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mingled with all kinds of colours

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mingled with all kinds of colours

A thesis submitted in fulfillment of the

requirements for the award of the degree

DOCTOR OF CREATIVE ARTS

from

UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

by

TERESA BELL, B.A, DIP. ED, M.A.

CREATIVE WRITING

Thesis Certification

CERTIFICATION

I, Teresa Helen Bell, declare that this thesis, submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Creative Arts, in the Faculty of Law, Humanities and the Arts, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Teresa Helen Bell

NOTES

This thesis would not exist without my supervisor Joshua Lobb; I can't imagine a more professional, supportive, consistent or inspiring supervisor. I know I have been very lucky. I would like to thank The University of Wollongong, and the APA, for giving me four years to explore ideas I was passionate about.

I would also like to thank Christopher Wilson and Faye Bell for helping proofread this thesis.

For friendship and support over the period I would like to thank: Robyn Rowland, Chris Wallace-Crabbe, Ildiko Kovacs, Richard Stark, Georgia Wallace-Crabbe, Frances Wilson, Tim Cole, and The State Library Macquarie Reading Room - may you last forever.

To the late Roy Jackson who was the first to read *Lunation* beyond my Supervisor, who, along with the late John Peart, believed in me, and supported me to become a member of the working artist community at Wedderburn where this thesis was largely written. Thank you both—up there in the stars.

Thanks to my family: Patrick, Faye, Marvin, Angelica, Margaret, Sebastian and John Bell.

This thesis is for my mother, Faye Bell.

The title of this thesis - *mingled with all kinds of colours* – draws on Sappho's Fragment 152, as translated by Anne Carson (2002, pp. 306-307). This fragment has been interpreted in various ways; Diana Collecott notes that the key adjective *poikilus* can be translated as 'many-coloured' or 'rainbow-hued', but the fragments central idea is about the 'play of light and texture, what is shining, artful, variegated' (1999, pp. 17-18).

This thesis is about just such a 'play' with colour, light, texture, variations, genres and female artistry. It consists of two equal parts, *Lunation* and *The Book of Ambiguity,* which could be called the creative and the academic components respectively. Ultimately, however, they have mingled into each other, as only colours can.

ABSTRACT

The Book of Ambiguity is a term I use to define texts that exist outside formal genres and categories created by market forces. The Book of Ambiguity takes reader and writer outside familiar narrative structures, outside traditional positioning of gender, sanity, and sexuality, to an ambiguous meeting place of ecstasy. In this liminal space there is a merging of writer, reader and character, until the sense of a third person, or uninvolved narrator, is challenged. There is a mingling of writer as reader, reader as writer, writer as character, reader as character, reader as book, writer as book, and the book itself 'as one of its own characters' (Cixous 2002). The Book of Ambiguity has a transformative power to take reader and writer outside the limiting binds of society, character, subjectivity and form momentarily, to highlight the ethical ambiguity of our individual freedom and responsibility. In this sense, The Book of Ambiguity is a political book that embraces Simone de Beauvoir's key principles from her 1947 philosophical text, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*.

Although both men and women write Books of Ambiguity, the increasing freedom afforded to women writers has enabled them to explore previously taboo subjects: to place themselves within their own narratives as 'mad', sexually adventurous, or passionate, without the fear of involuntary incarceration that haunted them until the late 1970s. This liberation in content has led to a liberation of form, away from linear narratives and towards an embracing of a feminine style of writing, *écriture féminine*, as championed by Hélène Cixous. I term this writing, post-*Madwoman* writing, as there has been a marked shift in writing by women since Gilbert and Gubar's 1979 study of Victorian Women's writings, *The Madwoman in the Attic.*

This thesis is in two discrete, but related parts: the first is a creative work titled *Lunation*, an original written example of a Book of Ambiguity, and the second is an essay titled *The Book of Ambiguity*. The essay employs case studies of three specific Books of Ambiguity written by post-*Madwoman* writers; Dorothy Porter's *Akhenaten* (1992*),* Siri Hustvedt's *The Shaking Woman* (2010) and Anne Carson's *Decreation* (2006).

CONTENTS

PREFACE

The relationship between reader and writer is one of silent, private dialogue: an intimate exchange, perhaps best explored metaphorically, by comparing the tacit contract a reader enters into with a writer when reading their book, to the more primal and basic form of communication: eye contact.

The average length of continuous direct eye contact varies from culture to culture, but in general, a mutual gaze becomes something more if it is held for over 1.5 seconds. Public speakers are often taught to direct their gaze into the metaphorical third eye (thought to be located in the centre of the forehead) to avoid the confrontation and potential cultural problems of gazing straight into someone else's eyes. Apparently Japanese children are told to lower their gaze to their teacher's bellybutton as a sign of respect. A friend, who worked as Assistant Director on *Mission Impossible II* in Sydney in the nineties, told me that Tom Cruise made everyone on set sign a contract that forbid them to look him directly in the eyes. In Tantric Yoga, according to devotees, you can keep your clothes on, and eye contact alone will produce an orgasm.

Making eye contact with certain animals can spell catastrophe, while with others, it might save your life. Eye contact can cross the species divide and make us question human sovereignty, taking us back to a primitive time of hunter and hunted. Speaking of hunted, who could forget the stare of Anthony Hopkins as Hannibal Lector when he first meets Jodie Foster as Clarice Starling in the 1991 film *The Silence of the Lambs*? He orders her closer and closer to the clear glass that separates them, without once blinking or taking his eyes off her, while Clarice stumbles to find her I.D card. Then the shot changes, framing Hannibal alone, looking directly into the camera, and into the viewers' eyes - the viewer as Clarice. The glass and the screen that separate the fictional characters and the audience from the action are removed for a brief moment, and we are locking eyes with a killer. We are in the movie. The eyes of the mad and the haunted have fascinated artists from Artaud to Avedon. Eye contact is essential for flirtation and seduction. People that hold eye contact for too long can be frightening, challenging, powerfully seductive, or all three at the same time, as Hopkins demonstrated in his portrayal of Hannibal Lector. Adolf Hitler prided himself on his hypnotic gaze.

