

Writing-As-Shadow-Work: An Aesthetics of Jungian Psychoanalysis

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Abstract

Taking a personal experience of Jungian psychoanalysis as a starting point, *Writing-As-Shadow-Work: An Aesthetics of Jungian Psychoanalysis* shows how I integrated the concepts and practice of Jungian psychoanalysis with creative life writing to develop fresh possibilities for writing on difficult mother-daughter relationships and related trauma. An inter-disciplinary practice-based body of creative and critical research that draws on the diverse fields of creative writing, Jungian studies and related depth psychology, trauma theory, mother-daughter relationships in feminist thought and the literary studies of autobiographical and short fiction, this thesis stages an intervention into the under-explored territories at the intersection between Jung and literary studies, and between short fiction and writing on trauma, alongside the adjacent culturally taboo subject of cruel mothers, to demonstrate how I developed the distinctive mode of writing-as-shadow-work via an inter-textual cycle of surrealist autobiographical short stories.

While the challenges of representing the traumatic experience remain a dominant concern in the field of writing on trauma, *Writing-As-Shadow-Work* offers a literary aesthetics of Jungian psychoanalysis that views trauma as both a source of suffering and an opportunity for growth in order to expand on existing modes that explore how writing can be a container for working through. Just as physical shadows and their metaphorical counterparts are porous, permeable and shapeshifting, this thesis examples how writing-as-shadow-work is a porous, permeable and shapeshifting approach to enacting Jungian psychoanalysis on the page. It explains how, through the extensive journey entailed in this process, I synthesised the multiple resonances between the Jungian individuation process and the characteristics of the surrealist autobiographical short story to arrive at an original mode of creative life writing: ‘the shadow memoir’.

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Introduction

i. Context

As a girl I was afraid of the dark but I was even more afraid of my mother. She loomed over my childhood, a furious, screaming figure of whom I lived in perpetual terror. My basic sense of trust in the world was catastrophically blown apart and my sense of self was shattered. I lived in a state of constant terror, never knowing when or why my mother might erupt in a vitriolic outburst of rage. The fear, anger and shame I felt as a consequence were too big and too threatening for the girl I needed to be in order to survive – especially as my mother took any sign of independence on my part to be an unforgivable act of betrayal. It was dangerous for me to feel, dangerous to breathe, dangerous to be. Unable to make sense of my feelings, I shut all these dangerous parts of myself down, burying them in the same way that, as a teenager, I had buried my diary at the bottom of the garden.

A traumatic experience that cast a shadow over everything that came after, my way of dealing with it was by pretending I was fine. Except I was not fine. Instead, the ‘acquired unconscious undertone’ (Jung [1964] 1972: 40) of my fears became a constant white noise of worry and anxiety, fusing the past with the present into a discordant underlying note. Deep in denial about what psychotherapist Miriam Greenspan terms the ‘dark emotions’ (Greenspan 2003) of grief, fear and despair, I had exchanged what she describes as the ‘authentic suffering’ of feeling these emotions for the ‘neurotic suffering’ (Greenspan 2003) of denying them.

Repressing my dark emotions, I developed a ‘fear of fear’ (van der Kolk [2014] 2015). Unable to acknowledge or articulate my anger, guilt and shame, they became ‘exiled’ to my body (Levine 1997), stored in the circuitry of my brain and nervous system and locked in my muscle memory, which is how trauma experts Peter Levine and Bessel van der Kolk describe the somatisation of unprocessed pain. A time-bomb waiting to go off, they exploded in the form of a breakdown and related chronic fatigue that tore through my thirties.

In the meantime, writing about my mother and my experience of childhood abuse was the last thing I was interested in doing. As a journalist in my twenties I wrote about music, subcultures and art. In the midst of the breakdown that lasted most of my thirties I wrote a novel in which the first thing I did was kill off my heroine's mother. Avoiding writing about her, I was also avoiding confronting the dangerous emotions that were tied up with my own mother. Instead, I turned the novel's heroine, an alter ego version of myself called Annie, into a tortured artist with a powerful death wish. A vector for the breakdown I was going through, I unconsciously split myself in two. Exporting the intensity of my feelings into Annie, her character became one-dimensional, lacking in variety and texture, in a way that was described by others as overwhelming and intense. While Annie carried the immense freight of my unconscious pain and dysregulated emotions, my novel overlooked her relationship with her mother. Territory I was simply not ready to explore, I dealt with it as I had dealt with my dark emotions by way of avoidance.

The accidental site of my unconscious rages and fears, my novel demonstrates the pitfall of 'skipping a step in awareness, moving from repressed, shamed emotions to an act that expresses unconscious feeling' (Greenspan 2003: 185). Overwhelmed by a fear that 'cannot be processed or assimilated by usual mental processes, [I had] as it were, nowhere to put it and so it falls out of our conscious memory yet it is still present in the mind like an intruder' (Ganteau & Onega 2014: 10). Despite my best efforts to bury my dark emotions, they did not go away but staged an invasion of my novel by stealth. What I did not want to write about emerged on the page anyway, drowning both the characters and the narrative beneath the immense freight of unprocessed trauma. Learning the hard way that there are 'two kinds of writing: the one you write and the one that writes you' (Winterson 2011: 54), I hit the bottom, creatively, psychologically, physically, arriving in exactly the place I did not want to go.

Caught between what Cathy Caruth calls the 'twin crises' (Caruth 1996) of a psychic death that is a result of silencing the unbearable, on the one hand, and an equally crushing death, that is living with this silencing, on the other, I undertook an extensive period of psychoanalysis with

Mandy, a Jungian-informed therapist. At the time I knew little about Carl Gustav Jung and his ground-breaking work into the unconscious. I stumbled across Mandy by accident because she was the nearest therapist to where I lived who offered a sliding scale payment scheme at a time when I could only afford to pay the minimum amount.

I had buried my dark emotions so effectively, however, that in our early sessions I continued to put a positive spin on my life – telling the same old stories I had unconsciously told myself as a child; that I was okay, that everything was fine. As I struggled to talk about what I was really feeling, it was Mandy who suggested I keep a dream diary as means to access the stories of my unconscious. It was through analysing the dreams I documented as part of this process in the safe container of therapy, that I began to understand how their mythopoetic narratives of crying girls, shouting mothers and collapsing houses told a psychological truth about my traumatic experience through the language of metaphor.

These buried and rejected parts of myself that showed up in my dreams, Jung calls the shadow archetype. A psychological phenomenon he believes is universal to everyone, in Jung's view, avoiding the shadowy parts of ourselves and leaving them unexamined, poses a significant threat to our well-being. Exiled to our unconscious, our dark and difficult emotions do not disappear but become increasingly toxic. What we cannot face in ourselves, we outsource to others, exclusively blaming them for our suffering. According to the Jungian analyst Liliane Frey-Rohn, 'knowledge of one's own personal shadow is the necessary requirement for any responsible action, and consequently for any lessening of moral darkness in the world' (1990: 267). Echoing Frey-Rohn, psychologist Alice Miller argues that is by facing the demons of our own dark emotions that we extend our capacity to acknowledge and empathise with the inner demons of others:

Finally, a person who has consciously worked through the whole tragedy of her fate will recognise another's suffering more clearly... she will not be scornful of others' feelings,

whatever their nature, because she takes her own feelings seriously... she will surely not keep the vicious cycle of contempt turning

Miller 1979: 114.

It was through my encounter in therapy with the ‘symmetrical counterpart of the conscious mind and its contents’ (Jung [1974] 2002: 249), which ‘night after night practice philosophy on their own account’ ([1974] 2002: 261) that I was able to begin the ongoing work of confronting my shadows in order to break this larger cycle. A psychoanalytic process that Jung calls individuation, he describes its purpose as ‘the complete actualisation of the whole human being’, ([1974] 2002: 108), by which psychological growth is achieved not through rejecting the shadowy aspects of the self but integrating them into a larger whole, as in the Taoist symbol of yin and yang.

The Jungian process of individuation is now commonly referred to in contemporary therapeutic settings as shadow work. A term coined by Jungian analysts Connie Zweig and Jeremiah Abrams (Zweig & Abrams 1990), I am using it in the title of this thesis to reflect how Jung’s concept of individuation has evolved in line with current theory and practice, including my own. While the ideas of Jung have influenced the writing of Polish author Olga Tokarczuk (Armitstead, 2018) and contemporary British writers Jeanette Winterson, Kae Tempest and Lily Dunn share in *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* (2011), *On Connection* (2020) and *Sins Of My Father* (2022) respectively how Jung has informed their creative and writerly approaches to working through trauma, the absence of a consideration of Jungian psychoanalysis from the recent *Routledge Companion To Literature And Trauma* (2020) suggests that a discussion of the intersection between Jung and writing on trauma remains underexplored territory. Although the validity of Jung’s work is questioned in some circles as unscientific and responsible for reinforcing gender stereotypes, an in-depth exploration of these criticisms is beyond the scope of my thesis. Having experienced both the devastating cost of avoiding my shadow and the benefits of be-friending it,

I have personally been persuaded of the effectiveness of individuation and its potential as a compelling blueprint for both my own process of recovery and that of others.

ii. Methodology

The profundity of my experience of shadow work in therapy was the catalyst behind undertaking this thesis as a vehicle to research-through-practice how I could translate the narrative approaches of Jungian psychoanalysis that I had found to be so helpful into the medium of creative writing. A hybrid literary mode that uses ‘invention and imagination... to make self-representation possible’ (Gilmore 2001: 24), I instinctively chose autobiographical fiction to accommodate both the external facts and the internal emotional truths of my experience. Having previously struggled to write a novel, I decided that I would conduct my exploration through a series of autobiographical short stories. Firstly, I was keen to know how the brevity of short fiction might offer a literary equivalent to the brief one-hour therapy sessions I had experienced with Mandy. Secondly, I was interested in how short fiction’s characteristics of elision, condensation, compression and brevity and its association with experiment (Lohafer 1989, Cox 2005, Saunders 2021) might open up inventive avenues to test the therapeutic and creative possibilities for applying Jungian psychoanalytic approaches to writing.

Drawing on material from life and the surreal world of my dreams, I have adopted a methodological approach that makes ‘a place for a researcher’s dreams, symptoms, synchronicities, and the function of intuition and feeling, alongside the functions of thinking and sensation’ (Romanyshyn 2010: 275). A mode of what Estelle Barrett terms an emergent, subjective methodology, ‘involving an experiential approach to lived experience and personal reactions’ ([2007] 2010: 5) this thesis integrates creative and critical writing through a synergistic ‘inbuilt reflexivity’ ([2007] 2010: 5) where each informs the other in an ongoing dialogue. As such, the

creative writing is presented here as a work-in-progress series of experiments that can be thought of as case studies to demonstrate my thinking.

iii. Research Questions

- How can I adopt and adapt aspects of Jungian psychoanalysis to writing about my mother and my traumatic experience of emotional abuse in a way that is therapeutic for myself, a useful model for other writers and engaging for my reader?
- What are the ethical considerations in doing so?
- How can the experimental, hybrid qualities of autobiographical short fiction operate as a distinct container for writing about trauma?

iv. Project Summary

Taking my experience of Jungian psychoanalysis as a starting point, this thesis offers a fresh perspective on the complex entanglement of difficult mother-daughter relationships alongside new possibilities for creative life writing on trauma. Showing how ‘trauma invites the crossing not only of generic but also disciplinary boundaries’ (Schönfelder 2013: 257), it is an inter-disciplinary practice-based body of creative and critical research that draws on the diverse fields of creative writing, Jungian studies and related depth psychology, trauma theory, mother-daughter relationships in feminist thought and the literary studies of autobiographical and short fiction. Staging an intervention into the under-explored territories at the intersection between Jung and literary studies, and between short fiction and writing on trauma, alongside the adjacent culturally taboo subject of cruel mothers (Hirsch 1989, Giorgio 2002, Apter 2012), it demonstrates how I developed the distinctive mode of writing-as-shadow-work via a series of surrealist autobiographical short stories.

Occupying a shadowy hybrid space between disciplines and genres, the external and internal, personal and universal, the past, present and deep time, writing-as-shadow-work is a literary aesthetics of Jungian psychoanalysis that views trauma in non-binary terms (Vickroy 2002) as both a source of suffering and an opportunity for growth. Just as physical shadows and their metaphorical counterparts are porous, permeable and shapeshifting, so this thesis examples how writing-as-shadow-work is a porous, permeable and shape-shifting approach to enacting Jungian psychoanalysis on the page.

Finally, it explains how, through the extensive journey entailed in this process, I was able to synthesise multiple resonances between the individuation process and the characteristics of the surrealist autobiographical short story to arrive at an original mode of creative life writing that I am calling ‘the shadow memoir’. The cumulation of my research, the shadow memoir is a hybrid literary work blending memoir and intertextual short stories that tests

the generic limits of life-writing, leading to the creation of new modes and practices of self-representational writing that (contributes) both to the expansion of the generic parameters of life-writing and the perception of the role of life-writing in culture in general

Kurvet-Käosaar 2020: 313.

v. Aims & objectives

- To explore the ways in which I might creatively and therapeutically benefit from applying Jungian psychoanalysis to writing in order to create a model for myself and other writers.
- To investigate how autobiographical short fiction can offer a mode for writing on trauma that extends and expands on the available possibilities.

- To engage, through writing-as-shadow-work, with the complexity of trauma in order to translate the raw material of personal experience into an engaging literary narrative.

vi. Original claims

- The synthesis of Jungian psychoanalysis with creative writing into ‘writing-as-shadow-work’ as a dynamic practice and model for writing about trauma.
- The specific effectiveness of autobiographical short fiction as a container for writing about trauma.
- The generation of new hybrid mode, ‘the shadow memoir’.

vii. Overview

Writing-As-Shadow-Work: An Aesthetics of Jungian Psychoanalysis shows the unfolding development of a major practice-based journey in three parts. I have chosen to present a segment of creative work at the end of each part to evidence the stages of its development as they have been informed by the corresponding critical and conceptual input. As noted, the creative element is a document in process showing the accumulative progress of my research rather than a polished literary artefact and may be understood as a work that will continue beyond the confines of this thesis.

‘Part One: Abusive Mothers & Damaged Daughters’ considers difficult mother-daughter relationships and related ethical debates through the intersecting lenses of feminism, sociology and Jungian psychoanalysis. It includes reflections on the influence of psychoanalytic and trauma-informed thinking at work in the representation of difficult mother-daughter relationships in Jeanette Winterson’s *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* (2011) and Heidi James’ *The Sound Mirror* (2020). Finally, it considers Winterson, James and related debate in the light of the challenges

I faced when writing about maternal abuse and related trauma in my own early creative experiments. Part One concludes with four early-stage stories.

‘Part Two: Writing As Shadow Work’ reflects a key developmental shift from thinking about the representation of trauma to considering how writing can offer a speculative space for working through it. Focusing on the Jungian concepts of individuation, the shadow, active imagination and the creative tension between opposites, Part Two documents how I synthesised Jung’s ideas into my own writing to develop an aesthetics of writing-as-shadow-work. In addition, Part Two takes a closer look at how autobiographical fiction can enable writers to approach the difficult subject matter of maternal abuse and examines how the flexibility of this mode is particularly suited to the speculative nature of writing-as-shadow-work. It reflects on how Winterson and the twentieth century British writer Anna Kavan filter autobiographical fiction through the lens of psychoanalysis to explore their own difficult mother-daughter relationships in *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit* (1985) and *Sleep Has His House* ([1948] 2002), respectively, and shows how writing-as-shadow-work expands on their approaches. It concludes with four mid-stage stories.

‘Part Three: From Autobiographical Short Fiction To Shadow Memoir’ demonstrates how the specific characteristics of short story, in general, and surrealist short fiction, in particular, lend themselves especially well to writing-as-shadow-work. It examples how Kavan and the contemporary U.S. author Carmen Maria Machado employ surrealist short fiction to explore personal experiences of trauma and emotional abuse while documenting how I employed this mode to perform the Jungian concept of creative self-realisation and experiment with the psychoanalytic function of metaphor. It shows how I adapted the Jungian archetypes of the mother and the self on the page and shares the ways I developed writing-as-shadow-work into the distinct hybrid genre, ‘the shadow memoir’. It concludes with a body of late-stage writing that examples the evolutionary culmination of my thinking in practice.

Part One

Abusive Mothers & Damaged Daughters

‘But what about unconditional love? That a mother’s love knows no limit, no end?’

James 2020: 217

‘The only thing for certain is how complicated it all is, like a string full of knots’

Winterson 1985: 93

I. The collapsed mother

This section focuses on the challenges and ethics of writing about the culturally taboo subject of the violent and cruel mother. It offers a brief overview of the violent mother from a feminist-psychoanalytical perspective before exploring how the writing of Winterson and James illuminates related debate to provide a critical-creative context for my own investigation. Finally, it discusses my own early creative experiments writing about this challenging topic.

i. A difficult and dangerous subject

Writing about the screaming, violent figure of my childhood came fraught with difficulties. There was the emotional difficulty of writing about the hurt and harm I had experienced as a consequence of my mother's behaviour, which I explore more in the next section. And there were the ethical difficulties of writing about a loaded and emotive subject, polarised by prevailing socio-cultural ideals about the sanctity of a mother's unconditional love on the one hand and a pathological cultural fear of the mother as 'the monstrous womb; the witch; the vampire and the possessed woman' (Creed 1993: 7) with the power to devour and castrate, on the other.

Delivering a paper at a conference on 'Bad Mothers', I witnessed first-hand the dangers of talking about violent mothers when I was cross-examined by a fellow panellist about the risk of 'mother blame' in relation to late-stage story 'Disappearing Act' presented in Part Three. In *Difficult Mothers* (2013), psychologist and writer Teri Apter argues that any discussion of violent mothers is viewed as dangerous because the paradoxical feelings it arouses leads to discomfort. She suggests that while our preference is to deny these difficult feelings, 'the cultural pressure to deny complex and unpleasant thoughts and emotions should be resisted. This resistance is a fundamental task not only of the psychologist but of every person who wants to feel whole' (2013: ix).

Apter puts forward the view that one of the difficulties of the difficult mother is that she belongs to a minority of women who 'presents her child with the dilemma: Either develop complex and constricting coping mechanisms to maintain a relationship with me on my own terms, or suffer ridicule, disapproval, or rejection' (2012: 5). Apter explains that while all mothers, on occasion, might be angry and controlling, the difficult mother *primarily* views her daughter as existing to serve her needs in a way that is significantly detrimental to the child's immediate and long-term well-being. Her definition of a difficult mother's dysregulated behaviour uncannily matches that of my own. Controlling and angry, this is the mother who swings

from grandiosity to abject insecurity. Feeling injured, humiliated, hollow and empty, she reacts defensively... she may actively go out of her way to engage in furious arguments as a means of trumpeting her outrage and punishing others for failing to acknowledge her superiority. However disproportionate her anger may seem to others, it is fully justified in her eyes

2012: 95-96.

While it is true to say that difficult mothers may also be the parents of sons, viewed within psychoanalytic and feminist contexts, 'maternal dominance in early childhood, and mothers' closer identification with daughters than with sons' (Hirsch 1989: 20) indicates the distinct nature of difficult relationships between mothers and their daughters as inextricably related to gender (Miller 1979, Apter 2012). Whether consciously or unconsciously, a difficult mother 'imposes on her child the task of becoming a mirror that flatters and glorifies her. The child is valued insofar as ... she supports the mother's shaky self-esteem' (Apter 2012: 17). And, like my mother, she is more likely than not to view her daughter as a compensation for her lack, whether real or perceived.

In her feminist reading of the individuation process narrated through the lens of folklore and fairy tale, *Women Who Run With The Wolves* ([1992] 1998), the Jungian psychoanalyst Clarissa Pinkola Estés describes this exceptionally difficult mother as psychologically ‘collapsed’. For Estés, ‘it is a given that a person who treats others in this aggressive manner is under intensive attack in her own psyche by a demon who does exactly the same to her’ ([1992] 1998: 362). This collapsed mother is a woman who ‘has lost her sense of herself. She may be a malignantly narcissistic mother who feels entitled to be a child’ ([1992] 1998: 176). Unable to confront her shadow, the collapsed mother projects it onto others.

As Estés’ collapsed mother implicates, although violent mothers like mine might be controlling, narcissistic, aggressive, manipulative and emotionally violent, her behaviour is understood to be at least partially produced by the same patriarchal power structures that monster, minimise, objectify and stereotype women, which feminist critical theorists like Hélène Cixous, Barbara Creed, Julia Kristeva and Adrienne Rich, amongst others, have committed their life work to challenging. The journalist Deborah Orr contextualises her mother’s refusal to support her career as a form of narcissism, which she describes as ‘the psychological motor behind patriarchy’ (2020: 208). This mother who believes her daughter must learn to put up with what she did, Orr claims, has internalised the very power structures that have kept her in her place. Just as she has suffered, now must her daughter.

Somewhere between a mother’s individual agency to make her own choices and the unequal power structures of patriarchal societies that weigh so heavily upon her, lies the mystery of my own mother, which makes the challenge of writing about her all the more difficult. Seeking to find my own path through this complex territory, I found the approaches of Winterson and James to be particularly instructive.

ii. **‘A wolf, a monster, a devil’: the collapsed mother in *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* and *The Sound Mirror***

A relationship that Paola Splendore describes as ‘antagonistic by definition’ (2002), the field of mother-daughter relationships is an innovative and dynamic subject area within contemporary women’s writing. Winterson’s memoir *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* (2011) and James’ autobiographically-informed novel composed of ‘ready-made’ stories (2020) both example a narrative focus on difficult mothers that employs ‘the skill and depth of analysis, sharpened by tools of psychoanalytic, cultural and feminist criticism’ (Splendore 2002: 188) as a means to investigate this figure from a trauma-informed perspective.

Building on ‘a hard-won shift of consciousness’ evident in women’s writing of the 1980’s and 1990’s, marked by affecting attempts at reconciliation between the generations’ (Giorgio 2002: 113-4), both texts have informed my own thinking on the subject throughout this thesis as works that navigate the multi-faceted complexity of abusive mothers. In *Why Be Happy?*, Winterson tells of growing up with an overbearing adoptee mother who was ‘too big for her world... she crouched under its low shelf, now and again exploding to her full three hundred feet and towering over us. Then, because it was useless, redundant, only destructive, or so it seemed, she shrank back again, defeated’ (2011: 35).

Written over twenty years after her autobiographically-informed novel *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit* (1985), which is discussed in Part Two, in *Why Be Happy?* Winterson contextualises her difficult mother through the lens of working-class history alongside her encounters with the ideas of Jung. She situates Mrs Winterson within a larger story of systemic oppression by describing how her adoptee mother herself suffered through the difficult experience of growing up with a violent, womanising father and a mother who struggled with depression. She paints a complex, nuanced picture of a woman who is psychologically split. A photograph of a mysterious woman who shares the page in the family album with Mrs. Winterson’s former lovers is torn out, her

cigarettes are put in a box ‘marked RUBBER BANDS’ (2011: 62). What she cannot admit to others, let alone herself, is hidden away.

A woman who hates people who are mad, in Winterson’s memoir she is portrayed as blind to the madness in herself. Unable to forgive the fictional Jeanette for keeping a secret diary, Mrs. Winterson revokes her motherhood with the cruel rejection ‘but I’m not your mother am I?’ (2011: 79). Betraying her daughter in revenge for what she perceives as her daughter’s betrayal, when the young Jeanette leaves home to escape her cruelty, Mrs. Winterson blames her for that too.

Like *Why Be Happy?*, *The Sound Mirror* also takes a psychoanalytical approach in its portrayal of the abusive (and abused) mother Gayle and her damaged daughter Tamara. Focusing in particular on the impact of generational trauma, *The Sound Mirror* tells the story of Gayle obliquely through the intertwined narratives of Tamara and her two grandmothers, Ada and Claire. While Ada and Claire tell their stories in their own voices, Tamara’s story is primarily narrated indirectly through the collective ‘we’ of her ancestors. Meanwhile, James employs the sound mirror of the novel’s title as both a literal object that is encountered by the young Tamara on a beach and as a metaphor for what is echoed back from the depths of the unconscious, as symbolised by the sea.

James employs these disparate narratives across three generations of mothers and daughters to illuminate the dissonance between their contrasting perspectives and interpretations of the same people and events. Presented through the memories of Claire and Tamara, the character of Gayle is both an absence in the narrative and very much a presence. Viewed through the eyes of her mother, Claire, Gayle is the difficult teenage mother of a young Tamara. Yet it is Tamara, whom Gayle says, who is ‘difficult to love’ (2020: 25) and ‘a liar (who) makes up stories’ (2020: 206).

Meanwhile, it is through Tamara’s childhood memories of Gayle, that the reader learns she has an alcohol addiction and spent much of her adult life falling in and out of precarious romantic relationships. James sets up Gayle as a bad mother through the eyes of Tamara before de-stabilising this view via an inter-play of multiple perspectives that reveal both daughter and mother to be

victims of abuse. While Tamara's account of Gayle risks contributing to monstering stereotypes that 'there's always a bad or dead mother. It's no secret, it's hardly new. Blame the mother, it's her fault' (2020: 14), it is through the narrative voice of Tamara's ancestral we, that James interrogates these assumptions.

In this way, James doesn't seek to untangle the difficult relationship between Tamara and Gayle so much as show the extent of it. On the one hand, Tamara 'tells herself that her mother was entitled to her freedom, to a little love', yet in the same train of thought she adds, 'besides, it was never as simple as a child's jealousy. At least one of her mother's lovers was less than kind, less than decent, less than human' (2020: 24). Implying the devastating consequences of Gayle's narcissistic self-absorption through Tamara's internal dialogue, James seeks to ask questions about abusive mothers without drawing neat conclusions. Do we blame the mother? Is it her fault, as Tamara's ancestors suggest? Or is the question of the abusive mother's agency more complicated?

Just as Gayle is silenced by her mother Claire, who refuses to accept she had been abused, so James later shows Gayle silencing Tamara in the same way – enacting through the text, how the wheel of the unbroken trauma cycle can turn from one generation to the next. While Winterson takes ownership of her adoptee mother, protectively naming her 'my monster' (2011: 229), Tamara's response to the dying Gayle is more ambiguous. Although Tamara 'doesn't tell the nurse that the frail, vulnerable woman dissolving on the bed was a nasty, selfish bitch. A wolf, a monster, a devil' (2020: 144) the image lingers, nonetheless, as the sound mirror of the title echoes across space and time, suggesting a hidden, psychological truth about Gayle behind her fragile, end of life appearance, un-salvaged by sentiment.

iii. Early experiments in writing my collapsed mother

At this project's inception, my feelings about my own mother were unresolved. I didn't know whether I blamed her or not. Although, like Mrs. Winterson and Gayle, my mother had grown up

in a working-class family, unlike Winterson and James, I couldn't point to a specific cause to explain her dysregulated behaviour – although it's likely it was in part triggered by an experience of post-natal depression following the birth of my youngest brother. Intellectually, I had forgiven my mother but I remained emotionally conflicted about her. I didn't feel particularly angry towards her but I didn't feel at peace, either. Meanwhile, I was regularly having nightmares about being trapped in a house with her, from which I would wake, still in tears.

Inspired by the psychoanalytical concept of maternal mirroring (Miller 1979, Apter 2012), 'The Mirror' employs symbolism and allegory to explore the ways in which I was a mirror for my mother's unprocessed pain. In this story some historical background about my mother is shared but for the most part the "me" in the story encounters her as a disembodied voice shouting from somewhere on the other side of the mirror in which I am trapped. An early attempt at mixing memory and metaphor, it employs the fantastical setting of the mirror as a means to hold and contain the very real experience of the ways I psychologically fell apart as a consequence of my mother's abusive behaviour.

Where 'The Mirror' incorporates elements of fact and fiction, 'The Zoo' was an experiment in working primarily with fantasy to investigate the more primordial aspects of my mother's dysregulated rage. A vehicle to explore the notion of agency in relation to my mother, it imagines her unconscious demons as the dark figure of a zookeeper with whom she becomes romantically involved. However, I discovered both these experiments to be problematic in terms of accessing deeper truths and complexities in relation to representing my mother and her behaviour. A sketched outline of her is present in these stories, as is the echo of her voice, but her character lacks substance and context. Ironically, I learned through the writing process that the more explicitly monstrous I made my mother, the less effective this was as a device to show the extremity of her behaviour. Arguably, I was projecting my own shadows onto her. As a result, the shouting in these early creative experiments is diminished in impact, while the full extent of my mother's cruelty and the human being behind it, although hinted at, remains unrealised. How I critically and

creatively developed my investigation into representing both the complexity of my mother and my traumatic experience as a consequence of her behaviour, shown in Parts Two and Three.

II. The Mother Wound

Continuing my exploration into mother-daughter relationships, this section focuses on feminist-psychoanalytical perspectives on the inter-subjectivity between difficult mothers and their daughters. It investigates in more depth the adverse impact of an abusive mother's behaviour on her daughter in terms of trauma theory and explores the ways in which Winterson and James articulate the often intangible damage that can result from maternal emotional abuse in order to illuminate my own early attempts at investigating this topic.

i. The hold of the maternal entity

As a child I did not understand that my mother was collapsed or that her behaviour constituted a form of emotional abuse. Nor was I aware of research in the fields of psychology and neuroscience that indicates a direct link between childhood abuse and an increased chance of chronic physical and mental ill health in adult hood (Hermann [1992] 2015, Levine 1997, van der Kolk [2014] 2015). I simply thought my mother was grumpy and that shouting, terror and fear were what all families are made of. If I blamed anyone, it was myself. I was 'the girl [who] begins to believe that she is weak, ugly, unacceptable and this will continue to be true no matter how hard she tries to reverse it (Estés [1992] 1998: 171). As 'the dominant structuring principle of female identity' (Giorgio 2002: 7), I accepted my mother's version of reality that I was not, and could never be, good enough without question.

Absorbing my mother's stories and beliefs as my own, in this way I acquired an 'internal mother' who 'acts and responds in a manner identical to a woman's experience in childhood with her own mother' (Estés [1992] 1998: 171). Unconscious of the 'primitive panic at abandonment (that) lasts long after the physical helplessness of the infant ends' (Apter 2012: 9), I experienced 'words and gestures that might be neutral... as threatening because we imbue them with painful

memories... reading the present as though it were the past' (2012: 131). Such was the 'hold of the maternal entity...where identities (subject/object) do not exist or only barely so – double, fuzzy, animal, metamorphosed, altered, abject' (Kristeva [1980] 1982: 207) my tolerance of stress decreased, my anxiety increased and I became physically ill. Inheriting my mother's insecurities and internalising her critical voice, her wounds had become mine. A psychological phenomenon that describes an inter-generational trauma passed from mothers to daughters, the mother wound is a 'highly critical inner voice (that) is the internalised version of their mother's voice, burned into their brain as neuro-linguistic program' (Apter 2012: 98). Intangible, internal and inherited, Winterson describes this shared psychological wound as 'a string full of knots' (1985: 93).

Aside from the psychological implications to this knotty relationship, as previously noted, the complex inter-subjectivity of so many mother-daughter relationships has made it a popular subject amongst contemporary women's writers. Recent writing on difficult mother-daughter relationships, including *An Abbreviated Life* (Leve 2016), *Hot Milk* (Levy 2016), *Everything Under* (Johnson 2018), *Burnt Sugar* (Doshi 2019), *The Book Of Mother* (Huisman [2018] 2021), *Motherwell* (Orr 2020) and *My Phantoms* (Riley 2021), illustrates the ongoing 'centrality of the mother-daughter narrative in 21st century fiction' (Splendore 2002: 185). Arguably a sub-genre of contemporary women's writing, these are works that all place 'the mother at the centre of a... quest for Self [as a] means to adhere to the most real fact of one's life, namely the fact of being born of woman' (Giorgio 2002: 30). In other words, for women, writing about their relationship with their mothers is innately bound up with the task of writing about herself.

ii. **'The love you get is the love that sets': the mother wound in *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* and *The Sound Mirror***

In conjunction with their exploration of difficult mothers, *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* and *The Sound Mirror* simultaneously investigate the 'double, fuzzy' inter-subjectivity of the mother wound. Works that offer what Anne Fogarty terms 'feminocentric plots that explore the

multiple points of connection rather than merely the tensions' (2002: 89) whereby 'motifs such as those of the omnipotent mother and the devouring daughter are deconstructed and reformulated to yield new meanings and symbolic patterns' (2022: 88), both texts bring a psychological understanding of trauma to bear on the co-extensive entanglement between difficult mothers and their daughters.

Through the braided narratives of Tamara, her grandmothers and her ghostly chorus of her ancestors, James considers mother-daughter inter-subjectivity within the wider context of developmental and inter-generational trauma. Seen through the eyes of her ancestors, who act as 'the ghostly maternal domain (that) often expresses itself through hallucinations, voices, madness' (Kristeva [1980] 1982: 103), Tamara 'is not a whole. She's a recording, a medium the past speaks through' where 'the quality of her mother's health and care in pregnancy will not only affect the baby she carries, but all the little egg cells in the child too... (and) no wonder the Russian matryoshka dolls seem so right' (James 2020: 34).

Addressing themes of agency and fate, the intrusive voices of these ancestors who are parasitically living in the host body of Tamara reject the concept of individuality as 'romantic... what we are is the story she is made of' (2020: 2). Meanwhile, James' use of multiple narratives situates Tamara's experience of childhood abuse at the hands of the negligent Gayle inside a complex nexus of colonialism, racism, sexism, class, poverty, war, mental health and sexual abuse, where 'history is a halter that leads' (2020: 1) producing an 'inherited self' (Lawler 2000) that is passed from mothers to daughters across generations and continents via Ada and Claire's mixed heritages.

Although the narrative frame of *The Sound Mirror* is trauma-informed, James shows Tamara as being largely oblivious to the forces at play behind her psychic distress. Through Tamara, James depicts the nullifying effects the behaviour of the abusive mother can have on her daughter. Disembodied and numb, policing herself in the way she had been policed by Gayle, she goes

through life on automatic as ‘the void of freedom, of not belonging, flaps about her dusty head’ (2020: 163).

Attempting to break from Gayle, Tamara is the first in her family to go to university and get a professional job. But even as she tries her best to escape her inheritance, such is the vice-like grip of the cycle of trauma Tamara is caught up in, this is easier said than done. While Tamara evidences the tropes of outward success – a good job, a nice apartment, tasteful clothes, a middle-class lifestyle – ‘she feels she has something to hide, something sick and dirty. That she isn’t good enough, not wanted. At risk’ (2020: 14) as she quietly unravels. A narrative that echoes my own previous experiences of avoidance, although Tamara is estranged from Gayle, she is not free but ‘suffers in the old way, melancholic and prone to sadness and with the newer sort: the jangle and fizz of misfiring neurons, nerve receptors, spinal cord, inflammation’ (2020: 190).

Where James paints a portrait of the mother wound as bloody and messy, buried so deep within Tamara’s psyche that only her unconscious is aware of it, in *Why Be Happy?* Winterson stages an attempt, through writing, to consciously make sense of her wound from the perspective having a breakdown and coming out on the other side. On the question of a daughter’s ability to break free from the fine mesh cast by her collapsed mother, Winterson aligns herself with the perspective of Tamara’s ancestors. Claiming that ‘in the beginning the love you get is the love that sets’ (2011: 76), Winterson writes with unflinching self-awareness on the ways she understands herself to have internalised Mrs. Winterson’s dysfunctional beliefs. She recounts, how, for most of her life she behaved ‘in much the same way’ (2011: 77), possessing (and possessed by) a violent temper that jeopardised her relationships with others. As with James’ portrait of Tamara, Winterson presents a view of the self that is inherited, ‘through a tie with the past that seems unalterable’ (Lawler 2000: 59) which ironically echoes what she describes as the powerful fatalism of her adoptee mother (2011: 119). Acknowledging this inheritance as ‘the dark narrative of our life together’, Winterson describes the past and its patterns as ‘so hard to shift... like a chaperone, standing between us and the newness of the present – the new chance’ (2011: 145).

A chapter narrating Winterson's breakdown and suicide attempt, in which she is haunted by the critical voice of Mrs. Winterson, serves to illustrate the impact an abusive mother can have on her daughter, even from beyond the grave (Apter 2012). At first glance, its inclusion appears to affirm Winterson's fatalism that she is a product of Mrs. Winterson's pathologies. Occurring as it does mid-way in the memoir, however, this breakdown is not the end of Winterson's story but a turning point. Instead of reinforcing the idea that a daughter is irreversibly tied to her mother, Winterson's experience of hitting rock bottom provides an opportunity for her to view 'the apparent fixity of the self' as a perspective that 'can be subverted by the element of choice involved in recognising/not recognising inherited characteristics within the self' (Lawler 2000: 60).

This narrative structure frames *Why Be Happy?* as a restorative narrative (Frank [1995] 2013, De Salvo 2000) with a focus on learning from the past in order to move on. Delineating not only the similarities between herself and Mrs. Winterson, but also their differences, Winterson observes 'I think that is a lot of why I enraged her as much as I did. I just couldn't live in the cosmic dustbin with the lid on' (2011: 50). Indicating an awareness of both the ways her identity has been formed by Mrs. Winterson but also of her capacity to act autonomously, despite her past, Winterson further complicates the entanglement of the mother-daughter relationship by introducing a narrative thread in which she sets out to discover, and subsequently meet, her birth mother, Ann. It is through this meeting Ann that Winterson finds herself defending Mrs. Winterson, warts and all. Describing how she is 'interested in nature/nurture' (2011: 229), Winterson observes how a lack of identification with her biological mother leads her to defend her adopted mother. Noticing 'that I hate Ann criticising Mrs. Winterson. She was a monster but she was my monster' (2011: 229), Winterson offers a flexible view of a self who can own her wounds rather than being owned by them.

iii. Writing the mother wound in early creative experiments

As with writing my difficult mother, in the early creative experiments presented at the end of this section I also employed the surrealist landscape of my dreams as a means to disinter and write about the bloody, weeping mess of the mother wound. The heavily allegorical backdrop of ‘The Mirror’ and ‘The Zoo’ are early attempts at not only showing the shadowy maternal figures of my dreams but also my horror at being trapped in their homes and worlds, subject to their cruel whims, unable to escape or assert my autonomy.

A story exploring how my mother projected her shadow onto me as a child, ‘The Mirror’ aims to show the confusion, suffering and pain I experienced as a consequence. At the same time, it also incorporates elements from a dream, discussed in analysis, featuring a group of friendly tigers. While the dark landscape of the mirror is intended to symbolise the extent to which I was trapped inside the damaging narratives my mother projected onto me, the appearance of these tigers is an attempt to explore how the “me” in the story might or could escape. In a similar vein, ‘Another World’ translates my ‘real’ childhood fantasy that my mother would die into a story about an imagined scenario, in which the “me” in the story is adopted by my teen idol, Morrissey. Like *The Sound Mirror*, it is a piece of autobiographically informed fiction that writes around the edges of the traumatic wound I suffered as a result of my mother’s abuse, implying the nightmare that was my experience of living with her, rather than showing it, through the ‘the story’s silent twin’ (Winterson 2011: 8) – my wish for her to be dead.

Where both these stories focus on my childhood, ‘A Visitation’ investigates the mother wound as a psychological phenomenon that conjoins the past to the present. In this story, my aim was to exhume the inner critical voice of my mother by externalising it as a wounded, vampiric character who appears at my door. An experiment in staging my mother’s invasive voice through the porous inter-play of inner and external realms, the house in the story is intended to double as my psyche and the stranger at the door, as the experience of being invaded by unwanted thoughts. A speculative performance of experiencing the internalised ‘call of the mother’ that leads to

‘disintegration rather than to coherence’ (Kristeva [1980] 1982: 103), this story is an experimental attempt to show a subtle slippage between recognisable physical reality and the inner realms of the psyche.

While these stories stand as attempts at working through the difficult and messy terrain of the mother wound complex, they evidence how, at this stage, I did not yet have sufficient technical expertise in the craft of short fiction to successfully pull off a seamless slippage between inner and outer realms. Although they adopt first person as a device to blur the lines between fact and fiction, the use of this voice felt awkward and uncomfortable for me as the real author standing it. Paradoxically, the first-person voice I adopted in these stories felt too close to the bone for comfort, while, at the same time, it also didn’t really feel as if it belonged to me. As a result, I felt lost in my own stories, struggling to locate the perspective I was writing from and find a voice that felt authentic. How I developed a narrative voice suited to the project and deployed the craft of autobiographical short fiction to meet the demands of the task will be explored in Parts Two and Three.

III. Early-Stage Stories

The four stories presented below are a sample of early-stage creative experiments that show my initial attempts at conceptually engaging with the difficult themes of abusive mothers and the complexity of the mother wound. They demonstrate the creative experiment at play via my initial attempts to translate the symbolic language and landscapes of my dreams into the realm of story as a means to communicate the emotional and psychological truths behind my experience of maternal abuse.

i. The Mirror

The inside of the mirror was black. The blackness had many densities. Where the shadows were thickest nothing could be discerned. In other places the blackness rippled with traces of light that had leaked in at the edges. Here the blackness had a greenish quality. It was thinner and more translucent and gave the interior a form and space out of which objects took shape.

This form and space was that of a Victorian townhouse. The mirror-house had four floors – a basement, a ground floor, a first floor and an attic – but no windows or doors that led outside. The air in these rooms was as rotten as a dead animal’s lungs. It was damp, too. The walls glittered with condensation and fungi grew from the carpets and wallpaper. Nothing was immune from the damp and I had a tubercular cough where it had set into my chest. The cough rattled my bones and I moved around from room to room in the partial-dark shivering with cold no matter how many jumpers I wore.

I had no idea how long I’d been inside the mirror. It was like a dark womb in which I had been incubated from before birth. The mirror was all I knew. It was my world, my existence. What I didn’t understand then was that I did not in any conventional sense exist. What I didn’t understand was that there was no “I”. There was only the mirror. And like all mirrors its job – my job – was to reflect whoever looked into it.

I only found out later when I was able to look back and make sense of things that the exterior of the mirror was black too. No ordinary mirror, it was made from the volcanic glass obsidian. An instrument of black magic, this mirror, as all obsidian mirrors, conformed to the occult laws of reflected dark and was designed to show a person’s innermost demons through the practice of scrying. This particular obsidian mirror belonged to my mother and the demon she saw when she looked in it was me.

