planted plagiarisms such as the passage from Guattari and Deleuze's *Desiring-Machines* (125). The final pages of the narrative are entirely fragmentary: diagrams, drawings and maps accompanied by partial anecdotes, labels and captions. Fragmentation of thought and expression denotes trauma and also suggests the fracturing of individual identity in such a world of gendered and capitalist exploitation as Janey inhabits. Acker's text embodies in its fragmentariness a state that is the antithesis of orderly, systematic expression, and cannot be effectively conveyed in orderly, systematic language.

The overall narration of *BGHS* performs, in its inconsistency and permeable boundaries, a kind of vacillation of identity. Refusing to remain true to one voice, style, form, tense, or thread, it is, like Carter's bodies in Kérchy's analysis, a 'self-freaking', self-destabilising narrative. (Kérchy, 31) Janey's narrative repeatedly refers to loss of self or disintegration of identity: 'I am nobody because I work. I pretend I like the customers and giving them cookies no matter how they treat me' (37); 'I had to work seven days a week. I had no more feelings. I was no longer a real person.' (40) The character notes, in effect, the state of being a lack, an absence; but the below statement, a similar evocation of a self-disintegration, could also be a comment on the text's behaviour and its effect on the reader:

‘Your self is a ball turning and turning as it’s being thrown from one hand to the other hand and every time the ball turns over you feel all your characteristics, your identities, slip around so you go crazy.’ (55) The destabilising behaviour of the text denies the reader the security of a final and certain interpretation, requiring instead a willingness to co-exist with an unreliable represented reality or set of realities. This slippery, un-pin-downable paradigm is a way to give the slip to the illusion of fixed binaries upheld by the symbolic system, to destabilise the regulatory male-centred framework that casts the non-male as other, as lack, as absence: it actions Mary Jacobus’s entreaty to undermine the tyranny of fixed dualism. As established in the opening chapter of *BGHS*, an immediate effect of this behaviour of the text is, in terms of trauma, the induction of hyper-vigilance, a reading experience in which there is no safe place. The text embodies the experience of trauma in a way that purely verbal language cannot. Needless to say, all of these disruptions lead to disorientation and explosions of meaning for the reader, an experience that cannot approach the true horror of PTSD, but which gestures toward such a confounding and inexpressible experience.

In an article with some parallels to Zaikowski’s, Gabrielle Dane explores Acker’s novel with respect to Hélène Cixous’s theory of ‘hysterical’ discourse. In *Studies on Hysteria*, Breuer and Freud claimed that hysteria occurred when a traumatic memory was repressed, emerging both as recurring ‘hallucinations’ and physical symptoms, from paralysis to convulsions - in expression of what was otherwise unsayable, whether due to trauma itself or to environmental conditions arbitrating what was sayable and by whom. (4-6) Dane says, ‘Hysterical rhetoric is located outside of linear time and traditional logic . . . “Meaning” is shown to be overdetermined, to occupy more than one locus of signification; contradiction demands consideration; surface ‘reality’ is disclosed as disguise’. Non-verbal discourse is ‘written on and spoken through the body.’(234) Genderised, exclusionary, abject meanings – irrational, over-emotional, incomprehensible, gibbering – are historically embedded in the

notion of female, consistent with the denial of woman's subjectivity in the Symbolic order, and the relegation of the feminine to the domain of the irrational body. Dane considers whether hysterical 'gibberish' is an attempt 'to speak that which cannot be spoken, to find a locus from which to insert the "feminine" into language, to tell the story of woman as subject', (234) and from this hypothesis reads *BGHS* as a 'hysterical' narrative, a body with symptoms; she observes, as does Zaikowski, its symptoms not only as disruptions of traditional linguistic and narrative structures, but as signs signifying their own truths. Hysterical discourse, Dane observes, is discontinuous, libidinal, subjective – qualities disallowed in the conventions of written narrative: 'a story filled with gaps, a ruptured narrative, filled with contradictions (and refusing or lacking the process of repression which would view those contradictions) . . . the very presence of hysterical rhetoric as an alternative yet audible voice disrupts the unicity of phallogocentric discourse'. (241) Rather than choosing silence or nonsense, Acker, in refusing the phallogocentric positioning of women as representing lack or absence, attempts to undo this linguistically woven 'spell' by playing with the exclusionary system of language and narrative: the conventions of ordered, objective, systematic, phallogocentric narrative are simultaneously challenged and complemented, in a sense, by the transverse threads of Acker's hysterical, or traumatised, discourse.

In its traumatised/hysterical disintegration, Acker's narrative fashions a sense-making of its own in its hyper-aroused, agitated way. Writing on the post-structuralist theory (de)structuring Acker's novel, Katie Muth notes that critics have read the anti-narrative elements of *BGHS* as merely device, intended only as demonstrative disruption of the sense and linearity of an allegorical tale of resistance; as she contends, such a reading suggests a failed subversion of the exclusionary binary that only succeeds in reinforcing the legitimacy of the established system. But Muth proposes rather a focus on the substance of the anti-

narrative, ‘the interruptions within interruptions and suspensions within suspensions’, which offers a complex reading well beyond the mere notion of whether it succeeds in writing a liberation from hierarchical systems. (89-91) Despite the destabilising, meaning-exploding function of the text, its renovated system of signification delivers quite deliberate meanings, albeit elusive and polysemic. Each seemingly random insertion or digression resonates with the grand themes of the narrative: the body, desire, the tyranny of language. The passage lifted from Deleuze and Guattari appears suddenly in the midst of an angry rant about how Janey wants President Carter, which is also interpolated with references to terrorism:

EVERY POSITION OF DESIRE, NO MATTER HOW SMALL, IS CAPABLE OF
 PUTTING TO QUESTION THE ESTABLISHED ORDER OF A SOCIETY; NOT
 THAT DESIRE IS ASOCIAL; ON THE CONTRARY, BUT IT IS EXPLOSIVE;
 THERE IS NO DESIRING-MACHINE CAPABLE OF BEING ASSEMBLED
 WITHOUT DEMOLISHING ENTIRE SOCIAL SECTIONS. (qtd in Acker, 125)

This passage can be connected to Janey’s desire for sex/love that pervades, drives, and undermines the narrative, as summarised in her poem written in the slave-trader’s house:

this immeasurable eating, hunger, moving
 desire to lose consciousness

go to the end
 as if there’s a beyond

driven beyond body desires into just desire,
 not for what, just desire

DEFIANCE born (112)

Her desire leads her to become a threat to the capitalists, who as they say, own the language that the desire-driven, traumatised narrative keeps demolishing. (135-136) In the centre of the novel, the ‘book report’ on *The Scarlet Letter* is interrupted midway by Janey’s hand-scribed ‘Persian Poems’ – Farsi-to-English translation exercises made up of repetitive words and phrases evocative of Janey’s mood and plight. (71-93) Dealing as the novel does in the problem of the male-centred, confining structures of the symbolic system, and occurring in the context of *The Scarlet Letter*’s story of Hester Prynne’s imprisonment and the regulation of her body by a patriarchal economy – ‘TEACH ME A NEW LANGUAGE, DIMWIT’ (96) - ‘The Persian Poems’ are a mise-en-abyme of the novel’s main premise; they register Janey’s entrance into a language that affirms her imprisonment as an object of exchange by Mr Linker the slave-trader. As observed by Muth, Janey translates a string of verb-phrases which not only presents a sequence that could almost pass for a summary of Janey’s life, but comprise a lexicon of desiring, appropriating, sexually consuming and violently dominating, with Janey the passive object in each phrase.

to have Janey

to buy Janey

to want Janey

to see Janey

to come Janey

to beat up Janey

to eat Janey

to rob Janey

to kidnap Janey

to kill Janey

to know Janey

Janey's coming into the language of the slave-trader involves assuming a signification system that positions her as desired, passive, consumable object. (Muth, 91) The meanings engendered by the disorientating and fragmentary mode in which Acker ushers the reader to this point are signified in these disruptions.

Acker's novel resorts to many modes of signification, and its somatised narrative is intrinsic to its system. Spivak has asked what it means to take the body as a text; Acker invites us to interpret her text as a body, inflecting its language with its desire and trauma. As in the experience of trauma, or Freud's idea of hysteria, the body manifests transverbal modes of expression, and if Acker's text is taken, as Zaikowski suggests, as a body, what appear to be disruptions and derangements of meaning become readable parts of an expanded language, just as symptoms must be read as signs made by the body. The somatised narrative of *Blood and Guts in High School* succeeds, in its merciless ransacking of the hallowed halls of literary convention, in shaking loose from the strictures of denotative narrative a visceral, confounding roar of protest against language itself.

The body's presence in a text can be instrumental in giving voice to that which is excluded from, or inexpressible in verbal language. As the unspeakable drives can emerge in transverbal modes of expression – gesture and tone, posture and pitch – and the experience of traumatic stress may show itself in disorientation, fractured identity, the inability to communicate, tension, panic, tunnel vision and other physiological signs, unspeakable experiences can find expression in the transverbal aspects of the text. The body, repressed in the rational, systematic order of the Symbolic, is nevertheless present in fictional narrative both as vehicle for signification and in the degree of somatisation taken on by the text, whether in plot shaped by the pleasure/death drive or in the transverbal rhythms, tone, sonance and textual gestures such as repetition and fragmentation. Angela Carter's 'The

Bloody Chamber' scrutinises and attempts to refashion the tradition of the female body as text, re-inscribing the traditionally immutable fairy tale heroine with the will to move from *spoken* to *speaking* subject. Kathy Acker's *Blood and Guts in High School*, on the other hand, offers a narrative of magnified somatisation, a text that behaves like a body, not abandoning but destabilising the exclusionary, orderly system of signification that the story identifies as structuring the oppression of the heroine. These iconic feminist texts offer just two examples of the body's role as a resource for the liberation of silenced perspectives from the exclusionary structures of narrative tradition.

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Voices

Catch

I see her when I surface, a blurry figure on the river. Stone's daughter at the cockle bed again. The one who had the baby. The baby's there too, more of a boy now I suppose. I dive again, see her ankles turning under the water, clouding the mud as I swim in from the channel. The boy falls over in the shallows. She hasn't seen me. Or maybe she's ignoring me with her face hidden in the tangles of hair. I wonder if she remembers me from school, but she was younger than me. I watch her for a while but my teeth start chattering.

If I were Stone's daughter I'd go away where no one would know. I don't understand why she stays.

The party for Ros and Dan kicks off after the trawler gets in. We sit on the edge of the verandah as the light fades. Ros sips from the bottle, taps her rings against it in a rhythm. We watch the pines on the sandspit darken to spiky silhouettes. The moored boats turn their noses with the tide. Lights appear in the Stones' house on the far headland.

Sometime after midnight the music gets louder inside. People begin to gather around the fire pit. One of them has a guitar. Tom on a milk crate next to Billy, looking over at me. My face gets hot and I turn away.

I try to do things other women do that make men like them. I try to say the right things and my tongue gets stuck in my mouth.

Ros nods at the woman swaying across the lawn. 'Did you see her vomiting in my rubbish bin?'

'Nice engagement present.'

'I heard she was giving Billy a you-know-what in the pub car park last week.'

'Yeah, right, Ros. I bet she remembers it differently.'

'Did you see her just now? She was probably too pissed to remember at all.'

I turn my glass, feeling a bit sick, and see Billy looming toward me.

‘Not now, Billy,’ Ros says matter-of-factly, and he veers toward the door instead.

‘He could have had a shower, jeez.’ She lights a cigarette. ‘He just can’t stop trying it on with you, can he?’

‘He thinks I’m desperate.’

Her eyes close as she exhales and the clench of her jaw softens. She must have had a fight with Dan. I lay my hand on her back and we watch the moon drift into view, scattering its pale path across the water.

‘Don’t get any ideas about Tom, Bess.’ Ros says, not looking at me. ‘You don’t know what he did to Nina.’

‘Don’t worry. I’ll never be able to talk to him.’

‘That’s what worries me. You only get tongue-tied round the ones you like.’

‘Which is why I’m permanently single. And why does it matter if I am?’

‘Because I want you to be happy,’ she snaps. ‘And I don’t want you settling for a dickhead.’

As if she’s shacked up with Prince Charming. ‘I’m going for some ice,’ I reply, standing.

‘Watch out in there, Bitchy Liz is on a roll.’

Ros is as bad as my hand-wringing aunties. *You don’t want to leave it too long, dear.* What I want is for them all to shut up.

In the kitchen Bitchy Liz makes a few slurred remarks about how I shouldn’t aim too high at my age. I find my way out the door and to the gate without being noticed by anyone else. I’m nearly at the corner when I hear Billy behind me.

‘Not interested, Billy.’

A waft of beer and sweat and his arm slides around me. ‘Come on Bess. I just want a cuddle,’ he pleads, hauling at me. His hand closes on my breast and I whip around and drive my foot into his groin before I’ve had time to think. Billy gasps and staggers. Someone’s quick steps are approaching in the dark. Tom.

Dawn is glimmering over the estuary as I step barefoot onto the sand, flexing my toes. They still hurt from the force of the kick. I tie my shoelaces together and dangle them from one hand, turning to survey the river. The boats have turned their noses again and the tide is already creeping over the mud flats. Downstream an old man is loading fishing gear onto a dinghy; the *Nereid*.

I stop to look up at the old house, memories flooding like water filling footprints. Mum’s wiry arms covered in compost up to the elbows, Dad picking dirt and leaves out of her hair. Mum waist-deep in the water, waving me in when I ventured into the deep part, the thalweg, she called it, where the drag was too strong. The windows are all yellow with reflected light. My feet sink into the sand.

Tom stops beside me, hands in pockets. He looks ready for sleep. They don’t get much on the boat. Wind and salt burnt into his skin. Eyes raw blue against the tan. He turns to the old house, the pohutukawa leaning out of the bank, the rope swing still hanging, frayed to tufty strands.

‘I remember when your oldies rented this place off us,’ he says, leaning against the low branch. ‘I had a crush on you, did you know?’

I shake my head, not trusting myself to speak. I hoist myself up on the branch and the tree shivers around us, a brittle whisper of leaves.

You don’t know what he did to Nina

I remember him coming to the rope swing with Billy and the other boys. One time he swung out into too-shallow water and landed wrong and I had to help shoulder him out and run up to get Mum. The boys staring at his crooked leg while he groaned white-faced in the sand.

I found reasons to pass by them often after that, and each time he would nod and say my name like a magic word. I became a prolific collector of jetsam. When storms washed up kelp I would collect buckets full and mum would dig stinking piles of it into the garden. She planted my driftwood finds for stakes among the tomatoes, decorated them with the smaller treasures. Strings of mussel shells, dried puffer fish, bird bones.

I remember how quiet she became. Stopped taking me swimming, Stayed in her garden till after dark. Billy's mum Jen drinking with her out there while Dad cried in front of the TV. I heard things at school about Jen and my mum. I didn't ever tell Dad.

After Jen did a bolt, mum would lie half the day on a rug by the tree. Dad stayed away. Sometimes she'd read to me, Danish fairy tales with horrible endings.

Tom moves closer to me and the hairs stand up all down my arm. So many words rush to the surface, but I know it will come out wrong so I hold my tongue and watch the oystercatchers out in the shallows, turning up cockles. Cockles that crunch under your feet. Fat cockles, so sweet roasted on a piece of tin. Ros grew up eating them raw, but I can't handle the thought of them being chewed alive. No worse than being boiled alive, she would say. We don't eat them now since the council put up signs about the die-off and the iwi laid the rahui. Ros's kids can't remember what they taste like.

But I still see Stone's daughter, digging up cockles every week since the rahui went on. She pretends she doesn't see me, face closed and furtive under her drapes of hair, like she's not used to being looked at. Nobody stops her from raiding the cockles. Nobody talks to her. It's like nobody can bear to meet her eye.

‘You ok now?’ Tom asks softly.

Careful, Bess.

‘I was handling Billy, you know,’ I say.

‘Believe me, I noticed,’ he smirks.

The old man floats the *Nereid* and steps in to take the oars. Ripples peel out from his wake as he rows toward the channel. *Fish bite at the change of light*, I think, remembering Dad.

‘You’ve got to feel for Billy, Bess. He doesn’t really know how to behave. You know how his mum took off when he was a kid.’

I bite my lip and say nothing. I don’t want to feel for Billy. He might be damaged goods like me, lost mother and all. But we’re not the same.

Tom stares at me, all the softness gone. His gaze is like winter. I remember the way he used to meet my eyes in school. *Don't trip over your tongue, Bess*, Bitchy Liz said.

‘We should go fishing sometime,’ he says.

I stare at him, dumb, and he leans and puts his lips to mine. The briefest touch, and all the colours come flooding into the morning.

I’m half-dressed for dinner when Ros calls.

‘Bess, I just heard Billy came after you the other week. After the party. Are you ok? Why didn’t you tell me?’

‘Oh yeah. I freaked out. I think I really hurt him. But Tom turned up so I was ok.’

A pause.

‘You haven’t been around,’ she says. ‘Come over tonight.’

‘The hotel has given me more shifts, I haven’t had any time.’

I don't mean to lie. But I'm not ready for her to harass me about Tom. I don't know what's happening with him anyway.

'Listen. Dan thinks Tom's got his eye on you and I just think you have to steer clear.' She lights a cigarette. I hear the rush of her exhalation; the phone clunks against something. 'He fucked everyone in town, Bess. That's what I was told.' Another pause. 'And when Nina got suspicious he messed with her head. Like, really bad.'

'How?'

'All I'm saying is people say stuff, ok? I know Nina's a fruit loop and all that and maybe it's not all true.' She drags on her cigarette. 'Dan loves Tom, he thinks the grapevine's blown it out of proportion. But I'm thinking smoke and fire, Bess. And you wonder what made Nina lose it the way she did.'

I know she's chain-smoking because Dan is treating her like dirt. Hypocrite, I mouth at the phone.

'Anyways. Come over tonight. I haven't seen you since the party,' she's saying.

'I'm kind of tired,' I tell her, reaching for my good shoes in the wardrobe.