The meeting of eyes strips us of our clothes, our gender, our species, our guises, and protective layers. It equalises. Christos Tsiolkas talks about this when he writes of his need to avoid eye contact with a group of refugees he walked past in his essay 'Strangers at the Gate':

> The first day I visit the ASRC, I notice a group of five men, all young, all Middle Eastern, sitting outside the Centre chatting. I tense up. I am astonished at my response. Their gaze falls on me and then very quickly they turn away. Walking past them, I do my best not to look these young men in the eye. Nothing they do is threatening. They are a group of good-looking young men enjoying a brief break of sunshine in the middle of a Melbourne winter. Nevertheless I am intimidated and, if I am honest, this sparks feelings of resentment. It is an ugly, ungenerous moment but it makes me aware that I am not untouched by the shame and fear that is my country's dominant response to asylum seekers. (2013, pp. 24-25)

Perhaps this example from Tsiolkas comes closest to addressing human fear and avoidance of the direct gaze. By looking deeply into someone else's eyes gender, race, class, and any other borders can disappear. What is left? The ambiguity of our free existence as individuals bound to a body, a time and an earthly world? The construct of self we create? In Tom Cruise's case, a man, just like any other man, though perhaps a bit shorter? Pure connection? Energy? Souls? Of course this is where it can start to get weirdly esoteric and I am aware that this is the preface to an academic thesis, and at least one part of it needs to be a linear structured argument. I do believe, however, like many others before me, and particularly in relation to this thesis, Simone de Beauvoir and Hélène Cixous, that creative writing can take away the borders of difference between individuals.

Creative writing allows the reader, for a brief moment, to connect directly with another person's inner experience. In doing so, the writer of the book needs to tread carefully, as the intensity of first and second person narratives can mirror the power of the direct gaze, and if used without real skill, risk alienating the reader, or, arguably worse, just being plain indulgent. The Book of Ambiguity, however, challenges the traditional third person narrative by crossing the threshold of constructed character. Metaphorically, I see these books as holding eye contact that little bit too long, or playing with eye contact in ways the reader is not used to, in order to provoke a sense of fusion between reader, writer and character. I see these as books that question the construct of the book itself: unstable books that challenge the reader, like the book Bastian curls up with in the 1984 film, *The Neverending Story*. The beautiful, leather bound book confronts Bastian to the point he has to throw it down for fear it is speaking directly to him. The artifice of book, reader, character and writer are thus exposed. It becomes Bastian's responsibility to save the world within the book. Bastian is the central character, the reader and the writer. This dissolution of the third person can be terrifying, for, like Bastian, the reader

relies on its construction, in both fiction and real life, to distance us from the other, and to create an illusion of individual freedom. Literature can expose this freedom to be a construct, and as a freedom that is dependent on another person's lack of freedom. It is creative writing's ability to humanise another perspective that has led me to write the creative component of this DCA thesis, *Lunation*.

Lunation was written out of a sense of outrage at the government's silencing of any real discussion of Australia's treatment of refugees, in particular around the issue of children in detention. Whilst working as Artistic Director for Mainstreet Theatre Company in Mount Gambier, I was subject to endless phone calls from the Department of Immigration (DIMMIA), to remove a scene from a play that simply had a young child in a detention centre dreaming of a life outside. The company I worked for was threatened with cessation of its funding if the play mentioned children in detention at all. This was is 2002, and the Board of the company made the decision, over my head, to cut the scene, rather than risk losing their triennial Australia Council funding. The Australian government were terrified of the power of a scene depicting a child dreaming of freedom. Why? I believe because it held eye contact too long. It forced the reader/viewer to dissolve the borders between 'us' and 'them'. The audience was forced to inhabit that ambiguous space of connection between people, to interact directly in a borderless story, where character and audience merged.

This censorship in Australia at the time was widespread. Paul Toohey, in his Quarterly Essay 'That Sinking Feeling', writes about the steady increase of control over what the media could report on this same issue, revealing that the government asked for any journalist 'who visited an asylum detention centre to submit photos and their final story to the immigration department for approval' (2014, p. 34). In 2005, I took up the role of Artistic Director of Playworks in Sydney, at that time one of the two national script development organisations in the country, and I started to see the extent of the censorship around the issue of refugees within the government funded arts organisations. I wrote a report outlining the censorship and was forced by the Chair of the Board of Playworks to remove it from the website, as she believed it could be harmful to the company's fragile Australia Council funding. Again I was silenced, this time by the very organisation that was supposed to represent diverse voices in Australian theatre. The paralysis I felt over this national censorship, led to the need to write this thesis.

As I do not reference *Lunation* within this thesis directly, I believe it important to lay out within this Preface, as I have done, the real life background to the fictional world I have created. I am not Bella, the protagonist in *Lunation*. She is a fictional character, and the events too are fictitious; however, my own experiences inform her actions and the world of the book. Through Bella, and the other characters in the book, I have many things I want to say to the reader. This is why I wanted to do a doctorate in creative writing - I had *things* to say. *Things,* as Cixous calls, 'these residues of nocturnal earthquakes and convulsions. Living speaking frightening things. Untitled lava flow, spread by cracks in the soul' (2002, p. 403). *Things* that in other roles in my working life had been silenced, by a government very aware of the power of creative writing to provoke social change.