All day every day inside the mirror the dark creature she saw scrubbed, washed, rubbed, rinsed. If it was not cleaning out cupboards or scrubbing the skirting boards or washing every door handle in the house with a bucket of warm water and ammonia, then it was polishing the

ornaments that filled the many display cabinets or bleaching the insides of bins or cleaning the tiles in the bathroom with vinegar until their enamel varnish shone like teeth.

There were no pleases and no thank yous. There was simply a never-ending list of jobs. And when all the jobs on all the lists were done, there was always the Hoovering. The Hoover was an old model and almost the same size as the creature. Every day the creature pushed and dragged and pulled it across all the carpets in the house from basement to attic, coughing on rotten air and dust as it went. But every day the damp would immediately breed more mould in the Hoover's wake so the carpets were never clean and the job never done.

Inside the mirror, creature and Hoover motored through the shadows as one. Even when the Hoover was switched off, come nightfall the creature imagined it could still hear the drone of its ancient motor as if somewhere in the echoing shadows of the vast mirror-house the Hoover were humming the creature to sleep.

Outside the frame of the mirror my mother passed her days idly enough on the living room sofa. No one was allowed to disturb her nor were they permitted to make any noise in the rest of the house. Even the light was to be kept out and the living room curtains remained firmly drawn day and night. She could lie like this on the pea-green sofa for hours, only occasionally stirring to demand a cup of tea with a slice of cake or a piece of buttered toast through the permanently shut door.

The complaint my mother claimed took up all these afternoons in the sun-starved darkness of the living room was tiredness. This tiredness was chronic and debilitating. She was tired of "running around after other people all day", tired of "being treated like a dogsbody" and tired of "muggings-me having to do everything all the time."

This tiredness seemed to eat away at her soul. The more time my mother spent on the sofa, the more her tiredness claimed her. Never bothering to dress, she came down the stairs in the

morning in the same maroon dressing gown she was still wearing when at night she returned to her bed.

Wrapped in this maroon second skin my mother nursed her tiredness in the company of the Queen Anne style carriage clock on the living room mantle piece and the reproduction of the Picasso painting “Child With A Dove” on the wall above. Years later my mother told me this was her favourite painting. What she saw in it I still can’t fathom. Did the painting speak to an unrequited longing for innocence? Was there something about the angelic-looking child all in white her soul took comfort from? My mother’s motives for anything were never very clear.

Her tiredness was an affliction that miraculously disappeared whenever a better offer presented itself. An invite to lunch from her one friend or the lure of finding a bargain in the sales was enough to propel her from the sofa faster than a sprinter at the sound of a starting gun. Then my mother could not be seen for dust. Dashing through the front door, she would jump in her car and step on the accelerator so hard that the vehicle almost leapt in the air as it revved down our otherwise sleepy street in a dark cloud of fumes.

She was tiny - a small woman with fine strawberry-red hair and large, bovine eyes that were a very pale, almost yellowish green. But she drove that car with the ferocity of a bull. She could never get away from the house fast enough. Had she been able, my mother would have driven through walls and over buildings. It was her versus the rest of the world. Whatever she wanted, she was determined to have. And she would go to any lengths to get it.

From inside the mirror I experienced this tiny red-haired woman as a disembodied voice piercing the black glass. This voice was always angry and always shouting. According to the voice nothing I did was ever good enough. There was always something - some speck of dirt, some cup that had not been put back right, some streak of burnt on grease that could not be got rid of no matter how hard I had scrubbed.

“I CAN STILL SEE THE DIRT ON THOSE WINDOWS!” it would scream. Or “THIS IRONING HASN’T BEEN DONE PROPERLY!” Or “WHAT IS THAT TEASPOON DOING IN THE SINK?”

I never answered back because I couldn’t. Back then in the mirror I was a mute. It was her voice and hers alone that reverberated through its interior. After the darkness it was the shouting of this disembodied voice that circumscribed my life. I never knew when it would erupt or what it would accuse me of next. Its fury followed me from room to room and there was no place in all the dark world of the mirror-house I could go to escape it. Not the basement, not the attic, not the toilet where I would lock myself for hours, the door shaking on its hinges from the shock of her roar.

Megalomaniac, shameless, uncontainable, it is a voice that knew no bounds either then or now where it has followed me out of the past and into the present, turning up like a bad smell in my dreams. It is there in the dreams I have of being trapped in a house with her. Dreams where I am sitting at a kitchen table before a plate of grey chips coated in egg where the voice is shouting;

“YOU’RE NOT GOING ANYWHERE UNTIL YOU’VE EATEN EVERY LAST THING OFF THAT PLATE!”

Dreams where she shouts; “YOU ARE *MY* DAUGHTER AND YOU WILL DO EXACTLY WHAT *I* TELL YOU!”

Dreams where I feel her fury as a burning eye in my chest. Dreams where I want to shout back but can’t. Dreams where she is on the point of incinerating, shouting the words; “DON’T THINK YOU HAVE ANY RIGHTS! I GAVE BIRTH TO YOU! YOU’RE MINE TO DO WHATEVER I SAY! DO I MAKE MYSELF CLEAR? YOU BELONG TO ME!”

Dreams where I am choking. Dreams where I am trying to say something but can’t. Dreams where I wake suddenly, crying.

I was not alone inside the mirror. In the shadows and corners and cracks of half-open doors I often caught sight of bright flashes of fur belonging to the mirror's small population of Bengal tigers. I don't know how many tigers there were in the mirror – if it was the same three or four or dozens roaming the mirror's myriad rooms.

I didn't understand how the tigers had come to be inside the mirror any more than I understood how I had come to be there myself. As far as I knew they were just as much prisoners as I. But this didn't stop me from being afraid of them. If I was my mother's nemesis then the tigers were mine and I identified with them insomuch as they gave form to what I feared most.

The tigers were restless. Over the drone of the Hoover I could hear them knocking over tables and bounding up flights of stairs. Sometimes their bangs seemed to come from my room in the basement and other times I could hear their muffled growls far above me where they had climbed through the attic and into the roof.

Passing from kitchen to hallway with an armful of ironing I might become conscious of their muscular bodies sloping out from the pantry only a few steps after me before disappearing in the direction of the stairs. They always seemed to be searching for something and I was terrified the something they were searching for was me. Every time I caught the earthy scent of their fur I learnt to quickly slip away and I went around holding my breath in an attempt to cough less in the hope my silence might also make me invisible. At night I slept with my knees tucked up into my stomach for fear my legs would fall over the edge of the bed and the tigers would pull me feet first into the abominable dark below.

I couldn't give a name to it but I knew I was up close to something. There was the claustrophobic darkness of the mirror. And then there was the feeling that the darkness was not all, that there was something else behind it, some all-consuming presence that swallowed everything else.

Once a week I was allowed a bath. Any more often was “wasting water”. This concession to basic hygiene came with the caveat that I was not allowed a clean towel or any fresh underwear afterwards as this would “create more washing”. Since my mother’s desire to humiliate knew no logic, it was irrelevant to her that I did all the household washing and therefore any additional laundry meant no extra work for her. Not that I would have argued with her even had I been able to speak. I was so pleased simply to be able to wash that I accepted my mother’s perverse stipulations without question.

When filled with steam the bathroom was like a secret sea cave whose existence was known only to me. The steam made it easier to breathe and taking a bath was the only time my chest was ever able to settle. Here time slowed to the drip of the tap and the dissolving ripples it made in the warm water pooling around my toes. I would spend a long time examining my body, which was alien to me beneath all the jumpers I wore to keep warm. I remember being shocked to find long hairs hatching from under my arms that looked like the long legs of the spiders I sometimes found crawling from the plug hole when drawing the bath. Once I tried cutting these hairs off with a pair of nail scissors. But the next bath time they were back again, darker, thicker and doubled in number as if held there by some wild force that had nothing to do with me.

But nothing shocked me as much as the time my secret sea cave was invaded by one of the tigers. There I was standing up in the bath inspecting my legs for hairs. And there it was, upside down in my vision, weighing me up with a pair of almond-shaped eyes. Petrified, I remained perfectly still as the tiger breathed slowly right ahead of me with an adenoidal, snuffling sound. This close I could see the quiver of its whiskers and the perfect symmetry of its markings, which ran from the cornices of each eye and down the side of its nose in long calligraphic strokes.

Though I was cold I daren’t move, hoping that if I remained still for long enough, the tiger would become bored and wander off to another part of the house. But tiger didn’t wander off. It pricked back its back its ears and, rising up on its haunches, placed two front paws on the side of

the bath right under my nose. The view I now had of the tiger was the thick creamy fur of its belly, which ruffled and parted as the tiger leaned in and began sniffing at the crown of my head.

I could hear my own breath and beneath it that of the tiger's and beneath that, the mad, terrified beat of my heart. Preparing for the worst, I squeezed my eyes shut and started to pray when I felt something soft and wet bump against the side of my waist. There was a pause then something else - wider and flatter with the texture of sand paper - began scraping at the curve of my back.

I remained frozen as the tiger proceeded to groom me as if I were one of its cubs, studiously working its tongue down my back to the base of my tailbone. The tiger's chin hairs tickled my skin as it flicked its sandpapery tongue back up my body to the nape of my neck, while I stood in the bath holding onto my knees, ears wet with the tiger's hot fishy breath.

The touch of the tiger sent a delirious wave of shivers down through my pores into the web of nerves beneath. I sank to my knees in the lukewarm water. It felt like parts of myself were coming alive, growing like crystal formations from something like a secret sea cave inside me.

My neck suddenly felt cold as the tiger drew away and began to thirstily drink from the bath. Feeling emboldened, I put out a hand and rested it on the wiry fur between its ears. All the tiger's strength – the power of its tongue, the sinuous musculature of its body, the wildness of its animal instinct – I felt as a bright energy through the palm of my hand. Tentatively I began stroking its head. No longer afraid I wanted the tiger to stay. But after it had taken a long drink, the tiger lowered itself down from the side of the bath and slunk out through the door as silently as it must have crept in. Stunned by the strangeness of this encounter I remained for some time in the cooling water. Dripping with tiger saliva I felt holy, like I had just been anointed and I didn't want to wash any of it off.

I knew immediately after that something had changed. What I didn't know was that this change had coincided with the appearance of a fine crack in the surface of the mirror. But what I

didn't know my mother did. She saw the crack and understood exactly what it meant. And this made her more furious than in all her fierce rages she had ever been before.

What I remember most about the punishment is the pattern in the carpet. It was a paisley motif in the shape of teardrops arranged into pairs. The paisley was cream on a crimson background and at the centre of each teardrop was a cluster of small black circles that looked like black eyes. On my hands and knees clutching at the carpet the shouting went on and on.

“YOU SLUT! YOU WHORE! I KNOW WHAT YOU’VE BEEN UP TO WITH YOUR FATHER!”

Her accusations left nothing to the imagination. As she went on shouting, illustrating her claim, I could see everything. I saw the bed and I saw the sheets. Everything creased. I saw bare skin on bare skin. And I heard the cry at the end. I can still hear it now. A death rattle convulsing through me in wave after wave.

I tried to block this image – the one she had planted in my mind - by fixing my gaze even harder on the paisley pattern in the carpet. But the picture my mother had so powerfully and magnificently constructed, forced its way over it. There was nothing I could do to get rid of it. It was there, the image of myself and my father, scored into my mind in a way I couldn't erase.

My only hope was that she would forgive me but retribution was her game and she was not going to stop until she got it. Either I had to go or she would. It was as simple as that.

“IT’S YOUR CHOICE!” she was screaming at my father now. “I’M NOT STAYING HERE WITH THAT LITTLE SLUT! EITHER THROW HER OUT OR I’M LEAVING!”

I don't remember what my father said or did in response. I don't remember anything about him at all. For all I knew my mother was addressing some paranoid figment of her mind, as if she had to invent my father simply so she could accuse him of betraying her, just as she seemed to have invented me. I don't remember my father and I don't remember anything happening to make it stop. I only remember the carpet – the pattern and the faint smell of damp - and the awful

gasping feeling of the life rattling out of me as I coughed and choked into the teardrop shapes of the carpet.

Eventually the shouting stopped. The silence that followed was equally devastating. I knew I had lost something but I couldn't say what that thing was. I was thirteen and it felt like my life was over. This was her great victory – cursing me with a shame so unbearable that for years I couldn't bring myself to acknowledge it existed, let alone speak it. Guided by a last remaining flicker of instinct, I stretched myself out face down on the damp carpet and waited. A ghost of a ghost, I felt nothing. After that not even my mother haunted me as much as I haunted myself.

The darkness made it hard to count exactly how many tigers processed nose-to-tail into the bedroom but I was able to make out at least half a dozen. One by one they formed a circle around the bed, filling the room with their sweet earthy smell and gazing down their noses at me as if they knew, as if they had always known. I turned my head. There they were, as concrete as anything else inside the mirror, a wall of red-blooded bodies snuffling through their streaming wet noses. I felt my eyes brighten. The presence of the tigers was like a phantom blanket falling like snow onto the bed and I could have died there and then from the sheer bliss of knowing such a thing existed as kindness.

A drop fell on my forehead. It was followed by another on the bridge of my nose. And then another at the corner of my mouth. I put out my tongue. The drops tasted of salt. More came. They splashed down my face and ran off onto the pillow. They were the tears of years and the tigers' weeping did not stop. They ran down the elegant markings at the sides of their noses, dripping from their whiskers onto the fur under their chins. Nothing seemed to stop the enchanted beasts' mourning. Not the small puddles that began to appear on the floor. Not when the small puddles converged to cover the carpet. Not when the water was up to the tigers' knees. Not when it rose to their hinds. Oblivious, they cried until the room was so deep in water that all the furniture was afloat including the bed.

Tails held high and noses pushed out the tigers paddled like natives. But the rising water made me nervous. What did the tigers want? A bolt of fear shot through my groin. How many times could one person die? How many dilutions of a ghost could they become?

I gripped at the wringing wet sheets. From the corner of an eye I caught sight of a tiger veering off from the others and swimming towards me. It moved fast, beating its front paws through the water in a flurry of splashes. Knocking into the foot of the bed, the tiger did not stop but dove nose first under me leaving behind only a circle of bubbles. The next thing I knew the bed was toppling from beneath me and I was underwater drifting down towards the carpet. Struggling against the force pushing me down I opened my eyes. I could see the tigers' paddling legs and the fur spreading out from their bellies in a white fringe. This is it I thought. This is where it all ends, here drowning in tears. But seconds later I was at the surface again, coughing up saline water, legs astride the same tiger's back. I shook the water from my hair. Licking the drops of water from my lips I leaned forward and wrapped my arms around the tiger's wide neck. Beneath me I could feel the steady, rocking motion of its spine as we swam on.

Sometimes I still dream I am on the back of a tiger swimming somewhere far out. It is night and the moon is clearly visible through the cloud. In these dreams I never know where we are or where are going. I only know that I must not let go.

ii. **Another World**

There were the nights that summer after the death of my mother when Morrissey sung me to sleep. Exiled under the covers to some cold, lonely planet far out on the rim, his voice would penetrate my spheres and draw me into its spell.

Sing me to sleep, sing me to sleep

I don't want to wake up on my own any more.

Sing to meeeeeuuuuuuubbbb

Sinnnnng to meeeeeuuuuuuubbbb

Not long before her death I had been on a museum club field trip to a piece of inner city wasteland known for its wildlife where a group of gypsy travellers had also set up. One of them, an old woman sitting on the stoop of her caravan rolling cigarettes, told us a story about banshees. They rode through the night wailing for the dead, she said. If in our sleep we ever heard a strange shrieking coming through the trees it meant only one thing: the banshees were coming.

The gypsy's story made a deep impression on me and on those nights listening to Morrissey's voice through the darkness, I heard it as the unearthly wail of a banshee calling for me. Nose squashed to pillow, I experienced his voice as a spectral throb deep in my gut, the pulse of something unfathomable pushing up and up and up.

There is another world

There is a better world

Oooooobooooooooooooooooob well there musst be

Sing me to sleep

Oooooobooooooooooooooooob, sing to meeeeeeeeeuuuuuuuh.

And long after Morrissey stopped singing his voice continued to ring in my ears, *Sing to me, sing to me, sing to me....* so that his words were always the last thing I heard.

In the mornings I rose to a sharp August sun squinting above the slate roofs through the back bedroom window. Downstairs in the tiny kitchen I made tea and toast, careful not to get

crumbs on the cassette tapes that lay scattered out of their cases on the Formica kitchen table along with crumpled paper, chewed biros and empty wine bottles stuffed with roses whose stalks hung at precarious angles from their necks.

In my pyjamas I wandered his house chewing toast in a daze. It was not just the kitchen. Gifts from fans, there were flowers in every room of the house; gladioli spears shot out of vases on every windowsill. Unwieldy bunches of sweet peas filled several buckets on the living room floor. The dining room table was a jungle of orchids. Pots of tea roses were balanced haphazardly on the stairs. To get to my bed in the spare room I had to navigate yellowing bouquets of lilies, still in their stiff plastic wrappers while the drooping heads of lupins hung languorously over the edge of the bath.

At every stage of a flower's life cycle, they sprouted and wilted, bloomed and sagged, filling the house with a perfumed slightly rotting smell that made simply breathing intoxicating. Under their spell I wandered from room to room pulling off their petals and embalming my wrists with their heady scent. Even when they were visibly decaying Morrissey never displayed any inclination to throw them away. "Flowers are innocent," he said arching one of his thick, bushy brows. "They're not ugly. Flowers don't burp."

It was not just Morrissey's house that had been colonised with cut flowers. The front garden was also full of them. On the day I turned up on his doorstep, there had many so many bouquets stacked up against the front of the house that it looked like someone other than my mother had recently died. Opening the door to me, Morrissey stood in the shadows of the hallway, taller than I had expected, in jeans and a paisley shirt, shading his eyes. "Are you the girl who wrote the letter?" He asked with a mixture of warmth and amusement.

Painfully conscious of my limp perm and embarrassing Jesus sandals and the spot I could feel festering in the middle of my chin, my tongue had clamped to the roof of my mouth and all I could manage was a nervous nod. Morrissey put a ringed finger to his chin and looked me up and down. I gulped even though my mouth was so dry there was nothing to swallow. The porch had

an intense smell of lilies and I began to feel sick. *Please let me in*, I prayed in silence, *you're my only hope*. I bit my lip and took a deep breath. The front gate of the house two doors down clanged as someone came out. A boy about my age walked past trailing a dog. The soft drone of a plane floated into earshot from somewhere overhead. *I know you understand. Please, please, please. Please let me in*. I thought Morrissey was going to ask me to leave. Then he cleared his throat; "Charm will get you everywhere honey-pie. You'd better come in."

She was buried in the cemetery down the road from Morrissey's house. Even before her death I had known of this cemetery because Morrissey had written a song about it. It was the happiest Smiths song I knew and because of it the cemetery had become a mythical place in mind. After my mother's burial, it became a real place and I went there often to lie in the grass and reassure myself that it was all true and she was definitely in the ground not anywhere else.

We went there one afternoon, Morrissey and I, together. It was the day my spot burst and the newly formed scab that had grown in its place itched in the heat. Although the cemetery ran alongside a busy dual carriage way, inside the tree-lined iron fencing the drone of the traffic became dulled to a soft hum. The horse chestnuts and elms around the perimeter trapped the sun in their branches so that it fell in a patchwork of shadow and light onto the white slabs of the graves. That day the cemetery smelled of just-cut grass although we didn't see a gardener and no one else seemed to be about either.

Morrissey spread out his arms and tilted his face sunward. "In the midst of life we are in death," he spun himself in a circle on his heels, spraying an arc of dust from the path in his wake. I recognised his words from a song. He stopped and looked down at me through a pair of bushy brows and spoke in a serious tone. "Death is the most liberating thing, don't you think? I mean, what else offers the luxury of such complete escape?" I nodded. I thought Morrissey was the coolest person on earth and would have agreed with him whatever he said. I trotted at his heels, listening intently and trying not to pick at my scab as we followed the maze of cemetery paths,

Morrissey loping ahead expounding on love and poetry and revenge with a priestly vigour that fascinated me. He didn't seem to mind my silence and I wonder if the shyness of my awkward fourteen-year-old self fluttering with shadows on the path behind him as he talked was something that Morrissey found quaintly endearing.

Her grave was the only new one without flowers. The freshly turned soil had become crumbly and dry in the sun and an army of ants was crawling up and down their dry sods.

"Poor cow," Morrissey folded his arms behind his back and rocked back and forth on his heels. "She's probably best off where she is." We stood in silence for a while watching the ants crawling up and down the clumps of dry earth. The shouts of children floated on the air from somewhere, maybe a playground, on the outer edges of the cemetery. There were laughs followed by shouts and it seemed like they were playing a particularly boisterous game. I put a hand over my mouth.

"What's the matter?" Morrissey placed a hand on my shoulder. I shook my head and looked away. My throat felt dry and tight. There were things I hadn't told Morrissey, things I hadn't told anyone. I wiped my nose with the back of my hand. I could feel the throb again. It was strong and hard and I thought it was going to burst. I couldn't think what else to do so I started to run. The sun beating on my bare shoulders, I ran all the way to the cemetery gates, down the dual carriageway and through park back to Morrissey's house, where he found me half an hour later sitting on the step among the bouquets of gladioli, flushed and panting and feeling strangely exhilarated.

In Morrissey's flower-laden house I stayed up way past my bedtime, sometimes not climbing the stairs past the tea roses until gone midnight. Everything was exotic, even the vegetarian curry from the Indian at the end of the street which we ate straight from their containers so that there was never any washing up. I developed a fondness for kormas and their thick coconut sauces, which were rich and sweet and tasted like pudding. We consumed them balancing our takeaways on our knees on the sofa in the living room, the height of rebellion.

Beneath the posters of James Dean and Johnny Thunders on Morrissey's living room wall I listened with virgin ears to records by The Velvet Underground, Patti Smith and The Stooges. We travelled in time - to Elvis breaking hearts live from Hawaii or The Ronettes nursing them or to the haunting elegies of Joy Division's post-industrial Manchester that was still evident to me in the roofs of derelict mills I still glimpsed from the top decks of buses. Sometimes the record would play out and we would travel on to a place that was timeless and eternal where there was only the sound of the needle crackling on the fine grains of dust caught in the inner most grooves of the record.

Everything was new to me; what rebellion meant, what subversion was; how a person could live without fitting in. Sitting cross legged on the floor listening to Morrissey's record collection, I felt like Dorothy in Oz. It was as if I had clicked the heels of my Jesus sandals and been instantaneously transported to this inner sanctum, the holy of holies, the Emerald City with Morrissey the Good Witch of The East to protect and guide me. And when a particularly exuberant song came on, I would get up off the rug and dance, swinging my arms as I had seen Morrissey do, because the Wicked Witch of the West, my mother, was dead.

I never got the impression Morrissey minded me being around. He treated me like a pet - something charming and adoring that he would happen upon curled on the sofa with a book of poetry or drinking lassi from the Indian at the kitchen table. For my part, I thought that if I was charming and adoring enough then he would let me stay and maybe adopt me, my ultimate fantasy. Then Oz and the Emerald City would be my home and I would never have to go back to the old house with its bad memories.

During the days there was nowhere we didn't walk. We drifted the sun-blown streets of Stretford, Chorlton, Old Trafford, Salford past children playing hopscotch on streets where the gardens overgrew with roses and beer cans, mapping our bearings by the smell of hops wafting on the hot summer air from the brewery that sat on the road ringing the city. Morrissey always walked slightly ahead, hands nonchalantly hooked into jean pockets and cotton shirt catching the breeze. I

desperately wanted someone to stop us and ask for his autograph just for the kick of knowing that I, a spotty young girl with a bad perm and embarrassing sandals, had been seen with him. But only a couple of old ladies once waved from across the street, friends it turned out, of Morrissey's Aunty Pat. It was like we were invisible, moving in some current of light that carried us unseen along the streets in a parallel world of our own making.

We skirted past needles flashing from beneath the buddleia bushes which buried the city that summer beneath pale, washed-out flowers. We walked past newsagents with gob stopper machines chained up outside and condemned terraces dripping with CND symbols and graffiti screaming OUT TORY SCUM. I saw the words TRUST LOVE in giant red letters fifty feet in the air sprayed across one of the "walkways in the sky" that connected the brutalist tower blocks of Hulme. "Look!" Morrissey pointed up, "A divine sign." I blinked in the sun as the blood-coloured words burnt onto my retinas. I wanted to cry though I didn't know why.

There was always some treasure to be discovered on these walks. Once we found a musical jewellery box, wind up ballerina still intact, caught up in some brambles along the canal. Another time it was an unopened bottle of lemonade by a park bench. We drank it in one go, gulping the warm fizzy liquid as it dribbled down our chins. Another time I found a child's hair bobble decorated with plastic flowers in the kerb, which later came in useful after the buckle fell off one of my sandals while climbing a fence.

I was as under the spell of these walks in the same way I was under the spell of Morrissey. They answered the call of the thing I could feel but couldn't name and I sensed it was the same for Morrissey, too.

Already there were signs that summer was coming to an end. It was there in the crisp edges of leaves and the drooping necks of flowers while in our conversations Morrissey began mentioning an autumn tour. I imagined what it would be like to go on the road with The Smiths and how it would be standing at the back of stage watching the crowd leap and swerve in wild delirium as Morrissey ground his hips and threw flowers into the frenzy only yards away from me.

I thought about what the girls at school would say. It felt so close. In those days of no school and sun burned pavements. What my life could be if this became permanent. How people would look at me. Now she was dead nothing felt impossible and I would furtively glance over at Morrissey hoping to read in his expression some confirmation he was thinking the same thing.

Once we went walking at night. It was towards the end of the month and the nights were barely cooler than days. The moon was almost at its fullest and it coated our faces with a pale waxy light. That night the streets seemed to be overrun with cats. They came, apparently from nowhere, an army of black shadows and yellow eyes sliding along walls and looking out from under bushes, tails twitching and slipping through the darkness as in command of the night as we were in awe of it, they on their adventures and we on ours. Bathed in the moon's iridescence everything familiar to us in daylight – the corner shop, the Indian, the spire of the Catholic church, the ancient children's roundabout in the park – took on a strange newness. As we tramped the moon-bathed streets it felt as if we were trespassing on some alien and out of bounds landscape where we shouldn't have been or like we had broken and entered into the night and were criminals now or outlaws. I didn't know then this would be our last ever walk.

I felt the throb on that balmy night as a synaptic web pulsing outwards from my stomach through my whole body. The pulse made me want to rush headlong into this secret landscape of forbidden places, out of my body into some cool, starry space where I could watch my shadow from a distance go up in flames. I didn't know where these feelings came from or why I was having them - only that there was something inside of me that needed to be expelled, which seemed to come to the surface with more and more frequency.

In the dark we lost track of our bearings. We could have been in Stretford or we could have been in Hulme. It could have been midnight or it could have been dawn. The distance between places and times shrank and expanded according to the trickery of the night's mirror to day. Wrapped in the velvety air, we were nocturnal beings, kin to the cats, slipping by fences and through gates, awake while the rest of the world slept.

Guided as if by instinct, we walked without stopping past garages and pubs, supermarkets and betting shops, all of them locked up for the night with the lights off. We traversed empty car parks and the cobbled yards of derelict warehouses, parting the barbed wire of inconvenient fences and unhooking hems from where they had caught on a rusty nail or a piece of broken glass. It didn't matter how dilapidated the landscape, everything felt so very perfect and I didn't want it to end.

We found ourselves in a sea of rosebay willow herb rolling in silvery waves beside a disused viaduct. I felt the sudden need to pee. Ahead of me Morrissey was disappearing into the shadows of a viaduct arch and I took the opportunity to squat among the flowers. Luxuriating in the stalks against my skin as a long pee poured out of me, I nearly jumped out of my pants when I heard a loud scream. Although I knew Morrissey's falsetto shriek well, it was still a shock to hear it cut through the sticky silence of the night and I froze, dress around waist, in the middle of the rosebay hoping no one would see.

There was a brief pause then Morrissey whooped again. WHOOOOOOOOOOHHHH...WHOOOOOOOOOOHHHH...WHOOOOOOOOOO HHHH... his shout bounced off the curved brick, shifting pitch in the dark across octaves. Straightening my dress, I headed to the shadows of the viaduct where Morrissey was grinning almost maniacally. "You do it," He turned to me. "*You do it you do it you do it...*" His voice echoed around the walls. In the cold atmosphere of the arch the bare skin of my arms began to prickle. I opened my mouth and coughed as the damp air caught at the back of my throat, my shout an embarrassing splutter.

"LOUDER!" growled Morrissey humorously, "*LOUDER LOUDER LOUDER...*"

Although Morrissey was grinning, the shadows of the arch felt heavy with expectation, as if it was not only Morrissey who was listening but the bricks themselves. I shut my eyes, concentrating all my energy on drawing my breath upwards from the pit of my stomach. My spine arched forwards then backwards in a slow motion wave following the direction of my breath as it

undulated up through my chest and out through my throat shaking every bone of my body with its force and leaving it with an ear-splitting howl that sounded like nothing else which had ever come out of my mouth. *WHOOOOOOOOOOHHHHH.... WHOOOOOOOOOOHHHHH... WHOOOOOOOOOOHHHHH.....*

Thrown forward by the force I leant forward, placing both hands on my knees. Everything had gone out of focus and I couldn't really see. My whole body was trembling. I felt radiantly ecstatic and as if I had just vomited both at the same time. Morrissey slapped a hand on my back and I almost fell over. When I looked up, he was grinning.

iii. A Visitation

“HELP! HELP! PLEASE HELP!”

A shouting voice followed by a loud knocking breaks into my sleep and I sit up clutching the sheets as the cat flies from the bed to the shadows beneath.

“HELP! HELP! PLEEEEEEEASSSE!”

The pitch of the voice rises along with the intensity of the knocking.

“SOMEBODY ANSWER THE DOOR!”

The banging rushes at my ears as though the entire gang of bikers who congregate outside the pub opposite have descended on the garden and begun to pound *en masse* at my door. But the voice. The voice is the desperate wail of a woman. Heart hammering in time with the knocking, my first thought is to wait it out until it stops and whoever it is gives up, goes away. For all I know they are drunk or on some kind of mind-altering substance or both.

And yet. There are the police signs in the park at the end of my street asking for information about the attack on a woman last seen jogging through the rose garden only last week. The same signs that have put me off my early morning run ever since. What if the person at the door is the attacker’s next victim? Although it is summer a cold chill sets in my bones. Just as I am thinking about the park and sign and the woman, the shouting and knocking stops as abruptly as it started. I peel back a corner of curtain to see a woman with a wild furze of red hair buried into her knees crouching in the porch.

Guided by the cold in my bones I go to the door.

What makes my heart stop is the blood. It is everywhere. Running from her nose, splattered like paint down the front of her thin cotton dress, in the ragged half-moons of her nails, oozing from the gash of her mouth so that in the moonlight she looks like some kind of fury. Somewhere in my struggle for words I manage to say “come in.”

“Pleees. Let me lie down. I need to lie down.”

The woman stumbles past me, her voice lowered to a hoarse whisper, in which I detect the blunt tones of an Eastern European accent.

“I feel deeezy. I just need to lie down.”

The stranger grips my wrist and squeezes it with the subtlest of pressure. I notice her pupils have dilated into two black circles with only the slimmest rim of blood-shot whites. I can hardly bear to think what has made them go like that.

“Of course. Whatever you need.” I gently pull at my wrist but the stranger only tightens her grip.

“It was hiiim.”

She takes a haltering step then stops.

“The man who helped me escape. He deed it. He attacked me. I thought he vas going to kiiiill me. I haf never run so fast in my life.”

The dark circles of her eyes glaze over as if she can’t quite believe her own words and her fingers press so hard into my wrist that it begins to hurt.

“Escape from where?”

The unthinkable enters my head and I glimpse a trembling figure in a dark room.

“And I thought I could trust hiiim,” deaf to my question, the stranger continues.

I put my free hand on the woman’s shaking shoulder.

“Don’t worry. You’re safe here.”

I try to catch her eyes but she continues to stare ahead as if she hasn’t heard. It is like I am here but I am not.

“Vat is that?”

The woman jumps back as a streak of fur skims between our ankles emitting a strangulated howl.

“It’s the cat. She’s normally very friendly.”

“I diiislike cats.” The stranger wrinkles her nose. “At home ve had dogs. Cats give me the creeps.”

Letting go of my wrist, she shuffles herself towards my room with a disquieting confidence as if she knows exactly where it is. I look down at my wrist and notice her fingers have left a bright bracelet of blood. A shiver goes down my back and as quickly as the thought comes into my head, I put it out. I’m doing the right thing, I tell myself as I follow her tightly bunched shoulders into my room. She needs my help.

Without waiting for an invitation, the stranger climbs into my bed.

“Plees. I feel siiick. I just need to lie down.”

“Go ahead.” I say trying not to think of the blood on the sheets. “It’s okay. Everything’s going to be okay. Shhhhhh.”

I put a finger to my lips. I realise I’m talking to her like a small child because that’s what her erratic behaviour reminds me of. A small child with the brute strength of a biker.

“Thank you. You are a wery kind person. I owe you my life.”

Her black eyes begin to well up. I don’t know but I feel drawn towards her. I hover a hand over her forehead then think better of it.

“I can’t imagine what you’ve been through.” I pull the eiderdown over her shoulders. “Get some sleep, then in the morning we can take you to a hospital.”

“NO! Pleees no!” The stranger jerks upright. “We cannot go to the hospital!”

Eyes aflame she grips the sides of my bed, her nostrils flared like a scared animal.

“Pleees.”

She says the word with a certain subtle emphasis that makes it sound more like a command.

"Fine."

It will be different in the morning, I tell myself. I will put her in a cab to the nearest Emergency, no arguments, and that will be that.

I sleep on the living room sofa. Except I don't sleep because I can't stop thinking about her. I write in my journal: *Everything happened so quickly. I was asleep in my bed and now I'm awake on the sofa with a stranger in my room. I'm trying to remember how she was when she appeared at my door but I can't get a picture. There is an imprint, a blur of blood and red hair but nothing distinct. Also. She never told me her name.*

When it is light I make two coffees and take the steaming cups to my room. But, stepping inside, I nearly drop them in the horror. Although the curtains are closed, I can see well enough to where she is sitting cross-legged on the bed, her back towards me with my favourite cardigan draped over her shoulders, contemplating the contents from my wardrobe which are lying scattered around her in various forms of dis-attachment from their hangers. But it is not just this. It is all my books, excavated from their shelves and stacked into piles at the foot of the bed. It is not just that. It is the sheets of paper torn from the notebook where I write down my dreams, crumpled into balls on the floor. And it is the putrid smell of gone-off meat and the flies circling in the small bar of light where the curtains don't quite close.

Burning coffee dripping from my wrists, I set the cups down.

“What’s going on? What have you done to my room? I’m sorry but you need to explain.”

My throat is tight with the strain of trying to sound calm.

At my question the stranger slowly pivots herself towards me. In the dim light I see that the blood on her face has dried into a mask of dark lines, while her eyes seem to have grown a milky-ish skin. Instead of answering she cryptically holds out my notebook with the plaintive expression of a suffering saint. What I want to do is grab her but I daren't in case I make her injuries worse so I grab the notebook instead. I scan the scratchily penned lines organised into groups of fives on its open page. In each grouping there are four lines going down and one going across.

“I don't understand. You need to explain to me now what this is.”

“I know it’s hard for people to understand but I have a disorder of obsession and compulsion for a long time. Doctors try and help but it’s difficult. I haf to count to feel safe. I’m so scared....You don’t understand the things I’ve been through.”

Although shakes inside my cardigan like a small child, her explanation is almost too plausible and I don’t know whether or not to believe her. But now she has slept I am determined to get some sense from her.

“What is your name? I didn’t catch it last night.”

“Oh yes. My name. It’s wery difficult to pronounce so I don’t use my real name here. But you. You.” She prods a bloody finger at me. “You can call me Anna.”

The stranger turns away and gestures towards the floor. “You have a lot of books don’t you?”

“I suppose I do.”

My temples are beginning to throb, as if from her cross-legged position on the bed the stranger is psychically slamming into my head.

“I thiiink that people who read books are veird.” The stranger makes the same wrinkling expression as when she saw the cat. “You are not going out and leefing your life. You are leefing though the life of others. Like a parasite!”

“Can we forget about books for a minute? Listen to me. You can’t stay here anymore. I really do think the best place for you is a hospital.”

On the other side of the bedroom door I can hear the cat thundering madly up and down the tiny hall.

“No! That is impossible!” The milky eyes of the woman who has told me to call her Anna even though that is not her real name, rove around the top of my head. “Look. I vill explain. I am wery far from home. Wery far from people who lof me. But there my life vas in danger. The people I lof are killed. I had to leef. So I come here but I don’t have the right papers. They put me in a centre. I am in a room on my own with a man. He attacks me. It

happens again. Another man who comes to bring food says he can help. That is the man who did this. Last night. His friend and his friend's friend."

"I thought you said it was one man?"

Along with the throb in my temples there is now a red glow at the edge of my vision and the woman sitting crossed-legged begins to swim inside a blood-coloured aura.

"No, no. I didn't say that. There were two. Always it was two men. You think one man did all this?" She points to the stains down the front of her dress. "It was horrific. I am in shock. Very great shock. But now I must tell you. It is very important. I cannot go to the hospital. I will be in trouble. They will send me back and I would rather be dead."

Uncrossing her legs, the stranger slithers across the bed towards me, rolling her hips in a way that is almost sexual as the aura breaks away from her in blotches and floats up to join with the flies.

"No one must know I am here. You must tell no one." Through the swirl of red a pair of hands opening and closing like the claws of a crab reaches towards me. "Please. This is my life I am putting with you. You are my only friend. I am so grateful for your kindness. Will you promise?"

I try to look the stranger directly in the eyes but her gaze keeps slipping past me.

"I promise if that's what you want. But you can't stay here." I gesture to the mess of my room. "This is too much. Do you understand?"

"One more night. Then I will go. I just need more rest then I will be fine. That is the promise I make." She flashes a blood-stained smile.

"Look...Anna..."

At a loss what to say, my voice trails off. The room feels suddenly silent and still. I notice the stranger's head has dropped and her hands have stopped gesturing.

"Anna." Smothering my nose from the stench coming off her, I shake her by the shoulder but the stranger is lost in sleep.

Back in the living room I look for my phone. I don't care what she says. I'm going to call the hospital. She has to go – out of my home and into some kind of care whether she wants to or not. I look under the pile of books on the coffee table then fling the cushions off the sofa one at a time. But all I can see are the bloody blotches welling out from the edges of everything I touch, dispersing, multiplying, spotting the whole room.

Then I realise. I pick up my journal from the coffee table and shakily write.

I think I'm going mad. I don't know why I let her in. I don't know what I was thinking and what's worse is I'm getting one of my migraines. I found her in my room taking an inventory of my possessions. Now I can't find my phone and I'm sure she's taken it.

She says she doesn't want a shower. But it's like she's enjoying it, like she's deriving pleasure from it. Like her blood is a kind of power and her wounds a kind of weapon. I'm looking out of the window and it's a beautiful day. I can see the tops of the oaks in the park and I would give anything to be outside running through the trees. Away from her and the flies and the terrible smell. But I can't leave the house because of what she might do. And now I can't call for help either.

The page dissolves into a red mist and I can no longer see the words. Somewhere through the living room door I hear movement coming from the kitchen. I feel my way along the walls towards it. Rounding the kitchen door, I can just make her out through the bloody aura. There she is squatting on the lino, my cardigan hanging off her like a shroud, holding a chopping knife in one hand and a pen in the other, a piece of notepaper and a pile of utensils on the floor beside her.

“Look. This counting thing has got to stop.” I lean against the counter to steady myself and try to look her in the eyes but they are circling everywhere. Or is that the flies?

“Do you not like cooking?” Ignoring me, the stranger waves the chopping knife in my direction.

“Why do you ask that?”

“You haf such blunt knives. At home we did not haf a lot but our knives ver always sharp. Like this!” The stranger picks up another knife from the pile and expertly sweeps its blade up and down that of the first. Raising the sharpened knife in the air, she takes an apple from the bowl and runs it through the centre so the fruit. The throb in my temples is so intense that it feels like my head is being beaten into my shoulders.

“Vat is wrong? You don’t look vell.” Through the red swim I see a hand coming towards me on a wave of rotting breath and I instinctively flinch.

“My phone...” I drag the words out. “Where have you put it?”

“As if I would take your phone. Why would I want to do that? You are my friend. The only one. I thiink you need to lie down.”

A hand locks around my upper arm and I feel myself slump to the ground.

I don’t know how I got here but I’m on the sofa again and the crazy knocking is back. Except it’s not coming from the door but inside my head. It is dark. Night again? All I know is that I am surrounded by the shadows of objects burning at the edges like dying embers. And there is something else too. Something on me. A weight pressing down on the bottom half of my legs. Like when the cat sits on me. Only it is not the cat. Can’t be the cat because I can hear her heavy, snuffling breathing coming from the arm of the sofa above my head.

Although I can’t see, somehow I know. What is there. In the darkness pressing down on my legs. Although I can’t see her I can sense her strange pallid eyes rolling up and down the sofa, looking at me, taking me in, eating me up with her stare. It feels like a test. Her will against mine. Like she is waiting for me to break. I can almost smell her. Almost hear her breathe. And I daren’t move because somehow it feels the only way to survive is to remain very still until whatever it is passes.

Above my head the cat’s snuffle deepens into a low, throaty growl. From the angle I am lying at I can see her shadow on the wall ahead of me. With each growl it seems to grow bigger

and bigger until she is no longer cat but a giant tiger arching its back to the ceiling and thumping its tail to the floor, whiskers stretching from wall to wall. Puffing itself up to fill the whole room, the tiger-cat-shadow draws back on its haunches and I tense as if something is being pulled sharply inside me. There is a sound like a gust of wind and then the pressure on my legs is gone. I kick out a foot and it moves freely. Am I imagining it? Or was I then? Before when it felt real? Was it not what I thought but the door inside my head flapping on its hinges, letting all kinds of things in? The cat jumps from the arm of the sofa onto the cushion next to my head and begins licking the underside of my chin, a small creature again. Even though the weight has gone I don't feel safe. She could be anywhere doing anything and I don't know any more what I can do to stop her.