Tom's mother's house is all quarry stone and railway sleepers on the outside. Anne greets me at the door, quick eyes moving over my face, my hair, my baggy jeans. She used to fix me with the same gaze when she came to do rental inspections.

I take my shoes off, noting the polished floor. Anne nods approvingly. Tom calls a greeting from the pantry, and there's a woman, a young woman with sleek dark hair, stirring something at the stove. She raises her eyes to me.

'This is Jane, my lodger,' says Anne.

I watch them work, lingering at the end of the bench, uncertain how to help. Jane moves fluidly from bench to fridge to pantry, weaving around Tom like a cat.

‘When do you go back to uni?’ he asks her, touching her elbow as he passes.

‘Couple of weeks.’ She dips a spoon into the pot and sips from it.

‘How were your results?’

‘I’m keeping up,’ she says lightly, and he laughs.

‘But are they keeping up with you?’

He glances at me, leans around her for the bread knife, his hand on her shoulder. It is a lingering movement, almost an embrace. He glances at me again, his face unreadable.

She props herself against the bench and holds out a plate for the bread as he layers the slices. I feel superfluous. I take the bowls to the dining room, arranging them around one end of the table.

The children have already eaten; they are making houses from cardboard boxes in the corner, talking to each other in nonsense syllables. *Babadiddy dardum*, Libby says. *Diddy mardo dum baba*, Jack replies, propping a big box on its side and flexing its lid for a door. He puts a cushion and a book inside and Libby giggles, holds his hand, pulls him into the box. Their held hands, the little house, the shapes of the sounds from their mouths; a secret world made for two. Jack opens the book, a Disney story. *Mamadee bobado*, Jack intones, pointing to the mermaids.

‘I saw Billy in the surgery the other week,’ Anne says as Tom sits down. She ladles soup into his bowl. ‘He was limping. Did something happen on the boat?’

‘Billy parties too hard,’ he replies smoothly, but he raises an eyebrow at me. Jane catches it, turns to regard me across the table.

The quiet clinking of spoons. I try to remember the things people say at dinner tables.

‘Jack had his terrors again last night,’ says Anne, reaching for the bread. ‘The dog dream again.’

Tom glances at Jack and Libby in the box. *Beemum budo ma*. His lips become a thin line.

‘I have dog dreams too,’ I say, to fill the silence.

Anne purses her mouth. ‘Did you hear what I said, Tom?’

‘I don’t know what to do about it,’ he snaps. He glances at me and quickly away, and for a moment he looks unbearably sad.

‘Get them away from their mother,’ Anne says, her voice rising. ‘No wonder they talk to each other in gobbledygook! It’s probably –’ she flicks her gaze to the children, lowers her voice. ‘It’s probably preferable to reality in that household.’

‘It’s a sign of high intelligence in children, inventing their own language,’ Jane says brightly. Tom meets her eyes.

‘Yes, well,’ says Anne, clattering her spoon into her bowl, jerking her chin toward Jack. ‘I don’t believe that Disney rubbish helps either, Tom. What happened to proper fairy tales?’

‘Proper fairy tales are full of murders and amputated body parts, Mum,’ Tom says. ‘Not going to help bad dreams.’

I remember my mum started to talk in the language of her fairy tales, as if in the end she couldn’t tell what world she was in. I felt her floating away from me. I asked her what she was going to do, when we were lying there on the rug under the tree; knowing something was coming, desperate for a future I could fit myself into. She laughed shortly. *I’ll become foam on the sea*.

I always swim under the river in the deepest part, the thalweg, to see the light coming through the swirls of foam on the surface, people’s legs kicking, the switch and flash of the small fishes. You can’t speak underwater. No words and no meanings, only water sounds and the language of sea animals. I met dolphins in the river one time, swimming so close I could

see the scars on their bellies, their tongues in their mouths. Their ancestors were land mammals, like dogs, that went back to the ocean, Mum said. All life once came from the sea; that's why we need to be near the water, Mum said.

The day she was found drowned, the rain clouds rolled over the river and across the bay like a terrible silence descending. I dreamed for weeks about a dog coming out of the water and trying to talk to me, and I would wake up unable to speak.

The afternoon is cool when we load Tom's truck and drive to the beach track. Jack sits on Tom's lap and helps to steer as we bump over the hill. On the clifftop I unload the rods and buckets from the back of the ute, wishing I had brought a coat for the wind. Jack stares at me. His eyes are like his father's, slivers of glass. I turn my back on him, wonder what I'm doing here.

It never stops, the whispering. *Must be desperate. Gagging. Maybe she's too damaged.* I can see people thinking it.

The sea's surging and grey below. I grab the old fence post for balance and step onto the trail, feeling Tom's eyes on my neck as I scramble down. Careful, Bess.

He made Nina think she was going mad.

I haven't seen Ros for weeks.

The wind is constant on the cliff track, murmuring in the trees in a multitude of voices. I can just see the flaking walls of the place where Stone lives with his daughter and the baby. I heard she ran away a few times in her teens. I don't get why she went back.

I see Stone at the store sometimes. Red face, big shoulders, big puffy hands. He dumps his money on the counter and takes his beer without a word. Sometimes people point and murmur. Ros says he grows good weed; Dan buys off him sometimes even though Ros

fights him about it. Nobody knows the real story for sure, Dan says, and anyway, his product is a bargain.

‘Go slow, there's a drop,’ Tom says, pointing to the vanished path, the humps of pohutukawa roots, the writhe of branches down the slope. I clutch at twigs and skid down to the rocks. Tom hands me his gear and turns to catch Jack, sliding. I don't know how we will get back up again.

I browse through the tackle box and choose a silvery yellow lure, turning it to see its facets gleam like fish scales. Jack watches me, cheeks pink with cold. His silence unsettles me. I wonder what he remembers of his parents' marriage. The time Nina was found bleeding in the bath, that's the part I heard. I hope he doesn't remember that.

I dig in the bucket for an icy pilchard and hold it out to him.

‘Lucky bait for you,’ I say, trying for a smile, but he doesn't move. Tom takes the fish from me and tends to Jack's line, murmurs instructions, stands behind him to steady the rod. I watch, transfixed. The patience in his voice. The tenderness in his hands.

He messed with her head.

The slow swell pushes on the rock and we cast out in silence. I shove Ros's voice to the back of my mind. Tom seems more and more preoccupied. His face turns hard and strange as if he's forgotten I'm here. I can't get any words out. It's all going wrong. I want to feel like the first day, when he kissed me, there at the rope swing after the party.

The sun ebbs from the sky until we're standing silently in a strange, clammy half-light, waiting for bites, watching the kelp billow. My line remains untouched, trailing its golden lure back and forth in the swell. Jack lets his rod fall and wanders, poking at driftwood wedged between rocks. He picks up a white stick and points it toward a figure forming in the gloom.

She's indistinct until she's a few metres away: a long, lean line to her, like a cormorant. Jane. Tom lays down his rod and strides over to her, saying things I can't hear. He glances back at me, touches her arm.

I watch them, cold awareness crawling up my spine. He talked to her like that in his mother's kitchen when they were leaning against the bench. Angled away from me. There was something about the jut of their hips. The closeness. He leaned toward her as he talked. She met my eye.

Nina's been known to lie.

The minutes lengthen and the sea rolls around me. The kelp fronds, thick and sinewy, rise and fall beneath the foam. They're like arms, waving. I think of Mum and the river, the deep drag of the current. In the corner of my eye, Jane looks down at Jack and says something.

'Please Dad? Please?' It's the first time he's spoken. Tom catches him and pulls him up to hip level, but Jack struggles down and dances circles. Jane pats Tom's shoulder with a slender hand. I look down at my stubby fingers, my jeans covered in bait smears.

Up on the ridge, the chug of an engine slowing.

Nobody seems to think about the baby in that house, the baby grown to boy-size now. Someone has to get the kid away from that man.

I cast in again. I wonder if Stone's daughter hears what people say; or if the world is muted for her, like living behind a wall of water. I wonder if her being an adult now means she stays in that house by choice. If it is worth it for her, the enormity of what she gives up so as not to be alone. But perhaps it's the town that keeps her there, weighing her down with all their stares and silences, their horrified murmuring. *Imagine giving birth to your own brother.*

Jack and Jane are gone. I don't look at Tom as he walks back toward me.

My line jerks. The rod bends and I stumble toward the edge. Steadying my feet, I bump into Tom behind me. He reaches around to bolster the rod. 'Give it some line,' he says.

'I know what I'm doing,' I snap, lurching away. The reel spins out and I wind back, brace against the plunge, feel the fish dive, hook tearing the gullet till the blood plumes. You can feel its pain and fear. *Be ruthless*, Dad would say.

I didn't even like fishing; I just wanted to be with my dad.

Another dive bends the rod. But when I wind in the pull is gone: the fish has slipped the hook. The line sinks toward the kelp fringe. Too late, I try to yank it away but it's caught and tangled in the fronds. I lean down into the water to haul it free; a shock of cold. My hands come up purple and aching with a snarl of line; hook and lure both lost.

His eyes are on me. I sit down to untangle the weedy nylon so I don't have to look at him.

'What's the matter, Bess?'

I fight to stop the tears spilling but he's already seen, so I stare down at my hands. The rock digs into my knees. 'I want to go home now.'

He looks down at me, frowning. 'Don't tell me you feel threatened by me talking to Jane,' he says, half-laughing, appalled.

A pause. 'No. No, of course not,' I reply, seeing, all in a rush, how petty and absurd I am, how I've ruined it now. He's shaking his head, watching my cheeks flare.

I stare at my ruined line as he moves away.

The whizz of his line, the slow winding. The slap of water on rock.

'I'm sorry,' I confess, but I don't know if he's heard. I wonder if the tide's too high to walk home around the beaches.

I contemplate diving off the edge. Imagine the cool silence.

Time passes. A window brightens in the Stones' house. I think I hear a cry. At length a figure, a woman - I can't see her face - walks down the trail beneath the house, stepping onto the rocks, and disappears into the water. I breathe in, breathe out. Far off in the gloom, a sleek wet head surfaces, the face turned to me. Her arm comes out of the water, waving or beckoning. I lean forward, trying to see.

But now Tom is crouching, eyes moving over my face, stroking his thumbs across my cold palms. It's okay, it's okay. Something in me gives way and I sag toward him.

A kiss: this is what happens now, in the fairy tale. I look him in the eye, thinking, I must have been wrong. His hand on the back of my neck. I must have been wrong. His cheek rough and cold. When our lips touch there are no colours this time. Only the heave and pull of the sea around us, the kelp lashing at the rock. A sharp, painful joy tugs at me and slips away, unreachable, like my lost yellow lure turning in the sea.

He regards me solemnly. Then he lifts the knife and cuts my tangled line away. I watch the sinews moving in his forearms and still can't find the right words. Dusk lies on the water like a blanket. Something breaks the surface, quick and slippery.

The Doll

If thou canst answer these riddles three,

Lay the bent to the bonny broom

This very day will I marry thee,

Fa lang the dillo, fa lang the dillo dillo dee

See to the understorey, the master said to my da, and waved his hand at the plum trees. The honeysuckle had run wild in the orchard, creeping up the trunks of the great black damsons which leaned into each other like crippled grandfathers. My da said Sir; and snicked his shears. The master nodded to me and I saw he were worrying about his work, his stories, you could see it in his eyes with a look of hurt in them because his work was so important. I thought the understory must be told in whispers.

Maybe it were a ghost story, for the voice that keeps speaking to me from the eaves.

I followed Da into the honeysuckle and I could see the master's daughter putting mud on herself under the trees. She were muttering about something she can't find. She doesn't open her mouth properly when she talks. Muttering with her mouth askew *must have put it in the wrong place.*

I could hear Maudie working in the kitchen. She were singing of silver apples, the old wandering man with his dream, in some old folk tune. I used to hear ma singing the words when she were alive and it ached in my chest.

To tell the understory maybe you have to throw your voice.

*

I pull at the loose neck thread to make the jaw close properly. The muttering is coming from another mouth someone else's mouth somewhere else. I put it in the wrong place, I don't know where it is, I put it somewhere, I am about to remember where it is but my jaw falls open and I have to fix it.

I scavenged in the sewing room. They were telling tales over the flick of needles. Slip of yarn, whisper of shears. I gathered the threads and rags fallen from their hands. I made a doll and I'm trying to put the voice into the doll but it's getting harder and harder. Her mouth flaps so unrealistically.

I felt myself being made. Stuffed and stitched with limbs and hair. Rags and oddments. I am not sure what kind of doll I am. Perhaps a linen dolly stuffed with rags and a mouth that's a red bow. Perhaps instead of a flap she should have a red stitched kiss, a mute woollen pout on her poppet mouth. She's prone to invention, Mother says of me to friends of the family. Mother takes to bed to end a conversation.

The gardener's boy watches me daub myself with dirt. Hair and wool stick. Muddy eyes, hello. In the orchard the trees are cracked and black with mould but the darkness is gentle under the leaves and I hide in the fork of a branch like a dirty fruit. I am serene and whole and no one demands words from me.

*

The master heard Maudie singing and he called her into the library. I crept to the window.

'Don't be nervous, Maude. What are you singing?'

'It were my mother's song, sir.'

‘Did she go by the name William Butler, then?’ he asked, mocking.

‘She were called Mary, sir.’

‘Did Mary have other songs?’

Now he has her in there every day, singing for Mr Thorne.

*

‘The authenticity of her, old man,’ I say to Thorne as he folds his angular body into the corner chair. ‘To think after all my wandering and research, I would find the real thing, the silver trout, so to speak, here within my own walls!’

She’s not quite a beauty, standing there awkwardly against the light of the bay window. The doleful eyes, receding chin, the sensuous pout of a mouth. She has such a simplicity to her. And when she sings, her voice belongs to the earth and the trees and the ancient fairy mounds. It promises to bring my work alive.

‘Did you hear that, Maude? He called you a trout,’ teases Thorne.

‘Show Mr Thorne the Riddle ballad, Maude.’

She looks at the floor and draws a breath.

There were a knight of noble worth,

Lay the bent to the bonny broom

Which went a riding in the North

Fa lang the dillo, fa lang the dillo dillo dee

The eldest sister let him in,

Lay the bent to the bonny broom

*And pin'd the door with a silver pin
Fa lang the dillo, fa lang the dillo dee*

*The second sister she made his bed,
Lay the bent to the bonny broom
And laid soft pillows for his head
Fa lang the dillo, fa lang the dillo dee*

*The youngest daughter that same night
Lay the bent to the bonny broom
She went to bed to this young knight
Fa lang the dillo, fa lang the dillo dillo dee*

*Now you've had your will, quoth she
Lay the bent to the bonny broom
I beg you, will you marry me?
Fa lang the dillo, fa lang the dillo dee*

It is longer this time. When she falls silent I tap my pen on the desk to make her pay attention.

'You keep singing it differently, Maude. First it was the devil posing the riddles, now it's an amorous knight. First there were three riddles, then there were six. And it was a *bairn* laid to the broom yesterday. An allusion to illegitimate children, no doubt. Did you forget the words, dear?

She stares at me with a jut to her chin. If she were more intelligent I would suspect her of defiance.

‘Well, what does it mean, then, to lay the *bent* to the bonny broom?’

The girl promptly blushes pink as a piglet.

‘Goodness, girl! I didn’t mean to cause you distress,’ I assure her, although her reaction is pleasing. ‘Sing it again, Maude, as you sang it yesterday.’

*

Nobody knows me for all the smears on my face. I cover my doll with dirt to put the life in her. Like God did, a manikin of mud he did with a ghost of breath and made the lady too, the two. Maude is singing for Father and Mr Thorne who has done so much for our family.

If thou can answer me questions three

Lay the bent to the bonny broom

This very day will I marry thee

Fa lang the dillo, fa lang the dillo dillo dee

O what is sharper than the thorn?

Lay the bent to the bonny broom

O what is louder than the horn?

Fa lang the dillo, fa lang the dillo dillo dee

O what is longer than the way?

Lay the bent to the bonny broom

O what is colder than the clay?

Fa lang the dillo, fa lang the dillo dillo dee

Oh what is greener than the grass?

Lay the bent to the bonny broom

Oh what is worse than a woman was?

Fa lang the dillo, fa lang the dillo dillo dee

My father thinks Maude is an innocent but she knows a thing or two. A back door click clack of a night, back door kisses for the rag and bone man. That is the secret Maude. That mouth perches on her like a fat fruit never saying all the stories stored up there but pursing all manner of knowings. Fa lang the dillo dee.

I am prone to invention. My face is covered in mud. But perhaps I imagined the mud. If I am mud-faced then I can be seen and not seen.

O hunger's sharper than the thorn

Lay the bent to the bonny broom

O thunder's louder than the horn

Fa lang the dillo, fa lang the dillo dillo dee

O the wind is longer than the way

Lay the bent to the bonny broom

O death is colder than the clay

Fa lang the dillo, fa lang the dillo dillo dee

O poison's greener than the grass

Lay the bent to the bonny broom

And the devil is worse than a woman was

Fa lang the dillo, fa lang the dillo dillo dee

Ventriloquy is the art of throwing the voice. Nobody knows where I am, really. The voice floats in the wind. The garden boy's head turns to it, eyes dark with fear.

*

'Da showed me how to trim the honeysuckle and the master nodded to me,' I told Maudie.

'Don't talk to him unless he questions you,' she said as she turned down my bed. 'They don't like to hear our voices.'

'But you sing,' I said.

She laughed and sang a verse for me.

'What's worse than a woman?' I said after a while.

'That riddle were a devil's trick,' she said. 'She were better not to answer that at all.'

*

'Stop. You've changed it again.'

She halts mid-verse. With her back to the window her face is in shadow, but I see distress in the big dark eyes. Thorne has taken to loud sighs. If he loses interest in the

endeavour, all my work will be for nothing. If I cannot win the faith of the faculty, all will be lost.

‘You’re a slippery fish indeed, aren’t you, Maude?’ he says with an insinuating smile.

I laugh and clear my throat, but his provocation is a slap.