LUNATION

A novel in 72 frames

for those we lock up

A lunation is the mean time for one lunar phase cycle.

It is on average 29.530589 days.

The brain and eyes are equal partners in vision. A human eye can process 10-12 separate images per second, perceiving them individually. Persistence of vision creates an illusion of continuity, allowing a sequence of still images to give the impression of motion. Cinema relies on this persistence to give the viewer a sense of action. As the film rolls through a projector frame by frame the viewer creates a moving story from individual information. Generally 24 separate frames per second (fps) are needed to create non-jerky movement; however, to not see the film rolling, the picture needs to be made black while the film rolls on. But 24 black moments are too visible, so the eyes see smooth motion - but also flicker. To avoid the flicker many modern film projectors use three-blade shutters to show each frame three times and make the screen black three times per frame. This makes the black moments shorter and more frequent. The reasons for this are afterimages.

Bright light creates an afterimage in the eye. This after-light makes it possible to see what was there seconds ago. The brightness of the cinema canvas produces such afterimages, and eats the blackness, thus making the movie flicker-free. Some pathological conditions such as Palinopsia, amplify the number and intensity of afterimages, and can mean objects that are not moving present as if in motion.

In the cinema you generally see 72 fps, where three consecutive frames are the same. However, single frames can be renegades and pass subliminal messages to the brain through the visual system, even though the stimuli are below the threshold of perception. The human visual system depends on psychological and biological cues, and can perform tasks that are impossible for computers to recreate. What we see and what we perceive are very different things, and individual to each human visual system.

Lunation *presents 72 frames, or structural systems, and asks you, the reader, to build them into a continuous narrative. Some of these frames are deliberately blank allowing you to interpret the void they represent – some may be renegades.*

Lunation *may or may not be fiction. The stories we are told and the stories we create are dependent on the frames of information we are given and are as much to do with what is outside the frame as what is within. Story is always story.*

CONTENTS

I

Bella

.

And yet, I did say to myself, when I was mad, was I myself or not myself?

When does one person become another?

Siri Hustvedt

The Summer Without Men

[1]

Beyond that which I am is a glass box,

a soft frame through which a black triangular fish stares at me. Within this rectangular prism lie the hands of a man fingering an old newspaper clipping. Behind him a beautiful lady floats in the water. Her black hair singing to the ghosts of the old shipwreck her clothes are caught in. I can read bubbles. I see ghost upon ghost of women in the green light at the edge of the mirrored back of the tank, their fingerprints on the walls.

Could I jump into that fish tank?

The thought comes, without feeling, without logic.

Would you notice?

The foyer is expensive, not at all as I had imagined a psychiatric hospital, more like a boutique hotel. A glamorous anorexic sits coltishly beside me. She has been here before. Her father too knows the drill. They flirt and giggle as if in on a private joke in the principal's office. I would hate them if I felt anything, but by this stage in my void they are just noise. I thought of all the ghosts of confinement I had read about, as I handed over my credit card to cover my stay. Out of mind, out of sight. Out of sight can send you very much out of mind.

Am I inside the fish tank?

No. I am in the pool of a flashy Sydney artist's cousin. All freckles, skinny 11-year-old legs, peeling sun burnt shoulders, and dry lemon juiced hair. Watching myself. Watching herself.

Above self. Out of body. Floating above blue chlorine and strangers. First sip of wine, first immaculate conception, first fictional moment. A soaking baptism of water.

'Take me somewhere where I can't hurt myself.'

I had managed to get these words out just in time, as if I had breached the water that called me into its blackness with seal tales, toy treasure chests and song.

The fish is still staring at me with his black skin, different words tumbling out of his gulping mouth. Locked up like Luna, my moon girl dreamer. The fish understands my need for a small world, where all there is to do is wait to be fed. Then I see a new man reflected through the glass of the tank. I watch as this man takes notes. His words leave their ink on my skin and within the grooves of his hands. This man wears a tie. He wears a tie for no reason except that once he had to. Like the fish, my veins shine through my skin.

So this moment is without structure. It sits in time and I float with it. Like Bella Chagall I hover in love on a sea of coffee. I have never looked so good, however, I am starving, and my brain chemistry has started to malfunction.

[2]

Come to me, come to me fairy sprite!
Free this soul from harm tonight.

Invisible hands all over my flesh. A man is looking on outside the stained frame I inhabit. According to old lore he can't come in.

He that enters a fairy ring,
where a woman has sought haven.
Will be forced to his head forever cling,
and dance till he is ravin'.

'So what is your story?'

The man who is sitting on the end of my bed in a tiny room speaks to me. I must have moved here somehow from the foyer. The anorexic girl and her father have gone. I am in a new scene. New location.

'Where am I?' I ask.

'This is your room in ICU'. The man explains without giving anything away.

I see. I begin. I am a journalist after all, I can spin a tale, add a punch line, package it up for a deadline. Dead line. So I tell this stranger at the end of my bed (or at the end of eternity) my story. Funny how quickly transference starts.

I talk about my years in Politics for the Sydney Herald, then my move to Lifestyle, after writing stories that were seen as too partisan for the Political Editor. I had not taken the move well. I liked being in the hotbed of politics, knowing the game plan, the speed of it all. I knew the players. There had been drugs, sex, late nights and small planes to outback towns for a few

hours with your team. Flying above commitments, broken relationships, body clocks and Sydneysiders' mortgage conversations. You could drink every night of the week, type up your story, make the right calls to get the quotes you needed, and then finesse, finesse before falling into a numb, white wine slumber.