Collecting myself, I write *It's like she has put a spell on me. My home doesn't feel like my home. My body doesn't feel like my body. My mind doesn't feel like my mind. And now I'm afraid she is outside my door waiting to pounce with a knife. I don't know but I have this feeling she is going to kill the cat and then me.*

I put my journal down and stare into the red-tinged darkness. The throb is still beating my head to pulp. But although I can't sense the whole, I can feel myself beginning to perceive the parts; the red handprints on the doors; the trudge of feet back and forth, back and forth from my room, along the hall, to the kitchen in an endless repeat; the smell of stale meat and the smell of something else too. Something acrid catching at the back of my throat. Smoke. I can smell smoke.

I leap off the sofa.

In the kitchen my eyes search through the swirl of red spots but although the smell is palpable, I can't see anything to explain it. I open the window to let in some air then go to open the back door. Except. The keys are not in their usual place on the hook. I know before I look that the front door key will not be in its place, either. I know too that she is close, is somewhere near

with my cardigan and my phone and my keys and God knows what else, counting my things, scribbling her lists, filling my home with her inhuman smell.

Almost on cue the stranger appears through the kitchen door. Looking straight through me, she hitches her dress to her waist, pulls down a pair of pants that are smeared with the same dark stains as the rest of her and begins calmly to urinate onto the lino as I watch open mouthed. When she has done the stranger very slowly raises her head with a strange dignity. For a moment the aura seems to thin and I can see her perfectly but then it returns, thick and red and smothering. Blinded, I claw at the air and my fingers touch down on the smooth handle of a knife. I curl them around it.

“I am so sorry. I haf the problem with continence since the attacks.” Her strange glassy eyes burn through the cloud as finally she acknowledges me.

“I could not wait. But look, I haf to tell you.” She holds out a fist and opens it like a bad magician performing an unconvincing trick.

“You need to keep these in a safer place. Hooks by the door are no good. Too easy for someone to break in.”

I can just make out the shape of my keys lying in her palm. Without taking my eyes off them I raise my hand. The blur of her body shrinks back.

“Pleees. There is no need. I am your friend. I am caring about you. Vat do you want to do that for?”

Through the cloud everything doubles and I see the gape of two open mouths along with two sets of palms holding up two bunches of keys. I can see two cardigans and two heads of wild, matted hair, the one laid over the other in a shifting assemblage of shapes dripping with blood and piss and flies and red and red and red and red.

“GIVE ME BACK MY KEYS!”

No ears no eyes I fly across the kitchen only these words. I don't hear don't see am only this shooting sharp clean through the red and the red. WHOOOOOSH. Am only GIVE ME

BACK MY KEYS. GIVE. THEM. BACK. NOW! Cold and sharp piercing the place of her eyes
her mouth her neck her chest there is no stopping the pure poetry of the trajectory plotting its
course through all of the points. The kidneys the bowels the sides the exquisite bleeding centre
of her heart her heart her heart with the perfect truth of my sharp gleaming point. GIVE THEM
BACK. GIVE. THEM. BACK. NOW! I am the words and the knife and the hand holding the
knife plunging into the points again again again until there is only the hand holding the knife
stabbing

air.

iv. The Zoo

They walked at a slow, almost ceremonial pace through the crumbling colonnades at the entrance to the zoo, their shadows falling onto the long, winding path that led into the burning haze. The sky was a searing blue and beneath it the trio progressed in silence, as if momentarily awed by the dust-blown expanse of enclosure after enclosure of exotic creatures shimmering in the heat at every side. There was no one else on the path and there was no sound except the crunch of gravel beneath the firm footsteps of Margaret and the lighter patina of Rachel's whose shuffle syncopated with the struggling wheels of baby Jonathon's pram. In the company of the distant beasts and the almost perceptible crackle of sun toasting their shoulders, mother and daughter continued in this manner for some time, not exchanging a word, each with their own reasons for nursing a silent excitement at crossing the threshold of the colonnades and the unfamiliar animal world tantalisingly held out by the zoo.

The silence was shattered when baby Jonathan let out a loud howl from inside the hood of his pram. With nothing except the colonnades to absorb the shock of his cry, his high-pitched wail tore through the open expanse, vibrating on the hot, dry air as though it was coming from everywhere and nowhere. Rachel rushed to the side of the pram to see what the matter was but Margaret grabbed her by the top of her arm and steered her away.

"Leave this to me."

She did not look at Rachel but spoke into the pram as she leant in to scoop the baby out while unbuttoning her sleeveless blouse with her free hand. At a nearby bench, Margaret drew their small procession to a halt beside it.

"Wait here."

She instructed her daughter as she arranged herself on the peeling varnish of the wooden seat and fed a breast from the gap in her blouse towards Jonathon's screaming mouth. Margaret watched with a pleased satisfaction as her baby instinctively nestled into her chest, closed its slippery lips around her swollen breast and dug a set of tiny pink fingers into the firm, veiny

flesh protruding from her blouse. It was almost like magic, how this one single act could induce a state of calm in Jonathon and Margaret's eyes shone with the sense of power this gave her.

Flushed with the hormones released by the tug of the baby's gums, Margaret felt like she could have taken on the blaze of the sun and won.

Attuning to the snuffling, grunting noises coming from Jonathon, she observed the tiny mound of her son's scalp nod in rhythm with the little gulps and sighs he emitted as he blindly suckled her. So freshly out of her body, his skin radiated with a luminosity that seemed to glow with traces of her. Margaret bent to kiss the baby on the fur of dark hair covering his head. The cord was still strong between them, she could sense it. She had always wanted a boy and now her wish had been granted. Stroking her son's cheek as he fed, Margaret allowed herself to sense the trajectory of his destiny – a son who would grow to be clever and handsome and strong. She could feel it in the walls of her womb which still held the shape of him and she could feel it when she looked at him and saw something of herself gaze back.

Margaret looked up and saw her daughter was nowhere in sight. She was less worried than she was angry. She had told Rachel to wait and what had she done? The minute she turned her back, the girl had run. Her shoulders contracted and the veins in her temples began to harden. She let out what sounded like a snort. As for Rachel, it had been settled.

It was not that Rachel had deliberately set out to disobey her mother so much as she hadn't been able to keep still. It was too much thinking of all the animals, so close but just out of sight. There were so many she wanted to see. Most especially, there were the panthers –the beloved creatures of her drawings and dreams whom she had yet to meet in real life. Meanwhile, the sun dress she had never liked but that her mother had made her wear was sticking with sweat to her back. It was too long and there was too much material and it flapped against her calves when she walked in a way that made Rachel feel all bandaged up. She didn't want to wear the dress. She wanted to be like Mowgli in "The Jungle Book" – unburdened by clothes and free to swing

upside down from the branches of trees. Her mother otherwise occupied, she had wrestled out of the dress and rearranged it around her waist in the closest approximation she could manage to a loincloth. For good measure, she had picked up a feather from the path and stuffed it into the elastic of one of her hair bobbles.

Leaving her mother at the bench, Rachel sped off up the path, elbows moving like pistons as tiny clouds of dust erupted from the stampede of her Clark's shoes against the gravel. The distant shapes of the animals, too far away to tell what they were, shimmered in the heat on all sides of her. As she ran Rachel dreamed of making friends with a panther and bringing it home. She would make a den for it in the bushes at the bottom of the garden and feed it the cat's biscuits. It would be her friend and protect her from all the bad things like the clutching hands that lived under her bed.

"Rachel!" Margaret's irate voice broke up her reverie. "RACHEL! Stop this minute!"

Chest plastered in sweat and bobbles hanging loosely from damp threads of hair, Rachel stopped dead in her tracks. There was the pram furiously rumbling up the path towards her, her mother's red hair flying like sparks above the bonnet. As she approached, Margaret's arm swung out from the behind the pram and cuffed her on the back of the knees.

"What do you think you're playing at? Put that dress back on immediately!"

"I was hot." Rachel reluctantly untied her makeshift loin cloth and shrugged the crumpled garment back over her head.

"Well you wouldn't be if you hadn't run off like that."

Margaret pulled each strap into a tight knot with a sharp jerk and Rachel flinched where it dug into her shoulders.

"From now on I want you to stay by my side, do I make myself clear? Zoos are places where little girls can easily get lost and I want you where I can see you."

The first animals they came to were the elephants. But as Rachel skipped up to their enclosure, she immediately sensed something wasn't right. None of the elephants were standing up and they showed no interest either in the shallow mud bath at the centre of their enclosure or the buckets of food smelling of sawdust and shrivelled parsnips that had been left out for them. Instead, they lay as one in a heap of sagging ears, limp trunks and coarse, leathery bellies. Their hides were a bluish anaemic lilac and, except for the barely perceptible rise and fall of their sides and faint wheezing coming from their trunks, they appeared almost as a pile of life-less corpses – bloated, sagging, pale and crawling with flies.

Face pressed between the rusty iron bars of the fencing, the elephants reminded Rachel of her mother and how, since baby Jonathon had been born, she had seemed to be spending more and more time collapsed on the living room sofa, as if it used up all her energy simply to breathe. The elephants seemed so unbearably sad that Rachel wished she could climb into the enclosure and hug them.

As Rachel was thinking this one of the elephants began to stir and she watched hopefully as a white crescent trunk pushed itself out from the heap. The tusk was followed by an outstretched leg that made as if to push itself up but almost immediately the leg buckled and the elephant it belonged to slumped back into the mass of wilting flesh as it let out a low moan. This elephant's moan set off the others as one by a one a wave of trunks weakly swam upwards, letting out a tremorous wail before sinking back into the anaemic sea of bodies swimming with eyes that Rachel now saw were gleaming with tears.

The elephants' wail reverberated down her spine and sank into her feet. Rachel felt it as the crushing weight of a wave dragging her under and she wiped a tear away. Since baby Jonathon had been born her world had acquired a new complexity. Before there had simply been things she didn't know she didn't know. Now there seemed to be a new set of rules with a logic she didn't understand. It was like standing on the edge of a chasm looking at everything she

didn't know fall in. She thought of Mowgli living in the wild among the jungle animals and knew what it was she wanted to be.

When Rachel turned away from the elephant enclosure, she saw that her mother deep in conversation with a zookeeper on the other side of the path. The zookeeper was leaning on the handle of his wheelbarrow saying something to her mother. He stopped talking and pushed back his cap as she burst out laughing and enthusiastically nodded her head.

The keeper was the first person Rachel had seen since they had arrived. He was easily the tallest man Rachel had ever come across and she couldn't help but stare. His legs, which were long and thin like a spider's, seemed to go all the way up to the pits of his arms. As Margaret's laughter subsided, the keeper stepped away from his barrow and, hitching up his trousers by the belt. The back of her mother's head now fell still as the keeper's palm dropped with an emphatic clap onto her shoulder. A dazzle of bright light glanced from his hand that resolved itself into a large signet ring winking in the strong rays of the sun.

Rachel was trying to work out what it was the keeper could be talking to her mother about that made her laugh and serious both at the same time, when the keeper caught sight of her.

“Well, hello there! And what's your name?”

The zookeeper pulled forward his cap and crouched towards Rachel's level. The officialness of his uniform, how big and black it was, made Rachel feel slightly in awe of him. She smiled nervously. His cap was covered in dust, as was the dark serge of his jacket and trousers, which Rachel thought must make him very hot on a day like this. The keeper smelt strongly of whatever was in his barrow and Rachel wrinkled her nose. His face was shaded by the peak of his cap so that she couldn't really make anything more out than the crimson bow of his lips and behind them, a set of yellow crooked teeth like the ones in the posters she had seen on at the dentist's. But his voice was deep and reassuring.

“I'm Rachel.” She ventured.

“Pleased to meet you.”

The zookeeper held out a bony, white hand that was all knuckles and joints beneath a sparse growth of dark hairs and Rachel took it. The inside of keeper’s palm felt cold and dry around her hot, sticky hand. He shook her firmly in a way that made Rachel feel like the keeper took her seriously, which she liked, although he squeezed her hand a little too tightly, leaving a red mark from his ring which was still sore afterwards.

“Why are the elephants sad?” she asked the keeper.

“One of them died yesterday. It was a baby. There was a virus. The other elephants managed to recover but the baby elephant just wasn’t strong enough.”

Rachel’s mouth dropped open and her chin began to quiver.

“Cheer up! The elephants will be back to normal again in a day or two. If you like, I can take you all over to the reptile house. It’s time to feed the snakes and you can watch.”

The keeper picked up his wheelbarrow and turned to go.

The reptile house was in an ancient red brick building with a sagging roof. Creeping ivy sprung from the brackets of the rusting pipes that ran down its exterior while the frosted glass of its windows were black with grime. Mother, daughter and pram followed the keeper as he ducked through a door and turned on the light. For a brief moment the interior was illuminated with a hard neon light, only to seconds later dissolve into darkness.

“I’ll be buggered! I knew I should have changed that bulb!” the keeper cursed the blackness. “If you’d be so kind as to wait here a moment, I’ll fetch a torch from the storeroom. Oh, sorry, my apologies,” his arm knocked Margaret’s as he slipped past.

In the light-less reptile house Margaret closed her eyes and let the velvety cool of the darkness wash over her. She had felt the keeper’s breath on her bare shoulder like the shadow of a caress slipping inside her and inflaming the blaze in her veins. It seemed too much of a coincidence for the lights to have just gone out like that. He had made the bulb go out so that he

could come to her in the darkness without arousing Rachel's suspicion. Margaret remembered the way he'd looked at her when he'd suggested they come here, how his pupils had glittered and one side of lips had turned up in the suggestion of a complicit smile. Heartbeat racing, Margaret let out another half snort.

The keeper had only been gone a few seconds but Margaret felt his absence acutely. There was the cool space his shadow had inhabited only moments ago next to her. It was almost like she could reach out and touch him, like the towering hieratic figure who she often sensed standing over her while she slept.

A cone of torch light burning through the dark announced the keeper's return. Rachel was pressing her face into the glass front of a tank when the beam of the torch revealed its contents to be not the two snakes she'd thought she had been able to make out through the gloom but one snake with two heads. It was thin and white, almost to the point of transparency and from the coil of its tail rose a slender neck that split off into two ending in two sets of eyes and two forked tongues shooting in out and out of the snake's two mouths. Rachel gasped and drew back from the glass.

"Why does this snake have two heads?"

"This fine lady here is what we call a Siamese snake. They're very rare but I think them quite beautiful don't you?"

The keeper gave Rachel a toothy smile. Behind him, her mother rocked Jonathon back and forth in his pram, looking at the keeper with a strange expression that made Rachel think her mother must be as puzzled as her.

"It's quite marvellous what strange and wonderful things zoos contain! She's just one of the many reasons I like the reptile house so much. People don't seem to like snakes very much."

"Well, I'm not afraid of snakes," Margaret interjected, drawing herself and the pram up to the keeper's side and staring into the tank as if Siamese snakes were of great interest.

“As you shouldn’t be,” the keeper demurred but his smile had straightened into a serious expression. “The problem with this one is feeding it. The two heads fight for the same food and the danger is that one head ends up biting off the other and BOOM!” The keeper clapped his hands. “The snake ends up eating itself! Which reminds me, I have a job to do.”

He gave Rachel a wink before disappearing in the direction of the storeroom where he had procured the torch earlier and returning a few minutes later holding an albino mouse by the tail. Rachel drew a sharp intake of breath. At Pet Club during school lunch hour she loved watching the class mouse, which was albino too, whirl at high speed on its wheel although, secretly, she had always wanted to set the mouse free. And now Rachel wasn’t sure if she wanted to watch this little creature, who she would also like to liberate, instead meet a gory fate.

“Don’t worry,” offered the keeper as if he could read her thoughts. “It doesn’t feel anything. The snake breaks its neck in its jaws and it dies immediately.” The keeper made a cracking noise with his knuckles. “Just like that!”

He opened the tank and dropped the mouse inside and, within seconds, a set of jaws closed themselves around its trembling neck. Hands clasped over her mouth, Rachel watched the mouse’s back legs of the mouse wriggle frantically before disappearing into the snake’s gullet.

“Just look at that! Swallowed in one!” Margaret’s voice quivered with a note of jubilation.

“Yes, it really is quite remarkable,” acknowledged the keeper.

“Why can’t the snake eat grass?”

Rachel understood the snake would starve if it didn’t get fed but at the same time she didn’t want the mouse to die either. Some of the other children in her class were vegetarian so she knew it was possible.

“Well, little Rachel.”

The keeper put a hand on Rachel’s shoulder. She could feel the heavy gold of his signet ring pressing down on the bone as he squeezed it.

“Some animals are carnivores and they simply can’t survive without meat. The mouse dies so that the snake can live but out in the wild, snakes are the prey of hawks so that *they* can live. Only the hawks aren’t safe either because snakes can slither up trees and eat their eggs and round and round it goes.” The keeper circled a long, bat-like arm. “It might seem cruel but that’s nature’s way.”

Rachel tugged at the sides of her dress. It was confusing because the snake eating the mouse had made her upset but when the keeper explained, everything did seem to make a kind of sense. He sounded so certain about everything, like a headmaster or a policeman, and she felt confident that if anyone understood these things then he did.

After the reptile house, the troupe of Margaret, Rachel and baby Jonathan set off in the direction of the panthers. On either side of the path the landscape unfolded into a dust bowl of frazzled grass that seemed to visible smoke beneath the burn of the sun. Occasionally a solitary rock or rheumatic-looking tree bearing only a handful of dry leaves threw a shadow across the dead grass. Apart from the buzz of flies and the occasional groan from the shadows, the zoo was strangely silent. Inside each of their enclosures the zoo’s inmates clustered around what shade they could.

Margaret strode on, hands fastened around the handle of the pram, with a grim determination not to give in to the searing temperatures baking the animals inside their skins. She could still feel the weight of where the keeper’s signet ring had momentarily rested on her shoulder. It was like an electrical charge going through her and borne up on this surge she pushed the pram with a wild alacrity. With glittering eyes she watched her daughter trot ahead of the pram. She never wanted to hold my hand, Margaret thought. *She never wanted to be held. She is wilful and full of attitude and no daughter of mine and I will not have it. I will not have it. I will not have it.*

Convinced the panthers were near, Rachel gazed with a new keenness across the arid expanse of the zoo. She noticed the fencing around the enclosures seemed to have disappeared

and that what trees there were had all disappeared. Rachel wiped her hands against her dress, which had turned from white to the same dull grey as the gravel on the path. She couldn't see any animals - panthers or otherwise – only burnt grass and big sky and the shadows of lone rocks scattered across the scrub.

“Are we near the panthers yet?” Rachel turned to her mother.

“It's a big zoo Rachel. We all have to be patient.”

Margaret jerked the pram to a stop and ducked beneath its carriage to pull out a camera.

“Sit over there!” She commanded as she fiddled with the camera's settings.

The make she had was now impossible to get and she'd bargained with the man in the shop when she'd bought it to get a significant discount and these two things taken together were precisely why she liked it.

“No! Not there.... There! And sit down. Properly! You're not a zoo animal! Now look at me and smile! Did you not hear me? I said *smile!*” Margaret coughed and spat through a mouthful of dust.

She'd had to put up with Rachel and her difficult moods all day and she was rapidly running out of patience and her temples were beating with a merciless throb as she remembered the zookeeper's words outside the elephant enclosure. “*She has no rights. She belongs to you....*”

Margaret placed a finger on the camera's shutter and looked through the camera lens at her daughter who was squinting back, her face all scrunched up like a ball of paper, insolent and full of attitude.

“Can't you just smile?” she hissed.

Sitting on the gravel path as her mother had instructed her, Rachel was trying her best. But the sun was in her eyes and it hurt to look directly into it. It hurt, too, where the rough gravel of the path was digging into her knees. All Rachel wanted was make her mother happy. But she just couldn't do it, just couldn't stop squinting as the sun drew tears from her eyes.

“Are. You. Not. Listening. To. A. Word. I. Said. Smile.”

In the hideous glare of the sun everything went black and Rachel could see nothing except a swarm of blotches violently swirling in the vague shape of her mother. The blotches were swollen and dark. They pulsed and expanded. Gushing forth, they surged into the shape of a long, swaying neck carrying at its end a blunt, hairless head while at the back the blotches gushed into the form of a muscular tail.

A trickle of pee ran down the inside of Rachel's leg. But she had no sense of her body, only of the dripping mouth yawning before her and the sense that somewhere inside it were the corpses of baby elephants and the spasming legs of white mice churning like debris inside a black hole as a thousand hands swarmed up out of the darkness coming to get her, coming to get her, coming to get her. A large hand fell on her shoulder followed by the genial voice of the zookeeper.

“Just the person I was looking for! It's feeding time and the animals are hungry.”

Part Two

Writing-As-Shadow-Work

‘There is no light without shadow and no psychic wholeness without imperfection. To round itself out, life calls not for perfection but for completeness; and for this the “thorn in the flesh” is needed, the suffering of defects without which there is no progress and no ascent’

Carl Jung [1974] 2002: 237

‘Only poetically and in the imaginary can we approach these places of fire’

Hélène Cixous 1993: 53

IV. Meeting The Shadow

This section shows how the early creative experiments of Part One led to the development of writing-as-shadow-work. It discusses how the Jungian strategy of active imagination informed the evolution of my creative processes. It explores the difficulties, dangers and risks entailed in the practice of shadow work and writing about trauma and provides an overview of pluralistic and restorative modes of writing that focus on narrative as a device to work through traumatic experiences. In addition, this section looks at the influence of Jung on the writing of Winterson in order to demonstrate how writing-as-shadow-work builds on existing approaches to establish an aesthetics of Jungian psychoanalysis and related methodology.

i. From the theatre of the unconscious to the stage of the page

A model of identity akin to ‘post-structuralist... theories that challenge notions of a unified self... and conceptualise identity as constructed, malleable and discontinuous’ (Frank [1995] 2013: 256) Jung’s notion of the psyche is that of a whole composed of the conscious mind, the personal unconscious and the collective unconscious, which is host to what he calls archetypes. ‘A psychic phenomenon that transmits unconscious reactions or spontaneous impulses to consciousness’ (Jung [1964] 1972: 67), archetypes are composed of the inherited instincts and universal characteristics that manifest as symbols and images in dreams. Appearing on this interior stage as a spectrum of dark figures (in addition to other threatening symbols) who are always the same sex as us, and who collectively represent the unwanted parts of ourselves that we have disowned, the shadow is one of the primary archetypes among the many porous and shape-shifting intra-psychic phenomena that appear in the tenebrous narratives of our dreams.

Building on Jung, the Jungian analyst James Hillman claims that individuation is a transformative process that occurs through an intentional engagement with the dramatic structures, symbols and personae of our dreams. He suggests that healing occurs

when we move out of the audience and onto the stage of the psyche, become characters in a fiction (even the God-like voice of Truth, a fiction) and as the drama intensifies, the catharsis occurs, we are purged from attachments to literal destinies, find freedom in playing parts... never *being* the whole but *participating in* the whole

[1983]1994: 38.

Devising a method with which to meet these shadowy contents in waking life, Jung developed a dialoguing technique which he calls active imagination. 'Poetic, dramatic (and) literary in nature' (Hillman [1983] 1994: 56), active imagination is a creative strategy that involves approaching the symbols and figures of dream as if they are real in a delicate act that oscillates between putting words in their mouths and surrendering authorial control in order to let them speak in their own voices. A blend of fact and fiction, reality and fantasy, poetics and psychology, Hillman describe this process as a form of 'negative capability, a wilful suspension of disbelief in (these actors) and of belief in oneself as their author' ([1983]1994: 59).

Where Hillman frames psychoanalytic story-telling and dialoguing techniques in literary terms, in *Three Steps On The Ladder of Writing* (1993), Hélène Cixous offers a literary poetics of descent that echoes the psychoanalytic processes of individuation and active imagination. Observing a synergy between dreaming and writing, she claims 'dreams remind us that there is a treasure locked away somewhere, and writing is the means to try and approach the treasure' (1993: 88). Using the ladder of writing to access the contents of my unconscious, it was through imagining the shadowy selves of myself and my mother in story that I was able to give voice to the 'immense and extensive feelings that the dreamer, in real life, is unable to cry out' (Estés [1992] 1998: 381), speculatively acting them out on the page as a way of mirroring the individuation process and unlocking their treasure.

Both imagining the worst and fantasising about the possibility of triumphing over it, I realised through the early-stage experiments presented in Part One, how I could not only use aspects of Jungian psychoanalysis as a *literary* device to communicate the porous nature of these shadowy selves but also as a *therapeutic* device to perform them – adapting writing to shadow work (as in active imagination and the process of individuation) and shadow work to writing (as in turning this approach into a form of art) in a synthesis of both. This insight in turn led to a developmental shift that saw my thesis evolve into a deeper exploration of how I could adapt the healing drama of active imagination in order to enact a form shadow work on the page.

ii. Danger: death!

My experience of shadow work in therapy, however, told me that applying this approach to writing would not be without dangers and difficulties. As I had experienced first-hand, the journey of shadow work is to leave behind the person you thought you were and cross over a threshold from certitude and solidity to a dark, liminal place of unknowing. It is to paradoxically find yourself by first losing yourself and to become yourself by first dying to yourself, confronting the very things you most fear in a process of radical metamorphosis that involves a total dissolution of the egoic self before anything else can emerge.

Jung speaks about this process in terms of alchemy, in which in the base materials of our personal dirt – our guilt, fear, shame and pain – are transmuted into the gold of what he calls a supra-personal self large enough to contain our potential for both absolute darkness and absolute love in a harmonious self-regulating whole. Confronting our imperfections, we are swallowed whole by a monstrous whale which plunges us into a darkness that feels like death. Inside its mythological belly we pass, ‘beyond the confines of the visible world... inward to be born again’ (Campbell 1990: 249) in an archetypal journey that situates this symbolic death of the ego as the grounds for new life.

A difficult, dangerous process centred on the Taoist principle of enantiodromia, or the play of opposites, it is not one that practitioners of Jungian psychoanalysis suggest should be taken lightly. Clinical psychologists Hal Stone and Sidra Winkelman describe the dangers of the dark, unprocessed contents of the unconscious as an animal in a cage with ‘an enormous potential for destruction’ (1990: 286), which must be only approached when, or if, we are psychologically ready and willing to face what we most fear. To mishandle this animal, they imply, is to risk a traumatic descent into an interminable darkness from which we might never return. ‘The most dangerous work you can do. It is like bomb disposal but you are the bomb’ (Winterson 2011: 172), could I successfully continue the process of individuation that I had begun with Mandy through the medium of creative writing? Or would the animal in my cage and the Shadow in my darkest recesses bind me and re-traumatise me and keep me stuck in the past?

Cathy Caruth suggests the traumatic event is so unbearable that it becomes unconsciously buried in the body as a silent voice, ‘that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available’ (1996: 4). Highlighting the ethical challenges of writing on trauma, she argues that to do so is essentially problematic because this voice can never be fully known or remembered and so never fully expressed. Picking up on this thread, Jenn Ashworth suggests that putting the ‘pre-literate howling, violent monster that lurks in the shadows, hell-bent on revenge’ (2019: 106) into words risks running ‘bloody sheets... through the washing machine of prose’ (2019: 107), resulting in sanitised versions of the traumatic experience that fail to convey the full extent of its horror.

Where Ashworth interrogates the problem of truth-telling in relation to writing about trauma, Celia Hunt points to the adjacent risk of trauma writing that tends ‘towards flattened self-narratives, legible in only one dark context’ (2013: 58) through an over-identification with the shadow. Meanwhile, Jean-Michel Ganteau frames these twin risks of flattening and sanitising the trauma narrative in terms of a writer’s degree of vulnerability. He suggests that at one level, a writer’s vulnerability can overshadow the nuances of the traumatic experience ‘as if such

vulnerability defined the essence of what it is to be human' (2020, 130). However, he also points out that a false sense of *invulnerability* can result in a 'problematical closure' (2020, 139) where 'euphoric notations (give) pride of place to success and healing' (2020, 134) in a way that equally over-simplifies the complexity of trauma.

While these perspectives highlight the dangers of narratives that either falsely brighten the darkness of the traumatic experience or morbidly fixate on it, Jungian psychoanalysis argues that the way out of the darkness is, first, to go down into it. A process that 'aims not at silence but at speech, not at stillness but at story or conversation' ([1983] 1994: 79) it offers an alternative mode for thinking and writing about trauma from a psychoanalytical perspective that acknowledges the difficulty of putting the silent voice of the wound into words while also stressing the importance of doing so.

Neither advocating for the sanitation of the shadow, nor that it should be left unapproached and undisturbed, Jungian psychoanalysis proposes that 'the shadow needs to be acknowledged and given its place. You must invite it to the dinner table, this dubious guest, civilise it as best you can, and see what it has to offer. You cannot leave it outside the door' (Signell 1990: 257). Since 'the shadow becomes hostile only when (she) is ignored or misunderstood' (von Franz [1964] 1972: 173), it is by meeting with the dark aspects of the self that are produced and amplified by trauma that this abject figure of horror has the potential to paradoxically become a wise teacher.

Where Ganteau frames narrative identity in terms of levels of vulnerability, Jung views psychological identity in terms of developmental stages composed of the first and second halves of life. According to Jungian psychoanalysis, the purpose of the first half of life is to develop a healthy ego as a scaffolding to protect us from the knocks and blows of life. However, 'to be a child survivor beyond its time is too over-identified with an injured archetype' (Estés [1992] 1998: 196). If the ego remains unchecked, it risks the danger of dominating the personality and uncomfortable aspects of the psyche, like the shadow, are buried even more deeply. Neither emotionally ready nor sufficiently psychologically robust to meet with my shadows in the first half

of my life, the novel I wrote in my thirties about the tortured Annie and her neurotic suffering is symptomatic of my own level of vulnerability and ego fragility at that time.

It is the function of the second half of life to dismantle the ego – should we be open to the profound change entailed in the individuation process. In my case, it took a breakdown and chronic illness to catalyse this transition and begin a ‘dance of bearing the tension of opposites (that) is always intricate’ towards ‘the widening of consciousness, integrating what was formerly unconscious and possibly seen as evil’ (Brewi & Brennan 1990: 261) both off and on the page. In other words, just as Ganteau suggests degrees of vulnerability to be a factor in determining trauma narratives, so shadow work pivots on degrees of psychological self-awareness. A second half of life pursuit, timing is everything.

While Caruth draws attention to the challenge of trauma representation, sociologist Arthur C. Frank builds on the Jungian archetype of the wounded healer, who alchemically embodies the opposites of illness and health, to propose a restorative mode of writing via a ‘wounded storyteller’ ([1995] 2013). Viewing stories as a means to recover ‘the voices that illness... has taken away’ ([1995] 2013: xx) by ‘way of re drawing maps and finding new destinations’ ([1995] 2013: 53) in order to instigate a restorative process of meaning making, Frank offers a ‘pedagogy of suffering’ that echoes the Jungian process of individuation. A ‘pluralistic model of trauma [which] suggests that criticism may explore trauma as a subject that invites the study of the relationship between language, the psyche and behaviour without assuming the classic definition of trauma that asserts an unrepresentable and pathological universalism’ (Balaev 2014:4), Frank’s concept of the wounded storyteller offers a blueprint for thinking ethically about trauma. Neither over-identified with their dark nature nor over-simplifying it, the wounded storyteller is engaged in a ‘perpetual self-reflection on the sort of person that one’s story is shaping one into, entailing the requirement to change that self-story if the wrong self is being shaped’ ([1995] 2013: 158) with narrative operating as a mode to enact healing.

Expanding on Frank, Louise DeSalvo also draws parallels between therapeutic and literary approaches to storytelling, claiming that both can allow us ‘to take experience and re-enter it and represent it after the fact in some kind of symbolic way’ (2000: 55), as a means to process trauma. Building on this equivalence, Reina van der Wiel references the writing of Winterson and Virginia Woolf to illustrate how literary modes of storytelling can offer an equivalent to the container of therapy as a means to

instigate, facilitate or represent a transformational process of working-through of trauma by successfully containing its emotionally overwhelming content through form and style. Within such a framework, literary form functions as a container by offering a means to control, transform and gain distance from traumatic emotions

2014: 48.

In a chapter called ‘The Night Sea Voyage’, named after the Jungian archetype for a descent into the underworld, Winterson writes of her own breakdown in the second half of life precipitated by unprocessed trauma allied to the mother wound. Defining her shadow as ‘that part of me, living alone, hidden, in a filthy abandoned lair’ (2011: 171), Winterson goes on to describe how she employed story as her container through the act of writing the children’s book *The Battle Of The Sun* (2009). In her memoir she explains that she chose to write a narrative aimed at a younger audience because the ‘demented creature’ that stood in for her wounded inner child was ‘willing to be told a story (and) the grown-up me had to tell it to her’ (2011: 173).

An allegorical descent narrative set in Elizabethan London, the story opens with the young hero Jack waking up in darkness and ‘feeling like he was inside a giant animal... he remembered the Bible story of Jonah and the whale and wondered, if he too had been swallowed’ (2009: 13). Situating Jack in a ‘darkness that was so dark’ (2009: 13), Winterson sets up a clear echo between

the archetypal hero's journey, in which Jonah and the whale is one of the many symbolic substitutes for the night sea voyage, and her own passage through the darkness of breakdown. Mirroring the psychoanalytic process in story, Jack's battle to bring the light of the sun into the exceptional darkness that has descended on London courtesy of an evil dragon, can be read as an extended metaphor for Jung's stages of individuation.

A form of reinstating 'the constructive integration or collaboration between body and mind, feeling and thinking, so as to enable the process of symbolisation, thinking and working-through' (van der Wiel 2014: 52), in her memoir Winterson describes how, as part of this process, she created *The Creature Sawn In Two*. A composite of the voice she heard while in the depth of psychosis coming from the 'the lost furious vicious child living alone in the bottom bog' (2011: 173) and that of Mrs Winterson, she describes how inventing this shadow character meant that her 'grown up' self could talk back to it. Exemplifying how the Jungian technique of active imagination can be translated into a work of literary fiction, Winterson writes of how she became 'saner than I have ever been, inasmuch as I knew there was part of me that was in the madness... (but) now I could contain it' (2011: 177).

iii. An aesthetics of in-betweens

Images, projections and dark echoes of the things they are conjoined to, shadows cast themselves like spells, hiding, revealing and hinting at what can never really be seen or known. Intangible, mutable and permeable, they exist in the in-between and at the liminal edges of things, shrinking and lengthening, thickening and thinning, as if with a life of their own. In folklore and myth, shadows without a body are the ghosts of dead souls and the protectors of living ones. While bodies without shadows are vampires preying on the living to give substance where there is none. If shadows are places where dark things lurk, to have no shadow at all is to be darkness personified.

Symbolically associated with the supernatural and the uncanny, shadows often come with a sense of danger or threat but, to be without them, it would seem, is the most dangerous of all.

Where Winterson uses allegory in the form of a children's novel as a fictional device to mirror meeting the shadow in story, I was interested in how I could develop the shape-shifting qualities of shadows as an aesthetic. Just as the Jungian analyst Marie Louise von Franz describes dreams 'as... a moonlit landscape: (where) all the contents are blurred and merge into one another, and one never knows exactly what or where anything is, or where one thing begins or ends' (1972, 173), writing-as-shadow-work blurs the boundaries between psychoanalysis and creative writing, fact and fiction, past and present, self and other. Porous, permeable and shape-shifting in content, it is also porous, permeable and shape-shifting in form – as this thesis will go on to demonstrate.

V. 'On The Other Side Of The Facts'

This section considers the specific uses of autobiographical fiction as a container for my project of writing-as-shadow-work. It looks at how Winterson and twentieth century British writer Anna Kavan employ this mode to write about difficult relationships with their mothers as a framework within which to situate my own approach. In addition, it explores how I synthesised the characteristics of autobiographical fiction with aspects of Jungian psychoanalysis to further develop my strategy of writing-as-shadow-work in the mid-stage stories.

i. The magic circle of autobiographical fiction

Drawing on their mythic origins as permeable boundary markers between the solid and numinous, matter and energy, in Jung's system of archetypes, circles symbolise the cycle of life and psychic wholeness. It is inside the charged liminal space of the magic circle that healing occurs and transformation happens (Jung [1964] 1972, [1974] 2002). An ambiguous hybrid form operating at

the porous threshold between fact and fiction, memory and imagination, truth and tale, in a similar way ‘autobiographical fiction allows the victim/writer a chance to inhabit... (another) version of the world’ (Jensen 2016: 442) and explore self-experience inside the protective circle of fictionalisation.

As Winterson observes, ‘truth is a very complex thing. For a writer, what you leave out says as much as those things you include’ (2011: 8), while the absences and negative spaces most certainly tell a form of a shadow story. Since it is commonly understood within the fields of autobiography and life-writing that an element of ‘fictionality (is) a necessary part of the autobiographic process and not something external to it or incompatible with it’ (Gudmundsdottir 2003: 4), the hybrid nature of autobiographical fiction allows for creative explorations of the past as both a real and mythic place. It enables writers to establish control over their narrative and compensate in story for all the ways the experience of trauma takes it away (Frank [1995] 2013, DeSalvo 2000).

In *The Limits of Autobiography* (2001) Leigh Gilmore claims it is no coincidence that writers who have experienced trauma should turn to the permeable form of autobiographical fiction in order to explore alternative languages and narratives as a way of negotiating the emotional, ethical and technical challenges of saying the unspeakable and communicating the intangible. Highlighting ‘the boundary between art and lies, form and subjectivity’ (2001, 5), Gilmore argues that autobiographical fiction not only interrogates notions of fixed truths but also those of a fixed self. She suggests that it is the mutability associated with autobiographical fiction which writers can harness towards developing a new knowledge of the traumatised self that incorporates emotional truths.

Noting a specific correlation between writers choosing to employ the form and those who have also experienced childhood abuse, Meg Jensen observes that, for these writers in particular, ‘it must only be in the realm of the imagination that meaning can be ascribed to acts of violent emotional or physical incursion’ (2016: 444) through the distancing device of fiction, metaphor

and the symbolic. Neither wholly fact-based nor completely made up, she asserts ‘the truth that autobiographical fiction tells is the truth of loss and of an unsymbolisable, narcissistically installed absence that... can only ever be insufficiently articulated by parrahesiatic post-traumatic speech’ (Jensen 2014: 721). In this sense, the imaginal space of autobiographical fiction can give meaning to the apparently meaningless while simultaneously pointing to the mystery at the heart of existence where the full story can only be known by the edges of its traces – if it can ever be known at all.

ii. **‘Faithful and invented, accurate and misremembered, shuffled in time’: the ‘cover story’ of *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit***

Where autobiographical fiction and its extensive cohort of variants, including the semi-autobiographical novel, creative life writing and a multitude of other hybrid strains, have become an increasingly popular mode amongst writers, particularly (although not exclusively) those wishing to address trauma, Winterson arguably pioneered the contemporary use of the form with her 1985 semi-autobiographical novel *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit*. Narrated in first person by the protagonist Jeanette, it is a fictionalised account of the author’s adoption into a working-class Pentecostal family dominated by an eccentric collapsed mother figure.

Troubling the ethical difficulties of writing about trauma in relation to memory, identity and truth-telling alongside the emotional challenges of approaching difficult subject matter, *Oranges* engages with ‘autobiography’s central issues without reproducing its formal conventions’ (Gilmore 2001: 120). In her memoir, *Why Be Happy?* Winterson describes how she constructed *Oranges* from ‘an assemblage of ‘experience *and* experiment... the observed and the imagined’ (2011: 3) that is ‘faithful and invented, accurate and misremembered, shuffled in time’ (2011: 6). This faithful and invented version of Winterson’s childhood includes the character Elsie who goes out of her way to show kindness to the young Jeanette. However, Winterson reveals in her memoir that Elsie never existed. Illustrating *Orange’s* ‘complex process of fictionalisation and symbolisation

(that) can create a space in which experiences that appear to defy confrontation and verbalisation... can be tackled and explored from multiple perspectives' (Schönfelder 2013: 259), Elsie's character operates as a stand in for the one friend Winterson claims she wished she'd had.

A 'cover story' (2011: 6) offering a version of events that Winterson could live with, in her memoir Winterson also shares how she took an experience of sexual assault out because she was not ready to process it at the time. Intentionally setting out to depict Jeanette as 'a hero in a shipwreck story' (2011: 6), in this way *Oranges* draws a magic circle of fiction around the 'things we can't say, because they are too painful' (2011: 8). It operates as a form of self-protection from truths that are too difficult, too complex, too unspeakable in order to offer 'a vision of the self that is based on the individual's imagination rather than on the "truth" of the past' (2013: 269).

A novel of two halves, *Oranges* also incorporates a parallel quest story which follows the androgynous hero/ine Winnet Stonejar and her troubled relationship with an ambiguous shape-shifting figure, who variously appears as the Red Queen from *Alice In Wonderland* and a tricky sorcerer. Commenting on Jung's interest in fairy tales, Winterson observes 'we can't negotiate with that powerful but enraged part of us until we teach it better manners – which means getting it back in the bottle to show who is really in charge. This isn't repression but it is about finding a container' (2011: 34-35) in a way that can allow writers to author their own fates from a place of relative safety.

Enacting the tropes of fairy tale in the text, Winterson shows how Winnet literally draws a magic circle 'to protect... from the elements and the like' (1985: 141) as a way to do the inner work of learning to breathe. Exercising control 'but in such a way as to leave a gap, an opening' (2011: 8), although 'dangerous thoughts and the shadows' are put away 'for a more convenient time' (1985: 172), Winterson resists a neatly tied up ending. Instead, the invisible thread connecting the sorcerer to Winnet and Jeanette to her mother is left hanging. One tug and the whole story might all unravel.

iii. **‘Shadows in a beckoning glass’: the night-time language of Anna Kavan’s *Sleep Has His House***

Like *Oranges*, Anna Kavan’s *Sleep Has His House* ([1973] 2002) offers a fictionalised account based on the autobiographical facts of growing up with a difficult mother. Also like *Oranges*, it is informed by a psychological understanding of the self that challenges ‘rationalist distinctions between... interior and exterior, mind and body’ (Ferris 2017: 403). Where *Oranges* is a semi-autobiographical novel foregrounded by a realist narrative, however, *Sleep Has His House* occupies a shadowy ground between memoir and speculative experiment influenced by elements of surrealism and Kavan’s long-term addiction to heroin.