‘Maude doesn’t mind my familiarity, do you, Maude?’ he prods, watching her face.

Her cheeks redden.

‘Do you, Maude?’ he insists.

Maude returns her gaze to the floor. Her continued silence is glaring. He will suspect me of brooking insubordination.

‘Maude,’ I snap. She lifts her head. ‘We have work to do. Begin again at the third verse.’

She closes her eyes.

I reflect, as she sings, that Thorne’s unseemly interest may at least fortify his patience.

*

Mr Bones doffed his hat to Maudie and she gave him two old pans. He knuckled the rusted things and stowed them in his gunnysacks. His hands had pink scars and dirt in the creases.

‘Look at what I found, lad,’ he said to me. He opened his coat and lifted out a puppet with a soft nest of hair and a bonnet like a little woman.

‘It’s a storytelling doll,’ he said.

Stuffing spilled out of its belly and its face was crooked. The coat were ragged at the hems.

‘Take it away,’ said Maudie, ‘it’s awful.’

‘I’ll persuade her,’ he told me, winking. He closed it into his coat and doffed his hat to Maudie again. ‘I hope to see you again soon, miss.’

Her smile told a secret story. She carried the sheets to the laundry yard, singing of riddles.

*

Maude brings tea and cake to the summer house. The day is so warm that tea is hardly called for, but the occasion requires something of a ceremony. Eleanor, flushed in her heavy dress, stops the girl as she turns to leave.

‘Maude, please be sure Alice is properly confined while Mr Thorne is here. She’s just so delicate.’

Henry laughs bitterly. His face is shiny with perspiration; the heat has made him impatient. ‘Delicate is hardly the word, Mother. I daresay she could bear to miss a meal or two.’

Eleanor turns to me. ‘Arthur, don’t let him speak like this!’

‘I know you still have hopes for her, but besides getting fatter by the day, she is completely mad, Mother,’ Henry continues. I am sure it’s her very intention to become utterly unmarriageable. And I doubt any husband could afford to keep her fed! Is it any wonder that father is in debt?’

‘Henry!’ Eleanor gasps.

‘Ah, Mr Thorne.’ I rise, with relief, to greet Thorne as he strides up the steps. ‘I’m glad you could come while Henry is here.’

Thorne grips Henry’s hand in both of his. ‘Wonderful to see you, my boy.’

I pause as he seats himself. 'Henry, Mr Thorne has offered to have you at his London house next summer.'

'What do you think, Henry? Could you bear to be my right hand man for a time?'

Henry grins. 'I could indeed, sir.'

'Mr Thorne's influence will establish you in the right circles, Henry.'

'I have it from my colleagues that Henry has excelled in his year,' nods Thorne. 'I will be proud to introduce him.'

'You are a dear and generous friend, Mr Thorne,' Eleanor says. Her cheeks are quite pink.

Thorne turns to me. 'Arthur, while I think of it, about your presentation. If that little trout of yours can be relied upon for the thing, it could help garner the support you need. The Dean is already interested.'

'I'm sure with adequate preparation she will be marvellous,' I assure him, more confidently than I feel.

He looks across the lawn as he sips his tea. 'I haven't seen Alice for some time,' he remarks. 'Is she quite well?'

Thorne's continued affection for Alice pains me. It would break his heart to know what she has been saying. The doctors insist that such fantasies emerge in some cases of hysteria. It is not her fault. But the shame, if anyone knew, would ruin her. It would ruin all of us. I have had to threaten the doctors to ensure they say nothing.

'My sister is delicate,' says Henry, after a pause.

It is then that Alice appears on the lawn.

*

In the evening the master's daughter were in the orchard again, muttering. I could not bear to hear it. No one else noticed she were not locked safe in her room. Maybe Maudie. Maybe it were Maudie let her out again for pity, just as she takes her bread and cake when the mistress forbids it. But there were such a scandal when she got into the garden and were seen by Mr Thorne, all muddy on her face and skirts tucked up in her drawers. The master shouted and the mistress went to bed sobbing that Mr Thorne may never come back.

I barrowed the last trimmings of honeysuckle to the fire pile for my da, though the barrow were too big and I had to keep stopping. I broke off an armful of blossoms and carried them to the kitchen table. I sucked on some on the way so there weren't as many when I got there, but Maudie still kissed me because she were so pleased.

After supper I were in bed but I couldn't stop thinking of the master's daughter in the orchard. The voice were in my ears but I couldn't understand the words. I ran to Maudie in the kitchen but she shook me off for the darning needed doing. Go to Da, she whispered. But Da were asleep and the darkness were under the trees. I wandered in the garden and in the bright window of the library I saw the master with his head in his hands. Up above, beneath the gaslight in the landing window, I could see Mr Thorne walking, far from the guest rooms. I wondered where he were going so late, and if the voice were in his ears too.

When Maudie found me in the laundry yard she took me in her arms until the shivers went and the voice had gone quiet in the eaves.

*

If I stuff the wadding tight and stitch it close, if I give it a face it will be almost real. If I put a little heart in it might beat. The mouth is crooked, the hands have no fingers but the mouth might have a song in it. The devil is worse than a woman, dillo dee.

Maude's songs swoop from her like birds and come back to be sung again. I made my doll with a mouth but the voice wouldn't stay. I patched and pieced it but its parts came away at the seams. I am prone to invention, we have agreed; I say it again and again so they will hear me. But I may have invented what I know. Do I know what I know? My tongue gets stuck and the mouth won't close and perhaps I have imagined the tongue and the mouth's a tattle and the sticking's a fiction too. The garden boy sees me in the trees and his eyes are wide. My dress is stained by all the fallen plums.

*

We watched Maudie heave cloth through the mangle with her red, raw hands. She had to start work before dawn because of her singing every day. Mr Bones's pipe winked red in the gloom. When Maudie were finished she nodded to him, and he opened his coat and there were the puppet.

'Ventriloquy's an ancient art,' he said as he laid it in my hands. 'It means belly talk, you know. The Romans thought the noises in their bellies were the voices of the dead. And that were the first ventriloquy – indigestion.' He laughed a cackle from his belly.

'That's a story for ye. Ye wouldn't believe what I learned on me rounds. The things rich folk throw away, it's a scandal. I learned meself to read from the works of Shakespeare, can you fathom it? Some toff threw the lot on the back of me cart.'

Maudie were hanging the sheets to dry in the wind. I stroked the doll's hair and the green glass eyes.

'And that deep torture may be called a hell, when more is felt than one hath power to tell,' Mr Bones were saying. 'That's a soliloquy there, from the Bard himself. All the words about talking, they take a toll on the tongue, eh? Hear them: colloquy, soliloquy,

grandiloquence. Tolling and rolling and all about telling. I made a better man of meself learning them. An eloquent fellowquent. Learn from me, lad. The tale teller is changed by the telling of the tale, I tell ye.'

I were dizzy from the quickness of his words. He took the doll on his arm. Its mouth moved crookedly. Its eyes shone as if they saw me.

'I'm the dead person in your belly, lad,' said the doll, and it laughed a high wheezy laugh.

The sheets filled and billowed.

*

I told Mother of the visits of a night, I told her of the nighttime bites and grabs and chokes and the blood on the bed. He has done so much for the family. She watched my lips talking and the whites showed in her eyes. She said nothing at all but she went to her bed.

Mother's having one of her turns, Henry said. What did you do?

Father sent for the doctor. He measured my head. Asylum or cloister, they mumbled. She is prone to invention, Mother said. Forgive me, I said. She forgave me and my tongue stuck in my jaw. Barbiturate and bedrest, the doctor pronounced. What about my jaw, I said but he didn't hear because of my stuck tongue and the locked door.

Someone has opened a mouth and my words are in it. I imagine things sometimes. I think I do.

*

The master had another song from Maudie in the morning. She sung it so sad it hurt to hear.

*There were two sisters went a-playing
The wind blows cold and the wind blows low
To see their father's ships come sailing
And the wind blows over our bones, o*

*And when they came unto the sea brim
The wind blows cold and the wind blows low
The elder pushed the younger in
And the wind blows over our bones, o*

I heard her sing it only once before in another summer when Mr Thorne were staying and the blood were on the sheets of the master's daughter.

I could hear the mistress sobbing in a high room. Maudie scrubbed pink foam from the sheets. She hung them to blow. They were stitched with lilies. They snapped and billowed. But for all the scrubbing, she could not rid them of the red and they bloomed rust-dark stains like gory sails.

She sang, as she hung them, a song of a drowned sister and a fiddle made of a bone.

*What did they do with her breast bone?
The wind blows cold and the wind blows low
They made a fiddle to play thereon
The wind blows over our bones, o.*

What did they do with her veins so blue?

The wind blows cold and the wind blows low,

Made fiddle strings to sing so true

The wind blows over our bones, o

The strings sang 'O my mother nursed me

The wind blows cold and the wind blows low

'My father yonder, he loved me

And the wind blows over our bones, o

'And o my sister, she drowned me

The wind blows cold and the wind blows low

'And I died beneath the shifting sea

And the wind blows over our bones, o.

Da came to scold her, for anyone might hear her. They don't like to hear our voices.

But she sang it for the master today. She sang it many ways, never the same, while I tugged at the weeds beneath the window.

'Sing it as I ask you, not as the whim takes you,' the master ordered snappily.

'Stand closer, Maude,' Mr Thorne said, but his voice were soft as treacle. The creak of her steps, closer. I were afraid for her.

In the half-light Maudie took a knife and walked into the oaks, casting her eyes about the leafy floor. I followed and tugged her hand.

‘Shh,’ she said.

We trod a path through the bluebells. In a patch of grass she came on a clump of yellow flowers and cut three feathery stalks, crushing their drowsy sweetness into the air.

‘Shh,’ she said again, and took my hand.

In the kitchen she boiled water and laid a silver tray. Teapot, cup and saucer, spoon. She lifted them and shooed me away.

‘Go to Da.’

*

Beneath my room the rag and bone rogue boasts of his words and his rude soliloquies. He delivers his eloquence to Maudie there at the back door, a colloquy of tongues though there’s not much air in the locution. If anyone knew of it she would be all in ruin and Father would despise her. But I will never tell of it because my voice is in the wind.

She brings me cake and the grass-green tea I begged but I don’t look at her and her proud red mouth with its songs tucked up like nesting birds. Father wants her for company and never me. I have no songs or chirrup in my throat but there is an homunculus in me with its own dumb tongue and my father will not love it much or me.

*

Maudie were hunched over her sewing in the kitchen and she and Da were talking hushed voices. Pay no mind to the master’s daughter, he were saying. ‘Not your baby, not your business,’ he whispered, but Maudie’s mouth were set in a line. They thought I didn’t hear them.

I found a red thread in Maudie's basket. I pushed the stuffing into the torn belly of the puppet and sewed it as Maudie had shown me, though it were slow and clumsy and not like her perfect seams. I stitched lace to the hems and made the nape fast so the jaws would meet. When I showed Maudie she said it were not so awful now.

*

They came to hear her sing in the afternoon. Mr Thorne brought them, the ladies and scholarly gentlemen. I helped Da to set twelve chairs before the rose arbour with its shower of fat pink blooms.

Da told me not to be seen when they came, but I crept as close as I dared beneath the trees.

Mr Thorne stood on the steps in a handsome suit, saying peoples' names in his grand deep voice with all the nodding and the shaking of hands. Ladies and gentlemen rustled into their chairs, patting their hats and waistcoats. They were waiting for our Maudie.

'Friends,' said the master. 'Of the ancient songs in my collection, the one you are about to hear is one of the most stirring, and sung according to a tradition handed through generations.'

He whispered to Maudie, and she stepped into the arbour in her new Sunday dress.

'I will sing the old song, Crow and Pie,' she said.

The master frowned and coughed. It were not the song he expected. He tried to catch Maudie's eye but her voice were already pealing into the air.

He saw a fair maid come riding

He spake to her of love, I trow;

*She answered him in scorning
And said, the crow shall bite ye.*

*I pray ye, damsel, scorn me not,
To win your love it is my will,
For your love I have dearly bought
And I will take good heed theretill.*

*Nay for God sir, I ne'er will
I tell ye never, as I trow
Ye shall not find me such a maid
Therefore the crow shall bite ye.*

*He took her about the middle small,
And laid her down upon the green;
Twice or thrice served her withal,
He would not stint yet, as I ween.*

Mr Thorne stood up of a sudden. Heads turned. Maudie watched him as she sang.

*Now ye have lain me by, she said,
Ye will wed me, as I trow.
I will never, answered he,
For now the pie hath pecked ye.*

*Though a knave hath by me lain
 She said, I'm neither dead nor slow;
 I shall recover my heart again,
 And God's curse go with ye.*

The master stood stunned. Mr Thorne were glaring at Maudie with his hands in fists. Some of the guests were pale. No one said anything.

Steps crunched the ground underneath my tree and everybody turned. It were the master's daughter coming out of the orchard, all smeared on her face with her skirts held high on her muddy legs. In a moment the master rushed forward but she bent and twisted away, wagging her hips in a rude dance at the guests. Someone shouted.

When her knees folded it were Maudie ran and caught her, and I saw it were not a dance at all but pain wracking her, and it were not mud but blood, dark on her clothes and streaming to her ankles.

*

The thread cleaves my sides together as a corset knits the lady shape before the lady can be seen. I hear the words rushing in to be caught in the new-knit mouth. The ghost is in me now. It gives the roll to the tongue, the lilt to the loquution, the syllables to the liloquy. I'm a telling dolly, dillo dillo dee and the story is told.

They find me in the bed, all red-seamed with shiny eyes and lace about my hems. Arthur, she says, sobbing. She looks so alive.

Cuckoo

Auditions week

The walls of the costume room are yellow, like the inside of an egg. The shelves and table groan with dusty drapes, bolts of taffeta, tall hats and wigs. Boxes of old hardbacks – Shakespeare, Euripides, Ovid – clutter the floor under the table. I turn in a circle, taking it all in.

Leon spreads his hands. ‘What do you think?’

I shoulder Jess’s bag and walk to the door, nervous of him and not sure why. He looks down at me with an amused expression. I feel as if he’s trying to make me feel small. It doesn’t make me want to help him. He has never even acknowledged me before today.

Jess blows a raspberry at him as she follows the other kids outside. Their voices ring down the corridor like a chorus of birds. Leon leans after her and returns a big, fart raspberry. Peals of girlish laughter recede outside.

‘I don’t know,’ I say, shifting my feet and eyeing the exit. ‘About doing the costumes, I mean.’

‘This is just between you and me,’ he says, lowering his voice. ‘I’m not announcing roles till next week, but we’ve already decided to cast Jess in the junior show.’ He watches my face. ‘She’s a talented girl.’

His eyes are a pale blue-grey, unreadable. He’s used to disarming women with his gaze, I think.

‘Would you be paying for materials?’

‘Of course. Come in on Saturday and we’ll work it all out then,’ he said, as if all is decided.

I'm normally wary of good-looking men. The charming ones, anyway. It's because I don't trust myself not to be fooled by appearances. It's happened before. But saying no is hard. So here I sit in the costume room across from his office, pinning the dress for the heroine. I have cleared the table - lush, dark rimu from the props room - for my machine, and filled a jar with white-flowering manuka sprigs, the way I do at home. Their sharp smell reminds me of woodsmoke, birds' nests, rotting leaves. I feel as if I can make something happen here. The white cloth in my hands is a fresh page.

The junior show is *Bluebeard's Egg*, a theatrical repurposing of the fairy tale. It sounds a bit dark for a teen play. Most of the kids are older than Jess, I suppose. I have made a big papier maché egg with a bolt of crimson silk inside it. It's immaculate; I can't even see the joins. A seamless casket, the perfect hiding place for a secret.

Second week

After school I walk with Jess through the forest park where the birds throng in the kanuka. We stop at the totara stump to try and identify the birds. I tear open a chocolate bar.

'Sh,' says Jess. She tips her head back to gaze into the canopy.

'Riroriro,' she says, hearing the jubilant staccato of a warbler, and turns at another call. 'And there's another one.'

We listen until they fade, passing the chocolate between us. Jess picks at the rip in her jeans, tilts her head at another sound. A new, piping note rings out and stops, as if interrupted.

'Let's go Mum. I can't be late.' Jess wipes her mouth and skips toward the back of the theatre, braids swinging. The bird call returns, following us up the path.

'Pīpīwharaua,' calls Jess over her shoulder. 'First cuckoo of the season!'

She stops at the entrance and waits for me.

'I think I might be Leon's favourite,' she whispers as we go through the door.

‘Why’s that?’

‘The way he teases me,’ she says. ‘And I’m the one he always gets to help him.’

A pang of guilt runs through me. She used to show off to make her dad laugh. I’ve seen the way she drinks in Leon’s attention in that same way.

Jess is going home with Gabe for the afternoon so I can sew. I stuff snacks into Jess’s bag. Gabe’s mother Carly is flirting with Leon at the door as the girls put on their shoes. She bats at his cheek and he laughs, a booming, theatrical laugh. His eyes drift to me over her shoulder as if to check that I’m watching.

Returning to my room I tend to the machine, feeding white thread through the eyes and levers, watching the bobbin replenish itself. I clamp the cloth into place and slow-pedal the needle onto its path. The building has been silent for some time when I realise he is watching me at the door to the room, coffee cups in his hands.

‘Don’t mind me. I love watching people when they’re in the zone,’ he explains, placing my cup on the table.

I lean back in my chair to look at him.

‘It’s good to work on something interesting again,’ I say. ‘I was in a collective back where we were from, but lately it’s just been boring bread and butter stuff.’

‘What made you move away?’

I take a lingering sip from my cup.

‘A bad break up with Jess’s dad. He was the controlling type.’

‘Sounds traumatic.’

Tears come suddenly, humiliatingly. I had forgotten what it was like to talk to an adult. I turn my face, wishing I had kept my mouth shut. He makes a soothing noise,

distressed by my distress. I wish he wouldn't look at me in that way he does, like he's trying to get into my head.

Jess is on the couch with the laptop, looking at a facebook message from Leon. The strangest thing: a heart emoji. Her face is alight when she turns to me.