'Even inanimate objects have eyes, Bella.'

Who just spoke?

Not the doctor: he is still taking notes.

I feel soft, cold hands on my neck, slowly caressing my emaciated form. I turn and find the palest young woman I have ever seen smiling into my eyes, while straddling her long, sporty legs around my hips.

'Can I draw you?' She says, seducing me with every part of her she can.

I stare at this shape wrapping itself around me, coiling white limbs in some structural modern dance pose. From deep in her embrace I catch the sight of a dark haired little girl turn her eyes away from me and run out of the room.

'Luna?'

I shout, shaking the woman off me.

'Luna!'

There is no sight of her, just the floating Australian flag against grey loneliness outside my window. The strange woman in my bed has disappeared too.

'Isabella, what is going around in your head, what thoughts?'

The man at the end of my bed is talking to me again, but I am busy. Searching for love, hunting for a man inside a rectangle, writing my profile, creating my face, breaking the whitewash, crashing the Buddhism, chanting the therapy, smashing the prose.

Reader, you are not in the self-help section. I have more questions than answers. I am the anti-muse. Artists run from me in case I devour them, consume their creeds and mountainous creations. I sit atop history. Straddle her. While our protagonist meets random men she picks up from the computer in her spare time.

'Are you hearing voices, Bella?'

The man I now presume to be my doctor is asking again.

'No, I am not *hearing* voices. These are real people.'

I tell him firmly as 'Bella in the Psychiatric Hospital'.

I am back in this room again, I note, a strange man at the end of my bed. He continues talking to me but I cannot hear the words anymore, I am entranced by a girl running past the window.

[3]

I cannot hear his words anymore, as I *am* the girl running past the window, merely glancing in at the tinted dark world on the other side. Not knowing 'Bella in the Psychiatric Hospital' can see me during her first meeting with her psychiatrist.

I run on as 'Bella the Girl', past non-descript buildings with mirrored walls, endless sushi bars, banks, beauty salons and bargain shops. I feel tainted, as cheap as the trinkets in those shops, as disposable. Each encounter with a new stranger stains my soul more. Fat, white and obsolete in this new Asian paradise. If this girl doesn't work out, go online, buy a new one, a younger, shinier one and throw that old one out. I become terrified that I will be left with the dregs in this new world – the murderers, the liars, the broken.

Running to escape the overwhelming noise and colour of the new world, I make the train just before the door closes. I sit down inside a warm carriage. For a moment I feel safe, I reach into my bag for a novel, but as I turn I see a woman with eyes like solar eclipses seated beside me. This woman has a message.

'You will have a little girl. I see her dark eyes. They will try to lock the moon from her.'

I can't speak.

'Bella in the Psychiatric Hospital' watches this version of herself through the frame of her memory. She replays the facts in third person, a distancing tool that journalism has prepared her for.

This woman knows she is pregnant. How? She hasn't told anyone. She suddenly feels sick. She can't keep this baby, not now, not with all that has happened. She launches herself from her seat and moves outside to get air. Standing in the place between two carriages, the hot air of the

afternoon rushing through her. Unable to move backwards or forwards, 'Bella the Girl' stands one leg on each carriage, like a seesaw.

Woman + Abortion =

Woman + Woman =

Woman - Man =

Woman + Man =

Woman + (Man + Woman) =

Woman + Baby =

Woman + Occupation – Baby =

Woman + Baby – Occupation =

Woman + Passion =

Woman – Passion =

Woman ÷ Passions =

To be beautiful or faithful? Translations cannot be trusted. The space in-between the meaning of titles. The Between. The cold, windy space between two carriages. Raw space before the creation of names, or flags. The challenge of the untranslatable. The provocation of Joan of Arc's voices - voices that will not be translated into conventional narrative. The void. Before the origin of anything. *Sense of Snow. Feeling for Snow*. Just by way of simple equations, no pure mathematics here. It is women that meet in this in-between space. The unfaithful beauties. The real meaning of translation. The shadow of words. This is where I am now.

'I, Isabella Luce, repeat after me', a nurse called Anna is saying, 'am in a psychiatric hospital.'

'I would have liked to write a piece on the translations of book titles.'

I am thinking, or am I telling this tough old nurse?

‘Stop thinking you can make plans for tomorrow.’ Anna orders back.

So I must be telling her I think?

But I really would have liked to go to Greenland, to cover that story for the paper about tipping points. Be like Miss Smilla, make perfect cold white snow poetry, while hunting a killer. But how can I write about snow domes from the outside? I need to be *inside* the story, hunting the killer. And meanwhile the sea levels rise, the ice shields collapse, and I am caught up in middle class literary fantasies while having a breakdown. Why does everything I experience feel like it is on mute? Why can’t I get inside that snow dome and *feel* something? Why do I either feel numb, or the flip side of numbness - stabbing ice-cold pain?

I want to explain to Anna what I mean by the problem of translation, the Chinese Whisper of error that drives us along from birth, from the very names we are given. The meanings and titles we give ourselves. I remember a passage from *Miss Smilla’s Feeling for Snow* about the origin of names to illustrate my point. A good journalist always finds a source to back up their main points.

‘In the novel…. ’ I begin to tell nurse Anna:

‘ … Smilla's Greenlandic mother had heard the name Millaaraq in West Greenland. The name reminded Smilla's Danish father of the Danish word mild, and because his daughter had smiled to him they changed the name to Smillaaraq. The short form of that is Smilla. But you see the original Greenlandic meaning of the name was apparently related to the word millalaarpoq which means *the humming of an insect*.’