Populated by multiple versions of Kavan and her ‘remote and starry’ mother ([1973] 2002: 7) and written in an impressionistic ‘night-time’ language that ‘we have all spoken in childhood and in our dreams’ ([1973] 2002: 5), the narrative motor of *Sleep* is a mosaic of ever-shifting images and moods. Seeking to survive ‘the blackness all round’, Kavan’s first-person narrator sets off in pursuit of ‘images which appear, transparent as the shadows of icicles, incorporated into the night’s plasma’ ([1973] 2002: 8) on her own hallucinatory night sea journey. While *Oranges* is a survival narrative that attempts a rebellion against the maudlin suffering of Mrs. Winterson, *Sleep* is an immersive descent narrative into the geography and architecture of mourning and melancholia. Here, ‘home was darkness and my companions were shadows beckoning in the glass’ ([1973] 2002: 101). Both mother and daughter, who Kavan also refers to in third person as ‘B’, appear as spectral and ghostlike, mutually haunting each other in a liminal world fluctuating between certitude and collapse, ecstasy and despair.

A form of experimental trauma writing that does ‘not so much... represent trauma or its aporias, but... shock(s) the reader... into affective participation and sensorial understanding of trauma (with) its capacity to produce an aesthetic experience’ (Onega 2011: 269), *Sleep*’s slippage of realities, selves and perspectives is deliberately excessive, visceral and embodied. Just as the narrator struggles to separate herself from the darkness and the maternal unconscious it

symbolises, the reader experiences her melancholic loss and confusion through the same vista of ‘views sliding into each other’ so that ‘the effect is that of looking at a high building in various parts of which windows are lit up one after another as lights are switched on and off in different rooms’ ([1973] 2002: 86).

Enacting the tension of opposites that underpins the individuation process, Kavan’s narrator encounters both the horror of threatening ‘armour-plated monsters’ ([1973] 2002: 173) and the beauty of ecstatic ‘cosmic radiations’ ([1973] 2002: 5) as she journeys deep into the womb of the dark mother, which is both heroin and night. A place where ‘nothing is false’ ([1973] 2002: 170), it is the darkness of the unknown and the maternal abyss, she discovers, that reveals its own form of truth.

iv. Between imagination & reality

Forging ‘new writing modes... that bring together the material, psychological and symbolic aspects of the mother-daughter bond’ (Giorgio 2002: 29), writing-as-shadow-work weaves fragments of memory through the warp and weft of fiction as a means to not only represent my experience of trauma but also work through it. As with the therapeutic process I had undergone with Mandy, I continued to record the nocturnal theatrics of the actors who surfaced from my unconscious. In the ongoing project of keeping a dream diary, I focused on what I considered to be the ‘big’ dreams featuring talismanic animals and unfamiliar archetypal figures that I found to be particularly arresting and vivid, as if they had something more urgent and pressing to say. Documenting their unfolding dramas and the emotional ‘feeling tone’ of their moods (Jung [1974] 2002), I took inspiration from the non-linear narratives, oneiric landscapes and mythic figures to re-create this emotional feeling tone in story.

‘Biography gone into the imaginative act’ (Hillman [1983] 1994: 80), some stories compress repetitive events into single narratives. Others refract them through the recurring imagery of shadows, houses and ghosts. Just as Winterson conceives of herself variously as Jeanette and

Winett (*Oranges*), alongside the child at the bottom of the bog and The Creature Sawn in Two (*Why Be Happy?*) and Kavan identifies as B as well as the shadows that she sees in the mirror, as with the early stories, the mid and late-stage stories likewise employ autobiographical fiction to engage with porous notions of identity. If I am writing about the inter-subjective knot between myself and my emotionally violent shouting mother, then I am also writing about the *intra-psychic* conflict between a porous entanglement of inner and outer selves. Exploring a self who 'is fractured, changing, alterable and frequently an object as well as a puzzle to the subject whose self it is' (Stanley 1992: 85) through the optics of Jungian psychoanalysis, the terrified girl and her furious mother that populate my stories double as realist representations of myself and my mother while also acting as metaphors symbolising an internal cast of shadow selves.

Telling not only what *did happen* but what *might have happened* or *could happen* - these stories function as 'restorative narratives' (DeSalvo [1995] 2013) that embed facing the worst into a process of healing. Writing of dying, of being swallowed by my mother, of her breaking into my house in the middle of the night, of claws lodged deep inside my body, I could gaze at 'the horror of what can only be faced, never solved' (Frank [1995] 2013: 112) - confronting my worst fears on the page as a way of overcoming them. Writing of figures who knit themselves back together, of being re-born in the dark waters of a dam, of hierophantic crones who dive into my body to heal me, I could perform a creative act of psychic growth – shifting towards a flexible sense of self who is capable of healing and change.

Celia Hunt suggests that the increased sense of agency produced by this shift can lead to an *embodied* sense of well-being in the writer where the both the physical and psychological stress of carrying repressed emotions is alleviated through a self-reflexive process of narrative negotiation. Making a direct correlation between a felt expansion of the self and the therapeutic benefits of reflexive thinking encouraged by the mutability of autobiographical fiction, Hunt claims it is 'the development of mental agency grounded first and foremost in the physically and emotionally felt body rather than in self-concept... which brings with it an increased ability to

think and to act' (2010: 172). In this way, I experienced the embodied felt sense of my own dark emotions as they began to dissolve through the process of 'going down below... [to] find the fiery source of life' (Jung [1974] 2002 : 199) in the midst of it. Coming out on the other side of writing these stories helped me to gain the perspective that, although these dark places and shadowy selves are *part* of me, I can view them through a lens of compassionate detachment, knowing that they do not individually constitute *all* of me.

v. Between past & present

Jung proposes that a return to the past is not only about remembering what was lost in order to mourn it but also an act of re-experiencing what was unconsciously split off in order to fully feel the pain of our wounds and release what was previously buried. Suggesting this process cannot be arrived at by critical thinking alone, he claims

It is of course impossible to free oneself from one's childhood without devoting a great deal of work to it... nor can it be achieved through intellectual knowledge only; what alone is effective is a remembering that is also a re-experiencing. The swift passage of the years and the overwhelming inrush of the newly discovered would leave a mass of material behind that is never dealt with. We do not shake this off; we merely remove ourselves from it. So that when, years later, we return to the memories of childhood we find bits of our personality still alive.. being still in their childlike state, these fragments are very powerful in their effect. Then can lose their infantile aspect and be corrected only when reunited with adult consciousness

([1974] 2002: 136)

Meanwhile, De Salvo argues that the practice of writing opens up a creative and therapeutic space for a return to the past that can also function as a form of re-experiencing in the way that Jung describes. Drawing on psychologist James W. Pennebaker's research into expressive writing and its role in trauma recovery, she claims that 'through writing we can re-visit our past and review and revise it... It isn't that we use writing to deny what we've experienced. Rather, we use it to shift our perspective' (2000: 41).

Just as the flexibility of autobiographical fiction provided a medium for me to explore the slippage between inner and outer realms, it also offered a vehicle for me to negotiate the ways that the past can visit the present in the form of unprocessed shadows alongside how it can be *re*-visited in order to write new stories about who I might be now and in the future. Situated across a spectrum of past, present and speculative atemporal settings, some mid and late-stage narratives such as 'The Nights Were Long When You Were Gone', 'Disappearing Act' and 'There's Enough Evil In This World' take the past as their starting point. Others, like 'A Birthday Lunch' employ the present as an opening onto the past. Further stories, like 'Crow Wood' and 'Mother Bear' explore the bits of my own personality, still in their damaged childlike state, still alive in the dark as I imagine them to exist in deep time.

Dancing this entanglement of inner and outer, real and imagined selves across narratives that traverse past and present tense, irrespective of autobiographical chronology, the mid and later stage stories not only seek to re-construct the past but to interpret my self-experience in the present. A creative space to write about the girl I'd once been, the process of writing-as-shadow-work offered an embodied way for me to feel her pain in order to tolerate the dark emotions I had previously found unbearable. Confronting the shadows of my past in stories set in the present, I could *re*-member the shattered parts of myself in a way that allowed for a form of transformation, rather than re-traumatisation.

vi. Between subject & object

As the real author standing behind these imagined, speculative, semi-autobiographical stories, a further consideration in developing writing as a form of shadow work, was which version or versions of myself could I employ to speak in the narrative voice of the implied author? Arthur C. Frank contends that ‘finding a voice becomes the problem of taking responsibility for memory. Different quest stories all express this voice-memory-responsibility intersection’ ([1995] 2013: 132). If I was/am a fluid self in progress, what voice would I use to approach the truths of my experience in story?

Experiments with uses of focalisation and point of view, the mid-stage stories test a range of narrative voices. ‘A Birthday Lunch’ recounts aspects of myself in the present which are narrated in the past but told in first person, offering both distance and closeness. ‘The Nights Were Long When You Were Gone’ tells a childhood story in the present tense but with the detachment of a third person voice. ‘Samsara’ is narrated in second person through the personified voice of the moon who is able to coolly witness events from above.

Writing as a fictional “I”, as “Rachel” in the third person and as the persona of the moon allowed me to think of myself “less as an entity and more as a kind of awareness in process” (Eakin 2019: x). Translating the Jungian technique of active imagination onto the page, in each case, the process of fictionalising myself in story both as a character and as a narrative voice opened up space for me to put different aspects of myself (and my mother) in dialogue with each other. It was through experimenting with voice in this way that I also discovered that the one I felt most comfortable inhabiting was the second person perspective of the moon. There was something about the way this voice allowed me to look down from above, alongside the symbolism of the moon as that which reflects the unconscious and embodies archetypes relating to the feminine, which felt most allied to my project of writing-as-shadow-work. However, it wasn’t until the process of writing late-stage stories presented at the end of Part Three that I found myself being able to articulate more precisely who or what, exactly, this voice might be.

vii. Imagining the monster in my mother's house

In *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (1989), Marianne Hirsch suggests 'any approach to the subject of mother daughter relationships in literature would have to include a psychoanalytic perspective which could illuminate the psychic complexity of the interaction and suggest the effects of that complexity on the construction of literary plots' (1989: 18). It was through thinking about myself in Jungian terms as composed of a theatre of shadow selves that I came to view my mother not only as the monster who terrorised my childhood but also as a woman possessed by her own unprocessed shadows, left to go 'autonomous (as) a terrible monster in (her) psychic house' (Johnson 1991: 5).

DeSalvo claims that 'by inventing what our fictional characters feel and how they think, we are understanding ourselves...(while) the function of storytelling moves the writer from a position of detachment – the consequence of profound stress – to that of feeling for ourselves and others' (2000: 167). Thinking about the question of my own agency, I was confronted with my mother's. If I could change through the practice of writing-as-shadow-work, how could I approach the question of change in relation to my mother and her unprocessed pain? Was/is she too capable of change? Or, if not, how to write a character that *doesn't* change? A woman in pain, diagnosed over the years with multiple psychiatric conditions and disorders, which may have initially been triggered by untreated post-natal depression, the extent to which my mother is responsible for her behaviour, or not, remains a riddle to me.

Writing of her emotionally abusive female former partner, Carmen Maria Machado claims 'we deserve to have our wrongdoing represented as much as our heroism because when we refuse wrongdoing as a possibility for a group of people, we refuse their humanity' ([2019] 2020: 50-51). Advocating a similar position on the representation of difficult and violent women, in *Beyond Mothers, Monsters, Whores* (2015) Caron E. Gentry and Laura Sjoberg suggest violent mothers are the product of a 'complex construction' (2015: 13) involving both biological make up and an 'intellectual capacity to make deliberate choices' (2015: 12) in a way that explains their

violent and abusive behaviour without excusing it. Furthermore, they argue it is de-humanising to suggest that violent women are *not* capable of making choices or thinking for themselves. Instead, they suggest that ‘violent women are violent people, who, like all people, violent or not, live in a gendered world’ (2015: 8) where violent behaviour is a ‘complex construction’ (2015:13) produced through a combination of infrastructures that systemically oppress women *and* individual choice.

As previously discussed, in *Oranges* Winterson boxes off the character of Mrs. Winterson into two distinct parallel narratives, while Kavan depicts the mother in *Sleep* as a spectral symbolic figure. Building on the early experiments presented in Part One, however, I chose to present my mother in the mid-stage stories as fluidly shapeshifting between realist and fantastical registers to convey something of both her outward appearance and the psychic shadows gone amok inside her. Where some stories like ‘The Nights Were Long’ and ‘Samsara’ portray her as the shouting voice I encountered as a child, in ‘A Birthday Lunch’ I chose to characterise my mother as simultaneously monstrous and fragile in order to show something of both her power and *powerlessness*.

Going one step further, in ‘Intruders’ I take a leap into my mother’s psyche to imagine her as imprisoned inside a body and a mind over which she appears to have little control. An exercise in writing about my mother’s pathological behaviour while refraining from judging it, my aim was to show her as someone who is both haunted and human. It was by not only focusing on my mother’s dysregulated behaviour but also the insecurities and fears that might be driving it that helped extend my capacity to empathise with my mother both on and off the page. It was by thinking about *her* scared inner child and the ways its shadow might show up that helped soften my stance towards her. Although I might not be able to excuse my mother’s behaviour, *Intruders* opened up a space for me to forgive her from a distance via the act of writing about her sympathetically.

VI. Mid-Stage Stories

The four mid-stage stories presented here illustrate the creative evolution behind the process of writing-as-shadow-work. Experiments, rather than polished stories, they demonstrate a developmental stage in this thesis concerned with employing narrative as a speculative space to enact both grief and psychological growth.

i. A Birthday Lunch (early draft)

I agreed to go for lunch with my mother because it was her seventieth birthday and because she had asked me. I agreed because I pictured her otherwise spending it alone except for her blind rescue dog and the boxes of junk filling her bungalow. And I agreed because of the dull constrictive feeling in my throat connected to the dim belief that if I didn't go, all the red-rimmed loneliness she had ever felt would be entirely my fault.

I arrived at the restaurant to find my mother waiting for me inside the entrance. Although small, she stood out against the other diners standing in the same area waiting to be seated since she was the only person in a floor length oxblood gown and moss green shrug in matching satin, dressed as if for a ball a century too late. In each hand she held a bulging supermarket bag like a pair of life buoys to keep her afloat. Catching sight of me, she called out my name and I went over to greet her. It turned out that one of the bags contained Granny Robinson's bone china tea set individually wrapped in newspaper – a present for me. Inside the other, was a large chocolate cake – a present for herself my mother explained, offering it up for me to peer inside at the sickly looking orangey-brown buttercream she informed me was toffee-flavour.

“Well ishme birthday, you know.” Her words were slurred – a side effect of the anti-psychotics – while her Lancashire accent had become stronger with age like a mug of tea when the bag has been left in. Although her cheeks dimpled girlishly, my mother's eyes flashed defensively as if she saw over my shoulders a phalanx of adversaries pointing their fingers at her cake and muttering threats under their breath about snatching it away. Nevertheless, she liked the fuss when the waiter appeared and offered to store it in the kitchen fridge until after we had eaten. The storage of the cake safely navigated, the waiter took us to a table next to a window cascading with fairy lights. They blinked in the sun, briefly enveloping my mother in a luminous halo of light as she sat down.

It had been over a year since I'd last seen her and even longer since I had been with her on my own without any other family around. I was struck by how her once flame-red hair now fell in fine, sandy skeins across her face like a young girl's. Her eyes, too, seemed to have lost their colour. Their mossy green had dimmed to a translucent grey, turned permanently pale by a lifetime of rage. As my mother read out loud from the menu the muscles at each corner of her mouth flickered involuntarily like a faulty filament where her rage could not quite be contained. Even here in the restaurant. Even on her best behaviour. Where more times than I could remember her lips had peeled back to reveal the glistening flesh of her gums and where the screaming that followed had burned across her face, transforming her mouth into a shrieking black hole coming closer and closer and

“Would you like more time or are you ready for me to take your order?”

The waiter reappeared at our table with his notebook and pen. I asked for a Margarita pizza but my mother took her time, lingering over the carbonara before ordering the sea food tagliatelle.

“This is a treat for me. I never normally have tagli-telly, y' know. You choose the wine Rachel,” she went on, “I wouldn't really know what to pick. I'm not a big wine drinker what with me medication and everything. It makes me tipsy but if you can't have a glass on your birthday then when can you?” She chuckled to herself as if she had just committed the outrageous act of ordering a whole crate of champagne.

The waiter smiled sympathetically at me as one adult might to another over the eccentric yet endearing antics of a small child. Conscious he had been at our table for some time, I hastily requested two house whites. The waiter scribbled our order down and disappeared with it into the kitchen. Then there we were, the two of us, daughter and mother, we who knew each other so well and yet who were also strangers. I scanned the restaurant looking for some neutral observation that might fill up the gaping hole between us. It was a Sunday afternoon and the

restaurant was full of families. How many mothers, I wondered, were being taken out for lunch? What would it be like if this was a regular occurrence and I took my mother for lunch all the time? If we did not have to pretend? If I could feel safe? From the corner of my eye I could see my mother picking at the ragged skin of her cuticles.

“Are you still teaching Rachel?” She looked up and stared with watery green eyes. There was a serious edge to her voice as if she had asked did I still have a bad cold?

“Yes, I’m still teaching.”

Knowing better than to offer further information I stopped. She had beaten me to it. We had been in each other’s company less than half an hour and already we were at a vertiginous drop.

“You don’t do journalism anymore?”

“No. Not anymore. I’m a teacher now, Mum.”

“Well.” Here my mother paused, allowing for the full solemnity of her disappointment to ripple towards me. “I suppose doing journalism was too much like hard work.”

I felt the words *and teaching isn’t?* flare up but instead of saying them I drew a deep breath.

“I like teaching.”

“Well it’s your choice Rachel,” my mother said eventually, scrutinizing my face with a look that said that although she didn’t believe me she had decided on this occasion to humour me.

The waiter came back with our wine. My mother sipped from her glass without any apparent pleasure. I watched her gaze as it wandered out past the fairy lights in the window and into the afternoon traffic. And there, suddenly, it was. Not a shrieking black hole but something incredibly sad and lonely and lost wandering with a glazed look into the middle of the road.

Casting around for something to say that might bring her back from whatever brink it was she had gone to, I reached for a complement.

“You look nice. Is that a new dress?”

Immediately she brightened.

“Yes Rachel it is! I’d seen it in the sales but I thought to meself I thought I’ll wait another week and see if it gets reduced. And what d’you know it did!”

My mother’s washed out eyes lit up. “Which was just as well because it’s not just this dress I’ve had to buy y’know. All my clothes went when they discharged me from the home. I only went away for the weekend to visit one of me cousins and I didn’t even know they was going to do that. I only found out when I came back and there was my clothes with the rest of me things waiting on the drive in bin bags. The thing is you see it had been raining so when I opened them up everything inside was wet and all me clothes were crawling with worms! Well obviously I couldn’t keep them after that!”

My mother raised her hands in a gesture of hapless surrender and clapped them back down on the table, laughing the story off as if the dumping of her belongings in bin bags on the care home drive had all been a big misunderstanding and wasn’t it funny? But behind her laughter the faulty filaments at the corners of my mother’s mouth were quivering madly.

Again, I found myself searching for the right thing to say, which meant the thing that would edge us back from the brink, which meant the most innocuous subject I could think of, which materialised at that moment as a question about whether or not she had any holiday plans?

“Well as a matter of fact I do. I’ve booked meself a week in a caravan park with the vouchers I collected from *The Sun*. Ooo that looksh nice.”

My mother broke off as the waiter returned with our dishes.

“Ish a great deal and perfect for me, you see because it has all the facilities. I can take the dog for walks on the beach and thersh a likkle shop on the site. And you know people say well, what about the rain but the inclement weather doesn’t bother me because I just take an umbrella.”

The glee with which my mother spoke reminded me of all the times I had traipsed after her as she forensically searched the shops for the cheapest boil-in-the-bag fish or Sellotape or sensible shoes and afterwards the look of triumph on her face when she found her rainbow's end in the cheapest item.

“You always did love a bargain didn't you?”

I couldn't help it. The words just came out. A steely light flashed across my mother's eyes. Her voice dropped by several degrees and the faulty filaments at the corners of her mouth looked like they were about to blow.

“Ish not about bargains Rachel. Ish about what I can afford.”

She shoved a forkful of tagliatelle into her mouth, chewing violently as a dribble of tomato sauce ran down her chin like blood.

“I'm sorry, I didn't mean to...” I started but it was too late.

The touch paper of my mother's sense of lack, of what she did not have, of what she felt had been taken from her, had been lit. All I could do was watch her blaze as, cutting me off, she began to recount her anger at all the money she believed *the guver-ment* was trying to take from her. It was not long before she got onto the subject of taxes, glossing over the fact that she herself had never paid any by exempling her parents.

“Your grandad worked hard all his life, all his life he did,” my mother jabbed the air with her fork. “First at the post office and then at the bleach factory. That's a lifetime of labour that is. All that money is what got left to me and what got me my home. It's got your grandad's sweat on it and it's nobody's right to take it away. Not to pay towards my care! Not to pay towards anything! But don't worry Rachel,” she leaned across the table conspiratorially.

She was so close that I could see between her teeth black shreds of olive and smell on her breath hot waves of garlic and rage.

“I’ve made plans. It’s all with me lawyer.” The crimson bodice of her dress began to puff out. “No one is going to take away what’s rightfully mine! Not one penny of my money ish going anywhere near the guver-ment. Not on my watch. No siree!”

My mother fixed me with a pair of blood shot eyes. I felt the ferocity of her look as a call, ignored at my peril, to step up onto her stage and share in her outrage. Although part of me fought to resist her, it was hard not to be strangely in awe of this tiny woman who all her life had fought and fought to get her own way and who showed no sign of calling a cease fire or making any kind of peace deal now. There was something almost dazzling about her stubborn determination and the glacial ego behind it willing her on. Shackles raised against her invisible enemies, my mother glowered impressively in her oxblood gown, now in her element recounting the family reputation for fierce women. A crust of dried tomato ringing her lips, she launched into the story of Great Granny Reedy.

“Now she was a woman who stood up for her rights! She came over from Ireland with her family when she had nothing. Nothing! But she made sure. She ran that family. All eight children *and* her husband. Nothing got by your Great Granny. Other men would be taking their wages and going out drinking but she would never allow it. Every week she took your Great Granddad’s pay packet until one day she announced she had bought a house. She made sure, y’ see, that her family was going to be provided for and no one dared cross her. Not once. Not ever!”

Seeming to adopt Great Granny as her psychic mascot, my mother began waving an arm in the air as if summoning her back from the dead.

“The women in our family are strong, y’ know. Nobody messes with us!”

She stabbed an oily ribbon of tagliatelle with a virtuous smile as if she was party to some secret information that one day would vindicate her. But her eyes were not smiling. They were livid.

I could not tell if my mother had meant to include me in that *us*. Nor could I tell if her *us* was meant as a promise or a threat. I pushed my half-eaten pizza away. I did not know what to do with the fact that I was her daughter, would always be her daughter. It was then that my mother turned the full watery artillery of her eyes on me.

“It would be nice to see more of you Rachel. The years are passing, y’ know.”

She screwed her napkin into a ball and threw it onto her empty plate. Here we were at another drop. It plunged before us into the darkness. Everything inside me screaming to leave, I pushed my chair away from the table. And then it lit up. My mother’s cake burning with seven candles – one for each decade – set down by the waiter.

The candle shadows flickered across the cake, a ferocious sun setting on a buttercream ocean. The crowning moment of my mother’s birthday lunch had arrived and she wordlessly rose towards it, as if the cake were some kind of holy sacrament that would take her a step closer towards divinisation. The fury in her eyes dwindled to a pale prick of light and her face appeared to soften in the glow of the candles. She smiled over at me, inviting me into a perfectly choreographed moment, divorced from the devastation of our actual history, in which we were a tender mother and daughter sharing something precious that would stay with us forever. In those brief seconds I saw her as a young girl in thrall to the fairy tale momentousness of making a wish, all the tremulousness of her unmade future swelling up in her lungs.

A knot formed in my chest for what she was and what she wasn’t, for what we were and what we weren’t. How could I let my mother down now as she leaned over the cake? How could I not be the daughter she wanted? I began to sing, lowering my voice to the soft pitch of a lullaby. *Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday to you.* On my mother’s cake the tiny candle flames slanted on their wicks. I waited for them to flicker out and for the moment afterwards when I would go to the other side of the table and – despite the strangeness of touching her and the foreignness of our bodies pressing together – give her a hug.

But the moment did not come. Instead, the candles continued to dance and my mother continued to inhale as if the very air about to run out. Face as red as her dress, she was like a drowning person gasping for breath. The more air she hoovered in, the more the seams of her bodice began to tear apart as she ballooned right there in front of me. I shrank in terror as her dress tore off in strips like a snake shedding its skin and fluttered to the floor. Above me her furiously inhaling mouth twisted and contorted until it was a giant gash that completely erased the rest of her face while the shadow of her gargantuan body drowned the whole table. I tried to pull away but it was as if some force far greater than me was pushing my body back down and there was nothing I could do but silently pray as the dripping black hole came closer and closer and

something sharp grazing my knees and falling head-first into a sweating shaft of pure dark, strange bulbous shapes socking me in the eyes, and something slimy and thick basting my skin and squeezing into a concertina of dense, sticky folds and the smell of stale liver rushing into my lungs and trying to scream but no sound coming out, descending further and faster into a new stratum of blackness slipping past the grasp of my hands and nose stopped with slime, hardly able to breathe and then I hit the bottom.

My feet sank into something slimy and warm as the sweating walls closed in. They squashed me into the chthonic mud of their depths, forcing my knees into my chest and my face into the viscous slime of their flesh. I slid my hands in between the hair-breadth gap between my body and the cramped cavity in which I was wedged and tried to make out the shape of myself through the blackness. But the dank, sunless interior was beyond all light and although I waited and waited my hands did not appear as if there was no separation between my body and the burning core of my mother. The only way I could tell myself apart from her was the sound of my heart hammering like a fist against a double-locked door. But even then it was nothing compared to the bellow that seemed to come from nowhere and everywhere rushing through the

dark like an overflowing river – the rage of my mother translated into the language of blood seeping into my veins and throttling my bones.

The clatter of knives on porcelain and the smell of freshly baked dough and the sun streaming through the window at the restaurant table was the phantom trace of a half-remembered dream. A slow, sinking sensation snaked from my chest down to my stomach and curled up in my groin. Why hadn't I left when I'd wanted? Why hadn't I been more careful to stay away from the edge? Why did she always have to have her pound of flesh? In the ravenous blackness, I thrashed from side to side. Anything to escape. To not be inside her. To not be buried here in her body, smothered in her fluids, breathing her air, enmeshed in her flesh. I drove my elbows into the sides of my cell and butted my head against its sinewy tissue, writhing and screaming in the suffocating heat until I had no tears left to cry and no anger left to burn. Until I was entirely limp; emptied out of all feeling except that of the darkness seething around me. A thing alive growing itself from itself.

I felt something gritty and warm land on my forehead and crawl down my face, rounding an eye socket and dribbling into a nostril before it trickled onto the back of my tongue. There was no mistaking the acidic taste of half-digested cake that was making me gag. After the first drop, the sloppy crumbs of masticated cake fell thickly and softly onto the back of my neck and ran like rain down the sides of my face, packing themselves into every last crevice and crack between my body and the pocket of darkness that held me. I felt its weight as a heavy blanket. Beneath its dead weight, I couldn't tell if my arms and legs were spread far and deep like the roots of a tree. Or if I was no larger than a seed. Eyes closed and spine curled, I lost all inclination to move. I did not even feel the need to breathe, as if somehow the darkness itself could sustain me. Deep inside this annihilating fug of warm blackness, I heard a voice penetrate its layers. It sounded like it was calling my name. *Rachel... Rachel.* The voice came closer and closer and I knew it was time.

ii. The Nights Were Long When You Were Gone.

After she dies on the eve of her fifteenth birthday, Rachel does not slip away quietly but stays on the landing, a pale face staining the window, unable to shake off her mother's last words. *Madam. Sullen. Selfish. Ungrateful. Wish you'd never been born. Not the dirt under your shoe. No daughter of mine.* They ring down her bones, as if her mother possessed the power to be in two places at once. Plunging through the streets in her car and hiding in the shadows of the landing, ready to pounce.

Rachel's fingers flutter of their own accord to a snag in her red jumper and pull at the loose threads hanging there. It is the not knowing she can't bear. Where her mother has gone. When she will be back. What mood she will be in when she does. Rachel twists the threads between her finger and thumb. By now her mother could be anywhere. At the roundabout next to the retail park. Circling the narrow country lanes fringing the airport. Puttering down the maze of avenues and drives named after famous explorers, windscreen wipers slashing through the drizzle. Or not driving at all but stopped on some road sunken with dead leaves in Cheadle Hulme or Heald Green, hands, red raw, gripping the steering wheel.

The landing floorboards creak beneath Rachel's feet as her fingers free more yarn from the growing hole in her jumper. Large chunks of wool come away rapidly in her hands, dripping like blood from the frayed ends of her wrists into the carpet. Where is her mother? Where has she gone? Where is she now? Eyes boring into the blackness, Rachel extends her consciousness into the yarn spilling from her jumper to the tangled pile blooming on the carpet. She feels her way down their length along the landing, and beyond, out through the cracks in the wall to the garden, as if her jumper were infinitely unravelling itself into the darkness.

Slipping free of her body, a shadow without shape or form, Rachel searches the night for the place her mother is, buried inside it, until she can sense the silhouette of her car travelling at speed along a narrow road running through a dense tunnel of trees. Rachel glides into the passenger seat and whispers into mother's ear. *I'm sorry. Please forgive me. Please come back.* Close

enough to feel the heat of her mother's blood through the rabbit fur of her coat, Rachel tenses in the darkness, the dim shape of a hand hovering over her mother's and waits. One look is all she needs, then she can leave. But at the wheel of the car, her mother remains silent, eyes frosted over staring into the road, as if Rachel is not there.

Back on the landing, Rachel nearly jumps from the remains of her jumper as the phone downstairs in the hall starts to ring. Prophetess of her worst fears, she knows who it is without picking up.

Sorry's not good enough. I skivvy all day and all night after you and I'm sick and tired of it. You can fend for yourself from now on. There's going to be no more muggins-me running after you. You don't have any rights. I gave birth to you. Do you hear? You can say sorry all you like. You're getting nothing from me from now on. Am I making myself clear?

When the voice is done, the phone rings off. At the landing window, only Rachel's heart is anything like solid, beating in the shadows, loud and terrified, a thing apart.

Now when her fingers float up to the threadbare shreds of her jumper, it is not only wool which they pick at and pull but skin and veins. Although to Rachel, they are all the same; threads or veins, she winds them in loose bracelets around her wrists and weaves them between her hands in sagging cats' cradles. She wants her mother to come back. Doesn't want her to come back. Does. Doesn't. Doesn't. Does. And then there they are, as if she has summoned them. A pair of car headlamps, washing the smear of Rachel's figure at the window in a dim yellow light. A deep, grabbing sensation tugs at her intestines as she watches the cherry trees outside in the front garden rustle and heave and shake out more leaves. Rachel does not know if her mother will come ashen and silent, making a cup of tea and taking herself to bed without saying a word. Or if she will come raging and violent, kicking the front door and shattering the glass, determined to finish what she started before she left. Rachel closes her eyes and prepares for the worst. But when the car reaches her house it carries on up the road.

Above the house the moon streams in through the window, illuminating Rachel's threads with a silvery shine. But not her eyes, which are black as the ancient parts of sky that have never seen light. She knows it is possible. That it could happen. That, right now, her mother could be burrowing along a narrow country lane with no streetlamps, only cats' eyes. That, at this time of night, in this cold weather, the road could be varnished with ice. That, even if her mother were driving carefully, her tyres could easily skid and the brakes slip, with no one to witness her car's wild pirouette, except the owls and bats in the trees. That the car could spin so fast, it would soar clean off the road and land bonnet-first in a ditch – her mother's last view, the pale crescent moon. That she would not have to feel any pain. That there would not need to be any blood, except for a light smattering on the collar of her fur coat. That, any moment now, the phone in the hall could ring. That, this time, at the other end would be a stranger's voice telling her there had been a serious accident.

But Rachel can't be certain about anything. As the night goes on she can't remember anymore what it was, exactly, that she had done to make her mother so very angry. She can't say if it was because she failed to pick up every single leaf from the front garden. Or because of the teaspoon she didn't wash and put away after making a cup of tea. Or because she had *created washing* by wearing clean knickers when the dirty ones in the laundry basket would do. Or was it not that she had *created washing*, at all, but because she had taken a shower and *wasted water*. Or was it none of these things, but because Rachel had *not* worn her dirty knickers again, as she had been told, but had washed them by hand, scrubbing the gusset with soap in the bathroom sink and left them to dry on her bedroom radiator, *causing condensation*?

Rachel pulls a clump of wool and veins from her shoulders and a chink of white bone appears on her reflection in the window. It all happened so fast that the only thing Rachel can clearly remember is watching her mother arrange the last of the Michaelmas daises in cut glass vases, choosing what blouse to wear for Church and calling to her *which brooch do you think goes best with this?* And then, as if without warning, the sudden tearing apart of tectonic plates and her

mother choking with the black stuff pouring out of her. *How many times have I told you? I'm sick and tired. Do you not listen to a word? It's your attitude I don't like. This is the last straw. You can look after yourself from now on!* And how, equally suddenly, her mother was gone, as if a merciless gale had ripped through the house and swept her away.

Awake in her bedroom, the-girl-who-lives-in-the-house sits crossed legged on the carpet in front of the mirror, a sketchpad resting on her knees, and draws. At almost fifteen, the-girl-who-lives-in-the-house doesn't know everything but she does know some things. And the more she knows, the more there are things she would prefer not to. Things she is afraid to say out loud, either to herself or to anyone else. Things that keep her awake at night, especially on nights, like this, when her mother has stormed out without saying when she will be back. Flighty, agitated things she can hear on the landing. Things she can see flickering after dark in her bedroom mirror. Mismatched eyes, too large for the rest of her face; boils deforming her chin; pale, fatty cheeks, so far from the graceful symmetry, which all the pretty girls at school wear with an unburdened nonchalance she dreams of. These things are what the-girl-who-lives-in-the-house draws, deriving a strange satisfaction from birthing the hideous, almost animal-looking form from the dense scrawl of charcoal lines.

She bends with intense concentration over her sketch pad, barely noticing the passing of time, until she is stopped mid-stroke by the sensation of a wave in the darkness skimming past her right ear. Hardly daring to move, the-girl-who-lives-in-the-house remains frozen in place, blackened hands suspended a hair breadth above her sketch pad, listening in the darkness. What unsettles the girl-who-lives-in-the-house is not the stillness and the silence that follows but the feeling of it being too still and too silent, as if something were in the room with her, hiding in the dark and holding its breath.

And then she sees it. The whisper of a breeze rifling through the curtains where their hems brush the top of the radiator. Heart pounding inside her pyjamas, the-girl-who-lives-in-the-

house watches the ripple in the shadows, until it is no longer a breeze but a pair of hands and, attached to the hands, a threadbare girl streaming with veins, as if hundreds of moths had gnawed at her skin.

Hoping the hideous-looking thing weakly pulsing inside the curtains hasn't seen her, the-girl-who-lives-in-the-house's instinctively throws herself face down against the carpet when she hears the curtains collapse with a loud thud, like a giant bird shot down in mid-flight, and a scream flies from her mouth. How will she ever explain the curtains to her mother? Convinced she is doomed, the-girl-who-lives-in-the-house pulls her knees up inside her dressing gown and begins to rock. It is only the sobbing coming from the curtains that eventually makes her look up to see the hideous monstrosity staggering inside them looking every bit as terrified as she is.

Rachel stares incredulously at the-girl-who-lives-in-the-house. Has she been dead longer than she thinks? Could a new family have moved in? Is a different girl now sleeping in her room? Or is *she* the trespasser who does not belong? If Rachel was uncertain before, she is more confused now. She had only come here because she had not been able to get the thought of her mother finding her knickers drying on the radiator out of her mind. But although this looks like her room, with her bed and wardrobe and art folder leaning against it, the presence of another girl has made Rachel nervous that she has accidentally stumbled into a room that belongs to somebody else.

“I... I'm sorry. I didn't realise... I didn't mean to pull the curtains off the wall... I was looking for my knickers.” Rachel speaks in a breathless, susurrating rush, barely louder than a whisper. “I washed them and left them to dry on the radiator, but then I got scared my Mum would come back and find out.”

“I'm scared of my Mum, too.” Before she even knows she is saying them, the words come out of the-girl-who-lives-in-the-house's mouth. “I never know when she is going to shout next or what it is I've done wrong and when she goes out, I spend the whole time worrying what mood she will be in when she comes back. I never know where she goes or what she does when

she's away or how long she will be. She's gone now. She called me a slut and said that either I had to go or she would."

From the curtains, Rachel watches the girl on the floor bunch her shoulders inside her dressing gown and a glimmer of recognition ripples down the length of her threads. Does she know this girl? Has she seen her before? Does she go to her school? She didn't know there were others.

"My Mum is the same. I think she was different, once, but it's so long ago that I don't really remember."

Inside the tatters of her red jumper, Rachel's heart squirms like a newly born kitten crying to be fed.

"Can I touch you? I promise to be careful."

Surprised by the other girl's request, Rachel shrugs the curtain off and shakily stands up all the same.

"I don't mind."

The-girl-who-lives-in-the-house stands up beside Rachel and tentatively reaches a hand inside the ragged veins of her chest. But instead of clasping something slippery and firm, the hand of the-girl-who-lives-in-the-house passes right through her.

"There's nothing there! You're all air!"

"Oh but it tickles! Your hand tickles!" Rachel's threads separate and lift.

"That's so strange. I didn't feel anything."

"What about if I do this?" Without missing a beat, Rachel walks through the-girl-who-lives-in-the-house, who gasps and staggers backwards at the feeling of being gently lifted and put down again in the same instant. Shocked by her lack of solidity, in the seconds after Rachel jumps out, the-girl-who-lives-in-the-house doesn't move. Then, without saying a word, she closes her eyes and plunges head-first into the fluttering warp and weft of her guest.

Once they begin, there is no stopping Rachel and the-girl-who-lives-in-the-house as they slip and slide in and out of each other's bodies. They move slowly at first, holding their breath, like they are wading into deep water, becoming bolder and faster as they learn the texture and shape and fit of the other's interior. Where the bones are thicker and where they are thinner; where the muscle is tightest and where it melts to the touch; where it hurts and where it's sore; where it is darkest and where there is enough light and space to move and breathe.

Waltzing at speed, they bump into the bed, knocking over the art folder and skidding on the carpet until they are no longer touching the floor but spinning under a centrifugal force of their own making. Circling higher and higher, they reel around the lampshade hanging from the ceiling and trapeze from wall to wall. A blurry smudge of pajama and plasma, they dance as if their mother is dead; as if they never had a mother; as if they were not born but knitted from the black wool of night, deaf to the sound of a car pulling up on the drive.

iii. Samsara

You know me and you don't. The pale orb that travels the night currents, lighting the dark, I have watched your comings and goings since you were a throb, a speck of mica in the cosmic loam. Even when you couldn't see me, I could always see you. I saw before it happened. Each time you died and everything that came after. I was there. I'm telling you this now, whispering it through the waves of the black lake where you are, breathing under water, so that the cells forming your body will remember, will store it away.

How pretty they are, your bones pushing up through the darkness, like the branches of stripped willow. The shape of you beginning to show. How beautiful are your eyes. So large and blue and round. And buried inside, your future selves.

Where do you begin and where do you end? You ask this question through the tips of your fingers, feeling your way in the dark, flesh touching flesh. Slowly, you rotate upside down, backs of hands folded back on themselves into your chest, fingers curled into palms, your nails almost as long as them. A tidal pull sucks the crown of your head into the opening of a narrow channel, flattening the soft bone of your skull against its walls, forcing you over a threshold and out.

You are born, as I fade, in a maternity hospital in a small market town between the North Sea and the North Yorkshire moors. Your mother had wanted a boy but the new-born the nurse places in her hands is you. Writing in your baby book, your mother records your eyes as blue and your skin as ruddy. She teases your hair into quiffs with Toddy Locks and props you on cushions so that she can take photographs of the strange creature her body produced. Although you are not the boy that she wanted, you will do.

In the large garden of the house in South Manchester, where your parents move after your first brother is born, you love to make dens. At any one time, there might be six, seven, eight, spread out across the garden. In the apple trees; behind the shed; beneath the flowering redcurrants; in the brambles and ferns where the garden is wild and overgrown on the other side

of the hawthorn hedge, screening it off the house. Dens, like wombs, big enough to crawl inside, filled with the ripe smell of rot and decay. Your secret places, where you collect rose hips and leave saucers of milk for the hedgehogs and lie very still in the leaves so the Meadow Browns circling the shadows will land on your face.

You have a mother and you don't. When you are chased up the garden by a of swarm angry wasps, whose nest you accidentally trod on while making a den, your mother plunges your burning, sting-covered scalp into a bowl of warm water and calamine lotion as all the dead insects float out. When you get the mumps, she wraps you in a blanket and makes you scrambled egg with cheese. When you are good, she buys you dolls and stuffed animals; Flopsy Bunny, Teddy Edward, Holly Hobby. But when you are naughty, she takes them away, confiscating them to the twin bed next to yours where they lie in rows like forbidden treasure that you can look at but not, under any circumstances, touch. You do not know what it is like for your mother to read you a bedtime story or kiss you good night because she never does.

The first time the shouting happens is on a trip to the zoo one day in late July just after your second brother is born. It comes like the sudden darkening of a blue sky. You, in a head scarf, sitting on the gravel path of the lawn in front of the gift shop, holding your new baby brother for the camera. Her, ignoring your cries the sun is in your eyes and screaming at you to smile, words so garbled and unrecognisable, it's as though she is speaking in tongues.

There and then, I watch you disappear, swallowed into the burning sun. Later, a photograph appears in a frame on the hall table taken that day at Chester Zoo of a girl in a head scarf holding a baby and smiling for the camera. A trick of the light.

You grow older, become a teenager. The shouting doesn't stop. In fact, it gets worse. It rips through walls and bursts from doors, razing anything that gets in its way. *Come out from your room! Come back from the garden! Put that book down! What are you doing? I need you here. I'm not your skivvy. It's time you realised, young lady. Wipe that smile off your face. I want to see the bathroom sparkling*

clean. That's not good enough. Go back and do it again. Have you seen yourself in the mirror? Your hair is like rats' tails. You only have to look at food and you put on weight.

Over the years it goes on. How many times do I have to tell you? You haven't finished practicing your flute. Go back upstairs. I want to hear every scale. I don't like your attitude. You haven't hoovered properly. Look at that dust. You're not coming in until you've picked up every leaf. Tell your friend they can go home. You have jobs to do. Why should muggins me have to do it? What's that teaspoon doing in the sink? I'm sick and tired of you. I'm not having any more of your cheek! I've told you before! Those knickers aren't dirty. Here, smell them. You can wear them one more day. Who said it was your right to go to out? You don't have any rights. You belong me. I gave birth to you and you will do as say. Sorry isn't good enough. No, I won't forgive you. No, I don't love you.