'Can I take one of the chocolate bars for Leon tomorrow? He's been sad today.'

The tiny image of the heart nags at me. I bite my nails as Jess laughs through *Whose Line is it Anyway*. She takes my hand unconsciously, as if knowing I need something to hang onto.

I text Leon before I go to bed. I ask him what he means by sending her such a message. I lie awake. He doesn't reply.

In the light of day I feel stupid and petty for suspecting Leon of anything. I watch him lead the cast through their warm up. Jess's eyes blaze as she slips into an improvised character. I have never seen her so confident. Leon meets my eyes and his gaze is cool.

None of the other parents seem to mind him being on facebook with the kids. Maybe I'm small-minded. Maybe I'm overreacting. My mum didn't see what was happening to me when I was a kid, right in front of her nose. Her own boyfriend. Maybe I'm paranoid because of that.

I close the costume room door behind me and stitch hooks and eyes onto the dress I am making for Jess. Leon's design looks a bit adult for her. I don't know, I never thought of myself as a prude, but maybe I am. I add an inch of lace to the neckline.

I could ask Carly about Leon. She seems to know him. But I don't want to start any rumours if it's nothing. I know what the fallout can be like.

When the parents start to arrive for pick-ups, Leon comes in and watches me trimming stray threads, my mouth full of pins.

‘So.’ He is frowning. ‘This is what I think. I should come and have dinner at your place. I think we should hang out. It’ll reassure you I’m a friend. And I can apologise for my unfortunate rambling to your daughter last night.’ He smiles, as everything is solved.

Jess’s head appears around the door. ‘Can we get pizza?’

‘I’ll drive,’ he replies, twirling his keys.

He’s an artist, a visionary. He knows famous people. He wants to come to my house. He says he’s my friend and he wants to apologise. Despite my wariness I feel a confusing, sickly joy, like the time I breathed too many paint fumes in the garage.

I hadn’t expected his car to be messy. It makes him more human. It makes me less embarrassed about the dishes in my sink.

He spots the wine on top of the fridge and pours some into jars when he can’t find glasses. Jess opts for lemonade. We crowd onto the couch with the pizza and watch *Outrageous Fortune*. He admires my homemade coffee table and the manuka flowers.

‘To new friends,’ he announces, raising his jar to mine.

Jess leans her head on my shoulder. I know exactly what she is thinking, beaming between us on the couch: it feels like being a family.

The pizza disappears.

‘More wine?’ asks Leon. He squeezes my hand and shock bolts through me at his touch. I nod, but I avoid his gaze and bite my nails through the next episode.

Third week

I search the secondhand shops in town, buying remnants and old clothes to dismantle. There is a dirty tuxedo, good for the villain if I shorten the legs and arms. Perhaps I can fashion a cummerbund for it from the scraps in the costume room.

Wandering into the hospice shop I meet Gordy, Leon's friend who builds the stage sets. He slings a lean arm around my shoulders and shows me the fat roll of wire he has found. In the bargain bin he discovers a grey silk shirt and an ugly ball dress in bottle-green satin, both of which he tries on for my benefit, the shirt on top of the dress. They cost me a dollar apiece and Gordy wears them all the way back to the theatre for a laugh. We drink coffee with Leon in the yellow room surrounded by the smell of manuka and I feel, again, a sense of beginning.

I meet Jess at the school gates and we walk home under the arching canopy, listening to the cuckoos.

Jess opens a message from Leon at the kitchen table as I wipe it down.

Leon: *Check out this one from e e cummings.*

*sometimes i am alive because with
me her alive treelike body sleeps
which I will feel slowly sharpening
becoming distinct with love slowly,
who in my shoulder sinks sweetly teeth
until we shall attain the Springsmelling
intense large togethercoloured instant –*

‘Jess, you need to put the dishes away.’

She looks up at me. ‘Don’t you think it’s amazing?’

‘Why did he send you this?’

‘He’s been reading my poems, Mum. He thinks I’ve got talent.’

‘I always tell you that. Didn’t you believe me?’

‘Yeah but he’s a real artist.’

‘Even talented poets have to do the dishes.’

She stomps into the kitchen. I delete the poem from her messages.

I am waiting to talk to him when he arrives at his office, preparing the words in my head. Be calm. Be calm. My hands shake as I sew. The needle stabs my finger. Beads of blood swell and fall onto the cloth.

His steps pass the door and I throw it open. ‘Why are you sending her things like that? Who do you think you are?’ I say to his back, all prepared words forgotten.

He turns and looks at me in shock. ‘What things? Who?’

He doesn’t even know what I’m talking about. I have to explain, to repeat the lines of the poem.

He brightens suddenly, as if he’s just remembered. ‘Oh. I think I was talking to Jess about sonnets. I’m a bit spur of the moment sometimes. I didn’t think to check the content of that one.’

‘You have to check. If you’re writing messages to children, you don’t get to be thoughtless.’

His face is pale.

She's vulnerable,' I say, still shaking. 'She has no father. She craves your approval. You'll give her the wrong idea.'

He bows his head and sits back onto the sewing table.

'I would never. Helen, it never occurred to me ... I do stupid things sometimes. I'm a bit clueless about appropriate behaviour sometimes. I'm impulsive. It's my nature. Sometimes I don't think.' He raises his eyes. 'Helen. I can't bear that you think I'm the kind of creep who would hurt her.'

He looks, suddenly, childlike and afraid. I know I must have misjudged. I reach out to touch his hand. They are terrible, the accusations that have been flying around in my head.

He leans toward me, searching my face. 'Listen, Helen. I should thank you. You were honest. You could have complained about me to the board before I had a chance to explain. But you didn't. You pulled me up on my thoughtless behaviour, and I can learn from it.'

I say I'm sorry, because he seems to need me to. I tell him that I wouldn't want to ruin his reputation just for a mistake. I won't mention it to anyone else. He nods and squeezes my hand. I feel oddly powerful; this intimidating man, so humble.

He's at the outside table talking to a woman with crimson hair. She stands as I approach, pocketing her wallet.

'Helen, this is my friend Teri,' says Leon. I offer my hand, but she kisses me on both cheeks. She's got shocking blue eyes.

'You're the costume-maker. Your stuff's amazing. I'm going to commission you to make me something.' She smiles a sideways smile at me. 'As for you, Spanky,' she turns back to Leon, 'don't be naughty.'

'Always,' he replies, sipping his coffee.

I stare after her. She's so beautiful. 'Girlfriend?' I ask, sitting down in her place.

‘Oh no, my girlfriend’s in Australia.’

‘Must be hard.’

‘Anyway,’ he grins. ‘I have my parents’ house for the weekend. Come and stay the night with Jess. They have a pool.’

I hesitate.

‘You can have my parents’ room,’ he adds, as if to reassure me. ‘She can bring Gabe if she wants and you and I can hang out. Drink wine, watch movies. Cards. I’d love the company.’

‘Okay,’ I find myself saying. I think I’d do anything for him when he has that look on his face. And then I’m holding his hand, because it feels right, even though I don’t trust good looking men and there is a worm of unease at the back of my mind. I know I mustn’t sleep with him. As long as I don’t sleep with him.

As the afternoon cools I join him at the outdoor table while he smokes. He has made us coffee on his mother’s expensive machine. The garden is spare and geometrical, dotted with evenly-spaced camellias. A tiny grey warbler bounces across the air and disappears into the hedge. The girls are playing cards.

Leon watches me with a narrow gaze as he exhales. His eyes are the disconcerting colour of an overcast sky.

‘What happened with Jess’s father?’ he asks at last. ‘Only if you want to tell me,’ he adds, seeing my expression.

‘Well, I don’t know what to tell you. He got quite scary toward the end. But there was only one violent time.’

‘It takes courage to leave those situations.’

‘The worst part was the suicide threats when I tried to leave. He told Jess he was going to hang himself. I had to get her away from him, not that it stopped him calling her. But when he stopped calling she was devastated. She thought he’d done the deed. She still cries at night and worries about him. I’ve heard he’s alright though. Shacked up with someone else.’

If I had stayed, she would still have a relationship with him. I don’t know if she blames me, deep down.

Leon shakes his head, as if I had spoken all my doubts out loud. ‘You did the right thing by her, you know.’

I want to touch him, fold myself into him.

After dinner Leon pours generous doses of his father’s Glenfiddich and lights a cigarette, leaning forward on the table. The moon is out and the girls are still in the pool, quieter now.

Leon is unusually silent. He’s watching my fingers tapping on my glass.

‘This thing between us,’ he says.

I look at him, shocked that he has said it out loud.

‘What I want to know is, are we going to do something about it?’ he continues, raising an eyebrow.

I hesitate. He walks his fingers slowly toward mine.

‘You have a girlfriend,’ I say.

His fingers stop, pause, walk backward.

‘What if she doesn’t mind?’ He looks at me, walks his fingers forward again.

I laugh, giddy and afraid, and stand up before his fingers reach me. For a moment I have the sensation of being on a cliff edge.

‘Let’s not rush into anything.’

He nods slowly. ‘Yes. We have Jess to consider.’

We. He speaks as if we are already a couple.

‘Anyway, Teri’s coming over tomorrow. I should go to bed soon,’ he says, draining his glass as I sit down.

I feel a sudden stab of jealousy and I’m annoyed that it bothers me. Then Jess appears in her swimmers, fresh from the pool, and sits on my knee, laughing when I shriek at the water soaking through my jeans.

Fourth week

Carly has a crush on one of the theatre dads. As soon as we reach the bar, she leaves me in the crowd to try and find him. I drift through the crowd until I see Leon, elbow on the counter, talking to Gordy. I squeeze Leon’s arm.

‘What are you having?’ I grin. But he gazes at me as if he doesn’t remember who I am, as if he’s vaguely annoyed that I’ve interrupted his conversation.

Gordy doesn’t smile. Something is amiss. My grin falters, but I order a beer for each of them anyway because I don’t want anything to be wrong. I raise my drink to them and they turn back to each other without saying thank you. A hollow, dreamlike feeling follows me outside.

I finish my drink on a ledge in the beer garden. Carly turns away from her conversation to tell me she’s staying a bit longer. She seems to have found the man she was looking for, a big blond guy; he’s balancing a lighter on his nose for her amusement.

Leon meets my eye as I leave, as if he’s only just noticed me. He raises a hand in goodbye.

Trying to peel Jess from the computer has been impossible. After the second hour I whip the laptop away and tell her to call Gabe.

‘It’s Sunday. Go outside. Live your life. Don’t be a zombie.’

‘But Mum,’ says Jess, pointing at the message on the screen.

We should get pizza again. Maybe you can stay after rehearsal sometime this week.

‘Can we?’ she begs, hands in a prayer pose.

‘We’ll see. Call Gabe.’

She takes the phone and walks into her room.

I scroll back through the messages. Two hours’ worth of messages with Leon.

Leon: *My girlfriend broke up with me by email. I’m heartbroken.*

Jess: *Leon I’m so sad for you. Mum and me will give you hugs tomorrow.*

Leon: *So good to have you stay on Friday night (heart emoji)*

Jess: *(heart emoji)*

Leon: *Sorry if I was talking to others most of the time. Have to be polite, you know?*

I feel a bit sick. Talking to ‘others’? Have to be polite? Does he mean me?

I don’t know what to do. She would be heartbroken if I made her unfriend him. It would be like losing her dad all over again.

There’s a pain at the back of my eyes, as if something malignant has taken residence in my head.

I sit opposite him in the yellow room among the half-made dresses. ‘Please try to understand, Leon. I have trust issues anyway. I was interfered with when I was a kid and it fucked up my life. It’s not easy for me to give you the benefit of the doubt,’ I say, and my

voice is stiff with the effort of remaining calm. I haven't slept. I don't know how to say it all without hurting him.

'You keep pushing at boundaries. You message Jess about your personal life. You spend hours at it. She's not your adult friend, Leon.' My voice wobbles and I grit my teeth.

He listens silently, expressionless. I don't want him to hate me.

'I'm sorry that happened to you, Helen. Thank you for telling me,' he says at last. 'You and I have a rare honesty in our friendship. I'm grateful for that. And I hear what you're saying. Maybe I overstepped.'

'You did, Leon. You keep doing it.'

I want him to reassure me. I want an explanation I can believe.

He sighs. 'I wish I could open myself up and show you how I feel, in here.' He mimes prising his chest open with his hands. 'But I can't.' His chin crumples suddenly and his voice is like a small boy's. 'I can only tell you that I know I will never have children of my own, and these kids, especially Jess, are the closest I will get to being a father.' He wipes his eyes. 'If I could show you my insides, Helen, if I could show you the purity of my intentions, I would. I just wish to God that you, as my friend, could accept my word.'

There's real pain in his eyes.

'I had to talk about this, Leon. I can't take any risks with my daughter.'

He looks resigned. 'I'm not a risk, Helen. But the important thing is that you feel safe. I'll be what you need me to be so that you feel safe.'

'But it's not my safety that's important, it's Jess's,' I insist, hearing the shrill note in my voice, knowing how he must despise it.

He stands and pulls me into his arms, stroking my back. I can hear his heart in his chest.

‘You were brave to confront me,’ he says, as I turn to leave. ‘I might have just thought you were a hysterical, suffocating mumsy type.’

I falter at the door and turn back to him, disoriented. He looks back at me mildly. There's a needling pressure behind my eyes.

All the way through the trees I keep hearing the word: *hysterical*. The birds' evening cacophony is deafening. I feel as if a wild-eyed, chattering madwoman is following me home.

Fifth week

Hysteria is when your uterus wanders around, the Greeks said; I have read them, over these weeks, the dusty books in the costume room. Between the Euripides and the Ovid I pored through the Aretaeus. *The womb is an animal that moves around within the flanks of the woman*. Hysteros. Hysteria. *Ungovernable emotional excess*. I have an image of my womb wandering out of the door and around the town in the middle of the night, accosting strangers, being ungovernable.

I festoon the heroine's dress with feathers. Green and grey. A hysterical dress.

I dream Jess is lost and there's only a bird in her bed, looking at me with small black eyes. I promise myself to stop reading those Greek books. All those people turned into birds and those wives gone mad, feeding their children to their husbands.

Sixth week

The trees are ringing with the song of the pīpīwharau, the shining cuckoo. Its egg has hatched by now in the nest of the fuzzy-bellied warbler, who lets her offspring die so she can nurture the intruder. It happens like this every year.

I do a final fitting with the costumes. The villain is a tall boy and the tux only needs small adjustments. Jess has lost weight; I have to take her dress in again.

The set is going up. Gordy has made a papier maché forest; a line of doors under the paper trees.

We go to the movies with Leon. He wants us to bond again after my meltdown. At the start it feels like being a family again, the three of us, weaving through the crowd together. He's forgotten his wallet, so I buy the tickets while Jess peers into the popcorn machine. He's standing behind her, looking at her, eyes moving slowly up and down her body. He glances back at me and for a moment it seems like there's a challenge in his eyes. I can't stop the thought, and then I have to try and unthink it, because he has only just forgiven me for the last time, and then I'm pulling Jess toward the exit in confusion because I can't not think it.

'Mum!' Jess stumbles after me. 'What are you doing?' She's looking back at Leon standing there all by himself. He looks bewildered, innocent.

I turn around. 'There's something wrong with him,' I'm saying, before I can stop myself. Then I apologise. I have to stay calm or I'll say something terrible.

I have decided I can't be around Leon. I have to get some distance because nothing is clear. I can hear her talking to him on the phone. Maybe I'm right to be alarmed, but maybe I'm just jealous of my own daughter because he's paying attention to her and not me. I don't want him ringing her in the middle of the night. But I can't tell what's right and I'm standing in the dark with my ear to her door like a mad person.

I wait till Jess goes quiet. I don't know what time it is when I call him. He doesn't answer. The message I leave makes no sense.

Seventh week

I meet him in the downstairs bar where he's eating lunch. He doesn't look at me as I sit down. I don't know what to say.

For a while he eats in silence. I wait for him to speak. He looks up at me and chews for a moment more.

‘Don’t get emotional. I’m trying to eat.’

I stifle the threatening tears.

‘You are pretty erratic as a parent, I must say, and you say irrational things, but I don’t think you’re a nut job,’ he says finally, examining the food on his fork. ‘You have unresolved feelings for me, I think.’

I can’t find words that make sense.

‘I’ve talked to the chairman about you,’ he continues. ‘It’s all I can do. I’ve bent over backwards to reassure you, over and over again, but nothing is enough for you.’

I open my mouth to protest but the words still don’t come out.

‘So the board is aware. I’m sorry, but I have to protect myself, do you understand?’

He gazes at me patiently. ‘I just feel sorry for Jess in all this. She’s been quite distressed. All I can do is be there for her until you sort yourself out.’

The tears come anyway. I promise him I haven’t started any rumours. But I know I’ve ruined everything.

His friend Teri calls over to him. She has a blue scarf in her hair. He leaves the table and goes to lean on the bar where she’s stacking glasses.

Teri says something witty and his laugh booms across the room. He curls her hair around his finger. He shakes his head sadly, as if in agreement with something she says.

I feel like something’s pecking me from the inside.

I have finished all the costumes so I don’t walk to rehearsals with Jess any more. She says I suffocate her. She’s become secretive and her eyes have deep shadows and I can’t comfort her any more. I hear her awake at night, anxious and pacing, and it must be because of me.

Dress rehearsal

I think there's something in my head. I can feel it, a quivering thing, growing and taking up more and more space. I'm trying to act normal but people can tell something's wrong with me.

At the dress rehearsal the board chairman ignores me and Leon doesn't seem to hear me saying hello. I sit in the front row, to see my girl, my dresses.

I watch my daughter marry the dark-bearded groom in his tuxedo with the green cummerbund. When the scene ends, Leon appears in the wings, stroking Jess's arm and watching me. I don't do anything hysterical.

Opening night

I sit in the front again. My costumes are magnificent. Alone onstage, Jess is fragile, thin as the paper trees. She looks like a child in an adult's clothes, but her face, beneath the layers of makeup, is no longer a face I know; under the lights she is as pale as the egg in her hands. The door at centre stage is open: a rectangle of shadow. She stands in front of it looking out at the audience, and I feel like she's looking for me, to make sure I'm there. I want to call out to her.