I continue on to Anna, who seems totally uninterested in this fact, or the origins of names in general.

‘Think about where you are and repeat after me,’ she continues.

Grounding me in the geographical moment.

‘I am in a psychiatric hospital.’

‘I am in a psychiatric hospital.’

Art is in the repetition.

[4]

All the heat and fear has purged itself,

poems the blonde after ECT.

I know that they don't know. Yet they say they know, for it is not conceivable that they *cannot* know. If they don't know, they will conquer it, zap it, drug it, entrap it, isolate it, study it and then write about it. Throwing words, statistics and case studies at you. Sometimes you need certainty. Sometimes you need them not to know. Sometimes you watch a snail sleeping on a green leaf in the sun. Sometimes you squash it between bare toes on a rainy night.

So down,

down,

down a hole to the black condition under the creator. To the skin under my nails. I sit in front of a wide screen television with a hot chocolate and medication in my hand. My fish in the foyer downstairs swims serenely. Pain balm. Water, bubbles, repetition. A simple enclosed world; where your food is served at the same time each day. Medicine at the first hint of anxiety.

upping the dosage till

Upping and decisions about the outside world

fade away.

An artificial bubbling harmony I sign myself up for. So this means I meet myself through the haunted eyes of an intake photo. It is through these eyes I meet other women. See them one after another in the smoky green edges. But I digress. There must be plot, there must be conflict and there must be research. Abstraction and form. A theoretical stance. There must be

references. There must be murder, lust, beauty and climax. Take your medicine cold and straight. Let nurse Anna lead you back to your bed to see your doctor. This is a tour of duty. You are safe here. You can close your eyes. You can dream your way out of this place.

'Bella, you do know where you are?'

Anna the nurse with heavily made up blue eyes and an accent I can't place is patient with me.

'I am in a psychiatric hospital.'

We say it together. It is a fact that I do not deny. I am a journalist. I seek facts.

'Now Bella, you said to me last time that you are not hearing voices, these are real people. Who is following you, messaging you?'

It is my doctor again.

'The Australian Government.'

'I see.'

'No, look, I know how that sounds – '

I didn't believe it either when I started getting phone calls about the stories I was writing, emails and letters to the editor, refuting my facts, slandering my ethics. I just thought it was some nutcase stalker. Maybe I am crazy?

'So why do you think the government would do this?'

The psychiatrist is sticking with me, or just playing along. Who knows?

‘They started saying that I was sleeping with people from the detention centre where I was researching a story. That I was pregnant to one of them.’

‘And were you?’

‘No!’

What is happening to me? I feel nothing, Am I disassociating?

‘Am I having a nervous breakdown or what?’ I demand of him.

‘Well I’m not sure we know what a nervous breakdown actually is.’

The psychiatrist is explaining, in what seemed like slow motion.

‘There are many ideas about it; personally I don’t think they exist. Just literary terminology, sells books.’

I seem to be able to have ten conversations and flashbacks to his one sentence. In this abstracted time I am ‘Bella the Writer’ being asked a question on a literary panel. I feel like Achilles, all dressed up for battle. My men are chanting my name but they are separated from me by the colour of my armor. Like the yolk without its layer of white flesh. I answer the question with yellow blood.

‘I wrote that book when I was being stalked by a poet,’

‘Bella the Writer’ begins.

I have told this story before, countless times, countless panels, countless lovers. It has become the story of creation. My creation story. Born as it was through retaliation in the only way I knew how – words.

‘ - everywhere I turned I found his words – newspapers, bottles washed up on the beach, birdsongs, nests and electricity itself. In the blackouts. I was cornered and floored by his poems.’

Time abstracts again. I have stopped talking. Thinking my fifteen minutes is up on this literary panel. There were others on my table with their stories to tell. Their fame to claim. Then I saw him, clearly. Sitting smiling at me from the back row. Medicated intensity. So he was curious? Typical, typical male poet. I feel no fear. Anything he could have taken from me he already has. The slow pace of nature calls. Sanitarium. Repose. Asylum. How many words for respite?

‘Isabella, can you read us something you have been working on?’

The male poet is persistent, challenging me to break from the back of the room with his legs spread. How dare he call me Isabella! I am suddenly terrified. Is he a plant? Have the government spoken to him? He would, or course, do anything for money. Male poets are always, always broke.

Has my doctor finished his sentence yet?

I try to go back to ICU, but the translucent blonde woman is back in my bed.

I am stuck. Stuck on a literary panel where they expect me to read in front of this monster. Hell really *is* murky! How do I make sure my words are being interpreted accurately? Are we being recorded?

Maybe.

I have started to take out all punctuation, I am writing in code. Do they really want to hear me, ‘Bella the Writer’, read? Or do they want to see my flesh burn? Can they smell how close to

breakdown I am? Is that why I am suddenly popular? They want to see me in the flesh, before I burn at the stake?

The silence is too much. I will have to read.

'Well, there is something I wrote about innocence and our relationship to China, '

I stumble as the words on my page dance in auras of light. I continue,

'….though due to the current censorship crisis in this country I have disguised the key players in a human parable, that of a mother, effectively killing off her child. I think of our leaders in this country and the way they are selling the ground from under us.'