Always a beat behind the shouting, is the sobbing. Night after night, I rise over the firs at the bottom of your garden and watch you cry yourself to sleep in milky white trickle of my light. The sobbing comes from a place deep inside your bones, drenching the room. *Please forgive me. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I love you. I'm sorry. Forgive me. I'm sorry. Please forgive me. Please forgive me. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Please say you love me. Please. Please.* You are there, rocking beneath your duvet on one side of the wall and on the other is your mother, her bed going head to head with yours. It is the wall divides your two rooms. But it is also something else, more inviolable and impenetrable, forever shutting you out.

The shouting and the sobbing is like a duet. On one side of the wall, there is the shouting, a hysterical, hyperbolic soprano eating the air. *Love you? Forgive you? You are no more to me than the dirt under my shoe.* On the other is the sobbing, gasping and strangled like a last breath. *Please forgive me. I'm sorry. I love you. I'm sorry. I'm sorry.* The shouting and the sobbing goes on all through the night until they are no longer distinct but one; the long, high-pitched wail of a wounded animal eternally sounding across the starry wastes. *Please forgive me. No. Please forgive me. No. Please forgive me. No.*

You have a mother. And then you don't. When you go to bed, you don't even know anymore what's behind the wall. You hear bangs and thuds, the heavy sound of something untamed crashing into the furniture and knocking it over. And, beneath the banging and thudding, your father's voice. "This needs to stop right now!" His appeal is met with more thumping followed by a series of injured snorts that give way a low, growling voice.

"*You!* Tell *me* what to do! What right have you to tell me anything? You disgust me. Don't think I haven't seen the way you sneak around each other. I know the long talks you have her room. Why don't you get into bed with her? Go on go! Go to your precious daughter if that's what you want. Go and fuck her! Don't let me stop you."

"And you!" The voice thunders your name in the blackness. "I know what you've been up to. You and your father. And I've got news for you, young lady. Muggins me ain't putting up with it anymore. Either you go or I do. Am I making myself clear? You're nothing to me. Nothing. You're not even the dirt under my shoe."

On the wrong side of the wall, you don't notice the claw going in but I do. It rips through your candy-stripe pyjamas, neatly serrating the tight mesh of membrane and nerves beneath the surface of your skin. It travels through you at speed, skirting the bone of a rib and severing the surrounding blood vessels, the excruciating tip of its point coming to rest in a thin layer of muscle at the centre of you.

The claw goes in and time stops. You don't breathe, don't move, don't cry, as if you have died. From my starry heights, I whisper your name and your heart starts beating again. But the claw remains where it landed, lodged in your tissue. You and not you. An occult wound only I can see.

An unnerving stillness strangles the garden as if everything is holding its breath, afraid to exhale, watching and waiting for the snap of a twig or the sudden appearance from the bushes of a pair of sour eyes. Although it is night, not everyone sleeps. Surfacing between dreams, your father leans up on an elbow and watches the untroubled face of his sleeping wife, asking himself,

how can he leave her? What should he do to protect you? What if his wife won custody over your younger brothers? Could he take you but leave them with her? In the bedroom at the front of the house, one of your brothers wets the bed. And you?

In my dim, ashy light, the stick of charcoal in your hand moves across the pad of paper set before you on the carpet. Glancing in the mirror that hangs on your bedroom wall by the door, you draw what you see. The thick outline of a bloated, grotesque face staring back at you. Hair like rats tails. Eyes that are all black. You bend so close to the drawing that your breathe sends tiny waves of charcoal dust shivering across the paper. Feeling headier and lighter with each heavy black line you scratch onto the page, you purge what you see. Licking the back of your thumb and smudging the wild scrawl of hatched lines into smoke at the edges, you set it free.

You sit your A-levels. Art, English Literature and History, counting the days until you will leave home for university. At night when you sleep, the dark smudge of a girl sits on the end of your bed, rocking and hugging her knees to her chest moaning, *I'm nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing*. She throws your bedcovers off, wraps them like a cloak around her shoulders, flouncing around the rose-pink valence skirting your bed and singing. *We're nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing*. She leaps onto your chest and sits there pulling your hair until you wake, gasping for breath.

Beneath the thin velum of your skin, the lining where the claw went in is red and inflamed. Although it hurts, you don't know where the pain is coming from. You stand up on your bed and press yourself against the window. Round white face, a mirror of mine, you watch me hang acrobatically above the firs between the dim blaze of distant planets, a crescent tonight. I am so very far away, you think. So very far away and so very beautiful. The longer you gaze, the more you certain you are you can see a woman with dark hair dancing between the clouds grazing my surface. What you don't see is the pale figure in the shadow of the curtains dancing next to you.

You know her and you don't. When she calls out of the blue with the offer of a job at the exact moment you need one the year you turn forty, you think she is a miracle; a gift from the gods. You stand in the doorway of the classroom where you will be teaching as she turns away from the student she has been bent over and casts you a smile big and wide enough that, before you know it, you are caught in its net. She is a complete stranger to you. You are strangers to each other. But you know that hair, the particular shade of those eyes, that diminutive silhouette. Even her name rhymes with your mother's.

At first you can do no wrong. Her compliments are like the last of the late summer butterflies floating out of the sky. *Whatever you have been saying to the students, it's perfect! Keep doing it. They're doing great work. The best ever. I don't know what I would do without you. I can't ever thank you enough.* When it is the holidays and you are due to go away, she puts an arm around your neck and pulls you so close that her lips almost brush yours. *If you ever need to talk, I'm always here. I'm only ever at the end of the phone.* Her breath is hot and damp in your ear and you stiffen your shoulders, nervous she might actually kiss you. *You can all anytime. You know that don't you. I don't let many people into my life but I know I can trust you. I'm going to miss you over the summer.* You don't call, of course. She is not your mother. Why would you?

After a year or so, the shouting starts. *Please don't smile when you come into work. I'm having a stressful time and I don't need that in my day. Can't you see how busy I am? You shouldn't have to ask. What are those students doing with you? They are MY students and they should be coming to see ME. I need your help. I don't care how you've been doing it. This is the way I want it done. What are you doing in there? I need you here! Er, hello? What about ME?*

You learn early on that arguing back only makes the shouting worse. That you are damned if you do and damned if you don't. You follow her, head bowed, into the grey-panelled break out room where she takes you so she won't get reported. She takes a seat in the shadows, face hidden beneath the cap she wears. She begins mid-sentence like a speech she is already half-way through.

I don't like you talking to the tutors on other courses. What we do is none of their business. When you do that you make me very upset. I am Programme Leader, you know! I've been doing twelve-hour days working eight until eight but you always make sure you leave on time. I'm not like you. I have work to do. Don't you care about the students? You've got to be more tough on them. They're only babes. We can't be seen to be too radical. You could get me into trouble. Their lives are hard enough without you upsetting them. They come into my lessons trembling. We need to be gentle. What are you teaching them? I can't see any improvement in the work.

Bottom lip trembling beneath the shade of her cap, her words explode like stars in the cold air. You sit on your hands, in the rain of her flames, trying to meet her eyes. "I'm sorry," you say as flatly and evenly as you can manage. "I won't do it again." But her eyes flicker past you, as if you are not even there, as she continues to shout. *You're opting out. I can tell with my third eye. You're still part of a team, you know. Don't you want us to be the best course?*

In the sunless cell of the breakout room, her voice and yours merge into a single excruciating note, which you chant as one. *I don't need this in my day. I'm sorry. I don't need this in my day. I'm sorry. I don't need this in my day.*

You are there. And you are in the black empty space of your bedroom, shut out on the wrong side of the wall, rocking back and forth on all fours. Bed sheet winding around your spinning body, you are pirouetting at speed, smashing into the grey panels of the breakout room, invisible as smoke, howling to no one in particular *Please forgive me. No. Please forgive me. No. Please forgive me. No.*

During this time your mother's visits to the house on the edge of the moors where you live become more frequent. You hear a knock on the door in the middle of the night and you know straight away that it's her.

Aren't you going to invite me in? she whirls past you in a dark streak, a charged electron split from its atom, knocking over the umbrella pot by the door and sending the cheese plant on the far side of the hall across the tiles.

I expected better of you, you know. I'm an old woman. I shouldn't have to come all this way. It should be you making the effort with me. Coming to rest in front of you, her body heaves and swells inside its rabbit fur coat. Her breath on your face is dusty and stale and, instinctively, you shrink away.

Aren't you going to give your mother a hug? She stiffly opens her arms but you hold back, afraid of coming too close and she drops them again with a loud huff, filling the hall with a cloud of black injury.

Even when you were little you never wanted to hold my hand. You had just learned to walk and we had taken you to the beach. I only turned around for a minute and you were gone and I couldn't see anything except for empty sand. We were hours walking up and down that beach in the rain calling your name.

And when that man, your father, left, you left with him. Poisoned by his lies, leaving me on my own. But then you always were unnaturally close.

Bare feet turning purple on the tiles, you try and tell her, calmly and resolutely, to leave. But when you open your mouth the words slip, lifeless, back down your throat. You feel unbearably heavy as if your blood had been transfused with mercury. You try and focus on where your mother standing in front of you but all you can see is the dark silhouette of her fur coat, expanding into the shadows, absorbing everything that is not itself into itself.

As you stand, paralysed in the hall, her bristling inchoate shape brushes past you and surges up the stairs in a seamless, seething mass of shadow. At the landing it stops and sweeps back round to you. *This isn't your house. You have no right to be here. If you don't leave immediately, I'm going to get all your things and throw them down the stairs. Get out! I said, get out now! Go on, leave!*

You wake, gasping for breath as if something has been pressing into your chest, pyjamas plastered to your burning skin. Putting on a fresh pair, you climb onto the desk that stands beneath the attic window and open the skylight above it, angling yourself through the gap into the wide-open night. From here you can see over the roof tops of the town out to the moors and, beyond them, me, waning tonight, my soft, buttery beams stroking your face. Shaking from your nightmare, you swallow a lungful of cold air as the rash on your neck you have had since

the shouting at work became worse telegraphs its silent morse code to the sky. You have lost weight and your pyjamas hang loosely off your light frame. Your eyes are silvery and shivering in the dim glow of my light. I can see the claw wedged inside the sinuous tissue that has grown over and around it like ivy, burying it so deep that it's almost indistinguishable from your own flesh.

Pulling yourself up by the window frame, you lean further out, dancing your fingers in the velvety blackness, brushing their tips against my co-ordinates and running your hand across the piercing blue light of Venus, then Chiron, then Ursa major and minor, reaching up through the mist to place them on Saturn. Where do you begin and where do you end you ask the ancient question? How can you get the nightmares to stop? How can you prevent your past from storming right into your present?

At work you walk the corridors, a protective hand placed permanently over your chest. You pause at the office door before entering, folding up and putting away any part of you that might cause her voice to rise or her cheeks to redden or her eyes to narrow into contemptuous slits. If not to stop the explosions altogether, then at least to limit their frequency. Disappearing into the smile you can now so easily conjure that it has become second nature, you float over to your desk, you and not you. Watching yourself from a safe distance, you check your emails from a place further out populated by billions of stars slowly drifting apart.

I am out here, gibbous tonight, and I am trapezing down through the constellations, wiry hair billowing behind me, towards you. Touching down on the slate tiles of your roof, I slip in through the sky light and tip toe, quietly as I can, to your bed. Lips moving in your sleep, you kick a leg and violently jerk your head on the pillow as the shadow of my hair spills over your face but you do not wake up. I arrange myself at the top of your bed, your head between my knees, and, cradling the back of your neck, gently tip it one way and then the other, until the back of your skull is heavy and lifeless in the knotty skin of my palms. I hold you there, balanced on the delicate ledge between dream and dread that you can only bear when asleep, watching you turn pale.

When you are perfectly still, I dive in, whispering as I enter *this is going to hurt*. I swim through the currents of your bloods, carried on their drag, down the hidden streams of your meridians to where the claw is lodged inside you like the anchor of a ship wrecked at sea, held in place by a thick weave of tissue. Immediately, I go to work, unpicking each sinuous strand of flesh, stitch by stitch, unravelling the red threads of vein that had wrapped themselves around it, careful not to graze the tissue around it with the rinds of my long nails. The task is not an easy one and each tug at a tuberous cluster of veins is met with resistance, as if part of you is determined not to let go. Undeterred, I keep going, digging my arthritic fingers into the blood vessels bound around the claw, carefully teasing it loose until finally it comes away in my hand, a black crescent as big as my palm. Back at my spot in between Venus and Chiron, I fling it into the deepest part of the night, watching the claw spin in the wind and the ice as it disappears from my sight.

You tell her you are going to leave and then you do. On the moor, you watch me rise over the dam, full tonight, appearing from the curve of the earth, heavy and ripe and dripping with a sticky peach light. The silence, when it drops, is explosive, shattering your bones with the thundering emptiness stretching in every direction. Stripping down to your costume, you wade past the sleeping mallards into the dam.

A shiny mirror to the sky, the water envelopes you in its cold fire, burning your skin. At first, the dam is shallow enough that you can feel the rocks at the bottom when you stop to stand up. But when you swim further out into the deepest part and put your legs down, there is nothing beneath but water. You could get the cramps or faint from the cold and there would be nothing to stop you from sinking all the way to the bottom. Panicking, you kick harder. But your arms carry on carving through the waves, pulling your body through the black sky of water into my path. Coated in the waxy vernix of my light, you stop at the centre and take a deep breath.

iv. Intruders

She sleeps with one eye open. The lid cut away where the cancer was removed, it floats on the surface of the dark, a speck of black pupil inside a jelly-ish white sphere, while the rest of her snores. A rumbling mound of blanket and nightie suspended somewhere between alertness and sleep, with each soft grunt her body rolls a little nearer to the lip of the narrow sofa-turned-bed. Precipitously close the edge, she hears, or thinks she hears, a knock at the door and almost falls off. Her first, her only thought. *Intruders. Outside in the darkness. Coming to get her.* Nightie prickling with sweat, she pulls her knees into the crevices of her stomach. But even as she tries to hold herself in, her body is running away from her, coursing over its edges and flooding into the shadows beyond the island of her sofa. The black discs of her pupils eclipsing both eyes, she thrashes against the darkness until she is up, stamping her feet against the carpet, pulling herself back in fistfuls of nightie.

She might be old and she might be small but this one thing she knows. Nobody but nobody is coming into her home without her say so. Nobody but nobody is going to take her away against her booman rights. Not in the middle of the night. Not any time. No siree. She places her palms flat on the bib of her nightie and swipes them down the front of her body, pressing her shape back as she goes. Around her the darkness peels back to reveal the mahogany display cabinet, stripped and waiting to be varnished in one corner and in the other, by the bay window, the moulting armchair she keeps meaning to re-upholster. But no intruders.

Not that she is about to take any chances. *Not after the last time.* She balls her hands into fists and holds them out, admiring the way their knuckles glisten in the dark like a string of fat pearls. *She'll knock them for six!* A laugh cracks from her lips. *Ob-ho-ho yes! They have no idea what they're up against. The black bird is going to come. Then they'll be sorry.*

As the lights haven't worked since her staff walked away in the middle of a wiring job, she sets off in the dark. Sweeping her nightie into the crook of an arm, she marches from the

living room to the narrow gallery kitchen, keeping a look out with her special eye for anything suspicious looming in the hall.

Ha! she calls through the kitchen door to show the intruders that she's not scared. *Ha!*

Except for the gurgle rising up from her stomach, her shout is met with silence. *But she knows better than to let her guard down. You never know with these people. They will hide anywhere if you let them.* Bare feet cold against the greasy lino, she squats to the cupboards beneath the sink and springs the first door open. A tower of tinfoil takeaway containers clatters at her feet followed by an ancient egg poacher, a milk pan and a rusty colander. Impatiently, she brushes them aside. *They are not what she is looking for. Not why she opened the door.* She unlocks the next cupboard and a bulbous formation of plastic bags bounces out in the wake of a wad of old newspapers and several family-size packets of past their sell-by-date biscuits. *Clever, very clever,* she thinks as she tears open a packet of biscuits and crams a jammy dodger, whole, her mouth. *But whatever tricks they have got up their sleeves, she has got more. Yesssh!* A spray of wet crumbs showers the bib of her nightie. *Oh-ho-ho-yesssh. The black bird is going to come. That will sssshow them!*

At the far end of the kitchen, she takes the small step down into the bathroom. In the gloom the bath gapes empty and black next to the hole in the wall where her staff walked off the bathroom job. *All these people, so lazy and rude. You can't get anyone to do a decent job these days.* She stares into the hole and tamps down her nightie where it has begun to ride up her legs. *Perhaps they were here just now while she was still in the kitchen. Perhaps her staff had tipped them off. Or perhaps they hadn't come in the front got in through the French doors in the bedroom.*

In the dark, she manoeuvres herself back along the hall. It is an effort to prise open the bedroom door because of all the boxes jammed in behind it. The reason she no longer sleeps in here, there are boxes containing tufted chenille bedspreads and silk jacquard curtain material. Boxes with christmas and birthday cards. Boxes filled with Simplicity dress patterns and coloured threads. Boxes of varnish and wood paint. Boxes brimming with baby clothes; crocheted cardigans and comfort blankets; knitted booties in pastel shades. Boxes of bibs and bonnets.

Boxes heaving with buckets, spades, fishing nets, jelly shoes. And boxes, too, filled with photographic slides from the old house. Of birthday parties and bonfires; trips to the zoo and milking the goats; the back garden knee-deep in snow; Christmas stockings; first and last days at school; concerts, sports' days and plays. *Precious moments a mother will always treasure.* And yet more boxes full of slides depicting lichen and butterflies, fungi and moss from her days as a young biology teacher, documenting and cataloguing and writing the Latin names of things on little white labels.

Shouldering the door open, she surveys the dim silhouettes of her collection. Submerging the bed. Covering the floor. Splitting at the sides. Straining against the shadows. *Of course, she would hide in here. Down in one of the gullies between them. Or even better. Inside one.* Special eye roiling in the dark, she squashes her body into a narrow gap between a pair of cardboard walls. The weight of their contents feels reassuringly firm against the mass of nightie and flesh mashed up against them. She inches her body sideways among the boxes, squeezing it towards the dark hush of their centre. As she pushes her way through, the density of the shadows, the silence and depth of them in the places where they are thickest between the tallest piles of boxes, tell her that she is getting close. *That soon, very soon.* Beneath her nightie, her heart thuds faster, harder against the spongy walls of the boxes. Pressing against her body, they seem to heave and sigh as she passes. As if they are closing in. As if there is an intruder hiding inside each one.

It comes on rapidly and without warning. Boxes falling, books, postcards, slides flying as her body breaks from its banks, spilling everywhere followed by a howl from the shadows.

No! And again, more forcefully. No. No. No. No. No!

Shouting for her life. Shouting herself back. Until there they are, the doughy forms of her arms and her legs protruding from her nightie, imprinting her being onto the darkness once more. She pulls herself onto her knees. Through a breach in the boxes, she can see directly onto the French doors and beyond them something shaggy and feathered sweep across the glass.

Inside the tent of her nightie, something folds itself back in. *It's here. Outside in the garden. It came. Everything is going to be alright. There is nothing to be afraid of. She is safe. She is safe.*

She watches the French doors until they are perfectly dark, perfectly still. *Perhaps there never were any intruders. Perhaps she imagined it. Perhaps it is her new medication.* A giggle pops out of her mouth. *How silly of her to get carried away. And now she is wide awake in the middle of the night! What to do!* Her hand falls on a loose-lying object from one of the over turned boxes. She rubs the flat of her palm across its hard, flat surface and smiles. Your baby memory book! *She can remember filling it in so clearly!* Date, time and place of baby's birth. Baby's height. Baby's weight. Baby's eye and hair colour. Cataloguing your special features and characteristics. Describing your complexion as "ruddy" and recording your first word; "pudding". *And you were like a pudding too!* She remembers, *big and fat like a baby hippopotamus!* Cheeks dimpling, she giggles out loud. *Yes! That's exactly what you were like! This strange thing her body had made. How her belly had grown and grown then there it was. Magicked from out of her.*

You!

Slowly she circles the palm of her hand across the surface of the book as if she could magick you again across space and time. Is she sad that you haven't visited her in years? That you never went to see her when she was in the hospital for her operations? Or the last time she was in the residential place under section. The peeled white surface of her special eye glints in the dark.

What upsets her most is that you got married without telling her. *She's happy you got yourself a nice husband in the end. She would have behaved, she wants you to know. She wouldn't have caused a scene. Not on your wedding day. There are so many things she would have given you. The hand painted china tea set that was Granny and Grandad's engagement present, your silver christening bangle, all here in these boxes, kept specially.*

She looks back towards the French doors. But there is only the silhouette of the flowering camelias growing in pots on the patio arching in the breeze. Grabbing the nearest

upright box, she pulls herself to her feet without noticing the letter that had fallen out of your baby memory book when she picked it up lying in the shadows of the fallen boxes. Written on a single sheet of paper covered in the pale wash of a rainbow print, each colour fading into the next as if it had been left out in the rain, it is a letter from you.

Dear Mummy,

It begins in the sturdy cursive of your hand writing from when you were eight or maybe nine.

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

I love you.

Please love me too.

But it is dark and there is not enough light for her to see the letter, not even with her special eye. It is dark and she is thinking *even when you were likele you never wanted to hold her hand*. She is thinking *I'm still your mother, you know*. The tips of her fingers prickle with heat. She steadies herself against an upright box, as it spreads in a hot rash up her arms to her chest, her neck, her cheeks. And downwards in a flush of fiery heat towards her stomach, her thighs. Inside, a burning laval stream firing up her bowels, pushing its way to the surface, making her eye weep.

Knees knocking into boxes, she stumbles towards the French doors as the stinging tide pushes insistently against the cheeks of her buttocks. She barely makes it to her usual place beside the bird bath in the flower bed when the liquid fire erupts from between her legs. She holds her nightie aloft as it splatters into the mud, dead matter to dead matter, steaming as one in the cold night air. Her toes sink into the clayish soil as she leans her hands on her knees, until she is empty, a hollow white nightie trembling like the blossom in the cherry tree waving over her head.

She splashes her face with rainwater from the bird bath as the blood rushes back and a face - her face? - appears from between the mosaic of bruised petals in the moonlit water. *Or, no?* She stirs the surface and the face disappears. Cooling in the rainwater, the tips of her fingers brush against what feels like a clump of frogspawn at the bottom of the birdbath. Slipping her

hand deeper into the crumbling stone chalice, she cups the soft gelatinous formation in her palm. Against her skin the floating cloud of eggs feels like the silky amniotic mucus of birth fluid. So fragile and delicate. Slipping through her fingers. Slipping, always slipping. From the very beginning.

In the moonlight her eye ripens. *It wasn't her fault. She wants you to know that. She was ill. People didn't understand. You didn't understand.* She pulls her dripping hands out of the water and wipes them down the front of her nightie. *If you came over, she could show you the frogspawn. And the camelias, which have had a particularly good year. She could make you a little something for your tea. She's got some mince in the freezer that she could de-frost to make a cottage pie. When you were likkle that was always your favourite. You haven't seen her living room since she got the new wall paper. It's a William Morris one with fruit and flowers. She wasn't sure about it at first because it's a very bold print but it's grown on her now although she would still like your opinion. And there's the Lloyd Loom chairs she has re-upholstered. She was going to sell them but you could have them if you liked. They're worth a lot of money, you know. Or maybe you and her could go away for a weekend on the coast. Just the two of you. There's a nice caravan park she likes. It's very cheap and convenient - only a couple of hours drive and they have all the facilities.*

Her eye bulges with horror. Something tugging at her nightie, she can feel it. She turns from the bird bath towards the dark mass of lawn. *They are here, she is sure of it. Sneaking around in the garden. Crouching inside the rhododendrons. Waiting to pounce.* Yellowish and bloodshot, her eye glowers in the dark. *How dare they come to take her away. How dare they do that and then have the cheek to accuse her of being violent and abusive! Her! Abusive!!!!*

Yes, you! I'm talking to you! She calls out to the thick hedge of rhododendron bushes at the opposite end of the garden. *How can you sleep at night? That's what I wants to know?* A high-pitched laugh flies from her mouth as she staggers across the lawn, nightie flapping against shins, a white phantasm frothing in the dark. *Ha!* She rears up on her toes, digging them into the spongy moss. *Ha! I'm not afraid of you! Come and get me if you dare. Surely you're not scared of a likkle old lady like me?*

An arm shoots out from her nightie and tears at a handful of lawn. Swinging upwards above a sheaf of red hair, it launches a damp clump of earth and grass in the direction of the rhododendrons. *Come on if you think you're so tough! Who's tough now, eh?* From the billowing mud-streaked sheath of nightie another arm flies downwards and, ripping out a second chunk of lawn, sends it hurtling after the first in a fine spray of moss and the shells of crushed snails. *You think you can order me about and push me around! You think you can stop me doing what I please! Well think again! This is MY house and MY garden! And woebetide anyone who thinks they can trespass! Just you wait! The big bird is going to come and carry you away!*

The garden turns incandescent in the tungsten glare of next door's outside light. It floods the lawn, illuminating the tiny curls of hair plastered to her wet cheeks and the flecks of white foam at each corner of her mouth. Bulbous eye straining against the cold, hard brilliance of the light capturing her in its net, for a beat she doesn't move. And then she is all elbows, teeth, nails, toes tearing at the invisible mesh, kicking her way out in a rain of soil and moss and wet, dewy grass. Kicking her way to the darkness of the flower bed, to safety. But before she can catch her breath, it begins again. Her body slipping out and beyond itself, haemorrhaging into the night plasma, into the fathomless edges of things. Everything disappearing from her grasp.

Where are her staff?

Where is the big bird?

Where are you?

They find her, matted with petals and mud, next to the bird bath. It takes three of them to carry her to the waiting vehicle. *We're here now. Can you hear us?* They try not to flinch at the monstrous eye with the missing lid. *That's it. Hold our hands. It won't be long. Sssshh. Sssshh. That's it. Sssshh. Sssshh. Go to sleep.*

Part Three

From Autobiographical Short Fiction To Shadow Memoir

‘We like to think that a story is based on the triumph of good over evil; but the deeper truth is that good and evil are superseded and the two become one’

Robert Johnson [1991] 1993: 107

VII. Short Fiction As Container

In this section I build on my exploration of the synthesis between Jungian psychoanalysis and autobiographical fiction to show how the specific characteristics of surrealist short fiction extend these resonances. I demonstrate how the form lends itself particularly well to writing on trauma through the short fiction of Kavan and Machado and show how writing-as-shadow-work expands on existing approaches to offer a fresh mode.

i. Removing the gears

Although a growing field at the intersection of literary and trauma studies makes the persuasive case for creative writing as a means to represent and process trauma across a range of genres from traditional memoir to hybrid and fictionalised approaches, how the specific qualities of short fiction can expand on existing modes remains theoretically underexplored. Advocating long forms as a container for restorative writing modes, De Salvo argues they are the most productive since their length enables writers to engage with ‘a healing process that is deeper’ (2000: 134). But Machado describes how, when writing about an experience of emotional abuse and related trauma, it was the experimental qualities of short fiction that enabled her to

jump from one idea to the next, searching for a kind of aggregate meaning. You know that if you can break (the stories) and reposition them and unravel them and remove their gears, you will be able to access their truths in a way you couldn’t before.

[2019] 2020: 171

Like Machado, I discovered through the process of writing the early and mid-stage stories how the brevity of the form could allow me to jump from one idea to the next in service to exploring how to write about difficult subject matter. As noted in the introduction, just as my time-bound sessions with Mandy in which aspects of my past and present, inner and external experiences were brought together through the process of analysing a single dream over the course of a single hour helped me to manage the risk of overwhelm, so I found the short story form could offer a similar container. With less at stake due to the form's short length, the brevity of each story was an opportunity for me to experiment across a range of registers, styles and points of view in order to explore how I might represent and work through complex emotional truths.

Although there are many examples of how long form writing on trauma can also accommodate fragmentation and non-linear narratives, such as Ashworth's *Notes Made While Falling* (2019) and Huisman's autobiographical novel in three parts, *The Book of Mother* (2021), I personally found that the short story form allowed me to experiment with writing about the same experience from different perspectives and angles alongside re-drafting the same story many times, as a way of testing out how my translation of Jungian psychoanalysis into a literary aesthetic via the mode of writing-as-shadow-work might function in practice. Confronted with the technical challenge of conveying the repetitive nature of my experience of abuse, it was the condensation encouraged by short fiction (Lohafer 1989, Cox 2005, Saunders 2021) that enabled me to explore how I could compress many individual events into a single event, as in the mid-stage story 'The Nights Were Long', which narrates the many times I waited on the landing for my mother's return as one incident.

Meanwhile, the experiment allowed by short fiction also proved useful in terms of allowing me to tackle the individual distressing memory that continues to haunt me of being falsely accused by my mother of sleeping with my father through an ongoing self-reflexive process of refinement and adjustment. The allegorical story of 'The Mirror' is an early attempt tackle this topic, through the distancing device of third person, past tense. The narrative voice of the moon in 'Samsara' is

a further experiment with writing about this difficult subject from a safe distance. It was through this process of trial-and-error that I arrived at a narrative voice and structure which combines the second person voice of ‘Samsara’ with the tropes of gothic horror at work in ‘There’s Enough Evil In This World’, which I feel most successfully synthesises aspects of Jungian psychoanalysis with creative writing, as I will explain in more depth in a later section discussing how surrealist short fiction can be a form of aperture story.

In the meantime, it was my experience of shifting the gears and learning from failure that led me to think about experiment in terms of how writing-as-shadow-work could also be a transformative experience for my prospective reader. In *Inventing The Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, William Zinsser claims ‘a good memoir requires two elements – one of art, the other of craft. The first element is integrity of intention... the other element is carpentry. Good memoirs are a careful act of construction’ (1998: 6). As my project progressed I became more aware of the technical difficulties at work in negotiating the shadowy terrain between memoir and fiction and between the therapeutic and creative aspects of my project of writing-as-shadow-work. How to write authentically about the nature of my traumatic experience while also crafting a satisfying story? What were the specific characteristics of surrealist short fiction and how could I further synthesise the resonances between creative writing and Jungian psychoanalysis to facilitate both?

ii. **The surrealist short story & the transcendent function of metaphor**

A ‘special domain for the fantastic and the supernatural’ (Pratt 1981: 189), the origins of surrealist short fiction can be traced to early iterations of the short story form in the fairy tale and ghost story (Pratt 1981, May 1989) and their use of metaphor to externalise hidden aspects of the psyche. Likewise, the origins of shadow work can also be traced to back to the primal narratives of myth, suggesting a natural affinity between the two approaches. Throughout his lifetime Jung extensively researched the symbolism and myths of ancient civilisations, spiritual beliefs and religions,

including Taoism and Buddhism, to inform his theory on the collective unconscious and uses of metaphor in the interpretation of dreams. Believing the content of dreams to be partially composed of ‘mental forms whose presence cannot be explained by anything in the individual’s own life and which seem to be aboriginal, innate and inherited shapes of the human mind’ ([1964] 1972: 67), Jung describes dream symbolism as an ‘emotionally charged pictorial language’ ([1964] 1972: 43) through which the hidden world of the unconscious might be grasped.

Central to this language of dreams is the ‘transcendent function’ (Miller 2004) of metaphor. Rather than simplify or reduce the truth, Jung claims that the metaphoric symbols of dreams ‘point to the edge of uncertainty beyond which consciousness cannot pass’ ([1964] 1972: 21), representing what otherwise cannot be put into words. A portal between the conscious and unconscious aspects of the psyche, it is metaphor that allows the dialogue between them that is instrumental to the individuation process.

In the field of literary trauma studies, it is widely recognised that this restorative and transcendent psychoanalytic use of metaphor is viewed as instrumental to writing on trauma as a vehicle for ‘looking at what must not be looked at, at what would prevent us from existing, from continuing our ordinary, domestic lives... “the truth”’ (Cixous 1993: 61). DeSalvo, argues that metaphor operates an ‘emotional self-right mechanism akin to our body’s innate ability to heal wounds’ (2000: 55) that allows for multi-layered and nuanced levels of meaning which in turn can help us to self-reflexively alter our perspectives, allowing for new interpretations, insights and perceptions of identity.

A poetic device with a psychoanalytic function, metaphor re-wires neural pathways by way of re-writing stories. Where trauma dissolves boundaries between self and other, inner and outer, leading to psychic distress, ‘symbolisation results in mental receptivity and creativity, indicating the enhanced ability to tolerate anxiety arising from destitution, contradiction and ambiguity in both internal and external reality’ (van der Wiel 2014: 52), creating a whole from the shattered parts of the traumatised self.

If metaphor lends itself particularly well to trauma writing in general, Charles E. May argues that short fiction lends itself particularly well to metaphor, based on the form's close relationship to 'the primal narrative that embodies and recapitulates mythic perception, and whose characteristics are compression rather than expansion and concentration rather than distribution' (1989: 64). While metaphor has long been employed by writers as a metaphysical device to illuminate the ineffable and is by no means exclusive to short fiction, May claims it is the compression demanded by the form which gives characters, objects and events 'metaphoric significance' by which 'the hard material outlines of the external world are inevitably transformed into the objectifications of psychic distress' (1989: 5-6), making the darkness conscious in story.

Where Marguérite Corporaal observes that short fiction's 'narrative condensation... serves as an omission of too excruciating, inexpressible trauma' (2014: 27), May views the compression of short fiction as being in service to the function of metaphor as both a rhetorical and psychoanalytical device. Just as Jung conceptualises the function of metaphor as instrumental to the process of shadow work, so May claims

if the boundary between inner experience and external reality is established at the same time that consciousness of the self and thus the world of objects outside the self is established, then as far as the adult civilised human being is concerned, this primal state of at-one-ness can neither be experienced nor understood except by means of an imaginative "as if"

2013: 10.

The very shortness of short fiction, he argues, makes it primarily a metaphysical form where metaphoric significance is enlarged, the internal contents of the psyche are externalised and the

ordinary is constellated with the inexpressible in a way that mirrors and enacts the primary process phenomenon of psychoanalysis.

iii. **Surrealism and symbolic metaphorisation in Anna Kavan's 'Julia And The Bazooka' and Carmen Maria Machado's 'Mothers'**

Both Kavan and Machado employ the short story as a form of experimental auto-mythography, blending tropes from surrealism, fantasy, fairy tale and myth to fictionalise aspects of their respective traumatic experiences by way of metaphoric symbolisation. The life of Kavan, in particular, is marked by numerous intersecting traumatic experiences. Not only did she have an emotionally negligent mother, Kavan lost an absent father to suicide and both her children to the Second World War. Suffering from depression, she spent extended periods in psychiatric institutions, while she also developed a life-long heroin addiction. Influenced by the Surrealist art movement and its interest in the unconscious and avant-garde experiment, Kavan wrote across numerous forms, while also practising as visual artist. However, it is the short story which she describes as being akin to 'a small room in which is concentrated a brilliant light' (Walker ed. 2019: xii) as a means to contain her vividly felt emotions and surrealist night-time language.

Where *Sleep* explores maternal entanglement in a novella-length form, 'Julia And The Bazooka' ([1970] 2019) shines a piercing light on the life of Julia, a flower loving, tennis and car obsessed free-wheeling spirit from girlhood to adulthood via multiple deaths, all in the small room of a single short story. Fictionalising aspects of her own life in the third person surrealist character of Julia, Kavan explores a disembodied and split self 'in a state of transparency to the world, as if a window through which light enters as a 'signal', and from which one perceives a complex, idiosyncratic web of connectives' (Ferris 2017: 401) whose fractured identity is amplified by the condensed narrative frame.

Stripping external reality to the bone, Kavan tears at the pervious skin between inner and outer, past and present, real and imagined to reveal the vast and dark mass of the psyche. Switching tracks between tenses and places in a narrative driven by emotional temperature rather than coherent logic, Kavan conflates chronological time into the ‘once upon a time’ of fairy tale that stands in for all Julias, past and present, dead and alive in a quantum leap that sees her simultaneously planting bulbs and sitting with her psychiatrist in ‘the bomb silence’ of fighter planes about to drop their load as ‘the world bursts and burns, while she falls through the dark’ ([1970] 2019: 151). Meanwhile, the subject of maternal entanglement is replaced by Julia’s equally complex long-standing entanglement with her syringe for injecting heroin – the bazooka of the story’s title. Formerly a little girl with ‘sad eyes’, chastised for picking poppies, with her bazooka, Julia ‘hardly remembers how sad and lonely she used to feel’ ([1970] 2019: 150). Now she has her syringe a near-fatal car crash sees her leave the wreckage laughing.

That Julia has ‘been damaged by no love in childhood so that she can’t make contact or feel at home in the world’ is the sole concretising disclosure in the story. Connecting the whirlwind of impressionist images with autobiographical fact, it operates as the narrative centre of gravity around which the otherwise condensed, fragmentary narrative skids between images and scenes, generating meaning accumulatively, by implication, association and allusion through repeated images of poppies and geraniums, snow and ice, prize cups and urns and their symbolic resonances with heroin and blood, life and death. Throughout, Julia’s spirits seem as unbreakable as her glass syringe. At the same time, however, she becomes obsessed by a ‘face which sparkles with frost’ ([1970] 2019: 152), that, although familiar, she cannot name. As in ‘an obsessed fictional character (who) makes the mistake of perceiving metaphor as if it were real... (so) that character becomes transformed into a parable figure in a fable of his or her own making’ (May 2013: 99), the cold face suggests itself as both Julia’s death mask and the psychic imprint of Kavan’s experience of traumatic disembodiment - all but dissolving the already faint line between inner and outer even more.

In a similar way to my project of writing-as-shadow-work, the writing of Machado experiments with the shadowy interzone between memoir and fiction to explore personal traumatic experiences of emotional abuse. While my writing focuses on the dangerous subject of abusive mothers, Machado addresses the equally taboo topic of violent women in the context of queer domestic abuse. In the surrealist short story ‘Mothers’ ([2017] 2018), she explores the gap between memory and imagination, real and fantasy through the history of an abusive toxic relationship between Bad and the first-person narrator – the two “mothers” of an un-named, genderless baby. The story begins as Bad hands the baby over for the main protagonist with the parting words; ‘when the baby cries, she could be hungry or thirsty or cranky or sick or sleepy or paranoid or jealous or she had planned something that went horribly awry. So you’ll need to take care of that, when it happens’ ([2017] 2018: 46). Since a new-born is understood as being too young to make plans, however, this subtle sleight-of-hand between the rational and non-rational suggests that the baby can be read as a metaphoric device, externalising what the relationship has ‘birthed’ in psychological terms. Just as Bad expects the narrator to take responsibility for the baby, whose screaming and tantrum’s mirror hers, so the baby can be interpreted as standing in for all the ways the narrator must psychologically take responsibility for Bad and her dysregulated emotions. Further unpicking the seam between inner and outer selves, while complicating the inter-subjective entanglement between the protagonist and Bad, the narrative later sees the baby split and evolve into two teenagers, Tristan and Mara.

Like ‘Julia And The Bazooka’, ‘Mothers’ condenses an extensive period of time from the baby’s birth to the teenagers becoming adults. Meanwhile, the fragmented first-person narrative similarly loops between present and past, while speculatively travelling into an imagined (inside the frame of the story) future. Simultaneously constructing and de-stabilising a coherent relationship history between the narrator and Bad, Machado conveys the psychological devastation of emotional abuse - the fantasies and the lies, the emotional manipulation and physical violence - with narrative jumps that both condense this experience into a few brief scenes, while

communicating the traumatic intrusion of the past on the present, achieved by looking through a rear-view mirror into the future where Mara and Tristan are warned not to flood the house because their 'mothers' have not taught them how to swim.

The house that Mara and Tristan must not flood, meanwhile, also operates at a dual level of fantasy and reality. Interrogating the notion of the fairy tale romance as both aspirational and illusionary, the rambling cottage buried deep in the woods, which Machado describes in vivid baroque detail, echoes the archetypal symbolism of fairy tale houses. While the narrator states 'I believe in a world where impossible things happen. Where love can outstrip brutality, can neutralise it, as though it never was, or transform it into something new and more beautiful' (2017] 2018: 56), the sentiment of hopefulness acquires a more ambiguous shadow as the utopian fantasy of 'a domestic daydream' incrementally slips into something more violent and claustrophobic. Structurally and stylistically enacting the slippage between reality and fantasy as a consequence of projection and manipulation in the context of emotional abuse, heightened by the symbolism of the crumbling fairy tale house, the shortness of 'Mothers', like 'Julia And The Bazooka', places the narrative focus

on not the whole experience... but rather on a single experience lifted out of the everyday flow of human actuality and active striving, an experience that is lifted out precisely because it's not a slice of that reality but rather a moment in which "reality" itself is challenged

May 2004: 12.

So, the surrealist narrative of both stories employs metaphor to challenge what is taken for real while revealing deeper meanings in relation to the psychological damage of invisible traumatic wounds in the process.

iv. Surrealist short fiction as aperture story

Although surrealism can be used as rhetorical device to convey the poetic traits of a situation where reality makes little sense (Onega and Ganteau 2011), I was interested in how I could employ the resonance between surrealism and the uses of metaphoric symbolisation to facilitate writing-as-shadow work, as Kavan and Machado do. According to May, it is the aesthetic patterning encouraged by the brevity of the short story which in turn generates a ‘tension between the necessity of the everyday metonymic world and the sacred metaphoric world’ where ‘truth is embodied rather than explained’ (2004: n.pag.) that correlates with the syzygy or conjunction of thesis and anti-thesis that is central to individuation and its alchemical transformation of opposites into a unified whole. In this sense, May seems to be suggesting that ‘the short story’s focus on the mysteries of dreams, fears and anxieties based on experiences and perceptions outside the realm of familiar, everyday life’ (2013: 4) lends it the capacity to function at a liminal level between the part and the sum, where the whole story can function as metaphor at a narrative level, as in fairy tales and myths. Estés calls these kind of multi-layered narratives ‘aperture’ stories. With the psychoanalytic function of metaphor acting as bridge between realist and surrealist approaches, aperture stories ‘allow us to glimpse their hidden healing structures and deeper meanings, rather than just overt contents’ ([1992]1998: 351).