She lets the egg fall. It looks like blood pouring from it, but it's the red silk I had hidden inside.

Applause.

I don't know where she is. I'm watching for the shimmer of her dress as the crowd spills into the foyer. Gordy and Teri eye me coldly and Carly walks the other way when she sees me. I wonder what he's said to them about me. Maybe they can see there's something

wrong with me. Maybe I'm imagining it. I feel like I might choke on all the words I can't say to them.

Leon's head appears above the crowd. Everyone wants to congratulate him. He turns circles with Teri across the room, laughing his too-loud laugh. But I see him glancing at me. He's terrified of what I'm going to say. I can't find my girl anywhere; I think he knows where she is and he's not telling me. All I know for sure is that inside me, choking me, hammering at the backs of my eyes, a monstrous thing is hatching. It wants to get back to him. It's too late to stop it. I can feel the cracking already.

Fitcher's Stitches

a Grimm mutation

The Eldest

What if silence were feathers? Not silence of the restful kind, like the dawn before the birdsong, but the muffling, gagging kind of silence of *not saying the words*.

What if silence were feathers? They would cloud a whole room and float down around you. They would stuff pillows, quilts and dolls. But you couldn't open the room for fear of letting the feathers out. And imagine the dolls. Little, puffy girls with rouged-on cheeks, all filled with the suffocating whiteness of choked-back words.

Pillows you could dream on. Quilts to shelter you from the night, and such a virtue, patchworking new from old. But the dolls ... you would never sleep.

This great edifice, this towering house was built on all the words we never said. Thatched and mortared with all manner of secrets. Strut, hinge and joist, the burdens of held tongues furnish it. But what would happen if we suddenly opened our mouths?

I tolerate my room, but I don't like the lock. And I don't like the sound of the chickens. Chickens are cheaper kept in rows. It's an efficient, tidy torture. They can't be allowed to move, or they might develop notions, and who can predict what disorder might ensue?

So I work my cloth. Being a woman of sorts, I know needlework, of course. They allow it in here because it calms the nerves. I try to write and it's like sewing on my own hands. Impossible! It can only be done by tricks and subterfuge, by deceiving the mind. She thinks she's a writer, he told them. They humour me, but not enough to allow me a pen; so

much more dangerous than a needle. So I stitch my story from pilfered rags; I weave the pale and shuttle the purple, but haltingly, for I am lop-handed and fumbling and mad.

Escaping a locked room is likewise a feat of mind tricks and subterfuge. A matter of disobedience. But I am a woman of sorts and obedience is sewn into my heart in white, feathery silences.

And who goes there? Just now? Who?

It was today I found another word: *Malkin*. Folded and forgotten in the crease of the door, a dirty shred from another time. It seems to mean something. Fragments fray like this from old stories worn and distended by many tongues, a language patched from conquerors' castoffs, misspoken, married and mumbled into new forms. It will do for a patch, for a fancy.

Hello? Who is that with the red trousers? She keeps slipping by in my peripheral vision. She's started to visit me. Sliding around corners to spy on me through the cracks. She is all the unsaid words. The malformed, the malekin, the little witch, the bad child. *Malkin*, tattered remnant of the Old German, ruined cousin of *madchen*, lurking sister of *maiden*, that lily-white heroine who fits the shoe.

Oh, for a happily ever after.

But I look in the mirror and I don't know myself. The gums have ridden back. No plum-smooth cheek or shining eye; the rose has vanished from this complexion. Now the mirror reflects a locked room.

It was before I was locked in here that I saw the chickens in the terrible barn. Wired into lines, neck by neck, faces to trough. Nobody could see them and bear it. Each egg contains a story that will never be heard.

They cut their beaks off.

Chicken Old English *cicen* from Proto-Germanic **kiukinam* from root **keuk-* echoic of the bird's sound

When your mouth is stopped what do you do with words? When you are born you have none. It isn't until your ears are your own that sounds grow shapes and chime with other sounds. Words mean nothing by themselves. They like to congregate. With the first parcelling of your name into your ear you had a sound to hang your body from. You found you had a place in the world the size and shape of your body. This is the babble of a madwoman. I try to cover my mouth but I have no hands.

Babble Middle English from Middle Low German *babbelen* as a frequentative based on the repeated syllable *ba*, typical of a child's early speech

Ba ba babble gaggalen babbelen. Did it all come from those Northern conquerors and their tales made of word containers? Wedlock. Hearthkeeper. A bag to hold you inside. A kenning, a knowing, an enclosure. This room full of feathers, full of body parts. We have to be dismembered for efficient storage, or for streamlining like those eye-pecked sisters who chopped off heels and toes to get a foot in a glass shoe. As long as it's a tidy fit and the blood doesn't show, your story might have a happily ever -

Don't open that door. You can't ask questions, they might crack the egg, the perfect, seamless egg.

Someone has let out the chickens again. Griselda is stumbling crookedly in the yard, emitting strangled shrieks. She may not survive her freedom.

I try to reattach my hands, but it is absurd, and I open my mouth to laugh and feathers fly out like mad hens. They take the form of a girl with hips and big teeth. Her hands and feet wag. A great untidy guffaw of a girl, a weird sister. Her eyes flash at me and she strides rudely about in her trousers.

I tell you there are tricks to escaping a locked room. Just in case, remember the art is in knowing how to dissemble. But my words are foolish prattle, for I am a woman of sorts as I may have mentioned, and my foolishness is both surrender and disguise.

The Youngest

This is a story of three sisters. The old one, the young one. I can't help it if he liked me better. I can't help it if she let herself go.

And the terrible sister. She just ruins everything.

This egg is the symbol of our love, he told me. Cherish it well, he said. Never let it go. A fragile vessel, white as my dress, with all its secrets closed inside. A strange and terrifying wedding gift and cumbersome to carry, but I am a dutiful bride. I spent my girlhood sewing my marriage bundle, you know: a trousseau sewn for a love so true. The lace and ribbons. The immaculate, pinching seams. I close myself into the dress. It's a little hard to breathe, not that I am complaining.

I only eat in secret when I can't help it.

When you meet him, the author, when he kisses your hand, something about him is not quite right, but that's what thrills you; the midnight lustre of his beard, the touch of cruelty in the smile that is for you alone. The greedy crush of his hand on yours. It's the beginning of a love story. And you are always going to jump in. My sister should have appreciated him more. She might be mad but I think she's just ungrateful.

But Fitcher's stitchings stick so. Better this room than that attic, though, where he tells you not to go. You think you can hear voices in there. Gag gagging babbling voices. The old wife heard voices. You sometimes look twice as you pass the door.

I only eat in secret, so it doesn't really count.

Maiden, I was unmarked: a stainless egg, an empty page. *I now pronounce you -*
 Keuk! A hen, escaped, limping grotesquely and ruining my wedding.

Every day I have fed his chickens through the hole in the wall. Their clipped syllables click and clack in the secret barn but I never look. And every day my terrible sister lets them all out the back door. They run and stumble in those dirty white tatters and I can't get them back in. They are so terrifying I can't look at them and it's all her fault, the strutting madam with her scarlet pantaloons.

But now I've seen them and the horror's like a stain on me and my bones are showing through my beautiful dress.

The Wickedest

Here come the wedding guests, scholars and literary men, collectors of tales, so kind but admonishing: Dear ladies, you would be happy if only you weren't so nosy.

But nosy is as nosy knows. Guests, what do you bring to this story? Why do you not say anything about his missing wives? Is it the dazzling blackness of his beard? In a language riddled with conquerors' histories, the telling of this tale is treacherous with slips and elisions. It's a ghastly dress. A tapestry with ill-met seams.

Malkin

My name's Malkin. There's my name, though they won't mention it. You know me by my big buck teeth and my wicked tongue. You know those half-bald chickens by their sunken eyes, their mutilated beaks. The smell of shit and disease. I slide the bolts, pick the locks haha and then they are running, running, but their legs are crooked and they can't bear the light.
 Keuk! Keuk!

They are afraid of the space. They don't know where to go. You don't know if they might prefer the cages after all. But how would they know, having hatched and grown inside them?

Malkin a slatternly girl

Who am I? Malkin of the red trousers. I burst out in a cloud of feathers. Impossible. I stride about in my trousers as if they give me special entitlements. My trousers are red as my lips. A laugh is a slattern, no regard for decorum, no fear of a door or what it conceals.

The author keeps the door shut so they don't find out about each other. But he is beginning to have terrible dreams and he can't bear the sound of the cackling.

Malkin a scarecrow

The bride examines her bones in the mirror. She disassembles herself obediently. She becomes a mannequin, a wax figure, to make herself pleasing. But her wasting is both surrender and disguise. It's the art of escape by decoy.

There she is, adorning her bones in the window for an effigy (till death do us part) and then there is me, laughing, feather-clad and mad.

I bathe in honey till I'm shiny with it. And feathers in a cloud! What a mess! I am a sticky chaos of feathers. Then he doesn't recognise me, let alone marry me. He calls me mad, for he cannot contain me. I am not anything he has words for; I am the other sister, a shapechanging thing of dubious name; try and catch me. I roll in the feathers and stitch up my sisters. Needlework has its value. Disassembled, we are stitched anew. We know the art of reassembly. We know the art of symmetry, repurposing, redress.

Prove your love to me, I entreat him, dissembling. Take this bag of gifts to my mother. I will watch you from my window to see you do not tarry.

You will be my undoing, says he.

Faster, Fitcher, I am watching you. See my bone-bald head at the casement, grinning in silks and pearls, while the guests roll by whistling and doffing their hats, never knowing I am not really there.

Malkin a ragdoll

No one is bagging me. I know which thread to pull to unravel it all. I loosen the held tongues of history and unpurse the mouths of gossips. I cackle as the house burns down. *Keuk cackle kakelen* I wear my bird body like red trousers. I am a cackling bodythief, stealing my own body from under his nose. Wedding guests, I cackle as I run, welcome to the feast!

The Bird

Impossible. She has sewn on her hands and the door is off its hinge and she is running in a babbling bird babel gown ravelled out of shrieks and laughs and half-uttered words. *I now pronounce* - she runs lopsidedly, untidily, threading and loosing the rags and feathers, pulling and pulling so you must cover your ears before the thread runs out. *I now pronounce you* - Once upon a time a word was a word, a lock was a lock. You honoured and obeyed the latching and catching, the syllabled snick of the nuptial door. *I now* –

And the egg is hatched and the words scattering back beyond bards and birds to old wives' mouths and if she speaks in glossolalia she may live ha, ha, happily ever

The Body in the Wall

The woman in the band tee shirt nods to you at the back door of the theatre. She offers you a cigarette. Her eyes drift over your uniform and she swears and snatches back the packet.

- Sorry, that was dumb, you're still at school. Terrible habit, don't do it.
- I've come about the work experience, you say.
- I'm Lou, she says. Have a seat.

She lights her cigarette, clicks the zippo shut. She has small, fine hands and a narrow face. Short mess of blond hair and Blundstones with paint splatters. You used to have boots like that. Teacher made you throw them out. They were too masculine. You are not supposed to care about boots. *I am not this body.*

Lou doesn't look like a girl or a boy. She's in a space all her own. Teacher wouldn't like Lou.

The actors arrive in ones and twos, going backstage. Lou says they're doing a play about a monastery.

- We'll get a feel for it when the actors get going. Then we'll start making the set.

You sit in the second row. Actors file slowly around on the stage. One of them is chanting.

- Byzantine, Lou mutters. She sketches archways and domes in her notebook.

The actors start improvising dialogue. Lou takes you into the back room full of scrap timber and paint and hands you a paint roller. You help her prime a big piece of ply for the backdrop. Paint splatters on your school shoes and gets in your hair.

Lou makes coffee while the primer dries. You touch a roll of black sticks leaning on the wall.

- Willow withies, says Lou. Take some home if you want. See if you can come up with something for the show.

The willow flexes, sinewy in your hands.

- Do you want to be an artist then, Lou says. Are you going to apply for art school.

You open your mouth but the words don't come out because art is for God and if it's not for God it's only vanity. If you want it too much it's vanity. Teacher told the parable when you were small. There was a man who worked with clay, she said. He made a vase. It was perfect and exquisite, and he presented it to the emperor. It is a gift worthy of God, said the emperor. The man was ashamed; he had given the vase to the emperor out of pride. He realised then that his true purpose was to make a vase for God. So he worked and worked but couldn't make anything perfect enough for God. At last in despair he threw himself into the fires of his kiln. In the morning the people opened the kiln and inside was a perfect and exquisite vase, worthy of God.

- Do it, says Lou. Go to art school.

Dad stows the withies in the boot and gets back in.

- Who's that, he says. Points through the windscreen at Lou and Ana holding hands on the theatre steps. Lou waves at you.

- I don't know, you say.

- Your first time, is it, Sam says, when he's all the way in.

The jerking tears something inside you. You wait for it to be over. He takes the condom off in the middle. You don't realise till the end when it's lying on the floor. He tells you to sleep on the camp bed in the lounge so his dad won't know. But Sam's twenty-four

and pays his own rent so maybe he just doesn't want you in his bed. You lie in the dark. You want to go home.

You tried to hide how happy you were when he asked you out for icecream. He said he wanted to go back to his place to talk about art. You should have known what kissing leads to. You didn't want to be a tease.

When he drives you home the next day you know you are in trouble for staying out all night. Your dad is waiting when you come in the door. His eyes are the terrible blue they go when he is angry.

- So which one did you sleep with, the father or the son?

It's okay to have sex if the man initiates but the woman has to have the right attitude. You didn't want to have sex with Sam it was just suddenly happening and you should have known. You wish you had told Sam to take you home instead but you didn't want to make him angry but now your dad is angry and he is looking at you like you really are a dirty thing that Sam didn't want in his bed. You hope you are not pregnant. Babies aren't allowed at art school. *I am not this body.*

You call Leader on the kitchen phone. You twist the phone cord.

- I feel bad, you say. I had a date with Sam. I don't know why I feel so bad.

- Think about your attitude, he says. You have to live with the consequences of your choices, he says.

The phone goes dead and you try to call him again but it rings and rings and rings.

You call Lou to say you're not allowed to help this week because you stayed out all night. Lou laughs and says Who had a good night then.

Mother is on the window seat knitting. I am not this body, she is murmuring. I am not this body. It distracts her from her jaw pain. Slowly the tension eases on her face. She knits

the pain into tight woollen rows in rib and cable patterns, knit six, purl four, knit six, I am not this body. But you can't watch for long because it feels like the pain is being knitted into you.

- Sorry about what I did, you say.

She glances at you.

- I worried about you all night, Emmy, she says. Her eyes are puffy. She goes back to mouthing over her stitches.

- I'm sorry, you say again. But it doesn't take the bad feeling away.

Your school shirt is smeared from the clay on the desk. You scrub at it in the bathroom. You get a box from the wardrobe for the half-made sculptures from school. A dog made of bundled sticks; a man's head pushed and pulled out of clay. In a rush of disgust you throw them in the rubbish basket. They are all hopeless. You eye the looped withies in the corner.

It's okay for a woman to be an artist but it has to be for God.

When you come out in your uniform your mother is laying the table. Her hair is pulled tight, the sign in place around her neck. She breathes loudly when the pain is bad. But she smiles. Asks what you want on your toast. Her front teeth are coming loose now. You wish she wouldn't smile.

You put out the plates. They clunk on the formica. Your father comes in. You hold hands with them and he mumbles grace. Mum makes tea in the yellow teapot, the way he likes it, with the matching cups.

- Bill, she says. I think something needs to be done about the ceiling.

He smooths his tie.

- There's no money for it, Margy.

All the spare money goes to Leader and Teacher. Because of the Work. Because of raising the vibrations of the planet. What about Mum's teeth, you think. Don't they care about Mum's teeth.

She pulls her chair in as she sits. Her sign swings against the table edge with a wooden clatter. *Vanity. Pride. Greed.* He squeezes her hand.

- I've got a sign today too, he winks, waving his work lanyard. He goes to the cupboards. Brings her aspirin clouding in a glass of water. You should have thought of doing that for her. You wish you were a better person.

You shoulder the willow and take your toast with you so you don't have to listen to her breathing.

Mr Tamblin lets you stay in the art room at lunch time because you have nothing to show for assessment yet. He lets you look at his books. You open *Ancient Buildings*. Stone age mud building. A photo of a monastery in Romania. *Byzantine*. You sketch its columns and archways, and read underneath it the legend of the Walled-up Wife, the mason's unlucky wife who was chosen to be buried in the wall of the monastery, to protect it from falling down. Humans and animals were buried in foundations and under corner stones from ancient times, the book says.

You soak the willow. You weave a cylindrical wall; a willow tower. The withies bend like limbs. Body parts form under your hands.

Sam looks uncomfortable next to your dad at the service. You sit in the back with the other women. As above, so below. Old Libby moves to make space for you. She has a sign round her neck like Mum's. *Envy. Pride.*

You smile at Sacha but she doesn't smile back. She must know about Sam. It's only a month since their breakup. You're a liar for smiling at her. *I am not this body.*

Leader in his white robe. He says the prayer and lights candles, one, two, three. Teacher sits in the velvet armchair at the front. Her hair fans out in dark waves. The room goes quiet. She starts to speak.

- Some of you don't understand what it means to be a True Woman or a True Man. Some of you think that abiding by our polarities makes us unequal. But being the same is not true equality. We will be discussing this today.

Her eyes move over the room. She says some people need to come up the front. Nervous shuffling. You hear Sacha's name. You hear your name. You walk to the front with your face burning. *I am not this body.*

Sacha is already there. All the people are looking at you and Teacher can see inside your head.

- Sacha has been thinking arrogant thoughts and not believing in the Teachings. Not Working on herself. She is consumed with vicious, jealous thoughts. She is sneaky and dirty in her attitude. She is not a woman, she is a sewer rat, says Teacher.

All the people's eyes on Sacha.