My writer persona puts on her glasses and reads in her husky, lispy monotone,

> *so when she swaddles her in her favourite blanket & puts her to the breast for a final feed she sings softly to her newborn watching china's bright supremacy out the windows through the rain she kisses each eyelid & every moment of her face before gently tucking this much loved package into her little cot on a blue vinyl seat under the fluorescent lights of the guard's carriage and runs through the shutting doors to the wet platform leaving her baby girl on the train.*

The eyes of my stalker, rivals, fellow literary panellists, and lovers fade, and I see the fluorescent glow of the ICU nurses' station. I am walking to the sounds of my thoughts. I am running from the baby I have left on the train. NO, NO. I was safe. It was a dream, a piece of ficto-journalism I had written because we were not supposed to talk openly about the mining deals we had with China. I had not left my baby on the train. Do I still have my ….?

No.

There is no baby. Bella. There is no baby. Another refrain to memorise.

I am pacing to the sounds of the feel-good happy movies they play twenty-four hours a day in the psychiatric ward. I hear a little girl laughing so I follow the sound, thinking it might be Luna. Most of the other patients seem half asleep, apart from a tiny black-haired young woman who is laughing. Not Luna after all. A Japanese doll, sitting cross-legged in the corner, reading a book. She looks up for a moment, looks right through me, taking in my shape from all angles before going back to her book, bored. I have been summarised and dismissed.

I keep walking.

I can tell the nurses are concerned about my lack of response to the sedatives. They are whispering, observing and note-taking. I am walking the city. I could walk the earth. I could walk this room for the rest of my life. My body is heavy and sweating, until finally, like a tossing fish at last smashed out of its misery with a rock, I became an imprint on a white sheet.

Letters on a blank page.

The window frames the last image I see, before tiny black dots merge together into a Yayoi Kusama painting. Into searing barbed wire coiling itself around my heart, my lungs. I can't breathe fuck, I can't. I am burning from the inside. I can't,

can't,

can't

breathe, can't……

I wake. Wet and dripping. A torch in my face. A new stranger's voice, telling me it is ok. She hands me more tablets. Red, pink, white, red, pink, white. Writing the numbers and dosages on her chart. I am just another broken lover on a clipboard to her in the end.

‘What time is it?’ I whisper.

‘11:10pm.’ The stranger says with the facts at her fingertips.

God, I had only slept for forty-five minutes. This night, this night. How long can one night be?

[5]

'Hold me. Hold me.'

I whisper in my head. Picturing Luna's black bob and brown skin wound around and around me, her father looking on. There was always something wrong with that picture. Where was Luna's mother?

'Take this book?'

I had encouraged her. I always gave people I loved books. It was a compulsion.

'I don't know how to read.'

'Just look at the pictures till I come back, they are very powerful. Images can tell us many, many stories.'

I look into her dark black eyes and feel I am drowning. I imagine her mother staring into those wide eyes on the way over to Australia, on a boat falling apart in rough seas. I try to imagine what her mother would have said to reassure her daughter. Would she have prayed with her, and would that be something I should do, if ever I was lucky enough to….

No. It was too early to say it.

Instead I want to tell her she is beautiful, and that I *saw* her. I really saw her in a way I had not seen anyone for years, apart from maybe her father.

'I wish I could give you a camera to start taking photos. I wish I could take a photo of you to show you how beautiful you are.'

'No cameras', she shrugged, simply.

As I left the detention centre my bones sang to the guard through the x-ray scanner,

There is more to her than bones,
than sticks and stones.
She wants to make them heard,
wants to give them words.

Warm, professional hands move me back towards my room.

'Bella I have re-made your bed, got you some fresh sheets. Were you too hot?'

This nurse says to me, noting the sweat-ridden sheets on the floor.

'No, I was freezing.' I whisper to the wall, to the pillow, to the 10pm-8am-shift worker who I will never see again, though she shares the darkest point of my life with me.

She shuts the door.

How did I end up here? Think Bella, think back. I demand of myself.

Who was following you? Think in terms of facts, the story.

You had met up with him on a dating site, but he knew too much about you already. He had warned you to stay away from Luna. Not to write about their situation. He had said that we were no longer free to speak about divisive issues in the public media. He had said this while holding your hips firmly and fucking you. Then holding your breasts, then your neck. You scream,

yes I said yes I will yes

He thought he had silenced you through his poetry and sex, but he didn't get the allusion to Molly Bloom. You lost respect for him there and then. You looked at him with challenging eyes. Eyes that said,

'What kind of a poor excuse for a writer are you?'

You thought he was going to kill you then. He flirted with it didn't he? Or did you?

FUCK! HOW CAN I STOP MY FUCKING HEAD?

I yell through all the storylines, to whatever nurse is on duty.

Taking a deep breath I force myself to remember something from that night

> *The sun shines for you*.

He had whispered afterwards. So he did get the *Ulysses* reference.

And again this notion of contentment. In the now. Mindful, mind full.

'Bella -'

I whisper to myself, trying to stop myself from splintering into second person, into past tense.

'- try to stay in this room. There is the bed, your books, your suitcase, your cupboard, and your timetable. Remember where you are. There is only this moment.'

In crisis meditation laughs at you and it is too late. You are outside yourself again, like you were when you heard the news about the fire and your parents. Obsessively replaying the worst times of your life in vivid detail, the anti-meditation soundtrack of your head mocking you.

You had blocked out this encounter with literature, as usual. Trying to appreciate the small details, the portholes that art provided. You thought you had escaped but then they started emailing you at work, threatening to send copies of emails you had written to men with your fantasies. They said they had copies of your every thought, your diaries, your blogs, your notes of whimsy and pain, the chat sessions you had for the last five years, the legal threats, your tax evasions from the nineties, your drug history, your medical records, your abortion. Think Bella, could they really have access to all this? How did they know you had been pregnant? Did they know whose baby it was?

Breathe. Breathe.