It was by paying more attention to the specific characteristics of surrealist short fiction that I began to think about how my own writing could employ both the poetic and psychoanalytic function of metaphor to operate as a form of aperture story. Expanding on an early draft of ‘A Birthday Lunch’, in the version presented at the end of Part Three I amplify the childlike eccentricity of the mother character by introducing the carnivalesque gestures of party hats and a tablecloth printed with laughing clowns to heighten the slippage from realism to surrealism and show the shadows lurking behind our dysfunctional dynamic. I also decided to include more background context about my mother’s obsession with bargains, extending this metaphor to demonstrate how she viewed the nature of our relationship as similarly transactional. Although I

always intended the story to operate as a descent narrative that mirrors the Jonah and the whale archetype, the late-stage version employs the interplay between the real and surreal and between metaphor and deeper meaning more skilfully, as a consequence of the trial-and-error process that preceded it. It shifts gears to think of this lunch not only in terms of a literal event but as an archetypal appointment with my mother that stands in for the literal breakdown which initiated the individuation process for me in my late thirties.

A re-imagined version of 'The Zoo', 'Disappearing Act' is lightly framed with references to *Alice In Wonderland* that aim to set up the fantastical landscape of the zoo as an unfamiliar exotic space where strange things happen. While the fictional version of my childhood self in the story initially is afraid of falling into the shadows that she perceives as holes, when she/I is confronted with her/my shape-shifting mother, her fear is reversed and she wishes a hole would swallow her up. In a direct echo effect, both the mother and daughter characters disappear – the former into a shadow and the latter into thin air while the meaning of the word 'smile' changes from a harmless exhortation to something more sinister evoking melancholy and loss.

Incorporating aspects of 'The Nights Were Long' and 'Samsara', 'There's Enough Evil In This World' explores the ways 'the function of the shadow... represent(s) the opposite side of the ego... to embody just those qualities that one dislikes most in other people' (von Franz [1964] 1972: 173) through the recurring doll imagery woven through the story. While the daughter/I is initially attached to the doll, she later rejects it, mirroring the callous behaviour of her/my mother. A symbol of the intuition, or part of the shadow self that 'may, however, be an impulse towards growth that one should cultivate and follow' ([1964] 1972: 16), the doll in the story metaphorically stands in for what I learned to be ashamed of and hide. Just as the doll doubles as uncanny version of the daughter's/my inner self, so the house is a metaphor for both her/my first home in our mother's belly and the fragile and tenuous states of the girl/my own psyche. Trapped inside a house she/I can't escape, the story operates as a space to explore the horror of my experience as a girl and face my worst fears through the container of story.

Building on the theme of the internal critical mother and associated invasive thoughts that are introduced in 'A Visitation', 'Crow Wood' explores maternal entanglement set against the shadowy backdrop of the woods, which in fairy tales are uncanny places of enchantment that symbolise both losing and finding the self. Incorporating the recurring metaphoric symbols not only of woods but crows, wolfish dogs, houses and thresholds, the daughter/me in the story takes both the mother figure and the girl who appears in the woods to be real. My encounter in story with the girl in the woods stages a re-connection with the intuitive knowledge that is buried in 'There's Enough Evil', which in turns helps the writer in the story to see this mother for what she really is.

Set against the backdrop of a long, meandering shoreline, 'Mother Bear' employs imagery that is both realist and symbolic in which beaches, flowers, rocks, the ocean and bears all point to a deeper, metaphysical meaning. The changes of colour in the landscape from black through white to red are an allusion to the stages in the alchemical process by which the base material of dirt turns to gold. A vehicle to perform how I might 'walk as far as the night. One's own night. Walking through the self toward the dark' (Cixous 1993: 65), the mother figure in the story is intended to act as a metaphor for my inner loving mother. A space for both grief and transcendence, the speculative nature of the narrative enabled me to performatively access this previously hidden part of myself and, by extension, the lost child she is searching for.

In this way the late-stage stories engage with the psychoanalytic function of metaphor to embed both explicit and implied layers of meaning that oscillate between physical and metaphysical. I chose to write them in the present tense in order to evoke a sense of an eternal present that transcends temporal time to further amplify the tension of opposites between the two. Writing of past, present, future and shadow selves in a fluid interchangeability both within and the across a cycle of stories was not only creatively generative, it also proved therapeutically beneficial as a strategy to develop 'the cognitive ability to move fluidly back and forth between an inside and an outside perspective on oneself, giving oneself up to the experience of "self as other" whilst

also retaining a grounding in one's familiar sense of self' (Hunt 2010: 232). Putting these possible selves in creative dialogue with each other, I could conceive of how all these parts could co-exist in a larger, ultimately mysterious, harmony beyond what can be perceived through rational processes alone.

VIII. Archetypes, Paradigms & Lessons

This section shows how I employed the Jungian archetypes of the mother and the self as vehicles that can allow my prospective readers to encounter a highly personal experience through the lens of universally recognisable paradigms. It demonstrates both the creative and therapeutic potential of thinking about the individual self through the lens of archetype in the writing of Kavan and Winterson, in addition to reflecting on how I engaged with archetype to this effect in my own writing. It concludes by looking at the shared characteristics between the mother archetype and the individuation process and examples how these similarities position it as an instructive vehicle with which to facilitate psychological growth both on and off the page.

i. The mother archetype and matrilineal narratives

Although my story is unique to the specific circumstances and personalities of myself and my mother, the aim of my project of writing-as-shadow-work is to not only develop a practice that can be healing for me but one that can also operate as a blueprint for other writers while also engaging my prospective reader. With this in mind, I looked to the Jungian system of archetypes and its organisation of universal character traits into a set of symbolic figures as a device with which I could adapt to my project of presenting personal material in a relatable way. Just as the poetic and psychoanalytic function of metaphor allowed me to cross the threshold between the physical and metaphysical in service to my own process of transformative learning, I also employed it as a strategy for taking a personal experience and making it relatable to others (DeSalvo 2000, May 2010).

In *Borderlines: Autobiography and Fiction in Postmodern Life Writing*, Gunnþórunn Guðmundsdóttir suggests ‘as the individual autobiographer writes on universal experiences, such as mother- daughter relationships... she has to deal with the universal structure of these

experiences. This invites questions about... how individual experiences fit in with universal structures' (2003: 6) as means to communicate with her audience and engage her reader.

Thinking of myself and my mother as both individuals and as archetypes allowed me to engage with how my personal stories could operate as 'paradigms and parables (where) the intensity of a story... releases into a bigger space than the one it occupied time and place (and) crosses the threshold from my world into yours' (Winterson 2011: 61) via the use of metaphoric symbolisation.

Alongside thinking about how I could write about the self through the lens of the Jungian shadow archetype, as discussed in detail in Part Two, I was also interested in how I could employ archetype to write about both my personal mother and the spectrum of characteristics that are associated with the maternal in folklore, religion and myth. A dual archetype that represents both the loving mother who nurtures and supports and the terrible mother who destroys and devours, according to Jung the mother

refers to the place of origin, to nature, to that which passively creates, hence to substance and to matter, to materiality, the womb, vegetative functions. It also means the unconscious, our natural and instinctive life, the psychological realm, the body in which we dwell or are contained; for the "mother" is also the matrix, the hollow form, the vessel that carries and nourishes, and it thus stands psychologically for the foundation of consciousness. Being inside or contained in something also suggests darkness, something nocturnal and fearful, hemming one in...the underlying primal reality (of the mother symbol) is so inconceivably complex that it can be grasped only at the farthest reach of the intuition, and then but dimly

[1974] 2002: 106.

The 'dark goddess' (Woodman [1996] 1997) who simultaneously stands in for both the womb and the tomb, creation and chaos, the earth and the ocean, intuitive knowledge and the unconscious, 'the image "mother" is a tuning fork that sets off vibrations far beyond the realm of the personal mother. It resonates in the creative matrix at the core of the psyche – the matrix that contains both the devouring mother and the cherishing mother' (Woodman [1996] 1997: 24). An archetype that represents both destruction and creativity, the mother symbol echoes the cycle of death and re-birth that is the ongoing process of individuation, in which the dissolution of the ego is the condition for new life.

In a similar way, Kristeva conceives of the mother as symbolic of chaos in the form of the abject and what appears too dangerous and threatening to be assimilated into the self, and by extension, society. Claiming 'abjection is resurrection that has gone through death (of the ego). It is an alchemy that transforms death drive into a start of life, a new significance' ([1980] 1982: 15), Kristeva argues that 'the aesthetic task (is) a descent into the foundations of the symbolic construct... retracing the fragile limits of the speaking being, closest to its dawn, to the bottomless "primacy" constituted by primal repression' ([1980] 1982: 18) in order to give metaphoric expression to the lost, buried and unspeakable, which is the horror of death and its archetype, the mother.

Metaphorically cloaked as the dark, as night, as heroin, as dreaming and sleep, it is this mother that Kavan's semi-fictional character B encounters in *Sleep Has his House*. Appearing as both B's biological mother and a shadowy face in the mirror or silhouette at the door, this uncanny mother 'takes B's hand and walks away with her down a narrow path; receding with her along the private, blind, quiet, inviolate path, the backward-reaching, down-reaching tunnel, as if into the crater of an extinct volcano' ([1948] 2002: 66) - leading her into a generative darkness at the edge of language and meaning. Paradoxically, it is also the darkness of night that is 'reliable' and a place 'where nothing is false' ([1948] 2002: 170). Beyond the limits of the self, roaming the rooms of her

mother while swimming in her dark seas, B is able to connect with a deeper foundational truth beyond the rational reality of daylight.

As previously noted, in the quest narrative fragments of *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit*, Winterson conceptualises the fictional Mrs. Winterson as both the Red Queen from *Alice In Wonderland* and a fairy tale sorcerer. Mercurial and manipulative, they display the dark power of the maternal as a force of destruction and deception. Just as the maternal archetype of the Greek goddess Aphrodite tests Psyche (who is symbolic of the soul archetype) with four impossible tasks (Woodman [1996] 1997), so these maternal figures operate as trials that enable the young Winnet Stonejar to develop resourcefulness and resilience. In both cases, the archetypal figure of the mother is moulded and shaped from aspects of Kavan and Winterson's own mothers in a way that acknowledges their psychological power as vectors of both nourishment and destruction.

Integrating and adding to the approaches of Kavan and Winterson, my project of writing-as-shadow-work investigates how my stories can operate as a creative space in which I can think about the mother character not only as *my* mother but as a representation of 'the matrix, the hollow form, the vessel that carries and nourishes' that simultaneously 'suggests darkness, something nocturnal and fearful, hemming one in' (Jung [1974] 2002: 106) to enlarge a harrowing personal experience through the universal themes of death and rebirth. Heightening the slippage between realms and the mythic realms of the symbolic, I explore the maternal as my mother – her behaviour, her body, her appearance, her smells – but also as the way her behaviour intersects with the negative aspects of the maternal archetype, as explored through the imagery of all-consuming shadows, bodies, houses and oceans that swallow versions of me over and over.

A creative device to represent the universal aspects of the difficult mother who views her daughter as an extension of herself, utilising the mother archetype was also a strategy for me to interpret and find meaning in the actions of my personal mother by viewing her behaviour as belonging to a wider set of tendencies and attributes. Externalising these shadows on the page, I could deconstruct and reformulate 'motifs such as those of the omnipotent mother... to yield new

meanings and symbolic patterns' (Giorgio 2002: 88). While the self-reflexive nature of writing-as-shadow-work allowed me to gain insights into the extent to which my identity is biologically, socially and culturally entangled with that of my mother, it was through depicting my mother as shapeshifting between the recognisable figure of my childhood and something more threatening and archetypal in stories like 'A Birthday Lunch', 'Disappearing Act' and 'There's Enough Evil' that I was able to confront and name the ways my mother projected the shadows of her unprocessed pain onto me as a starting point for the process of psychically *dis*entangling myself from her.

In addition to performing writing-as-shadow-work within the container of individual stories, as my project progressed I began to think about how I could employ this approach intertextually across a cycle of stories. To this end, the late-stage story 'Crow Wood' sees the character in the story, who is me as an adult trying and failing to write, rehearse how she will ask the uninvited mother figure who is staying at her house to leave. An opportunity to re-imagine myself beyond the confines of my people-pleasing, scared inner child, 'Crow Wood' was a space in which I could inhabit a position of agency to practice self-care and set healthy boundaries as a continuation of this disentanglement process. How I further developed writing-as-shadow to work across a cycle of stories will be discussed in more depth in the final section.

ii. Narrative voice, the self archetype and re-mothering

As I explored the creative and therapeutic uses of the shadow and the mother archetypes, alongside the inter-subjectivity between myself and my personal mother and the intra-psychic relationship between my theatre of selves, I returned to my unresolved dilemma about narrative voice. Which self was telling these stories? How might my choice of narrative voice further expand on the Jungian notion of active imagination and multiple sub-selves developed in the early and mid-stage stories? If I was/am a fluid self in progress, what voice would I use to 'express this voice-memory-

responsibility intersection' (Frank [1995] 2013: 132) and approach the truths of my experience in story? How could I work with archetype to test the creative and therapeutic possibilities of narrative voice and its role in writing-as-shadow-work?

As previously noted, the early and mid-stage stories were largely experiments in writing in third and first person. It was through the process of trial-and-error allowed by the experiment associated with short fiction that I landed upon a second person narrative voice that opened up the flexibility for me to both write myself and my mother as characters whilst also viewing them/us from above. As I have discussed elsewhere, my initial attempts at writing in second person were through the persona of the moon who narrates 'Samsara'. Although this voice proved to be problematic in terms of writing about events that took place during the day, exploring the moon's archetypal associations with feminine wisdom and the unconscious opened up the possibility for me to develop a narrative voice that could allow me 'to feel a shift in (my) perspective, an enlargement of (my) sense of self' (DeSalvo 2000: 52) and holistically integrate the dark aspects of my traumatic experience and the wisdom to potentially be gained from it.

To further develop this restorative use of narrative voice, I looked to the Jungian archetype of the self, which I will refer to as 'the true self' in order to distinguish it from notions of the self as an individual entity. According to Jung, the true self is both part of the psyche and an entity outside of it. Functioning as a wise, hieratic elder connected to the collective unconscious, the self archetype is comparable to an infinite 'original mind' (Jung [1964] 1972) that finds its spiritual equivalent in the concept of a loving divine presence.

It's a concept that correlates with the 'knowing subject' who 'works with dissonant materials, fragmented by trauma and organises them into a form of knowledge' (Gilmore 2001: 147) in the speculative arena of fictionalised autobiography. Where Gilmore, referencing Foucault's Panopticon, suggests that traditional autobiography conforms to the narrative voice of fixed sovereign "I" that functions as a surveillant editor of the self, she argues that this 'knowing

subject' enables a self-reflexive writing process that offers writers the potential to develop a mutable, expanded sense of self.

Apter also conceives of a 'true' and 'false' self with specific reference to working through the psychological hold of a difficult mother. According to Apter, the true self stands in for a child's authentic feelings. However, when a child buries her true self to avoid maternal rejection, she develops a false self to accommodate the mother's needs, as I explore thematically in 'Disappearing Act' and 'There's Enough Evil In This World'. Apter draws on the research of neuroscientist Antonio Damasio to suggest that by adulthood this true and false self have evolved into what Damasio terms the 'core self' and the 'autobiographical self'. Expanding on Damasio, Apter uses the term 'autobiographical self' to describe the part of us who tells a 'public story' about who we are. While the public story told by the autobiographical self may not be entirely false, since its function is to present us as how we wish to be seen in the eyes of others, it is 'vulnerable to distortion and denial' (2013: 82). Meanwhile, Apter describes Damasio's 'core self' as the part of us that is 'grounded in our own individual responses and desires, feelings that are deeply personal and specific to us' (2013: 82). She suggests that children who are shaped by the stories of their difficult mothers risk losing touch with their core self and their psychological growth, therefore, is dependent on recovering an awareness of a core self.

Where Apter employs Damasio's concept of the core self in relation to a discussion of individual experience, Jung's concept of the true self is trans-personal. While Jungian psychoanalysis understands the egoic part of the personality to be that which falsely believes itself to represent the whole, the true self functions as 'the totality of the psyche... not only the centre, but also the whole circumference which embraces both conscious and unconscious; it is the centre of this totality, just as the ego is the centre of consciousness' (Jung [1974] 2002: 113).

'That larger and greater personality maturing within us, whom we have already met as the inner friend of the soul' (Jung [1970] 2010: 65), the self archetype bears similarities with the positive aspects of the mother archetype as that which is 'the mysterious root of all growth and change; the

love that means homecoming, and the long silence from which everything begins and in which everything ends. Intimately known and yet strange like Nature' ([1970] 2010: 26).

A significant development in the late-stage stories was my decision to merge the similarities between the mother and self archetypes in order to create a second person narrative voice with the persona of a wise and loving higher self that correlates with Gilmore's 'knowing subject' through which I could dialogue with my various shadow selves and my mother. Simultaneously me and a 'supra personal force... as if something is looking at me, something I do not see but sees me – perhaps that Great (Woman) in the heart' (von Franz 1972: 162), I discovered this fictive narrative voice could operate as both a rhetorical and therapeutic device in service to learning how to mother myself. Akin to Vivian Gornick's notion of a narrative "I" that is 'both me and at the same time not me' (2002: 22) it was by viewing myself as subject and object, narrative voice and character, author and actor that I could engage with

the possibility of experiencing, through the intimate dialogue between... two textual selves made possible by the narrated monologue, what it feels like to be a dynamic self-in-process between a dominant self-concept and the felt body... towards a more fluid multiplicity of self centred in the body

Hunt 2010: 240.

Citing Jung, Winterson suggests 'a conflict can never be resolved on the level at which it arises – at that level there is only a winner and a loser, not a reconciliation. The conflict must be got above – like seeing a storm from higher ground' (2011: 145). In the act of stepping outside of my shadow selves and imagining myself as this other maternal self, I could 'exorcise the difference inscribed by trauma (and) transition from 'what I was' to 'what I may be'' (Jensen 2016: 444) in order to choose the person I wanted to become in the future. A way to transcend the apparent dualities of

my fearful shadow selves and the expansiveness of this other kinder self, my approach echoes the alchemical process of invoking ‘a metaphorical third presence’ (Miller 2004: 127) in order to therapeutically integrate diverse aspects of myself into a larger whole. In the late-stage stories I perform myself as this symbolic, archetypal persona *on* the page, ‘living the metaphors [that] often involves a leap of consciousness, which forces us to recognise not only gifts we buried long ago, but gifts we know not of’ (Woodman [1996] 1997: 171) in order to become this voice *off* the page.

iii. **The school of the mother**

According to Estés, the mother archetype is ‘a school we are born into, a school we are students in, a school we are teachers at, all at the same time for the rest of our lives’ (Estés [1992]1998: 180).

It is the school of the devouring mother, as symbolised by the goddess Kali and her necklace of severed heads, denoting the many deaths of the ego, who teaches us to die before we die so that we can live more meaningfully and purposefully. In this way, as previously noted, the dual mother archetype can be read as interchangeable with the individuation process and the holistic, healing integration of all parts of the self.

Both Kavan’s *Sleep* and Winterson’s *Why Be Happy?* demonstrate the archetypal healing patterns of the school of the mother who teaches living through dying and redemption through loss. In *Sleep*, the lesson B learns from this school is ‘to keep moving on, even if we didn’t know where we were going’ ([1948] 2002: 169) – embracing uncertainty as a form of creative spontaneity and learning to trust the darkness of Night, who symbolises the mother of all mothers. In *Why Be Happy?* Winterson conceptualises the trials she endured as Mrs. Winterson’s ‘dark gift’ (2011: 214). Meeting her biological mother Ann and glimpsing ‘the me I might have become without books, without education, and without all the things that happened to me along the way, including Mrs.

W', she re-evaluate her monstrous mother as 'my monster' (2011: 228) - not by denying or excusing her monstrosity but accepting it as contributing to own intellectual and psychological growth.

In each case, the school of the mother teaches how 'matrophobia is... a psychic malaise that can be scotched' (Fogerty 2002: 113). Likewise, it was through meeting my mother on the page that enabled me to re-imagine my relationship with and to her. What the school of the mother taught me was *both* the necessity of disentangling myself from my mother's projections *and* the value of my traumatic experience as a source of wisdom and growth. Apter suggests recovery involves a 'release from self-distrust' where 'the challenge is not to resolve matters between you and your mother but between you and the habitual fear-based thought processes that come between you and your capacity to thrive on your own terms' (2013: 200). A perfectionist and my own worst critic, it is through the practice of writing-as-shadow-work and the larger school of the mother this process has inducted me into that I am learning to fail, to make mistakes, to tolerate discomfort, to embrace not knowing at the start how a story will end, to trust my instincts, to accept and take responsibility for my shadows, in order to be kind to myself and, hopefully, others.

Meanwhile, it was through writing my own wounds, insecurities and fears that I understood myself to also be writing about the wounds of my mother

not as the story of the individual in relation to the events of (her) own past, but as the story of the way in which one's own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another, the way in which trauma may lead, therefore, to the encounter with another, through the very possibility and surprise of listening to another's wound

Caruth: 1996: 7.

Acquiring 'the enlightenment that the battle is no longer between ourselves and a mother but between the history that formed us and a possible better self' (Apter 2013: 201), I learned that I

could reject what did not belong to me, while forgiving my mother from a distance in order to break the cycle of violence, acknowledging her pain without excusing her cruel behaviour.

A school I am simultaneously living and writing, it is a place where ‘character is demonstrated, reflexively, in the writing that is the measuring up of that character... memory is revised, interruption assimilated, and purpose grasped’ (Frank [1995] 2013: 131). The work of a lifetime, the school of the mother, like the individuation process it symbolises, entails an ongoing cycle of death and re-birth through which unhelpful patterns of thinking are gradually changed, aided by the inherent plasticity of our brains as new neural pathways are forged (DeSalvo 2000, Apter 2013). ‘A process more than an arrival’ (2013: 198), writing-as-shadow-work is a way for me to continue the journey begun with Mandy over twelve years ago. It has not erased the past or my shadows but engendered a more spacious way for me to think about myself as responsible for them, free in each moment, on and off the page, to integrate good and bad, darkness and light, in order to transcend both and create a new self.

IX. Inventing Reality

This section draws on my experience of writing-as-shadow-work as both a creative and therapeutic practice to show how it is a reverse-engineering of autobiographical fiction. It highlights the similarities between the Jungian premise that reality is a mutable phenomenon we are perpetually in the process of inventing and the act of invention at the heart of creative writing to show how writing-as-shadow-work synthesises both. It discusses how viewing each story as part of a larger inter-textual body enabled me to produce meaning across a cycle of stories and generate a new hybrid mode, the shadow memoir, with reference to similar approaches in the writing of Kavan and Machado.

i. A reverse-engineering of autobiographical fiction

One of the founding principles of Jungian psychoanalysis is that whatever stories we tell - whether consciously or unconsciously, real or symbolic - the psyche takes to be true. As the Jungian analyst Robert Johnson claims, ‘a symbolic or ceremonial experience is real and affects one as much as an actual event’ (1991: 52). If writing-as-shadow-work deploys fictive devices to tell the story of real-life events, it is also a reverse-engineering of autobiographical fiction. Taking the imagined and making it real, my project of writing-as-shadow-work uses invention to not only ‘make self-representation possible’ (Gilmore 2001: 24) but to realise a new self. Interrogating notions of truth, it performatively engages with Jung’s proposition that reality is not an immutable external entity but something groundless and mutable that we create from an ‘archetypal place of pure possibility’ (Miller 2004: 105).

Drawing on the Latin root of invention - *invenire* - meaning “to find”, Jung stresses that truths are not only the preserve of rational, intellectual knowledge (which he associates with the masculine archetype of the father) but that the creative impulses of imagination and intuition

(which he associates with the feminine archetype of the mother) are vital to unlocking them. Although Jung uses gendered language to communicate the tension of opposites between these two different forms of knowledge, I am employing these terms in the same context as the feminist Jungians Estés and Woodman as place-holder names for the opposites we all possess within our psyches, regardless of gender identification and biological sex. This intuitive impulse towards finding the truth and connecting with a larger, intra-psychic self that stands both within and outside the psyche is what von Franz calls ‘creative self-realisation’. She explains ‘this is the process in which one must repeatedly seek out and find something that is not yet known... the guiding hints or impulses come, not from the ego, but from the totality of the psyche: the self’ ([1962] 1972: 164).

While von Franz expresses the concept of creative self-realisation in terms of individuation, Gilmore makes a similar argument for the role of creativity as a way to access truths in relation to writing on trauma. She argues

for the importance of fiction to autobiography, in part, to challenge the assumption that honesty lies in personal revelation where one assumes that testimonial transparency is not only necessary and desirable but possible... As controversial as any evidence of shaping may be in a trauma text – and what text is not shaped – part of what we must call healing lies in an assertion of creativity. The ability to write beyond the silencing meted out by trauma is an achievement

2001: 24.

Inhabiting a shadowy terrain between memoir and surrealist short fiction, writing-as-shadow-work translates the Jungian concept of creative self-realisation into a literary approach that not only describes self-experience but sculpts it through a fictive process of invention as means to imagine a larger and more expansive self. Self-reflexively dialoguing between the narrative voice of a

knowing true self and those of my shadows, ‘psyche and language are co-creators of new meaning, and by extension, a new reality’ (Dib 2021: 45) in which I am eternally and forever all the shouting mothers, crying girls, grieving wanderers, playful children and wise, knowing elders, simultaneously suffering and alchemically transforming my pain, as Jung would have it, into a form of hard-won wisdom through the intuitive and imaginative process of writing-as-shadow-work.

ii. A whole greater than its parts

Just as the Jungian concept of the psyche constellates the ego, the personal unconscious and the collective unconscious into a larger whole, so I saw how I might utilise this metaphorical concept to structure the late-stage stories into an inter-textual narrative that affords ‘both centrifugal-centripetalism and the tension between them’ (Gill & Kläger 2018: 2). While the early and mid-stage stories focus on single psychological states such as fear, grief and shame over narratives that have a beginning, middle and end, as this thesis progressed, I began to work with patterns and images across stories as well as within them.

Viewing my late stage writing as an inter-textual whole composed from the sum of its parts allowed for playfulness and repetition across the stories as well as within them. Now that I had developed a cast of characters constructed from fictionalised versions of myself and my mother in the past and the present, alongside their uncanny shadow doubles through the creative experiments of the early and mid-stage stories, I took the opportunity to experiment with how I could place their narratives on the larger stage of a story cycle as a means to construct an aggregate meaning across the stories. Weaving the metaphorical images of disembodied shouting voices, enveloping shadows, magically disappearing/reappearing girls and buried things in holes into a sequence of stories allowed me to enact the intra-psychic supersaturation of the mother wound across time, place, people and events as means to amplify its permeability and scale.

iii. The inter-textual short story cycle, Anna Kavan's *Asylum Piece* and Carmen Maria

Machado's *In The Dream House*

Working with inter-related characters and symbolism to construct meaning over a larger narrative, Kavan's largely intertextual short story cycle *Asylum Piece* ([1940] 2001) operates in a similar manner. Like 'Julia And The Bazooka', the stories in the collection blend autobiography and surrealist short fiction to facilitate a form of psychological realism. Although each story within the collection can be read as a distinct narrative, they are sequenced into a larger narrative that tells the story of the first-person narrator's breakdown from early signs to a full unravelling in a way that invites readers 'to progressively contextualise each individual constituent story within the wider frame of the cycle' (Gill & Kläger 2018: 5). While the stories are primarily connected through the narrator and her experience of progressively becoming more ill, they are also populated by a series of recurring authoritarian archetypal male figures, including an enemy, a judge and an advisor, alongside the guards and attendants employed by the asylum. Kavan employs their interactions with the narrator as a device to simultaneously illuminate and question the nature of neurosis as deluded and disassociated. Characterised via their role and occupation, rather than name, these figures could be interpreted as distinct personages drawn from life, externalised shadow aspects of the narrator's unconscious or both.

Like *Asylum Piece*, Machado's *In The Dream House* ([2019] 2020), also 'self-consciously performs (a) tension between gestalt and multi-part whole' (Gill & Kläger 2018: 5) through an interplay of themes, characters and images. Taking its narrative impetus from the dream house featured in 'Mothers', it is an experiment in inter-textuality that employs recurring characters, images and motifs not only within the pages of an individual book but between them. Here, the surrealist dream house of 'Mothers' becomes the primary motif (and the memoir's title) that weaves together a series of inter-linked pieces which re-visit Machado's experience of queer domestic abuse across an extended narrative constellated upon a literary taxonomy of the dream

house as a series of tropes from ‘*Dream House* as Murder Mystery’ to ‘*Dream House* as Self-Help Best Seller’. Belonging to an emerging creative life-writing hybrid of speculative memoir, it blends queer theory, personal essay, memoir, fairy tale and autobiographical fiction and shifts between register, form and genre in a way that further complicates the ambiguous territory between fact and fiction.

iv. A new mode of creative life-writing: the shadow memoir

In ‘A continuum of fragmentation: distinguishing the short story cycle from the composite novel’, Elke D’Hoker defines a central characteristic of the cycle as ‘its combination of openness and closure, diversity and unity’ (2018: 20). Meanwhile, Valerie O’Riordan claims that it is the ‘structural proficiency’ of the form that lends it especially well to narrating the complexity of the traumatic experience (2018). In this way, both Kavan and Machado utilise the hybrid form’s tension between flexibility and cohesion to narrate personal traumatic experiences that defy neat categorisations and which ask more questions than they answer.

The permeability between diversity and unity that characterises the intertextual short story cycle proved particularly fruitful in terms of my own project of writing-as-shadow-work. Not only did the tension between the two enable me to construct meaning across stories, it also further heightened and extended the play of opposites that is at the heart of the Jungian individuation process. The centrifugal-centripetalism of the short story cycle allowed me to construct an accretive web of meaning contingent on multiple intersecting narratives that could point to the complexity of shadow work as an ongoing non-linear cyclical process with numerous stages, as in the relationship between neurons and dendrites. Thinking about the larger narrative arc in this way led me to see how I could utilise the creative tension between individual stories and a whole cycle to produce a body of work structured around the stages of shadow work, beginning with a descent

into darkness and ending with a glimpse of transcendence. Integrating each story into a larger whole, I could build on my project of writing-as-shadow-work to enact an *integration of the selves*.

Although it is unusual to begin a collection of short stories with a prologue, due to the experimental nature of this cycle, I felt it was important to include one. In the prologue presented at the end of this section the narrative voice introduces herself as a trans-personal, somewhat mysterious entity who is both connected to and yet also separate from the part of herself who she is addressing. Her explanation of who she is functions as a creative interpretation of the relationship between the Jungian true self and the ego and is intended to provide a contextual framework for how the characters in subsequent stories can be understood as a cast of inner and outer personalities.

Meanwhile, it was through thinking about how I could perform the stages of shadow work within a larger narrative arc that I saw how sequential order could play a part in shaping each story's meaning. A case in point is 'A Birthday Lunch'. Before I had given thought to what place it might occupy in a larger sequence, I struggled with how to end it. Did the event of the "me" in the story being swallowed by my mother constitute a form of death? Was her womb a tomb? Or a site of re-birth? What stage of shadow work did it signify and how would that shape the ending of this particular story?

However, once I had made the decision to employ the story's tale of a descent into darkness as the sequence opener the ending also became clear. With 'A Birthday Lunch' now functioning as the instigating event that sets into motion the individuation process across a cycle of stories, I saw how it could operate as *both an ending* to this particular narrative *and also a beginning* to the over-arching story, paving the way for a return to the ghosts of my past in the stories that come after it.

A story that begins rooted in reality before segueing into the fantastic, 'A Birthday Lunch' also functions as a foundation text that positions my prospective reader to encounter the shift from recognisable reality into surrealism that underpins the whole sequence. A thematic twin to

‘A Birthday Lunch’, ‘Disappearing Act’ also operates as a descent narrative, but this time it is written from the point of view that is “me” as child. It situates the narrative in a past that also doubles as an ongoing present, as previously discussed in Part Two, and correlates to a stage of shadow work that is both about re-experiencing the past and facing demons in order to negotiate a fear of fear. The story that follows, ‘There’s Enough Evil In This World’, is another narrative set in the liminal space between the eternal present and the past which deals with the similar theme of being swallowed by my mother – this time for an extended period inside the “belly” of her house. Where ‘A Disappearing Act’ focuses on a single memory, ‘There’s Enough Evil’ employs short fiction’s impetus towards compression in order to tell the story about the repetition of my mother’s violence as a way to show how my traumatic childhood experience was ongoing.

In the meantime, ‘Crow Wood’ engages with the process of shadow work through a narrative in which I explore what it means to silence my critical internal voices in order to attune to a form of intuitive knowing. Like the stories that precede it, ‘Crow Wood’ plays with the recurring image of a shape-shifting mother who is not all as she seems, alongside the symbolism of the house, as it is associated with the maternal and the home of the psyche. However, in ‘Crow Wood’, like ‘A Birthday Lunch’, the central character is now an adult who encounters the character who is me as a child in ‘Disappearing Act’ and ‘There’s Enough Evil’ as a separate entity who she doesn’t recognise any more than she recognises what the mother figure who shows up at her door. It is through the conversations between these aspects of myself and the threatening mother figure that the adult character who is me in the story is able to experience a pivotal moment of clarity that alters her understanding of herself and her situation.

A story that I envisage as appearing towards the end of the whole cycle, ‘Mother Bear’ is set against the liminal back drop of the beach. Told from the perspective of a mother who has returned to the beach where, many years ago, she lost her daughter to a giant wave, the characters in the story double as realist and symbolic figures. The mother is a metaphor for my inner loving

mother and her lost daughter symbolises the girl/woman in previous stories who is swallowed by a threatening maternal figure.

Just as my project of writing-as-shadow-work thematically deals with the inter-subjective entanglement of mothers and daughter and the intra-psychic entanglement between multiple selves, so this entanglement of stories across a sequence demonstrates the qualitative difference between the individual stories that make up a traditional short story collection and those that belong in an inter-textual short story cycle. While it is commonly understood that individual stories in a cycle are often linked through recurring imagery, people, histories and places, as is the case in *Asylum Piece* and *In The Dream House*, the late-stage stories are further connected through an intra-psychic series of fictionalised shadow selves. Offering a ‘ “model of the world” and “for the world”, representing as well as producing a worldview’ (Gill & Kläger 2018: 6), these late-stage stories not only trade between genres but also between disciplines, slipping between inner and outer worlds, the personal and the universal, the past, present and deep time to uniquely express an original aesthetics of Jungian psychoanalysis through my project of writing-as-shadow-work. Performatively enacting the individuation process - simultaneously describing and inventing reality - the late-stage stories expand on the intertextual short story cycle, autobiographical fiction and speculative memoir to produce a new mode of creative life-writing: the shadow memoir.

Reflecting on the function of memoir, Machado writes:

The memoir is, at its core, an act of resurrection. Memoirists re-create the past, reconstruct dialogue. They summon meaning from events that have long been dormant. They braid the clays of memory and essay and fact and perception together, smash them into a ball, roll them flat. They manipulate time; resuscitate the dead

[2019] 2020: 4.

Where Machado defines resurrection as a resuscitation of the dead, Jung defines it as ‘a re-establishment of human existence after death. A new element enters here: that of the change, transmutation, or transformation of one’s being’ ([1970] 2010: 48). While the traditional notion of memoir, as Machado describes it, takes re-creating the past as its centripetal impulse, the shadow memoir that emerged from my extended journey of creative experiment is a form of auto-mythology that is not only about resurrecting the dead but about inventing a new self and new stories as part of a larger ongoing cycle of death and re-birth. It is a speculative tale that takes place in deep time where the past and present meet in an eternal now embodying a tension of opposites where ‘every single possibility or impossibility is true somewhere to someone at some time’ (Kavan [1948] 2002: 76).

A surrealist experimental memoir that is as much about a journey *in*, as it is about a journey *back*, the late-stage stories demonstrate how ‘a world of opposites is a world of relativity, a world in which the observer creates his or her own reality... a world in which all things are possible and all things coexist’, ([1996] 1997: 211), flattening time in a way that Woodman suggests finds its scientific equivalent in quantum physics. Describing and producing an aesthetics of Jungian psychoanalysis, my work-in-progress shadow memoir views all my possible pasts, presents and futures and all possible selves as simultaneously co-existing in an elliptical moebius strip of infinite potential where I am both tied to the resurrected shadow of my mother and free of her: re-born on new terms.

v. **On endings**

On concluding *In The Dream House*, Machado writes ‘that there’s a real ending to anything is, I’m pretty sure, the lie of all autobiographical writing’ ([2019] 2020: 275). Questioning the integrity of endings in relation to the short story, Ashworth suggests the brevity of the form encourages epiphanies ‘where a sudden insight, perhaps prompted by a conveniently placed line of dialogue

or change in the weather or even a domestic object, bubbles up through the consciousness of the focalising character' (2019: 21) in a way that implies resolution is arguably achieved at the expense of the truth.

One of the biggest technical challenges for me throughout the journey of this thesis, was how to square the paradox at the heart of Jung's dialectical tension of opposites with writing endings that were both aesthetically effective and ethically appropriate? How could I offer a satisfactory experience for readers while preserving the integrity of writing-as-shadow work and avoiding the problematical closure to which Ashworth refers? If shadow-work is an ongoing process, what are the implications for writing the endings of my stories?

Working with the larger narrative canvas of a shadow memoir allowed me to think about how I could negotiate story endings in terms of what shifts and changes might occur over a whole cycle in addition to those at play in separate stories. Unlike the endings of many earlier stories in which the protagonists are saved by tigers or pop stars, or a more mysterious process of transmutation, like the host in 'A Visitation', the inter-textuality allowed by the shadow memoir gave me the freedom to explore writing endings that need not conclude in redemption or resolution or epiphany in any obvious way.

As noted earlier, it was only once I had made the conceptual shift from a collection of short stories to an inter-textual shadow memoir that I saw how 'A Birthday Lunch' need not be resolved on its own terms. Similarly, now that I had decided to place 'There's Enough Evil' inside a larger narrative cycle, I chose to conclude it with a risky ending that deliberately evades redemption and ends, instead, with the girl who is "me" in the story vomiting up the disfigured body of her once beloved doll. Therapeutically, this story functioned as a vehicle for me to face my own inner hell as part of a larger cycle of healing, in which the things I bury re-emerge for me to confront with a different level of awareness again in the later stories, like 'Crow Wood'. Creatively, it weaves the recurring symbolism of the doll imagery with the repetition of the mother

character's shouting voice in order to tell an emotional truth about a past traumatic experience and all the nightmares that came after.

Although individual stories end in some combination of death, betrayal or loss, their meanings are re-contextualised through their sequential arrangement into a shadow memoir. Framed within a larger narrative that deals with the innate healing impetus at the heart of the psyche, the individual stories deliberately play with ambiguity to 'transform opposition into paradox... (and) allow both sides of an issue' (Johnson 1991: 86). If they imply loss, darkness and death, they also hint at a numinosity beyond the edge of the known 'that has no form but contains potential for everything' (Woodman [1996] 1997: 43), from which psychic growth can proceed. Between darkness and light, they are charged with the creative tension between opposites that Jung claims is the essential grounds for healing to occur. Where 'A Birthday Lunch', 'Disappearing Act' and 'There's Enough Evil' and 'Crow Wood' all explore an archetypal mother figure who devours and destroys, 'Mother Bear' re-writes the ending to this nightmare. The character who is "me" in the story is united with her/"my" lost child, the maternal and the unconscious, swallowed yet again, but this time the narrative speculatively imagines a form of integration that is holistic and restorative.

X. Late-Stage Stories

This section presents a prologue and five late-stage stories, which constitute a sample from a work-in-progress shadow memoir. They are arranged in a sequential order that is intended to suggest the stages of shadow work. A body of work that I plan to continue as post-thesis project, I will be adding more stories to this sequence to thematically incorporate the ongoing process of naming, accepting, grieving, forgiving and integrating my shadows through both real and imagined encounters with the maternal. I envisage 'A Birthday Lunch', 'Disappearing Act' and 'There's Enough Evil' will belong to an early part of this sequence, with 'Crow Wood' falling in the middle and 'Mother Bear' appearing towards the end of a sequence. 'Disappearing Act' is published in *Short Fiction in Theory and Practice* and 'Crow Wood' was shortlisted for the 2022 *Fish Short Story Prize*.

i. Prologue

Once upon a time, before there was light, we were one, knitted together in the dark along with the dormant seeds of the planets and stars. For a long time it was like this. You, me and the impenetrable, unimaginable blackness. Then an unforgettable fire sparked the world into being. Red hot rivers turned into ice. All that was gleaming, intractable and aching white became valleys and rivers, mountains and oceans, alive with flora and fauna and, finally, people. Everything in constant restless motion, an endless process of accretion and dissolution, waxing and waning, rotting and sprouting, throbbing and fading, rising and falling, living and dying, over and over until, one dark and stormy night, it's your turn to be born.

Inside the velvety room of the blood-red hotel you're checked into, you don't want to leave. Why would you? It's comfortable and warm and you have everything you need. I've seen who your mother is and I don't want to let you go, either. But it's her womb you are planted inside and so I must.

Like most children, you are afraid of the dark but you are more afraid of your mother. You never know when her rage is going to erupt, or why, only that, sooner or later, you will turn around and she will be right there behind you, a torrent of bitter invective pouring from her mouth. You have the wrong attitude, the wrong emotions, the wrong thoughts. You owe her dearly and now it's time for you to pay. She shouts and shouts and shouts and shouts, giddy with an acute feeling for her own personal injury, until one day you shatter, a little girl smashed to smithereens, like the waltzing porcelain figurine that gets knocked off the mantel piece.

You see yourself as she does; stupid, clumsy, careless, ugly and, above all these things, unlovable. In a school photograph from this time, you are the only girl amongst a class of glossy haired, bright-eyed young children to sit with a rounded back, shoulders hunched, folded over, closed up where your body has learned to protect itself from her violent attacks, looking haunted

and afraid behind an uncertain and wavering smile, not yet nine. To survive you learn to be what your mother wants. Her little mirror reflecting back what she needs. And even then, it's no guarantee. Trapped inside her dark dream, all the time, you think it's you who is terrible. You have to. You need your mother to love you so badly that you can't allow yourself to believe it's not true.