- Emmy, Teacher says.

The eyes turn on you.

- Emmy has not been sincere about doing this Work, Teacher says. Thinks she knows better. She questions my Teachings. She prefers to be sexually manipulative of men. This is not what a woman does. She is like Sacha, vain and sneaky and dirty.

She lets a silence settle on her words. You don't know how she knows that you haven't been doing the Work properly and you thought your mum's pain was Teacher's fault and you lied about Lou to your father and you had the wrong attitude and all you want is for

Sam to think you are pretty and you pretended you didn't hate it when he fucked you because you're sneaky and vain and dirty and manipulative.

- It is a privilege to have this Teaching, Teacher says. If you take it for granted, your hypocrisy will be rooted out and exposed.

The room falls silent. You can't stop a tear coming out of your eye. Sacha wipes her cheek.

Shame is a great teacher, says Teacher.

You sit down again. The room swims. Teacher speaks of other people's progress. She says Sam has been practising the qualities of a True Man. She gives him a small, approving nod. She speaks to your mother.

- You still have much to overcome, Margy, she says. But her voice is kind, and your mother opens her ruined mouth in a smile.

You lie in your bed in your too-much body. Too-much breast and thigh and buttock. Hair. Too-fleshy face. *Not this body not this body not this body.*

Your mum in the doorway. She crosses to your bed, padding feet. Strokes your head. Silence, except for her hand shushing over your hair.

- Teapot's hot, says Dad. He gulps from his yellow mug. You sit opposite the window. Mum leans into the fridge, pulling out eggs and bread. You watch the lightening sky. He fills your cup with soupy tea.

- This Work isn't for the faint of heart, he says.

You look at the tea leaves swimming in your cup.

- Teacher is hard on you because she loves you, he says. Remember how lucky you are. Remember how important this Work is.

He finishes his tea in three swallows.

- You have to think about what you really value, he says. These lesbians you're hanging out with. They want to be men. They want you to deny your true nature. They will bring you down.

Mum gets plates from the cupboard. She says Help me Emmy will you.

You stand up. Dad says Don't walk away when I'm talking to you. He pulls you back.

- Look at you. Your skirt is too short, he says. And I can see your bra through your shirt. It's sexually manipulative.

In your room you pick the seams on the hem of your school skirt. Your legs are not your legs. Your hands look far away.

The willow thing you have made is looming in the corner. Body parts protrude from its twisted weave. Someone is trapped inside it.

At school you wear your body as a uniform. It makes you look the same as the other kids. Your body has friends and talks and eats very day. Your hands write and draw and open doors. Sometimes they lie on the desk like pieces of wood. Mr Tamblin keeps asking if you are okay.

I am not this body.

Your period doesn't come.

Lou says Welcome back.

You make cups of coffee in the green room. She sketches in the second row, ripping out scribbled-on pages. The seats around her are covered in paper.

- Come to our place after, she says. Bring your work. I have a big workspace. Ask your mum.

You know you won't ask your mum.

- Are you okay Emmy.

Your legs don't feel connected to you. You wonder if you can stand up. Onstage an actor is shouting about the wrath of God.

A patchy Vauxhall rumbles up the alley behind the theatre. Ana leans out of the driver's window, lowers her wraparound sunglasses. She says You losers coming or what.

At their house Lou puts on Creedence Clearwater. She takes your arm and leads you into a big room with a wooden floor, full of wood and bags of plaster. Ana brings you a plate of boysenberry pie. She glares when you try to say no. Lou sings *There's a place up ahead and I'm going*. Eats big spoonfuls of pie.

- You can come and do your work here, Lou says with her mouth full of pie. Any time.

- What's the matter, Emmy, says Ana. You don't look right.

You don't mean to say it but it comes out.

- I didn't bleed, you say.

They wait for you to say some more. No words come out.

- What do you want to do? Ana says.

You can't say anything.

- If you need to get an abortion, says Lou, putting her hand on your hand.

- But Teacher would know, you say. She always knows.

And God. But you don't say that out loud.

Ana drives you home. Through the car window you see your dad on the steps. Waiting. You are in trouble. Ana frowns and grabs your arm. Pushes a piece of paper into your hand.

- Call, she says. If you need.

You know you won't call.

The clay goes on in thick, cool smears. Fills the hollows in the willow's weave. Stone Age building: wattle and daub, with the mud drying in layers. Your wall gains a clay knee, an arm, a breast. They swell out of the thatch. Clay falls on the carpet. Your feet tread it into the fibres. The body grows in the wall. A face. A hand.

Mum loads the tray with the yellow teapot and its matching cups. She says Bring the fruit cake Emmy. She sits in the free chair. Leader is sitting on the window seat and you have to sit next to him.

- I don't bite, he says, patting the space beside him, smiling with his wise, fatherly eyes. He takes a piece of cake and examines your breasts.

- Emmy, he says. I was telling your mother. Humility is vital to this Work.

That is why she has to wear the sign. Anything that distracts you from this Work needs to be sacrificed.

Mum fidgets with her knitting needles. She smiles rigidly through her pain.

- And that is what I am here to talk about: Sacrifice, Leader says. The old self has to die. The self that identifies with the body. Your pride, vanity and greed, Margy, are all about your identification with the body.

Your mother dips her head. Her breathing is laboured. Her hands stray back to her needles. Leader's hand falls onto your knee. He doesn't seem to have noticed. Your mum's eyes fix on it resting there, as if your leg is an armrest. You shift your leg away.

- You, Emmy, says Leader, have to think about what needs to die in you. Your

artistic ambitions, I'm afraid, are an obstacle to humility. This is the choice you have to make now.

He picks up his cup and sips his tea.

- You cannot be sincere in this Work without humility. Are you going to pay lip service to God while you consort with lesbians and tinker around with paints, or are you going to commit to the Work of becoming a True Woman?

He puts his cup down and his hand falls back onto your knee. Something is roaring in your ears. You stare at his hand. You wait for him to realise it's there. *I am not this body.*

- Bill, says Leader. I want to talk about the next phase.

Your dad sits forward. His eyes flinch away from Leader's hand. He searches Leader's face, waiting to understand.

- Now's the time to look at selling up and moving closer to our Community, Bill, Leader is saying. We need the funds from your house.

Click, click, click. The knitting starts up a rapid staccato. Yarn-hooked fingers dart and retreat, dart and retreat. Mum is trying to smile but she is mute over her stitches, the chatter of the needles replacing her voice in the click click click. She breathes loudly. You want to put your hands over your ears. Dad grits his teeth.

- When did you take your last aspirin? he asks her.
- Just before. She gasps a breath.
- Can you not be so dramatic? I'm trying to have a conversation.

She knits with a closed mouth. Click. Click. Click. Your father frowns.

- Perhaps you can take a rest from the knitting, he mutters.

Mum's face has gone pale. She picks up the pile of knitting. It unfurls from her needles. Waves of dark wool roll across the floor. She bundles it hastily and trips over the trailing ends as she leaves.

Leader's hand leaves your knee, lifts to his cup. You stand up. You feel as if you are standing beside your body, looking at it.

- Excuse me. I have to. Help Mum, you say.

Leader smiles benignly at you.

Your mother is in her bedroom folding washing.

- Can I help, you say.

Her mouth is drawn and tight.

- Go and put on a longer skirt, she mutters.

You take aspirin to her in a glass. You sit with her as she knits and the radio mumbles the evening news. You lay your head on her shoulder, feeling the quick rhythm of her muscles under the skin. The rawness of her breathing. The sour smell of the deterioration of her gums.

The house is dark and quiet except for your father's snores. You sit on your bed. A pair of hands swim in front of you like strange fish. Your hands. Someone stares at you out of the mirror but she is very far away.

It takes four hacks with the scissors to shear the hair from the head. It falls in dark swathes. The person in the mirror looks naked without it. You paste hair and torn strips of skirt into the wattle and daub to pad the thighs and the breasts and the face half-buried in clay, the body in the wall.

At last, there she is, you decide. Perfect and exquisite. The True Woman.

On the floor you find a scrap of paper, inscribed with Ana's spiky hand.

Magpie

We lived in the gamekeeper's cottage with the dark, teeming forest snuffling at our backs. My father kept his traps in the cellar and his dogs in a kennel under the trees, where they snarled and yapped and howled to be let out. To escape their noise I would slip my mother's eye and walk out on the bridle way, the old riding road that wove between the stubbly fields. I would build towers out of pebbles and pick blackberries from the hedgerow. Sometimes as I played I would find myself watched; crows wheeled and figures would appear in the road and fill me with dread.

When I was still small my brothers had died, all seven of them, fevered and swollen with plague. My father forbade mention of them after they were gone, but he wept every night into his drink and cursed me for being a bastard and a girl. Mother clung to her youngest boy as if she could make him live again, and when they tore him from her, she set her jaw and never wept at all, but the life was gone from her face. It was as if she would pretend her sons had never died. Folk said my father had cursed them in his cups, as he did me. Folk said my brothers could not rest because he had cursed them and my mother would not weep.

I knew my brothers were not gone. Though she never spoke of them or cried, they were always there in the back of my mother's eyes.

My father was a gamekeeper, but he squandered and drank his wages. My mother brought me to work at the weaver's house, so that I would always be fed and my father would not knock me about for being a bastard. 'It was the Squire, wasn't it,' he would say to my mother. 'I seen the way he looks at you.'

My mother denied it. 'She's yours, sir,' she always said, and sometimes he believed her. Sometimes he even looked on me kindly, but I stayed out of his reach just the same.

My muteness made folk nervous. But when I went to the weavers, the mistress Mary said it did not matter that I could not say much. She put me to folding and sweeping, and promised to send me home for Sundays.

‘She will give you no trouble,’ my mother assured her. And sure enough, the weavers barely noticed me.

‘I tell you, something terrible happened to those seven boys,’ Winifred muttered, as if I wasn’t there.

‘Yes. It was the pestilence,’ Mary replied.

‘I say it was witchcraft,’ hissed Winifred, winding a skein over her elbow. ‘That girl’s tongue been tied ever since, and her mother’s hair’s the devil’s colour and I heard she never once wept for them. They should have ducked her in the Stour and hung her from a gibbet.’ She put the new flax to the distaff and pumped her treadle fiercely. ‘It’s the witches who bring plague,’ she said, as she fed the thread through her fingers. ‘They poison the wells and kill little children. One day the witchfinder will return,’ she said, ‘with his sticking blades and pillywinks, to make England safe.’ She nodded her old head sagely.

‘Safe indeed,’ said Mary, who spoke with a wheeze. ‘He is a fraud who kills old women for money.’

If I could speak, I’d have told them he would have hanged me for a devil too. Instead, as I swept the floor between the looms I caught up the rhythms of their speech and stowed them in my ears. I hoarded words like a miser; my memory bulged with them.

I did not know if the deaths of my brothers hobbled my tongue. Perhaps the power of speech was knocked out of me when my drink-sodden father couldn’t bear to hear me cry. I could never make words of my own, only useless sounds such as a baby makes: ta ta ta, ba ba ba. I could only speak in mimicry. If my father spoke to me, I could only repeat his words

to him in an echo. It drove him madder still because he thought I mocked him. My crooked face told the story of his rages.

The priest said that infirmity is proof of sin. I heard the gossips say – for the gossips thought me an idiot, so they did not bother to whisper – that my mother was a witch and begot me under a beast, and that’s why all her sons died. She’s ruined in the head, they said of me, with no speech of her own, so she must always borrow the last thing she hears. They called me Magpie and mimicked me in turn. Since the plague had returned, seething into every corner of peoples’ lives, creeping into bedsheets, fouling nurseries and felling lords and whores and beasts, the gossips’ tongues became crueller, accusing. Bastards, redheads and ugly girls were the first to draw suspicion.

‘They know nothing,’ Mother told me. ‘Tell them you are nobody’s bastard.’

Old Mary noticed me shivering in my threadbare coat.

‘I will teach you to make your own coat,’ she said. For a moment, then, her eyes vanished into her wrinkles. A smile from her was so rare I didn’t know what it was at first; but it did not confuse me for long, for she soon went back to frowning so deeply that the furrows between her brows could have sprouted a peck of rye.

Winfred wound her yarn and talked of the Squire’s daughter, Cecily, who was to marry the Baron but had fallen ill, all bent up with fits and tremors. The Baron might not marry her, lamented Winfred; her father would be at his wits’ end.

If I am the Squire’s bastard, then she is my sister, I thought. Such an idea.

‘I’ll warrant she does not want to marry him,’ said Mary. She made me stand beside her and thread the loom with white and black as she showed me.

I wore my pied coat at the week’s end, striding home on the bridle way, and I thought perhaps I was not so ugly. Everyone turned to see me. The scarecrow nodded gallantly as I passed. Night fell as I walked between the fields and Abel, the farmer’s son, watched me with

shifting eyes from the farmyard. Even the fox watched from the hill above me, a stealthy, soft-foot follower.

The bridle way was a strange old road. Memories flocked like shadows. A dark-haired boy followed me; his face was like my own and his hands were grey and cold. He reached for me but he could not speak. His eyes were desolate and the chill of his hands went through me. I ran away from him, hearing footsteps echoing behind me all the way to the fork in the road. A man came on a ruddy horse, and I was relieved to have his company. He was a poet and a tale-teller, riding to the manor to sing an elegy; a long-legged, long-nosed rider with a narrow-lipped smile.

‘It’s a dark road to walk alone,’ he chided. His voice was rich and round. And he rode beside me and murmured a verse: it tumbled whole from his mouth and the horse’s hooves struck the stones in perfect time. It was a canto, he told me, for a Lady who had fallen to the plague. It told of the beauty of her speech, as if anyone’s speech could be more beautiful than his.

The poet did not mind that I couldn’t reply; he loved the sound of his voice as much as I. The horse snorted clouds; her hooves rang on the stones.

I bundled his words into my memory and went home to nurse them in my bed.

Of eloquence was never found

So sweet a fluency of sound

*

In the manor house the Squire presides over the dinner table in a thin-lipped rage, while the nurse hovers over his daughter in her bed. His wife is as mute and frozen as the bas-relief on the ceiling. The unspoken words fly round their heads like a swarm of terrible birds.

All the plans for the marriage have run awry. Cecily, on the eve of the Baron's proposal, has become a trembling imbecile, her hands curled into claws and her eyes rolled back in her head. She is not beautiful any more; she is as loathly as the lady in the pilgrim's tale, woven into a tapestry on the chamber wall. The Baron will not want an ugly invalid.

'Why must she ruin me?' her father exclaims as he paces hall, for the contrariness of women is beyond him.

In the sleeping dark, Cecily uncrabs her hands and steadies her eyes. She slips unseen into the grounds. Those pilgrims, that wife of Bath, trod these very hills once; the poet who told of them rode the bridle way.

Cecily steps onto the same road and her eyes adjust to the night.

*

My mother cut bread for my father's morning table. The dogs had started up their racket and it made him snappy, for his head was sore.

'I got not a wink,' he groaned.

'You need to fill your belly,' she said.

'Bring my beer,' he began to say, but it was already laid at his elbow. Every day Mother soothed him, met his needs before he knew them, said the right words. She thatched her life around his moods. Did she love him? Sometimes, when they sang together at the evening table, I believed they cared for each other in their way.

She was to take me to buy milk from the farm. I was afraid of the farmers; Mister Vine with his hollow face, Abel who watched me in the dark, and his mother Mildred Vine who was as tall as a door and white in the face, with fierce red spots on her cheeks when it snowed. At dawn she drove the cows along the bridle way by the sheer force of her gaze.

Mother had covered her head and wrapped her old shawl over her dress. She took pains to hide her bosom and her auburn hair, for she was wary of Abel Vine.

I trotted to keep apace with her. The mist rose from the pasture as the early sky paled. The scarecrow dozed at his post; a raven tilted low to fix us with a flinty eye.

The geese in the farmyard swarmed at me and sent me running. It made my mother laugh. The cows were lowing in the barn. Mister Vine was tramping through the dirty yard with two dead rabbits on a string. In the cart shed, plucking a chicken in a cloud of feathers, was Mildred Vine, with her meltwater eyes and cheeks ablaze.

The barn was warm with the rich stench of cow pats and milk. Abel was pulling at a brown cow's teats with his cheek pressed into her belly; the squirts hissed into the bottom of the pail. Another cow stood tethered to the wall, chewing and switching her tail. A rat slipped along the skirting into a mound of straw.

Abel kicked his stool away and stood. I retreated to the door and found the grain cart against the wall, laden with summer-coloured barley. Abel was talking to my mother, but I forgot to be wary. I wanted to feel the grain on my skin. The kernels rained through my fingers and slid over each other with a crunching sound. I drove my arms deep and pushed a drift to the end of the cart, then another drift, until I had made a small mountain there.

Suddenly the cart tilted with the weight and its nose crashed to the floor, spraying barley and tipping an urn on its side. A lake of milk pooled around my mother's feet.

Abel caught up the cart by the handle and righted the urn. I gaped at him, the shame creeping up my cheeks. He was taller even than Mrs Vine and his eyes were black as pebbles. He smiled a sneering smile. His fingers dug into my shoulders.

'You made a mess,' he said.

My knees trembled. He turned me to face my mother, holding my arms so I could not go to her.

‘You want to go home, don’t you,’ he said. ‘But I don’t think you deserve to go home. I should keep you here to make amends for all the milk you have lost me.’

I stared at my mother, my mouth opening and closing. Ta, ta, ba, ba, ba.

‘Your father might prefer it if you didn’t go home.’

‘Please, Mister Abel,’ mother begged.

‘Shall I keep you, or shall I let your mother take you?’ he asked. Mother stared at him. His words were for her, not me, and he meant something by them that I couldn’t understand.

‘Mother take you,’ I repeated, hopefully. I couldn’t take my eyes from my mother, for fear she would leave me.

‘*Mother take you,*’ he mocked. ‘Go then, Magpie. But your mother must pay for the milk before she leaves.’ He thrust me away, and gave a little laugh as if it were all a game.

Mother sent me home alone. ‘I will follow,’ she said without looking at me, and she shooed me away.