'Why do you look so white Bella?'

Luna was asking me, her eyes driving the truth out of me. Her lips were pink, and she held them between her teeth in concern. I want to tell her my secret. She was safe surely? No one would come asking for information from her? However in forming the words I was useless. I kept thinking in lines of verse, in curses and spells. In foam. She nods as if she knows what I mean, and maybe she does. I watch a fire-haired lady move towards us from the dayroom, her face desperate and pale.

> *Hark, do you hear the sea?*

This woman, who looks like Janet Frame, demands of me. She had come to share nonsense. Luna keeps her eyes fixed on me as I try to shake this madwoman off, but I can feel myself running from her, and all the other madwomen around me. I want to get out of there, I don't want to see or hear the truth anymore. I don't want their madness to run onto me. I am beginning to lose perspective on the story. A story line was always something that grounded me, but now the fictional characters were blurring into my reality.

I run back to my life as 'Bella the Journalist' where I am too busy caught up in the newspaper world to give it much thought. As 'Bella the Journalist' I ignore the words and threats. Ignore the dead birds out the front of the door, the strange blackouts that only affect *your* apartment, the poetry serialised in the alternative paper that describes every scar on *your* body. Just read more, drink more and talk to more late night strangers online.

'I am fine. I am fine,' you chant. Blocking the image of Luna out. Seeking decreation through a created self. Trying to keep everyone in their carefully constructed frames.

'You ignored Luna when she needed you most!' Your head screams at you.

STOP. Challenge that thought.

You had given her a book after all. She was learning to read. Books can be your friends, can't they? Challenge the, challenge the, the, the….

'Luna!'

You grab at a book, breathe in its pages, its words. Find the theory. Find the essence, the symbol, the moment where you can jump out of real time and notice small details. Notice the calm you feel in bookshops. Celebrate it, like Nabokov celebrates the moist reflection of a street lamp. The same street lamp you visualise as the children came out of the wardrobe entering Narnia for the first time. I meet my Minotaur in the snow at night, under a street lamp, in a snow dome of transfictive memory. We kiss. I swear that is all. And it is snowing. Snowing Chagall lovers, goats and fiddlers. And the night nurse gives you more medication and turns on a meditation tape for you to try to listen to in the dark.

Press Play.

[6]

I wake. For a second I feel like me, me before I started this whole damn investigation of detention centres. When I was happily writing my stories, oblivious to Luna or her father. Drinking after filing, with whoever had knocked off. Then it hits me where I am again, and I run gasping to the nurses' station for someone who is in the real world. The ghosts of my dreams keep willing me back to my little bed. I read too much, I can't even tell anymore what is dream, what is real or what is in a book. I don't trust words anymore. Just what I can hold.

I left, without another word, without a glance to the strong, quiet man I loved. Could I call him mine? His hands and lips felt like they were always over my body. The time for fantasy and reality has long since blended. I am in this romance even without the lover. I am a character in a book, and books are my blood. I made a promise in blood to Luna but I didn't keep it. I never came back.

'Isabella, you are up again?'

It is Anna, my favourite nurse who calls me Isabella like my mother used to, and I like it. She looks at me kindly and starts, with prodding, to talk about her marriage break-up. How she felt she would not be able to go on when her husband left her for a younger woman. How she took sleeping tablets, anti-depressants, anything she could to get through it. I ask her questions, I am good at interviewing, I want the story. Even there, close to death, I could hunt the heart out of a story. There was life after wanting to die. There was not-wanting-to-die after wanting-to-die.

'Can you try to sleep again Isabella? It is still early, not even midnight. Would you like a sleeping tablet?'

'Anything. Anything.' I beg.

‘You will get through this.’

Why is it a rope of clichés is what I need most? I had spent a lifetime avoiding them and now they were keeping me afloat. I didn’t want to hear anything original or new, because even the cliché was slippery to me in this state.

‘Words are so fucking unfaithful!’ I cry into my pillow.

I reach for them anyway. The novel a shape I grab like a raft, to stop me sinking. I am reading the same line from my Jeanette Winterson book again and again, waiting for the words to form a sentence, for sentences to form meaning in my chemically- adjusted brain. Waiting and praying for some miraculous thing like sleep.

Is happiness always a compromise?

Winterson’s protagonist Louise asks.

Is this sleep, or am I reading a book? Is every thought written on my body? I don’t even know anymore. And who is Louise? Winterson’s real life lover or Julian Barnes’ late wife? Both? Are writers always after literary muses to devour? Once devoured, then what? Is the muse real or fictional? In-between? The character of Louise, who may, or may not be real, is wet and sated after a weekend with her married lover. I seem to be able to understand the meaning of the words in my sleep only. The words form a sentence now and I can read deeper into the meaning. A starfish coming out of her cunt. The sea, the sea. In me. The sea and me. Take me to the sea. To be. Me.

[7]

A little brown bird is curled up asleep outside my window ledge. Is it a swallow? What is a swallow doing on its own in the cold I wonder? I can't tell if it is asleep or dead, the wind is ruffling its brown feathers giving the illusion of life. It reminds me of Swallow in *The Happy Prince*. I am up high. I have no idea how high up. I don't remember coming up here, and I have no intention of going back down again. I watch the bird from the dim light of the nurses' station, shining into my little room. It gives me something. Not peace. I don't remember what peace is. It gives me an image of something called life.

[8]

I sit with Luna, stroking the exposed skin between her sock and jeans. I curve my fingers under her white sock, wanting to be closer to her, to get inside her head.

I wait.

'Why did Prince not make Swallow to fly to where it be warmer, to be with his friends Bella?'