What do you do with all the things that are too dangerous to think, too scary to feel, too threatening to be? You hide them, of course, just like the diary you buried under an apple tree. Out of sight and out of mind, exiled to a lonely place, you soon forget they are there, as if these frightening parts of yourself never existed at all. But unbeknown to you, deep in the dark, they rustle and stir, flickering at the edges, crying out for their missing mother. Which is how your shadows come to take on a life of their own.

Eventually you escape. Go to university. Move cities and move again. Become a journalist, get a fancy job, travel. As you are white, straight and middle class, this gets you certain privileges. You are excellent, now, at being a mirror. It's your secret Ace and, apart from the occasional hysterical outburst, you play it well. Hardly anyone would be able to tell. But even though you think you have left the past behind, what you don't know is that your shadowy orphaned girls have travelled right here into the present along with you. Not only that, but in the damp dark where you are terrified to look, more shadows have bred. Where once your mother terrorised your childhood home, now another kind of monster is running amok in your psychic house who sounds and behaves just like her.

They slip out, bloody and screaming, when you're not looking. While you think you are free to live your own life, it is your shadows – your orphaned girls and screaming mothers - who have got hold of the reins, dragging you at full pelt, hell for leather, towards ever greater acts of self-sabotage that harm yourself and, sometimes, others. On and on they charge, pulling you with them, as the ground begins to crumble and give way beneath their galloping hooves.

And who am I? I live in the dark with your shadows but I'm not one of them. My origins are more primordial, more ancient. Just as the sun is stored inside trees in the form of carbon, I am the fire inside you. I am the depths of your best unknown self, the darkness you most fear. I see everything who you are, past, present and future. I see all your crying girls, your hysterical mothers, all you are yet to become. And now I am calling you from the hidden night-time world of your dreams to come and burn with me.

ii. A Birthday Lunch

You don't want to go for lunch with your mother but you agree because it's her birthday and because she would otherwise be spending it alone in her bungalow with her rescue dog and all the boxes, hoarded over the years, containing everything she can't throw away. You agree because you didn't visit her in hospital the last time she was sectioned. And you agree because of the guilt that has accreted inside you like a dark, sticky sediment and the deep, tidal pull of something else behind it you can't really name, which means you are here standing inside the restaurant entrance scanning the noisy tables of families enjoying a leisurely weekend lunch looking for the small red-haired woman who carried you and fed you and told you over and over, you have no rights, you belong to me.

You see her hovering on the other side of the restaurant, face expectant and pinched. The only person wearing a floor-length oxblood gown and lime green bolero jacket, dressed as if for a ball a century too late, your mother stands out from the sea of casually attired diners like a flare, an emergency, a cry for help.

Unaware of your eyes on her, she waits in the bar area the bulging supermarket bag in each hand like a lifebuoy to keep her afloat. It occurs to you that you could turn around, leave, send a message that the train was cancelled, you're in bed with a migraine, you got the wrong day. But then she catches sight of you and the metal bar of an invisible roller coaster slowly lowers itself over your head.

"Oh, there you are! It's nyessh to see you! I didn't see you come in!" Your mother's words slosh around in her mouth, a side-effect of the anti-psychotics. It's at least five years since you last saw her at a family gathering in your brother's garden and her Lancashire accent, you notice, has become stronger with age, like a mug of tea when the bag has been left in.

“It’s nice to see you too.” You flinch as your mother leans in for a hug, her body dense and unshakable, pressing itself against you.

The waiter seats you at a table by a window strung with fairy lights. They wink in the sun, briefly crowning your mother’s head with bright tongues of fire. Although you are here to celebrate your mother’s seventieth birthday, you are struck by how soft and fine her hair is. Still red but faded like an old bolt of silk.

“Jussh give me a minute.” Your mother reaches down into one of the bags she has brought with her before re-surfacing with a crepe tablecloth and two cone-shaped party hats, one silver and one gold.

“Here you go. This is for you!” Your mother hands you the silver hat.

“And this is for me!” She chuckles as she ceremoniously puts on the gold hat, tucking its elastic band beneath the loose folds of her chin.

Conscious of the raised eyebrows at the surrounding tables, you gamely put on your hat as your mother shakes out the cloth with a flourish and the laughing heads of a troupe of clowns, a relic from your childhood, tumble across the table.

“Oh my goodness! Where did you find that?”

“I’ve kept everything from when you were likkle. Your teddiessh and dollssh, your baby clothessh. You name it, I’ve got it!”

You notice that although your mother shares this information with a note of triumph her hands are trembling while the muscles at each corner of her mouth flicker involuntarily like a faulty filament. That your mother orbits in a different universe is something you’ve long understood. Meanwhile, it’s your job to mirror this precarious parallel dimension back to her, lest its glass shatter and splinters fly everywhere.

“What else have you got in there?” You point to the other bag.

“Ah well! I’m getting to that.” Fetching it from the floor, your mother chuckles again.

“Wait until you see thissh! Ta-daa!” She pulls out a shop-bought cake and places it victoriously on the table.

“Well, it issh me birthday, y’know!” Although her cheeks dimple girlishly, beneath their green crescent of make up your mother’s eyes flash defensively as if she can see, just over your shoulders, a phalanx of adversaries pointing their fingers at her cake and muttering threats under their breath about snatching it away. In fact, it is the waiter who whisks the cake off to be stored until needed.

He re-appears and you order a Margarita pizza. Your mother hovers a nail bitten finger over the menu. It veers between the carbonara and the seafood tagliatelle before she pronounces on the latter.

“Thisshissha treat for me. I never normally have tagli-telly, y’ know. You choose the wine. I wouldn’t know what to pick. I can only have one glassh because of me medication but if you can’t have a drink on your birthday, when can you?”

The waiter disappears with your order and a heavy silence filled with the weight of the unsayable and the unsaid falls between you.

“Are you still teaching?” It is your mother who breaks it, crinkling her eyes and pursing her mouth with the same distaste as if she had asked, “Are you still killing children and drinking their blood?”

“Yes, I’m still teaching.”

“So, you’re not doing journalism anymore?”

“No, Mum.” At pains to maintain the shimmery surface of the mirror that you must not under any circumstances crack, you shake your head with a firm even smile as the streamers dangling from your party hat swing merrily from side to side.

“Not anymore.”

There is so much you can’t even begin to explain. How you came to lose your fancy magazine job. How you are trying to write a novel that keeps on unravelling. How exhausted you

feel for no reason. How you wake, face streaming with tears, from the nightmares you keep having about being trapped in a house with your mother from which you can never escape.

“Well, it’s your choice.”

The cone of her party hat protruding from her head like a horn, she gives you a look of naked disapproval. Across the sea of laughing clown heads, your cheeks sting with the slap of her words as though you are back in that house, burning with the shame of failing, yet again, to meet with her approval. Swallowing the lump in your throat, you reach for a complement.

“You look nice. Is that a new dress?”

“Yessh it is!” Like a child with a giant bowl of jelly and ice cream, your mother’s eyes brighten. “I’d seen it in the salesh but I thought to meself, I thought, I’ll wait another week and see if it gets reduced. And what d’you know, it did!”

Relieved to see your mother’s joviality return as if it had never gone away, you watch her laugh mirthfully into the glass of wine the waiter has brought to the table. Judging by her expression of unadulterated glee, you can only assume that the thrill of sales-shopping is as much a blood-sport to your mother now as it was back in the days of the interminable afternoons you spent waiting outside the flapping curtains of countless changing rooms, bored out of your mind, while your mother rustled inside, occasionally poking out a hand for you to pass her another jacket or blouse from the pile of fresh bargains that she had hungrily hunted down.

You remember, too, how these outings to the sales would inevitably find you queueing at the returns counter a week later in a ritual which became such a regular occurrence, that it earned your mother the dubious reputation of being a Regular Returner, until, to your relief and her fury, she took back one item too many, and was banned entirely.

As your mother’s daughter, it was expected that you, too, should possess the same acute scent for a bargain. But in this, as in everything else, you fell catastrophically short of your mother’s high expectations. You remember the humiliation of being sent to return a fifty pence roll of Sellotape because you had failed to comb every shop on the high street for the cheapest,

which, according to your mother, cost ten pence less. On another occasion, you recall proudly showing her the bag of second hand books, bought with your Saturday job money, thinking your mother would be pleased with your thriftiness, only for her to fly into a rage that burned all through the night with an unquenchable fury at *your thoughtless behaviour, your irresponsible attitude, your failure to do anything right.*

The waiter places your dishes on the table. You watch your mother's face flush with happiness, trying to read her. Were you an insufficient return on her investment, was that it? Did she simply not regard you as value for money? As your mother scrupulously tucks her napkin into the neck of her dress, you wonder if she shares the same memories as you and, if so, what she has done with them? Which box are they sealed in? Does it ever get opened? Or is it shoved under her bed, gathering dust?

"Ooo, thisssh tastes delisshush!" All smiles, your mother plunges her fork enthusiastically into her bowl, talking and eating at the same time.

"So did I tell you I've been keeping meself busy stripping thessh two Lloyd Loom chairs I got from a charity shop so I can re-paint them and sell them?"

Holding her fork aloft in one hand, your mother gets out her mobile phone and scrolls through the camera roll. "Here they are! You can see where I've already restored the weave. They're very solid, thessh chairs, very well made. I'm thinking of painting them dove grey. Something neutral but tasteful. You would pay at least three hundred pounds for each of them new but if I do a decent job, I reckon I could easily get two hundred when I only paid fifty, plus the materials of courssh. Upcycling is very fashionable thessh days and people will pay good money for something thassh pre-loved, as they like to say."

Talking at you rather than to you, your mother moves through her roll, from pictures of furniture to shots of her garden, her face lit up with the bright splashes of colour glowing on the screen.

“Thessh are me peoniessh. And here are me sweet peassh. I have a gardener come in and look after them for me. I do love me garden. I get all sorts of visitors, you know. At thissh time of year there are lots of frogs and therssh also a hedgehog I leave a saucer of milk for. Then jussh the other week there was a yellow spotted newt sunbathing on the birdbath. I wouldn’t have seen it at all but it jumped jussh as I wassh going past. They’re very rare, y’see. A second later and I would’ve misshed it.”

Cheeks shining with grease, she smiles and you smile along with her, as if you are not on a roller coaster but a carousel, your mother gamely going up and down on her horse, as the restaurant slowly comes and goes around you. Emboldened by your mother’s shift in mood, you ask if she has any holiday plans?

“I do since you ask. I’ve booked meself a week in a caravan park with the vouchers I collected from the noosepaper. I’ve been buying it every week to get enough. Issh a great deal and perfek for me, you see, because it has all the facilities. I can take the dog for walkssh on the beach and therssh a likkle shop on the site. People say what about the rain but the inclement weather doesn’t bother me because I jussh take an umbrella.”

“You always did love a bargain, didn’t you?”

You can’t help it. The question just pops out. Immediately you regret it but it’s too late. Your mother’s cheeks are bright red and her nostrils, flared, as if you have just ripped off her party hat and stamped on it with both feet.

“Issh not about bargains. Issh about what I can afford.” Your mother shoves a forkful of tagliatelle into her mouth, as a dribble of tomato sauce runs down her chin.

“Beggarssh can’t be chooshush you know! Issh enough the guver-ment want to take all me money to pay towards my care. If I let them have their way, they’d be taking me home off me. But I bought that bungalow with the money your grandad left and issch nobody’s right to take it away!”

“But don’t you worry!” The smell of garlic and rage rolling off her in waves, your mother continues. “I’ve made plans. I’ve got the best hooman rights lawyer in the country working on me case! No one issh going to take away whassh rightfully mine! Not one penny of my money issh going anywhere near the guver-ment. Not on my watch. No siree!”

Gripping the sides of your chair, you turn to catch the couple opposite staring wide-eyed in your mother’s direction. But glowering impressively in her oxblood dress, a crust of dried tomato ringing her lips, your mother doesn’t share your embarrassment. Oblivious to the hushed whispers coming from the surrounding tables, she carries on, now in her element, recounting the family reputation for fierce women.

“Now your Great Granny Reedy! She was a woman who stood up for her rights! She ran that family. All eight children *and* her husband. Nothing got by your Great Granny. Other men would be going out of a Friday night drinking their wages to nothing but she wouldn’t have any of it. She took your Great Granddad’s pay packet off him every week before he could spend it, until one day she turned around and announced she’d bought a house. Just like that!” Your mother waves an arm in the air, as if summoning your Great Granny back from the dead. “No one dared cross her. Not once. Not ever!”

She fixes you with a pair of blazing green eyes and you feel the ferocity of her look as a call, ignored at your peril, to step up onto her stage and share in her outrage. Although part of you fights to resist it, it’s hard not to be strangely in awe of this woman who, all her life, has fought to get her own way and who is showing no sign of calling a cease fire or making any kind of peace deal now.

“The women in our family are strong, y’ know. Nobody messes with us!” She stabs an oily ribbon of tagliatelle with a virtuous smile. But her eyes are not smiling. They are livid. You can’t tell if she had meant to include yourself in her *us*. Nor can you tell if it is meant as a promise or a threat. Your party hat hanging like a noose around your neck, you do not know

what to do with the fact that you are her daughter, will always be her daughter whether you like it or not.

As if she can read your mind, your mother turns the full watery artillery of her eyes on you.

“It would be nyessh to see more of you. I am your mother and the yearssh are passing y’know.” She screws her napkin into a ball and throws it down like a gauntlet onto her empty plate as the table lights up. Your mother’s cake burning with candles, set down by the waiter.

“Oooh, look at thissh! I s’pose I’ll have to make a wish.”

She rises reverentially from her seat, as if the cake is some kind of holy sacrament that will take her one step closer to divinization. In the flicker of the candle flames, her fury dwindles to a pale prick of light at the centre of her pupils as she smiles over the candles, inviting you into the perfectly choreographed moment of a mother and her daughter sharing a precious occasion they will always remember.

Taking a deep breath, your mother hovers up the steamy restaurant air like a drowning person gasping for breath, as if it’s about to run out, as if no amount will ever fill her. Across the sea of laughing clowns, a knot forms in your stomach for what she is and what she isn’t; for everything that happened and everything that didn’t. It tugs, pulls, becomes taut and, before you can do anything about it, you are flying over the table towards the black hole of her mouth.

Barely able to catch your breath, you slalom headfirst into a hot, sticky shaft. Terrified, you cry out, but the seething darkness fills up your mouth as the roar of your mother’s heart rattles your bones like a distant explosion. You grasp at the fibrous sides of the dripping tunnel flying past you at speed but your fingers drag against the mucous lining of its wall without taking hold as you sink into the abominable centre of something bent on absorbing all things not itself into itself with a merciless hunger. Smothered in your mother’s fluids, breathing her breath, enmeshed in her flesh, you plunge deeper and deeper into her throbbing interior, chased by a tidal wave of half-digested cake.

Bent and pushed and pulled, you slip into the damp dark, a boat loosed from its mooring into the rush of a black river. The last thing you hear, its hoarse whisper; *I am your mother, your mother, your mother, your mother.*

iii. Disappearing Act

You have no idea when you arrive at the zoo with your mother and new baby brother that you will end the trip a different young girl. Never mind what is to come, nothing has prepared you for the zoo's sheer size. Vaster than you had imagined, it's like hundreds of gardens all stitched together into one giant patchwork of grass and paths hemmed with the tall iron railings that mark the boundaries between the enormous enclosures filled with animals you've only ever seen on TV and in books.

It is especially hot and the air ripples with waves so that you feel as if you are swimming through brightly lit water between black patches of shadow, which you make a point of skirting around in case they turn out to be holes you might accidentally fall into like Alice in Wonderland. Although you can't see them, the flickering silhouettes of legs and tails and horns graze on the withered grass through the haze in the distance.

In the intense heat, the zoo smells of boiled bones and the chalky stone of the path, which scuffs the toes of your shoes and turns your socks grey. By the penguins the smell of fish is so strong that you can taste the sharp gluey brine at the back of your throat. It's almost as bad as the sulphurous smell of the boiled egg that your mother produces when you say you are hungry. You don't like boiled eggs any more than you like fish. It tastes exactly as it smells, and you hold your nose as you eat it.

When it's time for your mother to feed your brother, she pulls you up at a bench by the rhinos. Sitting where you have been told, you watch her reach a hand into the dark mouth of the pram and pull out the slight, slithery form from inside. Your brother flips and jumps like one of the fish you saw being fed to the penguins as your mummy squashes his mouth onto a waiting

nipple. As he sucks on her breast, you can smell the same milky aroma emanating from the gaps between your new baby brother's toes and his squashed, pimples nose. Your mother, however, smells of something meatier, like the rind on the top of the milk when it's about to go off. It plumes from her wiry, red hair and rolls off the small mound of her tummy, which curves out from beneath her skirt waistband like the coils of snakeskin you saw in the Reptile House in a way that makes you wonder if something is still nesting inside her.

The sun is at its apex in a sky raked of all cloud when your mother draws you to a halt for a photograph. Parking you and your brother at an ornamental lawn beside a bed of marigolds, she pulls her new Nikon camera from the chassis under the pram. She slings it over her shoulder and it swings from a long leather holster, like the ones you've seen in the cowboy films your Granny lets you watch whenever your mummy sends you over, which since your brother has arrived, is often.

Ideally, your mother would like you sitting on the lawn but since there is a "keep off the grass" sign, she opts for the next best thing, which is to have you on the gravel path running alongside it. Then you must be sitting and not standing because she wants the photograph to be of you and your brother, who is too heavy in his big nappy for you to hold otherwise. Once your mother has you in place, she re-adjusts your floral headscarf, and whips a comb from her skirt pocket to smarten your fringe, telling you that, if you are good, you can have a miniature ceramic zoo animal from the shop.

"Watch his head!" The stern note in your mummy's voice sounds above you as she lowers your brother onto your lap. Terrified it might roll off, you raise the crook of the elbow in which it is balanced an inch higher as an extra precaution.

"Now stay like that and don't move!"

Although your mother is standing in front of you, the light is too bright for you to make her out from the dark silhouette moving on the path just ahead. Encased inside the glare of the sun, you are like a butterfly inside a glass paperweight, sitting where you have been put for what

seems like forever while your mother fiddles with the camera light meter. On your lap, soft gurgling noises bubble up from your brother. The load of his body grinds your knees into the gravel, making them hurt but you are determined to hold him straight as you have been told. The longer you wait, the more the light stings your eyes and the harder it is to keep them open. With each minute that passes, your brother seems to increase in weight, crushing your legs into the rough-cut stone with ever greater force as your blouse turns clammy with a wet patch of drool. Whichever way you hold him, you can't get comfortable. The pain jumps from spot to spot like a fly, from the crook of your arm to the gravel boring into your knees to the burning sting of the sun in your eyes.

You are beginning to think that your arm is going to snap from the weight of your brother when your mummy orders you to look at the camera and smile. Relieved the ordeal of sitting on the stony path will soon be over, you try to do as you have been told, but the sun hurts and the gravel hurts and you can't smile and you can't look at the camera any more than if she had told you to spin straw into gold.

“Mummy, *I caaan't.*”

“If you don't smile properly, there'll be no miniature zoo animal and we'll be going straight back home. Now look at the camera and smile!”

You try to explain that the sun is in your eyes and that you are doing your best but it's as though your mother is shouting at a different girl who is not you and who could perfectly well smile but has chosen not to out of sheer spite. You feel something heavy and jagged drop from your chest into your stomach, as if you have swallowed a large chunk of gravel. Although it sounds like your mother is talking to the wrong girl, you know there is only you, and that you are the one spoiling the photograph and ruining the day. You.

Beneath you, the gravel is alive, burrowing its rocky molars into your bones. In your arms, your baby brother has mysteriously doubled in weight. Somewhere just ahead, you hear the crunch of your mummy's sandals as the hem of her skirt swings into view.

“How dare you disobey me! How dare you! I’m sick to the back teeth of you! I bring you all the way here and this is how you behave!”

Your mother’s scream whips about your face, a sharp, shrill snarl you barely recognize. Clutching your brother, you shrink back as a dark shadow falls across your body, turning the air suddenly cold. And then you see. You *see*. From out of your mother’s dark shape, four feet leaping towards you.

But as the blackness closes itself around you something else happens. There, on the path, you start to disappear. It begins with a tingling in the tips of your fingers followed by the sharp, prickly sensation of your nerves unpinning themselves from the canvas of your skin, draining you first of feeling, then of form, as a loud CLICK sounds from the Nikon’s shutter just in time to capture the phantom trace fading into the marigolds, smiling for the camera.

iv. **There's Enough Evil In This World**

"I'll do it if you do." A tiny hand swims up and wraps a set of pale fingers around yours.

"I don't know," you giggle nervously. "It looks very steep..." From your perch on the top stair, you look down at the splashes of white in the otherwise blood red carpet swirl against the bottom step as, beside you, Alice's blue eyes sparkle, vivid and bright, in the gloom.

"Don't worry. Just hold onto me." She spins her head full circle and blinks. "One, two, three, *GO!*"

Alice launches herself off the top step, tugging you along with her into the red throat of the stairwell. It fills with your screams as you bump on the seat of your dungarees, one after the other, as if the carpet were rolling itself out and tossing you in a thick plume of dust along with it.

But you are not afraid. You are never scared when you are with Alice. Your favourite doll, it is with Alice that you find secret passageways all over the house, chase the beast who lives in the pipes, host feasts in the middle of the night when you are supposed to be asleep. That nobody else knows Alice is more like you than a doll, only smaller, is all part of the adventure. Just like the passageways, she is your secret.

"Race you to the bottom!" Letting go of your hand, Alice flips head over heels into the shadows.

The banisters flash past in a fuzzy blur and each collision with the stairs sends a sharp jag up your spine, as you half tumble, half skid down their near vertiginous drop, whooping for your life,

Alice's painted on red shoes cartwheeling through the crimson dark just ahead.

“Weeeeeee! Alice, we're flying! We're flying!”

Stomach in mouth, you ride the bucking, leaping carpet like a runaway horse. The bottom seems further away than it looked and the backs of your thighs smart with a fiery heat as you gallop deeper and deeper into the pit of the house. A cold blast of damp air slaps your cheeks and you are wondering if the carpet has taken you underground when you land with an unceremonious thump in a pile of rotting leaves at the bottom of the garden.

You stand up and rub the mud on your hands down the front of your dungarees. Behind you, the turret shaped chimneys of the house poke out from the roof like two big ears. Glancing around for Alice, you spot one of her chubby arms bent backwards at a forty-five-degree angle where it is poking out from a nest of brambles further up the bank.

“Alice! Alice! Are you okay?” Slipping on the deep drifts of wet leaves, you stumble over to where she is lying frighteningly still like a toppled graveyard statuette of a marble cherub and gazing into the tufts of grey cloud scudding across the sky, her face expressionless.

“Alice! Say something!” You scoop her from the twisted knot of branches and give her a good shake. But although Alice's eyelids rattle up and a handful of crisp leaves free themselves from her plaits, she remains unnervingly still.

“Alice!” You shake her again, this time more forcefully, a crack appearing in your voice. “Say something, please!”

You don't know what you'd do if anything bad happened to Alice. A tiny red bead glistens in the dull late afternoon light on the back of your hand where a thorn has drawn blood. “Pleeeeeeeese.”

You feel yourself tremble and quiver like the balloons you and Alice filled with water until they burst with a pop that sounded like a gun shot, drenching you from head to toe and covering the bathroom lino, where you were conducting your experiment, with a small lake.

“Ha! Tricked you!” Alice somersaults backwards out of your hands and lands next to a cloud of puffball mushrooms. Dusting off her patchwork pinafore, she daintily curtsies and flutters her lashes, which are long and dark, just like yours.

“No you didn’t. I knew you were pretending.” You shake your head vigorously from side to side, letting your hair sweep away the tear that has begun to run down your cheek so that Alice won’t see.

“Did!”

“Didn’t!”

“Did!” Alice leaps up onto your chest and pushes you to the ground in a rain of giggles and leaves. Climbing a set of spidery fingers up your arm, she squeezes them into the warm clammy space at the very top and begins to tickle. No longer able to keep a straight face, you wriggle and squirm beneath their touch as the cold air turns the gales of laughter leaving your mouth into puffs of white mist that tumble and dance on the breeze like dandelion clocks.

You return to the house covered in mud with Alice stuffed in a wet bundle down the front of your dungarees. At the back door, your mother’s hand locks itself to your arm and yanks you into the kitchen.

“What are you playing at? I’ve been calling you back for your tea for the last half an hour! What have I told you about going to the bottom of the garden? I don’t like you going where I can’t see you! Look at your dungarees! They’re absolutely filthy!”

In the unforgiving strip lights mounted on the kitchen ceiling, your mother’s face jumps and twitches as though something trapped underneath is trying to escape as a second hand comes down so hard against the back of your thighs that its vibrations send Alice’s head thumping against your chest. You know your mother wouldn’t believe you if you told her the truth so instead you lie.

“I’m sorry Mummy, I didn’t realise the time.”

“Get yourself upstairs and scrubbed clean! And then it’s straight to bed for you, young lady. D’you hear?”

In your room you meet another surprise. All your teddies and dolls, laid out like corpses on the tufted chenille of the spare bed, their glass and embroidered and painted on eyes, staring blankly at the ceiling. Confiscated by your mother because of your bad behaviour. In tears, you count them one by one. Holly Hobby, Topsy, Teddy Edward, Patch, Tiny Tears, Emily the china doll, Flopsy Bunny, Olly Octopus with the felt beak where his mouth should be, the miniature dolls in national costume, gifts from your Granny’s holidays in Italy and Spain.

Inside your dungarees, Alice wails and kicks.

“I don’t want to go on the bed. I don’t want to go on the bed, I don’t want to go on the bed. Please don’t let me go on the bed!”

“Don’t worry,” You pull her crumpled body from your dungarees and stroke her thick, waxy plaits. “You can hide under the covers with me.”

“Are you awake? I can’t sleep.” When the landing falls silent later that night after your mother has gone to bed, Alice prods you in the stomach. “I don’t feel safe. What if we’re found out?”

“*Sshh!* We need to keep quiet. Don’t worry. If Mummy does come in, I’ll pretend to be asleep and she’ll never know.”

“I’m not staying here. I’m not!” Wriggling out of your grip, Alice scowls up at you.

“What about the time she found you reading under the blankets and wouldn’t let you play out for a week? How do you know she won’t get up to do a surprise check?”

She jumps free of the bed and places a tiny white hand on each hip.

“Come on! I have an idea about somewhere better to hide!”

You look over at its twin where the rest of your beloved dolls are lying in sad rows, flat on their backs, the light gone from their eyes. Your tummy slips and slops like a runny cake mix.

You are scared your mother will catch you red-handed and confiscate Alice with all the others but you can't decide on what you should do next.

"I don't know... What if she finds us out of bed? Won't she be even madder?"

"If that happens you can say you heard a noise and thought it was burglars. She can't get cross with you for that." Alice's eyes make little clicking noises as they rock up and down. "I'll stay in the shadows so she won't be able to see. I'll be as quiet as the quietest dormouse. You won't hear a squeak from me, I promise."

Alice is so good at making things you think are impossible seem reasonable, like they are no problem at all that, before you know it, you are following the seam at the back of her head where her hair divides into in two neat plaits.

"This way!" Alice beckons you with an exaggerated whisper towards the stairs.

"Down is no good. We need to go up. Follow me!" She swings a red shoe onto the first step, which is almost as high as her waist, before hauling the other up after it.

"Come on! We haven't got time to dawdle!" She raises her eyebrows and widens her eyes as they click and clack open and shut and open again in a way that makes them seem even larger.

"Here?" You ask at the first landing you come to.

"No, it's still not safe. We need to go further up."

"Here?" At the next landing, you peer hopefully into the gloom.

"No, you need to be patient. Not yet."

Alice's confident whisper sounds so certain to your ears, as if she has been here before and knows exactly where the stairs lead, although you are equally sure that your explorations of the house have never taken you here. It's so dark that the only way you can tell Alice is still there by the rustling sound on the step ahead of you. You climb uncertainly, feeling with the tip of your feet for the next step, not quite trusting if they will meet anything solid. But you keep going, traipsing after her dim blur, up more and more flights until the carpet runs out and the floorboards creak, as though they are speaking in their own language of strange moans.

After several more flights, Alice stops at a landing illuminated with the dim glow coming from an open door at the far end.

“We’re here!” She points to the door.

“Are you sure? We’re such a long way up. I don’t know if I had to come back on my own if I’d be able to find you again.”

“Don’t you see?” Alice gives you a stern look and purses her lips. “It’s the one place she’ll never think to look.

She beckons with one of her plump crooked fingers, as you trot after her up the hall and into the room. You are greeted with the smell of old cardboard and pigeon droppings. It’s hard for you tell whether the room is large and small because of all the boxes arranged in uneven rows stacked one on top of the other. A loud flapping noise like wings or sheets blowing in the wind disturbs the silence before the hall-sized room falls quiet again.

“Alice! Sshh! Did you hear that? Do you think it’s a ghost?” You exclaim in a petrified whisper.

“All houses have ghosts,” Alice replies, as if it’s a matter of fact and you should know. “I wonder what’s in all these boxes? Perhaps it’s where the ghosts live?” Standing on tip toes, she reaches into the nearest box and pulls out the first thing that comes to hand.

“Look at this!” She waves a crocheted bonnet at you. “What else is in here?” Alice hitches up her skirts and hauls herself up the side of the box.

“It’s your old baby clothes!” She begins to jump up and down, plaits flung out like an extra pair of arms.

“This is so much fun! Look what I can do!” Rolling over backwards in mid-air, Alice sends her painted-on red boots flying over her head before collapsing onto the springy trampoline of knitted bootees and matinee jackets in a fit of giggles, arms and legs twisted out of joint, as if she has been assembled from back to front.

But watching her, you are not amused. Even though you are certain that it's another of the house's many secret tunnels that has brought you here by way of the stairs, a chill passes down your spine. How can you be sure your mother won't find it? She could come up here looking for your old baby clothes herself. Why else would she keep them? Who is to say she wouldn't bump into the box with Alice and accidentally knock it over? As you watch Alice blithely jump up and down you can almost hear her stomping up the stairs, a billowing shadow in her long nightie, coming to get you.

"Stop!" You shout in a hoarse whisper. "Stop! You're making too much noise!"

"What? What's wrong?" Alice looks at you plaintively, eyelids nodding up and down from over the flap of the box, "I chose this room 'specially because no one will hear."

"I don't care! You promised you would be a dormouse but you're not! You're like a... you're like a chattering cheetah! You think you know everything but you don't! It's my turn to decide what to do!"

You push Alice into the bed of knitted booties and jackets and bonnets by the stomach.

"Ouch! What are you doing? Let go of me! Let go!" Beneath your grip, Alice's red shoes furiously peddle the air.

"SSshhh!" You slam your other hand over her the pink bow of her rose bud lips. "It's for your own good. You just need to lie quietly under the clothes and not jump around. Don't worry I'm going to make you really cosy."

"Wait! I can't breathe! I didn't mean for you to hide me a box!" You hear the muffled voice of Alice protests through your fingers as, inside, she shakes the box with the force of a trapped animal and you have to use all your strength to bury her beneath a pastel bed of baby grows and shawls and miniature mittens. Coughing on a cloud of dust, pungent with pigeon droppings, you leaf the upper flaps of the box into a lid, pressing them down firmly with both hands before hauling another three boxes on top, just to make sure.

“It’s okay, Alice,” you stroke the side of the furiously convulsing box. “I love you. You’re safe now. There’s no way Mummy will ever find you here.”

The next night, you creep back up the stairs, re-tracing your steps to the secret floor that Alice led you to the evening before. But when you open the box with your baby clothes, she’s not there.

Although you eventually get your toys back, it’s not long after that your mother decrees you’re *too old for dolls*. She is cutting herself a slice of fruit cake in the kitchen as she delivers this edict. “It’s time,” she continues, talking between mouthfuls. “That you did more to help around the house, starting with the Hoovering. Every day because the carpets get so dirty.”

You troop after your mother to the cupboard under the stairs where she pulls out a strange creature by its tail and stamps a foot on its head. You jump as it shudders into life with a low growl. “Here,” your mother pushes the snarling thing into your hands. “Don’t forget! Every speck!”

A wild animal you somehow must tame, the roar from its belly rattles your arms and makes your teeth chatter. You try your best, leaning your entire weight into the Hoover as it drags you across the snaggle-toothed hall carpet. When you reach the bottom of the stairs, you feel dizzy just looking up at the pattern of eye-shaped whorls snaking up them. But you daren’t disobey your mother. Coughing in a cloud of dust and burning rubber, the Hoover bucks in your hand as you haul it from one stair to the next, terrified that, any moment it will keel over backwards, taking you with it.

At the top, you shine with sweat. Wheezing as hard as the Hoover, you flop over its handle as your mother calls you from the shadows of a door at your back. You have no idea how she could possibly have slipped past. And yet, when you twist round to answer, there she is.

“Let’s see how you did.” Your mother’s voice rings in the stairwell, almost too brightly, as if she has borrowed it from somebody else. At the bottom step, she swipes a finger across the carpet and holds up a fleck of dirt on its tip.

“Can you see this? Next time I don’t want to find any.”

Each day after school, you diligently push and pull the thrumming body of the Hoover up and down the house, determined to pass your mother’s rigorous inspections. On almost every excursion, you discover a new room and sometimes an entire new floor, as if the house is multiplying unstoppably, brick by brick, like the blue copper sulphate crystals growing in a jar on your desk for science homework.

No matter how many cake crumbs and fingernail clippings and dust mice and wiry red strands of your mother’s red hair the Hoover guzzles into its wide, grinning mouth, wherever you go there always seems to be more. You learn the corners where the dust collects in swirling clouds and where the carpet most frequently blooms with flinty white specks. In the more remote rooms, you come across stains and damp patches and inexplicable tears that look like they have been left there by a pair of large claws. While you never know when your mother will appear on a landing or from behind a door.

Alice long forgotten, you grow from a girl to a teenager. Your body starts to give off a sour, fusty odour that smells the same as the dry rot that has begun to spread through the house. As you grow, so do the lists of jobs. In addition to Hoovering, you must also:

clean the skirting boards and door handles

scrub the bevelled glass in the interior doors – with a toothbrush to get at the corners

tidy the pantry

hang out the washing, bring in the washing, leave it to dry on the rack and the radiators

put it away

clean out under the sink
empty and clean the kitchen cupboards
leave out towels on the windowsills at night for the condensation and clear them away in
the morning
do the grocery shop
wash the windows
polish the furniture
sweep the drive
clean the porch steps
wash and Hoover the car
weed the garden
pick the dead leaves from the flower beds
change your new baby brother's nappies and wash them in ammonia
give him his bottle
take him to nursery
teach him to read

Where is your father in this big, old house? He is out at work. He is up a pair of ladders mending the slates on the roof. He is in the garden, sawing dead branches off trees. He is in the cellar fixing a pipe. He is mending all the doors where cracks have appeared. He is behind a dust sheet in the living room, battling the dry rot. Sometimes, when his jobs for that day are done, your father slips into your room to sit with you on the end of your bed and scratch his head over your mother, whose behaviour he doesn't understand any more than you do. But it is never long before your brief consolatory exchanges are broken by the prickling, indignant voice shouting from the bottom of the stairs:

“What are you doing in there? Come out now I need you here!”

And where, all this time, is your mother? She is out shopping in the Sales. She is at the house of the tall rangy woman, with whom she goes windsurfing in summer and ski-ing in winter, despite displaying no interest in either when this one friend isn't around. She is in the kitchen helping herself to a slice of the cake that is just for her, nobody else.

Where is she? She is inspecting the carpet for dust.

She is marching up the stairs to your room.

She is coming, ready or not.

By the time you reach fifteen your mother has added your body to her list of grievances. Your hair, she tells you from the bath, where you are waiting your turn to get in her used water, is *like rats' tails*. Idly threading her fingers through the red pubic hair floating up between the milky islands of her knees, she looks your naked body up and down and adds *You only need to look at food and you put on weight. I'm going to have start buying your clothes in a bigger size*. After she is finished, your mother leaves the grimy water in the tub to you, along with the instruction that you are not allowed to use a clean towel but must dry yourself off with her used one.

In the bathroom mirror, you wipe a drip of water from the eyes that are steaming up in the glass. Only instead of meeting a solid surface, the mirror parts around your hands and something black covered in a matted plug of wet hair slips out.

“Urgh!” Wincing with disgust, you jump back. “Alice!”

You watch in horror as her tiny hands thrash in a puddle of tarry water at your feet. A large dent deforming the side of her head, one eye gummed together and the other without any lids, staring up at you through a film of grey scum, most of her hair gone and the lank strands that remain, oozing with a syrupy black gunk, Alice is more like a bottom feeder from the murky depths of the ocean or a rotting relic from a dank crypt than your once beloved doll. The faecal

stink of blocked drains coming from her body is so rank that it produces a nauseous trickle in the back of your throat as you reach for your mother's dirty towel to hold over your nose.

You feel no pity for your old doll, only disgust. Although it looks like Alice is choking on her own vomit as she coughs in the fetid slick of her own sewage, the last thing you want to do is touch her or go anywhere near her.

"I miss you!" Alice clasps a pair of slimy hands around your bare ankles.

"Get off! Get off me! You're gross!" You violently kick your leg, sending Alice flying into the side of the bath.

"Ow, that hurts," Her face the same colour as the dirty bathwater, Alice rubs the fresh dent in her head. "Why did you do that? I thought we were friends. Don't you want to play?" She blinks with one gently leaking eye while the other looks straight through you.

"I don't want to play," You shout through the towel that is pressed over your nose.

"And we're not friends. What are you doing here? I didn't ask you to come. You need to go now before you get me into trouble. Can't you go back into the mirror or something?"

"What do you mean we can't play? I want to play! I want to play! I want to play!"

Hauling herself up by the handle on the side of the bath, Alice stamps her painted on red shoes that are barely visible beneath their thick crust of grime.

"Shut up! I can't deal with this! I feel sick just looking at you. I don't want to play. I want you to go away and leave me alone!" To make your point, you kick Alice in the stomach. She keels over, face concave where it is crumpled up in pain. But you don't see your doll. You see something soggy and formless that looks like the entrails of a dead animal.

"Please stop!" Clutching her stomach, Alice moans from the floor, her voice mewling and thin. "I only want to play. Please help me. I can't stand up."

In reply, you kick her again, harder this time, piercing a hole in her stomach and releasing a gush of sticky black liquid that splatters all over your foot.

Stuffing the dirty towel into your mouth, you stand back in horror at Alice's blackened and deformed body lying motionless in a pool of her own slime. But you don't have any time to process what you've just done. Your only thought is how quickly you can remove the soggy mass of her body before your mother finds out.

Holding your nose with one hand, you mop up the mess on the floor with the damp towel of your mother's that you have been holding in the other. When it's as clean as you can make it, you get dressed and bundle the remains of Alice into the same soaking wet towel.

A black stain forms on your t shirt from the leaking bundle against your chest as you wait on the landing, listening out for your mother. From downstairs, you hear the kitchen door open and close, followed by footsteps in the hall and the creak of the loose hinge on the living room door. You wait until the only sound you can hear is the rasp of your own hot, ragged breath and then you move, quickly and stealthily, skirting the boxes that are now everywhere and running so fast that the carpet seems to slip and slide under your feet.

At the living room door, you stop and peer through the crack where it doesn't quite shut. Through it, your mother lies on the sofa, stomach slowly rising and falling beneath the rumples of her cardigan, red hair softly crackling in the embers of light from the electric fire, one arm trailing onto the carpet, where her fingers hang loosely beside an empty plate. You are about to move on, when her mouth suddenly drops open and her hand jerks open on the carpet as if trying to grab something just out of reach. Ready to either duck or run, every muscle in your body pulls itself taut. The dirty towel with Alice stuffed inside is cold and heavy against your ribs as you hold your breath. On the sofa your mother rolls over before falling motionless. Seizing your chance, you make a dash to the kitchen and let yourself out of the backdoor.

Outside, the black mirror of a new moon scries the darkness above the trees. Careful to keep away from the gaze of the house's windows, you tramp down the sloping lawn, the heavy towel containing Alice slung over your back. At the very bottom, you drop your load. It doesn't take you long to find a branch sturdy enough to hack at the hard earth until you have dug a hole

large enough to bury her. You toss Alice in but hold onto the towel, which later you will wash in secret so that your mother will never find out, then cover her blackened, twisted body with soil. When it's full, you stamp on the loose earth with both your feet. You don't know whether Alice is dead or alive. For all you care, she can stay there and rot.

Alice well and truly buried, you live for your mother's Good Moods. You wait for them like you wait for the rare days of snow in the middle of Winter, cupping your hands in the hope of holding onto a flake of benevolence before it melts in your palms. So it is that, not long after the incident in the bathroom, you are sitting perfectly still as she curls your hair with a pair of hot tongues, doing your best to reflect what she wants to see in the polished glass of her dressing table mirror while simultaneously hiding your dread at what might spill out.

The reason your mother is in a Good Mood on this particular day is that the aunty, who is not really your aunty but your mother's one friend, is coming over for a Christmas recital to hear you play some carols on the piano. Although you would rather stay in your room with your records and books than spend the afternoon performing for your aunty who is not really your aunty at your mother's behest, you also don't want to jeopardise her Good Mood. Some of the girls at school have invited you to the cinema and you have been waiting all week for the right time to ask.

"Very nice," The large floppy pussy bow of her silk blouse brushes against the back of your head, as your mother steps back to admire her handiwork.

"You look nice, too. That blouse really suits you."

"Oh, do you think? I'm not sure if I prefer the one in the mauve that I returned to the store..."

"No, no, the lilac one looks good on you. It brings out the green in your eyes."

Wondering whether now is your opportunity to bite the bullet and make your supplication, you bite your lip. Then the doorbell goes and so does your moment.

“Oh!” Your mother giggles and blushes, almost dropping her tongues. “It must be later than I thought! Now, remember what I said. You can join us for nibbles but watch out for those mince pies!” Her pussy bow jiggles against her chest as she giggles again. “You know what you’re like!”

In the living room a long rope of tinsel snakes between the pictures on the wall like a glistening serpent covered in shiny silver spikes. The fairy lights of a Christmas tree illuminate the tower of boxes stacked behind the television, next to which it stands, with tiny halos of colour. They dance in the darkness like fireflies as the aroma of sap fills the room. But even the strong scent of spruce can’t mask the smell of dry rot coming from behind the dust sheet hanging down the wall behind the sofa like a giant altar curtain that is also covered with tinsel.