I was glad to go. I waited for her at the fork in the road, but she did not come. I walked home as slowly as I could, but the sun was high when I arrived there and still she had not come.

Father was gone to the tavern by the time she appeared in the doorway, and it was better that he did not see her. Her dress was torn and her hair had straw in it. She left a pail of milk on the table and looked at me sadly.

‘Drink that milk,’ she said.

In the morning she did not rise at daybreak. When I went to rouse her she was motionless in the bed with a flush on her cheeks. It was not a healthy rosiness. It was not from drink, like my father’s strawberry nose, but an awful, sickly bloom.

When my father saw her staring at the ceiling with eyes like glass, his face went white, even his nose. Then he went straight to the table and poured wine into his cup. I knew she would get no help from him; he was already grieving her as if she were gone.

I brought him a loaf and stood by him as he drank. I filled his cup, never letting it empty, and I asked him to sing me hunting songs.

My father didn't like my face and he often told me so, but I learned from him my quick sly ways, so I needed not be pretty; only helpless girls need husbands. He taught me with his fists until he could no longer knock me down. But I loved my father when he was singing. His words were ill-turned like lumps of wood, but his voice was tender; when he sang I could believe he loved me, no matter what Mr Abel said.

He sang until he fell face forward in his food. When his snores were good and loud, I ran in my pied coat between the fields. A raven followed me, and the boy was on the bridle way, bent and lonely as a black bird. I could not tell where he came from. His eyes were sunken. He grasped at me. His hands were so cold. He followed me, but I had no time to linger. The fox was in the field, red as a fever.

The inn was dark and the innkeeper scowled at me. I repeated the last words my father had mumbled.

The lord of the land ranged left and right

In pursuit of the pig -

I mimicked my father's stupor for the innkeeper. He boomed with laughter and paid me a penny. Then I went to the apothecary and gave him one of my wicked pennies, miming my mother's distress. I will come when I can, he said.

My father was still snoring. I sat by my mother's bed, watchful, for when he woke he would be as mad as a bull. Behind the cottage, the innkeeper's sons crept into the weald to hunt the boar, for my father was not there to stop them.

The apothecary came and pronounced that my mother had a sickness of the mind. It is her grief, he said, and gave her a powder. I could not ask him if she would get well. Ta, ba, I said, hopelessly.

When my father woke, he wanted more beer, but I would not move from Mother's bed.

'The tinkers take you,' my father said, as he often did. He stormed from the house, for he was too afraid to see Mother so ill.

I always hid when the tinkers came by, so my father wouldn't sell me to them for a set of spoons.

She was no better in the morning. When I walked to the weaving house, the first bog cotton blooms were waving in the marsh. I picked them in snowy armfuls to take to Mary, my feet sinking in the mud. All the while the boy followed me, reaching for me with his cold grey arms, following me back to the weavers' house.

The poet rode by me with poems falling from his tongue. What do women want? He lamented. I held tight to my cloud of bog down and listened to the words and the chiming of hooves.

In the night, Mary woke me, and took me out to the marshy ground where the bog cotton was flowering. I gathered the down in my skirt, and she showed me how to spin it. She set it to the loom and in the cold early shadows, she showed me how to weave. She taught me to make a soft snowy cloth with all my hope for my mother in it. I repeated the names Mary

gave to each part and motion. Weft and warp; pick and shed; reed and fell. An incantation to fix the weave and fasten my prayers.

I embroidered on it a bird. Mary touched it, and looked on me with pride.

Mother's bad turn was the talk of the market. Winifred sniffed and said she suffered for her sins. But Mary took pity on me and bade me go home in the evening. I took my white cloth and walked home in my pied coat. Black birds watched me and the boy followed me on the road, but he did not speak. And the poet sang for sick duchesses, but had no kind word for a mother or a lost boy. I sat by Mother's bed and took a needle to my cloth.

*

The Squire's daughter had a shaking sickness. They kept her in a dim room. She trembled and spoke in nonsense. But some folk swore they had seen her in the early mornings, wandering in the marshes in her night dress, the bog down blowing around her. The Squire and the Baron made arrangements for her dowry as she lay in bed, a generous one in respect of her infirmity; a parcel of land would be made over to the groom when she grew well enough to wed, and the Baron would invite the Squire to hunt in his forest as a celebration of the match. But she only grew more ill, and the Baron could not bear to look at her. Winifred said it must be witchcraft. She heard it in the market place. But I wondered if it was despair that sickened the Squire's daughter, too.

*

I skirted the geese before they could bite me. Mrs Vine glared and mopped her brow, her fat fingers full of feathers, and her hand made a bloody smear above her eyes. She swung the chicken by its feet and raised herself to stand. She was a tower, a tree. She went into the

dairy and lifted a pail for me. I gave her the last penny given me by the innkeeper, and carried the milk between the hedgerows home. The ravens watched me, perched on the arms of the scarecrow.

I lifted Mother's head to tip the white foam to her lip. The spring thaw dripped from the trees outside. It grew dark and my father still was not at home. A figure slipped by the window in a white nightgown. I wondered if it was the Squire's sick daughter, wandering.

She did not get well. I combed the marsh for bog down and caught the song of a black-feathered bird to sing on the way. I met the boy with cold hands. I heard the chant of the poet and the beat of hooves. Canter, canto, incanta, incantata. I was ruined in the head but I collected words like thistle silk and I strung them on the loom. Somewhere in my early life I had caught a black bird in my head. It was an ill-wish, an incantation, the ruin of my head. Incanta incanta, the poet's words thrummed like the tripping of hooves, the canto cantering the bridle way and the black bird caught in the mouth.

They said a witch poisoned the well and that is why the plague came, and with it Mister Hopkins with his pillywinks and the deaths of my brothers, all seven. Perhaps it was a witch who made me talk in circles, haunted by the black birds in my ruined head. They said my mother was a sinner. It was ruining talk that cast her so. And so was I born with my tongue in a bow. Repeating, returning, like the shuttle's to and fro, like the click-clack of the heddle on the linen-maker's loom.

*

Cecily wanders into the weald at dawn. She wanders to escape the clamp-jawed silence of her father, the Baron's assessing eyes and her white-faced mother wringing her hands. She steps into the forest on the soft sinking ground. Rotten leaves gather at her heels;

bluebells nod their dewy loads onto her toes. A flock of black birds huddle like a circle of priests over something on the ground. As she nears, they rise in one movement and flap away. It is a rabbit, she sees, lacking its guts and eyes. She sits on a fallen tree and marvels at it.

When she turns her head someone is there at the edge of the marsh; a small pied creature with a crooked face, holding a bundle of white fluff. The gamekeeper's daughter. She stares at Cecily as if she is a ghost.

*

The boy followed me from the bridle way into the marsh. He made me cold with dread, with nothing on his bones and the black starting at his fingertips, hunched and crabbed as if death were a carrion bird, devouring him slowly. People can die of mere imagination, the poet said. I did believe him.

The Squire's daughter was standing in the trees by the marsh. Her hair was black like mine, but I could not believe her my sister. She was so beautiful I could only be her ugly shadow. She stared at me with my arms full of bog down. I saw a fugitive unease in her eyes, like those of a bloodhound escaped from the kennel. Then she ran away up onto the road. She's not sick at all, I knew then. She's trying to escape.

Mary wove and sewed, wove and sewed. My hands echoed hers, carrying the shuttle across the warp. Joining my cloth with tiny pearls of thread. My brothers died of the black-handed pestilence before I was born. Black hands, cold hands and swellings like cankers. I went at night to comb the marsh for bog down. The road jostled with echoes. Repetitions and returning, as a shuttle crosses to and fro in the making of a cloth. I made a shirt of bog down for the boy, so he would not be cold, though my father had wished him away. The shuttle journeyed away and home again. I wove for my brothers. I wove for the squire's daughter.

When I visited my mother again, she lay unspeaking all day while my father was gone with his hounds. She would not eat and her cheeks were hollow. I took the milk pail and showed it to her so she would know where I meant to go, but her eyes flew wide.

‘Don’t go there alone.’ She struggled to rise. ‘Don’t go to the farm alone.’

She would not say why, but clung to my hand as if to keep me by her. And so I stayed with her, and she grew weaker. When I went back to the weavers’ house in the evening, I passed the farmyard cautiously, for her frightened words were in my head, and I saw Abel leaning on the wall. His pebble-black eyes fixed on me under his heavy brows, his fleshy mouth drawn in a frown. His face disturbed me, and suddenly I knew why. I had seen the same black eyes, the same frown, in mother’s looking glass.

He smiled at me over the wall, taking in my shock.

‘Did she tell you then?’ he said. ‘Did she tell you who fathered you? She’ll tell you I forced her, but she loved it as much this time as the last. And she’ll keep coming back, or else I’ll tell the town she’s a whore and you’re the bastard that proves it.’

I ran, barely hearing him calling after me, hardly noticing the grasping hands of the boy who followed me to the edge of the village.

I wove in the night, making shirts as Mary taught me from bog cotton and broken words. Ta ta, ta ta, ta ta. The incantata, incantata, the cantering canto. I threw my shuttle and beat my cloth. Canto, canter, cantatata. Repeating, returning, like the shuttle’s to and fro, like the click-clack of the heddle on the linen-maker’s loom. The crisscross hedgerows mapped the bogs and fields, and the scarecrow watched them all, uncanny as a soft-foot fox. Ta ta ta, ta ta, I said with my bowed and borrowing tongue, ruined in the head.

On Sunday the snowy cloth, all stitched with birds, was finished. I carried seven shirts along the bridle way and set them on my mother’s bed. I had made one more, and I took it to the weald, laying it on the fallen tree among the bluebells.

My mother knelt beside the row of crooked crosses, wracked with sobs for all her years without her sons, and as she wept she laid to each grave a bog down shirt.

Winifred later said that on that day – for the candle-maker's wife told her - seven birds flew from my mouth at the graveside. That same afternoon, she said, a flock of ravens flew into the parlour and attacked the Squire and the Baron as they argued the terms of the dowry, and in the uproar the Squire's daughter slipped away. She vanished along with a horse from the gamekeeper's stable, and was said to have joined a band of pilgrims, or perhaps it was the tinkers, said Winifred. Such an outrage, she said, but her face was flushed with the joy of telling it. Strangely, too, Winifred said (as she heard it from the fishmonger) that on the Vines' farm that day, a magpie dived on Mister Abel and plucked out his eyes. Mary says it's idle talk, but Abel has not been seen since to give the lie to it.

I cannot say if the birds flew from my mouth, for all I knew was a choking roar in my throat and a feeling of falling. My mother only said I fell in a fit and shook. Perhaps it was the birds that tugged loose the thread that bound my tongue, for when I woke I cried out for my mother. And when she came to work in the weaver's house with me – for my drunken father lost his place as gamekeeper - I taught her with my own mouth the names of the to-and-fro chant of the shuttle's journey, the incantation of the loom.

Winifred says the witches are gone, for the plague has disappeared. Mary tells her there were never witches here. But she looks at me and her mouth twitches.

I did not see the boy on the road again. He has gone to his rest now, and the crocuses are flowering on my brothers' graves. The poet still visits me, riding out of the tales of another time. But I know he is only a rhyme, an echo in the canto, a memory, an imaginary friend. People can die from mere imagination, he said. I do believe him.

Skin

Out by the sandbar the cockles are thick under the feet, crowding out of the mud at low tide. Toe them up, rinse them off and into the bucket, keeping an eye on the boy. He sits in the mud, squeezing it through his fingers. His too-small tee shirt slides up his belly.

Home past the river mouth. Boy runs ahead and back, ahead and back, brown feet slapping the sand. Something flicks a tail on the river surface.

Seals come this way at the end of winter. Sometimes they drown in the trawler nets.

A crumpled thing on the tideline: cloth, half-buried. Boy tugs at it, falls over as it comes free. Sailcloth. Torn and dirty. Good enough for the sewing basket

Brush off the sand, fold it for carrying.

Past the old beach house, start up the cliff track. Watch for wild pigs down in the scrub. Boy stops, points. Not a pig; a bittern on the edge of the swamp. Half animal, half bird, frozen still as a tree, it vanishes slowly as the light fades.

Leave bucket on the steps, scrape sand off feet. The old man looks up, nods, goes back to the tv. He looks pale, chest heaving.

Boil the kettle, make the tea strong. He takes the cup in both hands. It shakes in his grip. His big chest strains for breath. Not as strong as he used to be.

Open two tins, put the toast on. Stir spaghetti as it heats. Scrub the sailcloth in the sink, hang it by the fire. Boy standing in the doorway, watching something. A cat, moving between the trees.

Close the door against the chill.

- Stay still.

Boy jerks away from the rag. Hold his head under one arm, wipe the spaghetti from

his face.

- Bedtime now.

Clothes off. Pyjama pants on. Tuck blanket around him.

- Book. Book.

The book is in pieces, left in last week's rain.

- Sh. Sleep time.

- Sh, says the boy. Sh, sh, sh.

Sea sound, wind sound, blood-in-the-ears sound. Sh, sh, sh.

Listen to the visitors in the lounge, come to play cards. Voices rise and fall. Bottles clinking. It's quiet in the bedroom. Safe. Stay quiet, stroking boy's head. Sh.

Pull the sewing from under the bed. Tug thread between pressed fingers in the half-dark. The seams are lumpy. But it will keep him warm.

After a while the people are gone. The old man comes in.

Stay quiet. The boy doesn't wake.

The morning's pink and cold. Old man still sleeping. Sh. Boy runs outside for cockle bucket. Quietly, quietly. Boy pulls the bucket up one step, clunk. Too heavy. Take it off him, tip sea water out on the dirt, carry bucket to the sink, pour the cockles in. Tap on, rinse cockles. Cook them in the pan, shells popping open like mouths. Boy stands on chair to watch. Too hot, slap small hands away. Sweet steam, plate clatter, bread for mopping. Smiling boy. Licking fingers boy.

Scrub the clothes with soap, foam and raw hands. The mangle still works on the machine. Lean down on clothes to bring them through, heave basket to the line. Boy plays on the patchy grass. Makes car noises, builds a tower with driftwood sticks, knocks it down, builds it again.

Heading down the track with the firewood sack, knife in pocket, boy running ahead.
Clouds moving over the sea. Brown birds hopping in the dust. Boy points, asking for the name.

- Thrushes.

Along the edge of the swamp. Past the old beach house. Busted windows, flowering thistles, high kikuyu grass, pohutukawa ringing with tui song. Boy jumps in the cushiony grass.

- Kuyu, he says, remembering the syllables.

Ku yu, goggog, warbles the tui in reply.

Warble. Some words sound like they mean.

A cluster of oysters low on the rock, still wet where the water's been. Crouch, slip knife under pearly lids and lift out the prize. Boy's greedy mouth like a baby bird's.

Beach pebbles, big and smooth and cold, shift and chatter underfoot. Pohutukawa leaning over the water. Maisie's dinghy's there, tied to its low branch. Boy splashes into the water in his clothes.

- Mum, Mum.

Lie in boat with boy, looking at sky, rocking. Wriggling, giggling boy. Water slaps on the hull, a lullaby.

- Where will we sail today, boy?
- Ah, says the boy, hands up to the sky.

Footsteps on the stones. Heart thumping scramble upright. Old Maisie staring down into the boat, hard face, narrow eyes, blood on her shirt.

- Sorry Maisie. Just playing.

She shakes her head sourly. Picks up her knife and bucket, walks on down the beach.

- Goodbye, says the boy, wagging his hand in a wave. No reply.

Remember being a kid on the bus, laughing at Maisie walking on the road. Miles and miles she walked. The skin stretched over her bones, whites showing all round her eyes. Mad Maisie. Bushpig Maisie, kids called her. Laughing even though her boy died and made her strange.

Those other kids, laughing kids on the bus, they left home, got jobs. Gone now.

Back across the stones. Lift boy on shoulders. Dried mounds of trodden seaweed, crunching. Over rocks, sharp under feet, to the next bay.

- I the biggest, he says. A full sentence now.

Driftwood pushed up in piles, white and dry. Let boy down to play. He drops some twigs in the sack. Runs off to whack the thistles with a stick. Shick. Shick. Shick. The white fluff floats around him like clouds.

Fill the sack till it's too heavy to lift. Drag and stop, drag and stop back to the track, boy running ahead and darting back. The tui follows; ku, ku, goggoggog. Boy mimics the sound.

- Goggog. Goggoggog.

Stack the wood in the shed, saving an armful for the fire. Boy on his belly, wriggling, reaching. Dust in his hair from the old couch. Pulls out a greybrown bundle. Dirt and fur and animal smell. Sealskin, rolling out on the floor.

Remember the fur seal that died on the point, cut by propeller blades. All matted with blood on the tideline, staining the sand red. Flapping her flipper hopelessly, still trying to swim away. Old man must have flayed her, taken her skin.

Can't swim without a skin.

Lay fireplace with sticks and spinifex, put a match to the pile. Fill the kettle for tea, go out to take the washing down as the wind picks up. Roaring in the trees.

Scrawny grey cat crossing the grass with something in its mouth. Boy running toward it, pointing in alarm. Cat lets the bird fall, flees into the manuka. Feathered heap on the ground. Boy puts out a hand, afraid to touch.

- Goggog. Goggog, he frets, pointing.

Gather the tui in both hands, look for wounds. Lost feathers; beads of blood on the breast. Small, fearful bird heart, thrumming, thrumming.

Boy jumps off the laundry basket, flaps his arms, tui feathers in each hand.

- I a bird Mum. Goggog.

Sky growing pink over the trees.

- Come inside now.
- I a bird.

He lines up feathers on the table. One, two, three. Yawns over his food.

Pull pyjamas up sleepy boy's legs. Voices in the lounge. More visitors. Bottles clink.

Tuck boy into the blanket. Close the door till there's only a ribbon of light.

- Book, says the boy.

Book's in the other room, where the visitors are.

- Book, he says again.

Try to remember stories in the book. Some about sisters growing feathers. Birds becoming boys. Seals turned into wives by the theft of their skins.

- Goggog, says the boy.
- It's okay now. It flew away.
- Goodbye goggog. His hand lifts as if to wave.

Repeat the sounds of the day for him; a story in patches of memory.

Kikuyu. Tui. Thrushes, thistles. Lay the sounds on each other like blankets. *Goggoggog. Sh.*

Sh. Sh. The sound of a stick on a thistle. *Ah*, the sound of the sky.

Watch the awareness leaving him like a slow breath.

Finish the hems in the half-dark. Time to pin the front. But the sailcloth is out by the fire. Stand in the gloom, deciding. Ease open the door, step into the light of the TV. Deal bags on the table, low murmuring.

- Baby, says the old man from his armchair.

Some words are like collars.

Two men on the couch. Staring, pretending not to. They've heard the talk. Don't meet her eyes, they're thinking. Don't ask her any questions.

- Baby, he says again. Get us another one while you're up.

Open a longneck from the fridge with the edge of a knife. Hiss, pale foam running down on the table. Grab sailcloth off the stool, not looking at him.

- That's the apple of my eye there, boys. He picks up the beer. Sit down with us, angel.
- Got room over here, says the skinny one. He smiles.
- Sit down and be sociable, says the old man, still smiling. His breathing coming hard.

The visitors wait, uncertain.

- My girl's hot, eh? he says. You'd do her, wouldn't you boys?

Silence. Some words trap you.

- Cheers to that, says the skinny one. He thinks he's being nice.
- You talk like that about my daughter again, I cut your balls off, says the old man.

Laughing nastily. Skinny man looks scared.

- Have a beer, girl. Don't be rude to our guests.

He's not smiling now. Look him in the eye. Say nothing. Blood-in-the-ears sound,

pounding. Take cloth into the dark bedroom, close the door. Pull all the seams apart. Undo all the stitches. It's all wrong. Don't want to see people any more.

Remember the last time at the shop. The chatter and the stares. Talking to people. Trying to talk like one of them. Making hopeless shapes in the air. Like trying to swim on land. Seeing the lips curl and knowing what they said behind their hands. Running back home, away from them. Back to being nobody. Back to the sound of the heart and the shushing of blood in the ears. Back to no talk.

Listen to boy breathing, sea thundering.

When the visitors are gone, old man watches the video. Comes in after.

- They were looking at you. I didn't like the way they were looking at you, he says.

Unzipping jeans. Weight on the bed. Scrabbling hands.

- They don't understand us, he whispers.

Some words choke.

- Seal. I a seal.

Boy, wrapped in the seal pelt, running. Turning circles.

- I a seal Mum.

He stops, stares at Maisie walking on the tree line with her rifle. Grey cat dangling from her fist. Boy points.

- Cat, he says.

She turns. Looks at him in the seal fur, her eyes like stones.

- You got a new skin, she says.

Possum furs on branches round the clearing, tails hanging like bottle brushes.

Maisie's hut rusting under the puriri. Traps on the walls, oars leaning. Tarp slung between trees and Maisie squatting with the knife. Grey cat limp on the ground. Knife slides in, clean and easy.

- Feral cats kill the birds, she says.

She digs fingers into the slit skin. Peels the cat carcass like a wet, pink fruit. Boy stares, big eyes spilling tears.

- Put it back, he says. Put it back.
- The cat doesn't need its skin any more, she tells him. Wipes the knife. Dumps carcass in bucket, drapes skin on tree.

- Goodbye cat, says boy.

Maisie lifts the oars from the hut wall, holds them out, one in each hand.

- You'll be wanting these.

Old man still sleeping. Sh. Pack bag with clothes, money from table. Tiptoe to door. Light coming into the sky. Down the cliff track with the oars, keeping the boy close. He clings, knowing something is happening. His body vibrates in the cold.

Mist in the gully. A faint sobbing in the raupō. Goodbye, bittern.

Crunch across the bay, stand under pohutukawa where the *Selkie* drifts on its tether. Goodbye tree. Dawn on the river. Birds hover and dive. Above, the tui. The soft jostle of leaves, the voice slipping, shifting, gog gog gog, ku, ku, ku, ai ai.

Loosen the rope of the dinghy. Lift boy into the stern, wrapped in his seal fur. Gasping cold water knee-deep, push off and step in, steady, steady. Glide into the current. Oars dip and creak and pull, dip and creak and pull. Boy looks up at the cliff house, the sunrise flashing off the windows.

- Goodbye Dad, he says, and his small hand rises in a wave.

Pupa

Mad Nanny gives us a whole packet of biscuits before breakfast, so we run through the sprinklers to hide in the bushes before anyone sees. Nessie gets a brown sticky beard from the chocolate and I keep eating even though I feel sick and the sprinklers are turning and the water's dripping through the leaves.

When I hear Fat Nanny coming I crawl back through the fence in my wet clothes. I go into the bathroom because Dad's shouting and Mum's crying in the bedroom.

I can't get dry and I don't want Dad to see. So I sneak out to the gate and run to the corner; then I don't know what to do so I run to the next corner past the empty buildings by the river and the tyre tracks in the mud. I stop by the power station to look at the towers and wires. The shed by the fence has a hole in the window and I tiptoe to see inside, but I can only see a crooked patch of dark and my face looking back out of the dirty glass. The electric noise buzzes in the air and the ground and in my insides like a thousand terrible flies. I run away from it to the next corner and I can see my house again down past the hedge.

The hedge is a wall of oily-green leaves and I can't see behind it and I nearly run into a hairy old man with cutters in his hands. His eyes are angry and a caterpillar is crawling out of his sleeve. He's cutting the hedge with jabs, *snick snick, snick snick*, the leaves falling around him in piles.

When I get home my clothes are nearly dry. Mad Nanny's still there over the fence, peeping at the underneath of leaves and talking to nobody. Dad calls her Mad Nanny because she does that but I wish she was my nanny because I'd get chocolate biscuits all the time.

Nessie's grandpop Mr Hudson is on the back verandah with the paper. Her brother Alex comes down the steps. He's already seven and he walks slowly because he has one skinny leg that doesn't work properly. I'm not allowed to ask him about it.

'Do you know about black holes?' Alex says through the fence, pushing his hair off his face. It flops back into his eyes.

I tell him about the hole in the window by the power station.

'Not that kind,' he says. 'The kind in space. A black hole makes everything disappear. Even suns. Swallows them up.'

'Don't lie.'

Maybe a black hole is as big as the sky, swallowing suns. I wonder what would happen if the whole sky disappeared.

Once I asked mum what was behind the sky. I couldn't sleep because I was worried about it. But she didn't say anything. She just looked at me and squeezed my hand tight, tight, like she wanted to say something but the words weren't big enough.

'You don't even know,' I tell Alex.

'Do too.'

Mad Nanny picks a red flower and holds it out to me over the fence. It has a caterpillar on it, poking its head out of a brown cocoon.

I show it to my dad in his studio, but he makes me take it away. 'Mad bint should be in a home,' he says, punching down the clay.

Maybe I asked mum too many questions and she ran out of words.

My dad's studio is a garage and the roof's going rotten under the honeysuckle. He puts poison on the honeysuckle but it keeps growing back. His bowls get sold in a gallery and a man visits him sometimes to take boxes away.

‘Don’t go near the kiln,’ Dad says. He’s leaning his whole body on a lump of clay on the wheel, round and round. His arms are muddy up to his elbows. ‘It’s a thousand degrees in there.’

I can hear the kiln roaring.

‘Will it burn me?’

‘Yes.’

I think of the bowls inside. ‘Are the bowls on fire?’

‘The glaze melts into the clay and turns into glass.’

‘Will we get swallowed up by a black hole?’

At school we do papier-mâché. Bits of paper ripped up, words and colours and pictures of eyes and shoes and trees all glued on top of each other on a blown-up balloon, and when it’s dry the balloon pops but that’s supposed to happen. Now it’s a little round house with a hole for a window. I paint it green and wait for it to dry in the sun and I try and see inside the hole but it’s too dark.

Under the trees on the way home the tall boy starts following us, the one with the pinched-up face from Alex’s class, and he starts kicking Alex’s legs. So I swing my papier-mâché house at him and it smacks him on the chin.

He stops kicking and stares at me. Nessie laughs, but Alex walks away with his head down and I feel like crying because now my house is the wrong shape and Alex has a stupid skinny leg for no reason.

When I get home I see Mad Nanny out the back and I give her the house even though it’s squashed on one side. Some of the paint isn’t dry and it comes off on her dress. She turns it around in her long, freckly hands, and when she smiles her eyelids are like scrunched-up tissues.

*

At sunset, Fat Nanny is holding Mad Nanny by the elbow and walking her into her shed, talking into her ear. We watch them from my room. 'They've put her on a waiting list,' whispers Ness. She's come to help me babysit Charlie. She's brought cream buns and wants to talk about Gary Veigh since he's the cutest boy in year nine. I don't get to ask her what waiting list because she's making a plan for me to find out if Gary's got a girlfriend. I give the rest of my bun to Charlie, but he's staring at the fly smacking against the window and most of the cream falls in his lap.

After Dad comes home I run along the river in the last of the light. I have to run off the pounds after the cream buns. Ness says I'm vain, but she's skinny without even trying. She's going to be a model which is pretty vain of her anyway. I'm never going to be a model but I at least I can run. I run past the shed with the hole in its window pane that no one has fixed for years. My reflection slips over the glass and the wires in the power station drone through me like the sound is in my body, in my head, a buzzing in my head. I run past the high hedge and see a car disappearing in between the gateposts.

Afterward Dad calls me to unload the bowls from the kiln. I pull them out one by one, listening to the slapping and kneading as he wedges clay on the bench, the clockwise push and fold so all the fibres will turn with the wheel.

At the back of the kiln is a shining red bowl. I reach for it with both hands. It has cracked in the firing, or maybe I gripped it too hard, and it falls open in my grasp. I don't know if it's my fault. The edge slices my thumb: more red, dripping on the floor.

Dad stares at the pieces. The perfect reduction-fired red, his rare prize. He says nothing; he doesn't even swear. I go to bed with a throb in my thumb and he stays awake to stack the kiln again and make more bowls. He's working all night on the wheel with the bare

light bulb burning. The kiln is a low roar and the wheel makes the voom, voom, voom sound, round and round.

At eight am the Hudsons' newspaper lands on their driveway. I'm waiting by the gate with Charlie when Mrs Veigh stops her car.

'Hello, Charlie!' she exclaims. 'Are you ready for kindy today?' She shakes her curls at him. He smiles and stares at her. She asks if I want a ride to school and I say yes. Charlie sits in the back and looks out the window.

She drives in a nervous way. Her mouth keeps moving as if she's about to speak. She looks at Charlie in the mirror. 'Your brother's a quiet boy, isn't he?' she says to me. She doesn't like silence. 'We try to encourage his vocabulary,' she adds. I feel as if she's trying to tell me something.

'He's not dumb,' I say.

She looks horrified. 'Oh no. Oh no. We don't think that at all!'

'Dumb,' says Charlie.

'Does your son have a girlfriend?' I ask her.

After lunch Mr Bole writes words on the board. *Lepidoptera. Psychidae. Liothula omnivera. Common bagmoth.*

'Gather round, please.' Mr Bole is holding up a cocoon thing. 'This is the pupal case,' he announces sternly. 'And pay attention, because you will be tested on this.' He raises his scalpel. 'I am now dissecting the pupal case.'

Ness stands behind him and bugs her eyes out like Mr Bole's. She chews up bits of paper and flicks them at his hair. One lands on top of his head.

Lepidoptera. Psychidae. I mouth the words to remember.

Inside the case is a dead caterpillar and a mass of maggots.

‘These are the larvae of the Tachinid fly *Pales feredayi*,’ says Mr Bole. *Pales feredayi*, I pronounce under my breath. *Tachinid*. ‘The bagmoth larva eats the eggs on the leaves and then they hatch and the fly larvae eat the moth from the inside.’

Ness pretends to vomit. Mr Bole smiles at the maggots like he loves them.

All the way home from school the wind shivers in the trees. I can’t stop seeing them in my head, the maggots wriggling over each other and Mr Bole’s popping-out eyes and the caterpillar getting eaten inside its bag.

I think a voice is coming from Mum’s bedroom. I go out and sit in the shade where Mad Nanny’s dahlia bushes crowd the fence, and there it is: a brown caterpillar, rippling along the edge of a leaf with its case bumping behind it, a long crusty bag patched from the materials in its path. *Liothula omnivera*. The syllables roll in my mouth.

The bag seems to be growing. Round and round go the threads from the scissoring mouth parts, stitching leaf and bark and petals. How does the larva know how to make it? Mad Nanny’s pacing, muttering her words, wearing a circular path in the grass, humming like the wires in my head. I think they’re in my head. Alex thinks she has to do the same things over and over because she’s trying to order the chaos in her mind. I wonder if she feels her memories collapsing like seams, I wonder if she is trying to pull them back together over the holes, retracing her path, repeating the words again and again so she doesn’t forget.

Lepidoptera psychidae liothula omnivera.

At seven o’clock the shadows are growing in the back yard. Mr Hudson pours a rum and turns on the news. Mad Nanny hums and inspects the flowers. Alex’s slow feet come to a halt behind me in the grass.

One of the bagmoths has retreated into its case, shrugging the fibres around its head like a sleeping bag hung from a stem. The pattern must be born into them. They just know how to do it. It's like a magician's cabinet where the change only happens because you can't see it. Maybe it won't open. Sometimes they never open, they just hang there forever until they turn rotten. Maybe those are the ones the maggots get. Even when they don't open, Mad Nanny still walks her circles and checks them every day.

She's tilting the watering can over the roots and the sun is going down. Two black moths flutter in the light from her window: male moths, because Mr Bole says the females never grow wings or come out of the bag, they just lay eggs and die in there.

Alex sits down, eyes gleaming with new things to tell me. He has new books from Physics Club. 'Check out this book Bole gave me. It's about this idea that we live in a Block Universe and time is happening all at once,' he says, pushing a hardback into my hands. He pulls a hip flask, sneaked from the kitchen, out of his jumper. 'And Einstein's idea that spacetime changes with gravity. So that's why a black hole can change time, because of its gravitational force.' He puts up a finger and draws circles in the air. 'It draws stars and planets into itself at this massive speed and makes a roaring sound so deep that a human wouldn't be able to hear it.'

What if everything I'm afraid of is already happening. I lie in the grass and stare up at the vast sky, waiting for Alex to pass the rum, waiting for the moth sleeping in its bag. Pupa, pupate, pupation. I think I can hear the little worm dissolving itself, breaking down, an immaculate self-annihilation inside the leafy shroud. I think about the fire hot enough to turn things into glass.

At dawn the Hudsons' sprinklers start up on their back lawn and I wake up to the hiss and patter of water. I put on my shoes at the back door and run down along the stopbank

above the river as I always do, the same way always, speed blurring the lines between me and the world. Back up the Ford Road toward home, past the power station humming and the shed with a hole in its window. I slow down and walk along the tall hedge spotted with camellias, the petals starting to wilt and soften like old skin. In the Hudsons' yard Mad Nanny is standing under the sprinkler with a big grin on her face. The dahlias are blossoming, pulpy-dark as the blood throbbing in my legs and my cut thumb.

Dad's eggs have started to burn so I turn off the stove. Shouts coming from the studio. I think he must have found a moth stuck to one of his bowls. Sometimes they get stuck in the wet clay. His face is red when he comes in, the colour of the ox-blood glaze he can never get right.

Charlie comes in from the backyard with chocolate all down his chin and a blob on his forehead. Mad Nanny's been feeding him biscuits through the fence again.

'That barmy bitch,' Dad explodes when Charlie sits at the table.

'Barmy bitch,' smiles Charlie.

Dad says at his toast, muttering about the moths in his workshop and putting Mad Nanny in a home. 'Bill's such a soft bastard.'

'Bastard,' repeats Charlie.

'Stop copying everything I say and eat your breakfast.'

Charlie smiles through the chocolate smears and swings his legs under the table. I pour milk into his ricies. There's a noise through the wall and I look at Dad, but he coughs and clanks his plate.

'And you.' He points his knife at me. 'Why aren't you eating? Are you on a diet?'

It's best to stay quiet when he's in this mood.

'I live in a madhouse,' he says through a mouthful of yolk.

'Mum,' says Charlie.

*

It's the last day of year twelve. Dad and Mr Hudson are already half a bottle gone on the Hudson's back porch. They're talking about Mad Nanny going into Camellia House and they don't even care about Ness and me and Alex on the couch and Mad Nanny going in and out of her shed. Charlie's watching her with his finger up his nose, just in case she comes out with biscuits.

‘You're too soft, Bill,’ Dad's saying. ‘Shoulda done it years ago.’

‘This is her place,’ Mr Hudson says. ‘It's not right.’

‘What's not right is your new missus looking after your old missus, Bill,’ Dad laughs, as Fat Nanny comes out the door and goes down the steps.

Alex looks at me, sunk into the couch. I know he wants to talk about next year. Dad's words are starting to run together and I'm sure he's looking at Ness's boobs, so I go down into the garden and stare up at the fuzzy whirl of stars.

‘There we go, Moira.’ The nannies are walking to the shed. ‘We got a big day tomorrow. We have to clean out your room.’ Muffled talking inside. Fat Nanny comes out and shuts the door behind her.

Goodbye, Mad Nanny, I mouth at the door.

Under the dahlia leaves a black-winged moth oozes from its split case, furred abdomen trembling. Alex takes my hand. We are very quiet, lying on the grass.

‘I reckon time goes faster as you get older.’ he whispers after a while.

‘It's not time, it's the way your brain comprehends the passage of time,’ I reply.

If you were to watch someone from far away as they got close to a black hole, they would look as if they weren't moving at all.

‘How’s your mum?’ he says, looking through the fence toward Mum’s window.

The shed door swings open again. Mad Nanny’s hair is a cloud against the light in the doorway. Things come flying out: a book, a plastic cup, the dented papier-mâché thing I once gave her.

Through the fence, behind the window, mum’s room is dark and quiet. I hold onto Alex’s hand as tightly as I can.