On the sofa, your aunty-not-aunty lounges against the cushions, long legs casually crossed in a pair of knee-high boots, gold hooped earrings glinting beneath a dark shock of thick hair with the relaxed air of someone who is used to being in command. Crumpled inside the flounces of her pussy-bow blouse, cheeks flushed a simpering pink, head bobbing up and down as she laughs at her friend’s jokes, your mother looks small and gauche, a Cadet to her Field Marshall.

Not quite knowing where you to put yourself, you stand stiffly in front of the two women on the sofa, self-consciously peering out from your freshly flicked fringe, your mother’s doll. On the coffee table plates crispy baguettes, slivers of brie, vol-au-vents and, of course, mince pies are laid out on your mother’s best china inlaid with real gold leaf. But your stomach is so contorted with worry about whether or not she will remain in a Good Mood long enough for you to submit your request that you can’t bear the thought of eating even such normally forbidden treats as these.

Dusting flakes of pastry from the pink glue of her lip stick, your mother steers the conversation towards your musical accomplishments. Cheeks shining with undisguised glee, she explains to her friend how you were recently awarded not only a Distinction in your Grade 5

piano but also a Rose Bowl for Public Speaking at school while your aunty-not-aunty soberly shakes her head, gold hoops shimmering in the fairy lights, as if she can barely comprehend such talent in one so young.

Mortified by your role as ornamental glass bauble to your mother's ego, you are relieved when she signals for you to begin your recital. Conscious of the two women's eyes on your back, you launch into the carols you have been earnestly rehearsing for weeks, praying you don't make any mistakes. Starting with 'Away In A Manger', you focus on the image of an imaginary penny on the back of your hand, like you have been instructed by your teacher, as you rattle through your repertoire in a rush of adrenalin until the keys gleam with sweat and your carefully coiffed fringe is beginning to droop.

The last dramatic chord of 'Hark The Herald Angels' ringing in your ears, you swivel round on your stool to face your audience. Half-expecting to find your mother's lips pressed into her usual peeved grimace, you are surprised to find her clapping mirthfully along with her friend, her Good Mood showing no sign of waning, and your heart leaps at the thought that, surely now, your mother will say *yes, of course you can go to the cinema with your friends, no problem*. You bob your head in the ghost of a bow at the same time as you catch a long piece of tinsel come lose from the dust sheet and slide down the wall, taking half the curtain with it, to reveal a cavernous hole. Terrified your mother will accuse you of causing the sheet to fall by playing too loud, the wrenching feeling in your stomach returns. But instead of shouting, she carries on merrily talking to her friend, a fresh mince pie on her plate, as if there were no hole behind her at all.

After your aunty-not-aunty leaves you find your mother in her bedroom humming softly to herself. You hover at the door watching her remove her make up in the mirror.

"Mum..." You address the back of her head.

"Yes?" Your mother turns towards you.

"What is it?" Neither encouraging nor discouraging, her voice is hard to read.

"Some of girls at school have invited me to go to the cinema with them tomorrow."

“And what film is this?”

“It’s about a boy who turns into werewolf... I’ve done all my jobs so I thought it would be okay...”

“Stop right there!” Your mother’s breasts tumble from her unbuttoned blouse, pointing themselves at you like loaded guns. “You’re not going anywhere! I don’t care what your friends are doing! I’m not having any daughter of mine polluting her mind! There’s enough evil in this world without you going to watch any film about werewolves!”

“But Mum! It’s a comedy not a horror film. Please let me go. It’s meant to be *funny*. I’ve worked hard all week and done everything you said. *Please*, Mum, *please*. I just want to do normal things like my friends.”

“I’ve no interest in what your friends do! Don’t think it’s you’re your right to go out! You don’t have any rights. It’s me who gave birth to you and me who decides what you can and can’t do!”

Somewhere deep inside the interior of the house, you hear a door slam.

In the darkness of the cellar, every noise is magnified. The click and whir of the heating, the thunder of the boiler, the wheeze of the pipes and the noise beneath it, that sounds like the pitter patter of tiny footsteps running across the low ceiling, perhaps a rat, or maybe even a bat. You don’t know how long you have been in the cellar, or how you got here, only that there is a graze on your knee and a dull ache in your joints. Barely able to distinguish yourself from the shadows, the damp sinks its invisible spores into your skin, blurring the edges between where it ends and you begin. As your eyes become accustomed to the dark, shapes start to emerge through the gloom. A stack of bin bags. A rusty spade. The miniature porcelain tea pot you played with as a child gleaming on the floor next to a pair of matching cups and saucers, as if laid out for a party.

By the time you are seventeen, the house that had seemed to go on forever is starting to shrink. You bump your head against low-hanging lamps. Your hips are constantly covered in bruises from all the tightly packed furniture you keep knocking over and the attic feels within touching distance of the hall. As you Hoover and mop and scrub, you stumble across more and more boxes. Sometimes there is just one, arbitrarily marooned in a whorl of carpet. But more frequently, the boxes appear en masse, blocking the stairs and the clogging the landings so you must bend and squeeze and shuffle to get past. Their cardboard colonies spread through the house, shrinking it more and deadening the sound of your mother's feet to a series of muffled thuds, which are all the more dangerous because you can't tell whether she is near or far.

Now when you wait your turn to get in your mother's bathwater after her, your conversations have turned to what your mother thinks you should study at university. Her red hair spreads around her face, reaching like tendrils through the soapy scurf, as she lists all the reasons why she thinks you should take Law. *It's a prestigious degree. At the end of it, you could become a solicitor, or even a barrister. It'd be very good money. She would jump at the chance.* She sits up in the bath and gives you one of her impervious looks, eyes intractable as stone. Breathing in the thick clouds of condensation rolling off the whey-like water, you hug your towel more tightly around you and nod. There is no way to tell her that you can't, you just can't. That the whole idea fills you with dread.

"Have you thought anymore about what I said?" At teatime, she turns from ordering your brother to stop playing with his food, in the same breath, curtly asking your father to *please chew properly* and directs her roving stare at you. In the piercing spotlight of her gaze, your mouth goes dry and your hands shake involuntarily.

"Go on, tell your mother what you told me." Your father interjects, encouragingly.

You look at his face and then at your mother's.

"What I want to study is English Literature," you say as a tear drops into the congealed egg on your plate.

“*English Literature?*” Your mother splutters on a forkful of chips. “I’m not paying for you to go to university to do a pie-in-the-sky degree. Not after I’ve spent all that money on your education. You’ll either study a proper subject or you’ll study nothing at all.”

“Come on. Be reasonable.” Your father puts down his knife and fork as your younger brother buries his head in his plate. “She’s old enough, now, to decide for herself. You should let her study what she wants.”

“Do what *she* wants?” Barely able to get the words out, your mother slams both fists on the table. Behind her, a box topples, splitting open its contents. “Don’t you dare tell me what I can and can’t do! I’m supposed to be able to count on you for your support. I am your wife, you know. Not her! But oh no! You’d rather side with that little slut over there!”

“Stop this right now! You can’t talk to our daughter like that! I won’t have it!” Your father gets up. “Take your plate,” he addresses your brother. “You can finish your tea in your room.”

“Just you watch,” your mother drops her voice to a barely audible whisper. “I can do what I like and you can’t stop me. I can see it so clearly. The veils are falling from my eyes. What you’ve both been up to behind my back. I know what you’ve been doing whispering together up in her room!”

She slowly rises from her chair and spits into your father’s face.

“This is getting out of control! Sit down! You’re being ridiculous!” A shiny trail of saliva running down one cheek, your father puts a hand on her arm.

“Don’t you dare touch me!” Brushing it away, your mother carries on. “Not after what you’ve done! You can have her for all I care! Go on! Go and fuck your precious daughter! Don’t let me stop you! Just don’t expect me to stay! Either she has to go or I do! It’s your choice!”

At your mother’s words, the feeling of something heavy and solid forms a tight fist in your stomach. It pushes up and up and up and up, forcing its way into your throat and out

through your mouth. You cough on a cawl of black mucous as, there on your half-finished plate, covered in slime and clutching at the air with a set of grimy fingers, is Alice.

v. Crow Wood

Even in summer, even in daylight, on this side of the valley, in these woods, it is always dark. It's for this reason that the house on the edge of the woods is so cheap to rent. You had not imagined yourself living in such a dark house and would have preferred somewhere with more light in which to write but it had been the only place you could afford and so here you are.

Sometime into your stay, there is a storm in the night that fells some of the oldest trees, leaving the slopes pock marked with a series of deep muddy holes. Although by morning the wind has died down, it is still raining. The beeches that make up Crow Wood are flush with a wet iridescence that is almost hallucinatory in its intensity when, inside the deepest gash, a shadow begins to stir. Substantial in size, the shadow struggles under its own weight, buckling several times, as if perhaps it is a deer that has fallen into the hole and is trying to climb out. But unlike the deer that live in the woods, this shadow has a thicker, heavier quality, as if it belongs to something formless and chthonic that has been birthed from the mud.

A mob of agitated crows wheel overhead as the shadow thickens and tenses at the centre of the hole, as if testing its strength. An increate thing, growing itself from the damp, rust-coloured earth, with each flex, the shadow pushes and pulls against the limits of its edges, throbbing and pulsing and bulging as it takes shape. It strains against the muddy sides of the hole, until it is up and out, thrashing among the brambles, an old woman conjoined to a large, wolfish-looking dog.

Staggering to its feet in a dripping mass of wet hair and fur, the woman-dog-shadow takes a moment to steady itself before splitting in two. The wolverine dog-shadow loping behind her, the only unusual thing about the woman-shadow's appearance is the tell-tale root hanging from her hair and the ankle-length evening dress she is squeezed into as if she has just left a party.

You are at your desk, the document containing your novel glowing on the computer and your first coffee of the day sitting next to it, when you hear a knock at the door. Since hardly anyone comes to the house, you don't answer straightaway, but peer out of the bay window, where you can view the porch without being seen. There, standing expectantly in the rain, you see an elderly woman packed inside a long dress straining against her stomach and thighs, accompanied by a giant German Shepherd with a long pink tongue. Your throat tightens and your mouth goes dry.

“Mum! What are you doing here?” You greet the woman when you open the door.

“I've come to visit, haven't I?” Steaming with rain, the woman you take to be your mother draws her lips into a tight smile.

“I suppose you'd better come in then.”

You lurch to one side as the dog bounds past, a streak of mud and wet fur, trailing a smell of rotting vegetation.

“Bruce, behave!”

Your soaking visitor turns to you. “Don't worry about him. He's a retired police dog and actually quite gentle when you get to know him. I'm a woman on her own, you see, and you have to have some form of protection these days, haven't you? You don't know who you can trust. Bruce!”

She shouts again but the dog has already bolted ahead into the living room. A second later, you hear a thump and run in after the animal, to find the rug covered in soil and your potted palm lying on its side, while the offending creature is up on the sofa, wrestling the cushions in a fight to the death. You are about to yell when your mother appears at your shoulder.

“It's only a bit of soil.” Her voice is cajoling and placatory. “It won't take long for you to Hoover it up. He's just a bit excitable.” She clamps an arm around you. “How about we put on the kettle?”

Your visitor's fingers dig into the soft flesh of your waist a little too hard. Although you try to brush them off, she keeps them there all the way from the hall to the kitchen, which was in the basement.

"It's not very tidy," you find yourself apologising. "But you'll be pleased to hear I do have biscuits."

"You know me, I'm happy with anything! All I need to know is where to find your guest room?"

"Guest room? There is no guest room." You stiffen.

"What about here?" Your visitor stops at the tiny pantry next to the kitchen. "I've got a sleeping bag and a blow-up mattress in me rucksack. All we need is a couple of blankets! We're tougher than we look, you know!" Shooting you a look of unconcealed triumph, she bustles into the small, dark room, the filthy dog on her heels, and the next thing you hear is the wheezing sound of air being pumped into a temporary bed.

In the kitchen, you vigorously mash the tea in the pot. You have to give it to your mother. Her tenacity is genuinely impressive. If a nuclear bomb were to wipe out most of the human race, you have no doubt she would be among the survivors, wandering the remains of the woods, sleeping bag and dog in tow, hair barely singed, surviving on burnt woodlice, beech nuts and the fried flesh of whatever unidentifiable bodies she found in her path.

"We've tested our new bed and it's very comfortable!" Entering the kitchen, your visitor has changed out of her wet dress and is now bundled into a lumpy-looking track suit.

"So, you're writing a novel now?"

She draws up a chair as the dog slides under her legs. "I suppose journalism was too much like hard work, was it?" The woman who speaks with the same back note of offence as your mother, who shares the same flint of petulance in the green flecks of her eyes, who you

have no reason to believe is *not* your mother, takes a biscuit from the plate on the table and crumbles it between her fingers. “I know *I* wouldn’t be rushing to do something different.”

The pot trembling in your hands, you pour your mother’s tea. You feel sick because here you were again in psychic combat, with her holding the advantage.

“I mean, who’s to say you couldn’t have had your own newspaper column?” Your visitor takes a long slug from her cup, raising her little finger in preparation for her next observation.

“After all you were doing so many articles. I’ve kept every one. Anyone who comes over, I show them the folder with all your journalism and they are always so impressed. *How lucky for you to have such a clever and talented daughter*, they say. *You must be so proud of her!* But then I have to tell them I haven’t had anything to put in there for years.”

Giving off the same pungent smell as the dog, she let out a laugh that is somewhere between a grunt and a snort. “Tell me again, how long is it that you’ve been writing this novel?”

You know you could lie but what would be the point? Your mother would only want to know what else you had been doing.

“Seven years.” You look her straight in the eyes.

“Seven years!” Your mother’s voice cracks into another bitter laugh. Beneath her, the dog scrapes its claws on the floor. “Seven years! And you haven’t finished? Surely it doesn’t take anyone seven years! I suppose you must have a publisher, then, and they are okay with the amount of time you’re taking to finish it? I mean, you would have to have some sort of guarantee you’re going to get paid?” She waves her mug in your direction. You noticed her fingernails are packed with tiny crescent moons of dirt.

“Actually, no. I don’t have a publisher. I’m writing because... because...”

“Have I said something to upset you?”

Thinking of how day after day, week after week, you sit at your desk, writing things down and then erasing them, you feel a violent charge burn through the veins of your neck.

“I think I’m going to take a walk.”

You run out in a rage without your raincoat. When you return, you are drenched and your dress is clinging to your body like a soggy second skin. Finding your mother and her dog asleep on the living room sofa, you creep past their snores and make your way up the stairs. In the sanctuary of your bedroom, you take off your wet clothes and stand in front the mirror. Your skin is a bright, raw pink with the beginnings of a rash. You scratch a pimple and it bleeds.

It is much later on when you are woken by a low-pitched whinnying to find the shadowy figures of your mother and her dog watching you from the end of your bed.

“Mum, what are you doing in my room? I’m not feeling well.” Your body and bed sheets are soaked, as if you have sleep-walked into the rain wrapped inside them.

“That’s why I’m here.”

Your visitor’s eyes burn through the shadows and a dull stench rolls off her.

“I’m worried about you. Should you really be writing if it’s making you this stressed? If you’re not careful, you’re going to make yourself ill.” She sits down beside you and begins stroking your head.

“Please go. I’m tired and I don’t feel like talking about it right now.” You turn your face away, but she keeps her hand on your hair.

“Maybe it’s time for you to get a proper job,” she goes on. “I’m only trying to be realistic. You should have done law like I said. There’s never a shortage of demand for solicitors. And they earn good money! It’s important to be honest with yourself. If you aren’t cut out for something, isn’t it better to admit it? What if you finished your book and no one wanted to publish it? I don’t mean this unkindly, but shouldn’t someone your age be thinking about that? I’m only saying it because I’m your mother and I’ve got your best interests at heart.”

“Look, Mum,” you begin but before you can say anything else, the dog leaps onto the bed, digging its claws into your legs and pinning you down, claiming your body as its territory.

“Ah, there’s a good dog. You see? What did I tell you? Look how much he likes you!”

“Please.” The prickly heat of tears burn the back of your eyes. “Please get it off me. I can’t move. Please. I just want to be alone.”

“Very well. If that’s what you want. Far be it for me to be the cause of any upset. Come on Bruce! We know when we’re not wanted!”

Your visitors don’t seem to leave so much as melt into the shadows. As your eyes flutter closed, you wonder if you had dreamt them. But all through the night, you are sure you can hear the sound of footsteps going up and down the stairs and the voice of your mother saying over and over. *Don’t worry. I’m here to help. I’m not going anywhere.*

The next day your fever dies down and your rash settles into little pustular jewels. Creeping past the pantry where your visitor and her dog are still asleep, you go out through the back door into the small garden, as you do every morning, to collect the slugs from the vegetable patch below the pantry window. This morning, along with the slugs, you find a dead crow lying underneath, the pinkish-brown of its guts smeared on the window above it. Thinking nothing of it, you scoop it up between a handful of leaves and take it into the woods and bury it.

Back inside the house at your desk, you open the document containing your unfinished novel. You scribble notes. You type a couple of sentences then delete them. You stare into the green screen of the woods. But the words do not come and you feel the prickly heat of your rash wrap itself in a burning choker around your throat. What if your novel is doomed? What if you are like the dead crow, flying smack into a window you just can’t open? What if you aren’t up to the task? What if your mother is right and you are making a mess of your life?

“Where are you? Come here! Quickly! I need your help!” As if on cue, from down below, you hear her voice break into a shriek, accompanied by the bark of the dog as their yelps fuse together in a pained duet.

It turns out your visitor has slipped on wet grass while letting the dog out and twisted her ankle. Since her accident means she can't walk, a week later she is still in your house. By then you have become so used to the smell of decay which envelopes both of them, that you have stopped noticing it, except for when she pulls you in close to say how much she missed you, and you catch a whiff of it on her breath.

The woman you take to be your mother seems to need a lot of sleep and spends most of her time napping on the living room sofa. Although she doesn't bring up the subject of your novel again, you feel her disapproval in the wounded look she gives you every time you sit at your desk, before meekly casting her eyes down, as if to suggest in some convoluted way that you are the cause of her injury. With your mother dosing on the sofa, what few words you had previously been able to summon now evade you entirely, as if they have formed an allegiance with her. Meanwhile, your rash continues its creep, colonising your body with blisters, which in a certain light, looked like teeth marks.

Beside making your mother's meals, changing the poultice on her ankle and helping her take a bath every night, it falls to you to walk her dog. It demands to go out two, three, sometimes four times a day. Despite your visitor's protestations, the dog does not grow friendly but lets out a suspicious growl each time you come near, goading you with its eyes to make a wrong move.

Following an unfortunate incident when it had gone for another dog's throat on one of your walks, you have stopped letting it off the leash. Each time you take it out, the dog drags you after it up through the woods, almost pulling your arm from its socket through the swirling undercurrents of ferns to the same hole, day after day.

It is at these moments out in the woods, while the dog is busy with its hole that you catch yourself dreaming about being a feted author, composing in your head the speeches you will give in gracious receipt of the prestigious awards your novel will garner. As the dog tugs you

back down the slope, however, these fantasies are replaced by the sickening presentiment that your life is slipping into an abominable darkness under the gloating gaze of your mother.

Meanwhile, not only is her ankle no better, but each evening when you wrap it in a fresh poultice, the swelling seems bigger. It bulges from her leg like the giant burls deforming the tree trunks in the woods and, although you wish you could ask her to leave, you can't bring yourself to say anything while she is barely able to walk.

A week later, there is another storm in the night and more trees fall in Crow Wood. When it's time for the dog's walk, it takes a diversion to the vegetable patch, yanking you behind it. Beneath the window, it pulls up short, poking its snout into the guttering, re-emerging with a crow wing hanging from one side of its mouth in a dark fan of feathers. As you catch up with the dog, you see the corpses of a dozen dead crows shining in the undergrowth. Directly above them, the pantry window is smeared in feathers and blood.

Later on, back at your desk, you can't get the image of the crows flying to their death out of your head. They are there in front of the other story you are trying to tell, blocking it out in a cloud of black wings, and it's some time before you become conscious of your visitor and her dog standing behind you.

“Mum! You gave me a fright. I didn't see you there. Are you okay?”

“I've been watching you, daughter.” Your mother's voice is taut and strained, as if she has been crying. “You're very lucky, aren't you, not to have to do a proper job? It's alright for you, isn't it, doing what you call writing? Yes, you really are lucky. I would have loved to do whatever I pleased when I was your age but I was far too busy skivvying after you. I had no time to be a lady of leisure.”

You feel your mother's words as if your chest had been doused in petrol and lit with a match.

“How dare you call me a lady of leisure! How dare you!” You don’t recognise the furious voice crackling up through your throat as you continue. “Do you know how many hours a day I spend walking that dog? Who is it that’s been changing all the poultices on your ankle? And where do your meals come from? Do you think they make themselves? And, yes, you’re right! I do have a choice about how I live my life and if that’s a crime, I’m guilty as charged! But I’d rather be a lady of leisure any day than a mean-spirited bitch like you!”

“Blame! Blame! Blame! Blame! That’s right! Blame me!” In the shadows, the dark figure of your mother swells with indignation. “I’ve never wanted anything other than the best for you and this is how you thank me. I’m old and my body is giving up and all you can think about is yourself. Where is your humanity?”

“Forget it! Forget I said anything! I’m going out!”

Charged with the white heat scorching your skin, you tear up the slope of the woods, half in a trance. You are so out of breath that it feels like your heart is going to burst out of your chest but you keep going, scrambling through the thorny web of the brambles, barely aware of your surroundings and without any idea of where you are heading, until the vein of an exposed root catches the toe of your boot, and you are lying flat on the ground.

Face down in the mud, the woods spin around you slow and fast, slow and fast, in a fuzzy whirl of branches and ferns, shadow and light.

“Are you okay?”

The woozy motion of the woods comes to a stop and you see a young girl standing over you in a floral headscarf and matching skirt, twirling a foxglove between her fingers, knees brown with dirt. Conscious of a shooting pain in your elbow, you want to say, no, you aren’t okay. You want to say that you are furious with your visitor and furious with yourself for letting her in. You want to scream that you are terrified your mother is right and you are wasting your

life. But then you see yourself through the eyes of the girl, a strange woman in the woods, bloody and blistered and covered in mud, and you take a deep breath.

“I tripped but I’m fine. That’ll teach me to look where I’m going!” You speak as lightly as you can as you pick yourself up.

“Where do you live?” Holding you in her curious gaze, the girl tucks in her lips and tilts her head.

“In that house down there. Can you see through the trees?”

“Oh, yes,” The girl nods sagely. “I know that house. A bad person lives there.”

“A bad person!” You laugh. “I’m not a bad person. A bad writer, maybe, but not a bad person.”

“Oh no, it’s not you.” The girl squashes one of the flower’s purple bells between her fingers. “You’re not the bad person. They’re in there now.”

You turn away from the girl towards the roof of your house, which is visible through the trees. You think of your mother lying with her dog on the makeshift bed in the pantry and of the crows ritually flinging themselves against the window. You know your mother is difficult, and that, with age, her behaviour has only become worse. But bad, as in bad to the core?

The girl carries on. “I go by your house every day on the way to my den but I always run when I pass because it gives me the creeps. Do you want to see my den?” Changing the subject, the girl points with a dimpled arm through the trees to a rudimentary tepee that has been erected beneath the fluttering canopy of a large beech.

“It’s just over there.”

On the heels of the girl, you crawl on your hands and knees inside the circle of branches arranged around the trunk of a beech. The interior feels cool and moist against your blistered skin. It smells of mulch and damp earth and summers from a long time ago. Kneeling beside you, the girl rummages in one of the den’s corners.

“These are my stories.” Producing a sheaf of damp paper covered in the wobbling scrawl of a child’s handwriting, she waves it in front of you. “And this is my bird’s nest. And here’s the skull of a bird that I found. And here are my fir cones.”

“You have some lovely things.”

You pick up one of the cones and roll it between your palms as your gaze strays from the girl’s treasures to the triangle of light pouring in through the entrance. Beyond it, the woods shimmer in a green rapture, as if the trees are leaving the outer body of their bark and transubstantiating into the grey light.

A cloud of midges dances across the entrance and you are that girl inside the dark womb of her den, writing poems and stories from a place of pure impulse without fear. You pull your knees to your chest and breathe in the damp air. And now?

“I’ve got to go. It’s time for my tea.” At your side, the girl is wriggling past.

“It was nice meeting you. Thank you for showing me your den. Maybe we’ll see each other again.”

“Maybe!” The girl calls back and then she is gone, the hem of her skirt scrunched up in her fists, as she makes her way between the trees back down the track.

Watching the girl disappear, inside the cool green shadows of the den, you decide.

On your way back through the woods to the house, you rehearse what you will say. *Can I have a word? Look, this isn’t working out. It’s time for you to go. Thank you, but I don’t need you to tell me how to live my life. I’m an adult, not a child. If you can’t walk, I’ll pay for a cab.* But when you open the door and call into the shadows, there is no answer from your mother and no sound from her dog.

Determined to tell her to leave before you lose your nerve, you march from room to room, flinging open one door after another. But, apart from a lingering smell of rotting vegetation and dusty balls of hair and fur gathering in the corners, there is no sign of them anywhere.

Collecting yourself in the dim hall, you feel as if you have run all the way to catch a train, only to find it's been indefinitely cancelled. Although a part of you is relieved to find that your mother has apparently left of her own accord, another part feels a growing unease. Had she left in a fury because of what you had said? Was she now limping off into the woods, dragging her inflamed ankle behind her, along with the dog? Were you supposed to be ashamed of yourself for driving her away? Was it possible she had somehow been able to read your mind? Or had she left because she'd simply got bored?

You check the house one last time and when you are absolutely certain your unwanted visitors have gone, you sit down at your desk. You have only got as far as turning your computer on when you hear a loud bang. Hardly daring to stir, you wait for your mother's critical voice to start up from the basement. What follows, however, is a heavy tomb-like silence that is almost too quiet, as if the whole house is lying in wait, holding its breath. Picking a scab on your neck, you tell yourself that you must have imagined it. That a crow has fallen down the chimney. That a window has slammed shut.

And yet. And yet.

You can't get the voice of the girl in the wood out of your head. *A bad person lives there. A bad person.* It's like she is right here beside you, whispering in your ear as the line of a new story comes to you fully formed.

Even in summer, even in daylight, on this side of the valley, in these woods, it was always dark.

vi. Mother Bear

The rock in the shape of a bear wading into the ocean on the tail of her cub is just as you remember. From the clifftop you watch the low tide washing against her craggy heft as she lumbers at the sub-perceptual speed of tectonic plates sliding beneath the earth's crust, long neck craning towards the blue vapour of the horizon, resolute and determined, as if she would shake out her ruff and bound into the water. The last time you were here, it was with your daughter. You remember being at exactly this spot looking out at these same rocks, her right beside you, headscarf flapping vigorously in the wind, taking a picture with her first camera. But this time you are alone, back all these years later to hike the trail of beaches you visited with her that long-ago summer before a giant wave rolled in from nowhere and stole her forever.

In so many ways you disappeared that day, too, leaving behind the shadow that has been living out a half-life in place of you. You worked hard. Rode the peaks and troughs of several careers. Were lucky in friendships, not so lucky in love. Carried on as best you could. But lately your insomnia has been getting worse, while there are some nights that you don't sleep at all. And so you are here, the salt wind stinging your eyes as you follow the path down the cliff, to face the ghosts you've been avoiding for years.

Thick clusters of bright yellow flowers brush against your legs as clouds of butterflies scatter from their daisy-like heads. A sun-bleached information board tells you the yellow flowers are *Helichrysum*, commonly referred to as Immortal or Everlasting flowers. You bend down to pick one. They wave around your face, filling the dusty air with the faint scent of spice and old straw. Through their web of spun gold, you glimpse your girl darting ahead along the path, smudged and out of focus like one of her photographs that you later developed. You hear yourself calling her name. See her turning and shouting back, up to her waist in flowers, blue eyes glittering like tiny granules of ocean. But her words are lost to the wind and you can't hear what she is saying. Then a butterfly lands on your arm and she is gone.

Dusk is beginning to fall when you arrive at the beach and, aside from a few last stragglers like you, the shore is empty. Dumping your rucksack in the sand, you stand barefoot in the shadow of the bears. From down here, it's harder for you to make out their shape from the dark mass of granite towering over your head, vast and immense, shouldering the beach from the worst of the wind. You see your girl again, scrambling up in her pink jelly shoes, testing each craggy foothold before putting her weight on it, fearless and agile. Hitching up your dress, you follow her zigzag path up the bear, feeling with your fingers for the faint imprints left by hers as she races you to the top.

You stop at a small plateau where the bear's shoulders meet the bottom of its neck. Throwing your legs either side, you straddle the rock as if you are riding it. The wind tearing at your hair and the gulls gliding beneath your feet, from up here you can see the distinct silhouette of the cub again, paddling towards the incoming tide. As you look down, you recall the tale you heard the last time you were here that once the coast was a glacier where the bears roamed freely. But when the ice began to melt, they were turned to stone.

This recollection unearths another. It comes back to you now as you stroke the knotty thread of quartz stippling the bear's neck. What the locals said about the beach being a portal. The breeze tugging your hair, you imagine a mirror world on the other side of the horizon where the sand is a river of sparkling ice and the bear's neck is soft and warm-blooded. Or another world that looks just like this, except one where your girl is alive, jumping the waves in her caterpillar print bikini and bug shaped sunglasses, laughing and whooping, as a sparkling green breaker lifts her higher and higher.

A lone sea gull screeches overhead and, for a moment, you can almost feel the rock stir, smell the tang of wet fur. You cling on to the scruff of the bear's neck, feeling dizzy and faint as it sways. Ahead of you, the ocean is briefly golden before night drops like a curtain. You take the limp stems of *Helichrysum* you had picked earlier from your pocket and cast them out into the darkness. So many years later, the closest you have come to scattering her ashes, to watching her

go. And that throb you can hear beneath the ocean's whisper? It is the sound of your heart beating hard and fast and loud, as if you are all out of breath from running for miles.

The darkness washes around you, beach and sky all one. Although you know that the giant unpredictable waves like the one which took your girl, are rare, her death has taught you nothing is impossible and that terrible, unexpected things happen to people all of the time. That, at any moment, another terrible and unexpected thing could happen to you. That it's better to get out your torch, make your way back up the cliffs to the campsite. Just to be on the safe side. Just in case. But there's something magnetic about the rock and the ocean and the waves bleeding into the blackness that makes you want to stay down here on the shore and spend the night on the beach.

Nestled inside your sleeping bag beneath the cliffs, you feel as though you are locked inside a sealed chamber filled with the sound of crashing breakers. Having lived for so long like a shadow, that there might be a wave out there with your name on it is terrifying in a way that makes you feel strangely alive. The bass of the ocean rolling over and around you, its briny wet breath settling on your face, you find yourself thinking the unthinkable - your girl plucked from the shore, an animal scream ripping from her throat, the tight pain in her chest where she is unable to breathe. A gust of wind buffets your sleeping bag and you see her in a foetal position, eyes screwed shut, a cloud of hair darkening her face, body filling with water. What were her last thoughts? Did she know she was going to die? What does a nine-year-old girl think, facing her own death?

You think of how her lungs would swell up and her brain drain of oxygen before full anoxia and loss of consciousness set in. You know it is likely that her last few seconds would have passed in a hallucinatory state, body slack inside its watery container, every moment an eternity, having visions, seeing colours. You visualise her slipping away to a woozy kaleidoscope of soft indigos and lilacs fading to pale rose. Or to loud splashes of red and pink, yellow and green like the paintings she did of lop-sided castles, blurry jungles and wobbly planets - you and

her, grinning stick figures, daubed into the corners, just passing through. And you see her at the very end holding onto the mane of a painted horse, your girl, your girl, not dying but galloping across a wonky sky dripping with rainbows. Picturing her like this, riding into the night, you fall asleep.

A vast and indeterminate black thing growling at your feet, there is nothing soothing about the ocean you wake up to. Hungry and menacing, it pounds the shore, a dark and terrible monster, rising to the surface and taking you back down with it.

See that bloated body shedding flakes of white fat? Its roar drops to a hoarse whisper. Here she is, here is, your daughter. See the putrescence shine in the place of her eyes. Look at the lice nibble the burst skin of her chest. Watch her intestines unravel into the weeds. See her bones rot in the slime. Back where she belongs. Mine all mine.

“NO!” Kicking off your sleeping bag, you stand up square to the dark, screaming into the void beneath a blizzard of stars.

“NO! Take me instead! Come on! I’m ready! Take meeeee!” You drop to your knees, weeping into the beach.

Be careful what you wish for. Sounding from everywhere, as if it is coming from inside the darkness, the voice breathes down your neck. My belly is full of dead bodies but there is always room for more. If you know one thing, you must know this. No one messes with me.

“I’m sorry,” you gasp between husks of breath, “I should never have let you out of my sight. I love you so much. So very, very much. My girl, my cub, my dear little bear. I’m so sorry. If only I hadn’t turned my back. If only I’d been a stronger swimmer.” You thrash the cold hard sand with your hands, beating out what your body can’t hold, as the ocean rustles and scrapes, a skirt of black taffeta sweeping the shore.

It is the gentle warmth of the first light on your arms that stirs you from your prostrate position. Before you the ocean tumbles and romps in the sun, a very different animal to the beast of last night. Rinsing the grit from your teeth with a swig of water from what's left in your bottle, you see a diamond-shaped hole between the mother bear's legs, through which is a window of ocean and sky that you hadn't noticed before. Without looking back, you throw on your rucksack and climb through it.

On the other side the beach curves North in an elegant scallop shape as the tide rolls in perfectly synchronous waves towards the shore. Although you have barely slept, everything in the white light of the sun feels vivid, electric, a silvery reel of film projected onto the shimmering screen of the ocean. You squelch bare foot in the shallows between clumps of bladder wrack bubbling with trapped air as more things you had forgotten swim to the surface like the silvery fish tickling your feet. Your girl holding a bright orange fishing net spilling with a jelly fish, you shouting at her not to touch it. Her chasing a piglet someone had brought down to the beach, hiccupy giggles bubbling up from her throat as it slips between her fingers. You watching her play from beneath a beach umbrella, the taste of peach in your mouth, content with your lot, your small unit of two.

At first the beaches are empty except for you and the gulls. But as the day progresses, small islands of families begin to appear along the long stretch of beach. The hours pass, heavy and hot with the heat of the sun, the weight of your bag, your sense of time lost, along with the signal on your phone, which is tucked inside a rucksack pocket, almost dead. But you are in no rush to charge it. You like being out of contact, slipping beneath the radar, out of reach, tuning into the frequencies of the beach, listening out for a different kind of call.

Ssshh. Can you hear? Beneath the waves, the voices?

At the first coffee shack you see, you stop for something to eat. Washing the salt from your lips with a tall glass of water, you listen to fragments of sing-song instructions, hot-

tempered screams and whoops of delight broadcasting from the industrious production of hole-digging, ball throwing and kite flying taking place among the clusters of brightly coloured sun hats circling the beach shading their small owners. On this beach long ago, your girl, too, dug moats, made tents from beach towels, drove herself giddy playing swing ball, cried when she got hot and tired, covering you in sticky handprints of sun cream and melted strawberry ice lolly. But at the same time, she feels just as opaque to you as these children do. How can you be certain your girl was as you remember? How much did you ever really know her?

You know that whenever the house went quiet, she was probably in the back garden making one of her dens. That she refused to be consoled after reading Robin Hood and finding out he dies. That she was the only one to love that grumpy cat, Raspberry, who was so vicious the vet refused to see it without first putting him under anaesthetic. That her school reports said if she day-dreamed less and concentrated more her grades would be better. But in so many other ways, you don't know her at all. Who was the girl who made the scrap book about this holiday which you still have at home? What do the feathers and shells Sellotaped onto the pages accompanied by the felt tip entries detailing the things you ate and did, tell you about her dreams or what made her afraid or what she thought about, secretly, to herself, or felt without having the words to describe it? That girl is a stranger to you. A translucent shadow on the other side of the screen.

Finishing your toastie and salad, you walk on, slow beneath the bulge of your backpack, following the winding coastline from beach to beach past more islands of families strewn along the white sand. Grateful for the breeze, every so often you stop to buy water or melon or ice cream from the vendors criss-crossing your path on the shore. Determined to not be beaten by the ocean, you decide to spend a second night on the beach. This time you light a fire to keep the darkness at bay. Beyond its pale glow, shadows shift and stir at the edges of your senses, perhaps rabbits or bats or the spotted cat-like genets who hunt the dunes in this part of the world. You find the presence of these other warm-blooded creatures comforting and for the first

time in months you sleep like a child as the dull, glittery boom of the waves smashes softly against the shingle.

Ssshhh-Ssshhh. Ssshhh-Ssshhh.

In the morning you leave your tent on the boardwalk with a note saying ‘please take me’ for someone who will make better use of it than you.

As the days pass, the skin on your shoulders and arms begins to flake in the heat. Peeling it away in long strips, you douse yourself in sun lotion and when that runs out, you rub yourself with dulse, shivering with delight as its cool, sticky gel sinks into the new skin growing beneath the old, which feels tougher and rubberier, almost like seaweed itself.

As your skin peels, so does the shoreline’s. Gleaming in the sunlight, the ocean is more lustrous, the beach the more crystalline, the waves more granular, as if everything has been clarified to its pure essence. Less bowed by your new lighter load, you follow the curve of the coastline, as if walking through a polished mirror in which time seems to slip, the days blur and merge. Dead in your rucksack, your phone remains untouched, a relic from another world that you are not ready to return to. Not for a while. Not just yet. Your business is here, re-tracing old steps, following her.

Ssshh. Can you hear the sound of the screen tear?

The days become weeks but the further you trek, the farther away your destination seems to get, as if time has begun to run backwards. New muscles appear on your shoulders and neck. Your thighs thicken, your calves become firm, their shape more defined. You like how your new body feels and moves. The sinuous flow of feet, limbs propelling you along the sand, skin to skin with the wind, the whole shore seeping into your pores. At the end of each day’s long walk, you unravel your hair from its knot and towel the sand and sweat off your body with it. Thick and getting thicker, dark clumps sprout from your armpits and cover your thighs. By the driftwood fires you light each night, you observe its growth, curling new fronds between your fingers,

wondering what will appear next and from where, as somewhere in the darkness, the ocean crackles and hisses like static.

You are washing in the shallows, as you do every morning, when you see it. At first you take it for a dapple of sunlight but as you shake out your hair, you see a stem of *Helichrysum* nudging against your feet. Of course, your rational self knows that anyone could have picked one of the flowers that are native to the surrounding dunes and tossed it out to sea. But another part of you believes the flower is a friendly message from the ocean - your girl letting you know she's closer than you think.

You can't even remember the last time you made anything with origami but your fingers surprise you by seeming to know all by themselves how to fold the old napkin you find into a boat. And this is how your conversation begins. She leaves a sandcastle and you make a spiral from razors and clams. You dig a hole and she fills it. In reply to the rune-like shapes of fishing rope, you write a poem with feathers and bones. In answer to the orange spade floating in a rock pool, you dig a moat with it. On your hands and knees in the surf, you burrow through crumbling honeycombs of sand with its blade, until all that can be seen of you from the beach is the curve of your back, the pistons of your elbows, shining in the sun as they move up and down.

Beach flies hopping on your arms, you dig with no plan, veering one way and then another, as if directed by the ocean's soft murmur until the moat is a giant serpent frothing at the mouth where the tide runs in and out. Pleased with your day's work, you stretch out inside it, alert to the shimmering feeling of something fierce and ancient waking inside you.

The farther you walk, the less people you see. Although your path still crosses the occasional picnicking family or lone fishermen casting a line into the ocean, your wanderings are mostly accompanied only by gulls. The beach shacks, too, are more infrequent. In their absence, you

drink with cupped hands from the freshwater streams that run down through the dunes. You exchange salad for sea lettuce, toasties for the cockles and mussels prised from their rocks with the thick rinds of your long, uncut nails.

As the days pass, the sun becomes hotter, the cliffs redder, the shore windier. Now the beaches shine like copper. Burnished by the great clouds of sand that follow you everywhere, your skin turns a dark, lustrous cherry. Large purple veins bulge from the dark hairs of your limbs. The nights, too, are red. In the fires you light to protect yourself from the enormity of the dark, they pulse, bloody and womb-like, as you gaze into the ocean watching for the monsters you know are out there somewhere, gliding beneath the waves, menacing and magnificent.

Ssshhh. If you hold your breath, you can hear. Ssshhh. If you stay very still, you can see.

Once, on a particularly hot night, when the wind is so dry that it feels like the ocean is breathing fire, your girl crawls under your blanket and curls up beside you. You know it is her because of the smell of sun lotion and strawberry ices and, beneath it, the musty aroma of mouldy apples. You daren't say anything and you daren't move because you don't want to disturb her. It's enough to know that she is right here next to you, making little whistling noises as she breathes, the knotty curve of her spine moving gently against your belly, warm and solid and wonderfully alive as you fall asleep holding her.

It is the deafening sound of water rushing onto the shore that abruptly wakes you to the sight of the beach turning pale with the rage beneath a giant frothing wave, your girl nowhere to be seen. Seeing a tree trunk spinning madly like a de-magnetised compass needle heading your way, you jump to your feet in horror as a ferocious roar breaks from inside your chest. It rips right through you, wrenching your joints from their sockets and re-arranging your bones. A dark silhouette against the pale swirl of the shore, your muscles flex and contort to accommodate their new shape as your neck thickens, your chest widens and the thick hair on your back bristles.

The pain is excruciating as the howl tears itself from the crevice of your mouth and your eyes turn the dazzling luminous yellow of stars smeared across a stormy night sky.

In the moonlight the giant wave seethes and the red coat of your fur gleams.

Then you leap on all fours into the rush of white water. Voluptuous, animal, ursine. On your way to save your daughter.

Conclusion

If the stories of our dreams tell emotional truths about our waking realities, then the story of mine is that since I embarked on the process of writing-as-shadow work, my recurring nightmares of being trapped in a house with a histrionically shouting mother, from which I frequently woke in tears, have completely ceased. Simultaneously writing and performing the tension of opposites, dying in story multiple times, a ghost haunted by the ghost of my mother, 'perhaps to the brink of self-extinction... [I am], in a sense, re-born into a new life. [My] struggle and what [I've] learned become the subjects of [my] work' (DeSalvo 2000: 156). Through the practice of writing-as-shadow-work, I give voice to the ghosts of my past while at the same time inventing a (present) self who is capable of integrating her pain in an ongoing cycle of grieving and healing.

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