She is talking about Oscar Wilde's *The Happy Prince*.

'He tried but the swallow would not leave him.' I answer.

'So better to stay and die with someone you love than leave them?'

'I think Swallow loved the Prince so much that he could not leave him alone.'

'I wanted to go with Mamma, but she made me to stay on the boat. She didn't love me?'

'She loved you.'

'So why the Prince not make Swallow to fly to Egypt? Not loved him?'

'In the end I don't think one could live without the other. Swallow could not bare to think of the Prince suffering, so he hid the fact that he was dying.'

I am reasoning in dangerous waters.

I do not tell Luna that I feel as cold as that dying swallow did. I have been pushing myself too hard with work and forgetting to eat again. I am able to see without eyes. I do not tell Luna that storylines can be parables and that *The Happy Prince* is *creative* writing. I do not tell her to question the printed word, even the printed words I had given her. I do not tell this wide-eyed

girl that there is as much danger in fiction as there is in fact, and that in the end no one can tell where one bleeds into the other. So much I did not tell her.

Luna stays curled in a ball around the book.

'I have to get going now Luna. I will bring you another book next Tuesday.'

She looks at me with her black eyes and challenges me,

'They stay together. Even when they tried to throw Swallow on the rubbish and melt the Prince heart of lead metal what happened?'

'They couldn't separate them.'

I say, playing right into her hands, wishing I had never given her the book.

'The book is symbolic Luna.'

I fail to elaborate what symbolic means. I am desperate to leave, I can't stop moving in my state of severe agitation, all that matters is *me*. I am always the centre of my own fucking narrative. I sit with her for a little while longer saying very little. This seven year old girl who has taught herself another language while she waits to be held by a father who has started starving himself, in the same country, but a world away.

We are all cold. We are all hungry.

I jump in my car and drive back to the newspaper that preferred I didn't have eyes or a mouth. A newspaper that makes sure your heart is leaden before they offer you a contract. I was still free and I could still write. I ignore the man who looks vaguely familiar sitting in the main office. Is he familiar because he works at the paper? Is he someone from a dating site? Both?

I ignore the look on his face when I walk into the room and catch him with his pants down with a porn site blinking on screen. Images for pleasure, words for pleasure. Images for pain, words for pain. The tortured face of arousal. The Rapture. He is old news and not in this story, or so I tell myself, as I begin typing up another piece on - The State of The Immigration Department's Detention Centres. Until I feel a knife at my throat.

Metaphorical or real? Living on the edge of a storyline was starting to take its toll. 'Bella the Journalist' would call in sick tomorrow she decided. First time for everything.

[9]

[10]

So imagine this is a book about a young novelist learning to write a novel? All of this is research; you are undercover. Only problem is, this young novelist can't write a novel. This journalist can't finish a sentence, she has been stripped of her job and her government has shut down her newspaper. Her freedom of speech laughs at her through weather reports, the one thing they can't lie about. All she can do is get distracted by the moments that life throws up to her. She is in love with character, but lost at sea. Remembering one of the first novels to change her life, Somerset Maugham's *Of Human Bondage*. What was it that affected her so much in this book? She was sixteen, a virgin, in love with her English teacher, reading Donne's poetry and dreaming of Paris. She was ripe for words to break her heart, her heart that had not yet turned to lead.

So is this novel you are reading completely real, or completely *un*real? Is the young novelist 'Bella the Writer', or is she a construct of various authorial selves? Or am I, the author, neither young nor a novelist? And what about you, the reader? What do you want from reading this book you have dipped into? What was the first novel that changed your life? Do you believe stories can take you out of yourself? Are they Neverending Stories? It is a stormy night, we could say a *dark* and stormy night, if we wanted to add an adjective here or there, give or take, attach the stormy night to its place in particularity. You, the reader, are curled into bed with me, the writer. This: the situation. That: the moment of touch. Something passes between us that can't be undone. We latch together, like adjectives, for a precise moment in the world. The frame leaps out at our visual system, stopping the relentless motion for a micro-second, before blackness eats it up.

Let's go back a step again. To our right is a young woman, first day in hospital, let's call her Fanny, in honour of Maugham who protests:

This is a novel, not an autobiography, though much in it is autobiographical, more is pure invention.

Poor real or invented Fanny Price did kill herself. Alone, poverty stricken in Paris. Starving. An artistic failure. She hung herself by a nail in the ceiling.

Just a footnote, just an Icarus.

In a detention centre in Australia a man sews his lips together.

[11]

'Aghhhhhh…'

I wake to find myself screaming through the thick deep waveless sea of medication and drugs they have given me to stop from feeling,

'No, please. I killed her, I gave her that book to read, and I taught her to read, asked her to dream. Luna, don't read it! Don't read anything. Just wait, wait please, we will wake up, this must be a dream, we must be sleeping.'

'Bella, Bella.'

I hear my name through the storyline. The voice is caring, but harsh, I remember a name, Anna, and I remember I can trust her.

'You need to stick with where we are now. In this moment, in ICU.'

Anna is feeding me the clichés I need while taking my pulse and my blood pressure.

'You are just avoiding the pain if you do not see where you are now. You are strong, you can get through this, but you have to face what has happened, not think you can reverse things. None of us are God, and horrific things happen to everyone. I have seen it believe me. Now let me change these sheets and your shirt. You are sweating a lot, that is normal when you first start taking the meds.'

But the pale woman is whispering to me from inside my bed again, telling me that her name is Lucia. Telling me a story about how she found a man's hands, stumbling through the folds of wool in her dress towards her breasts. About how, having cut her breasts off long ago in a fit of rage, she awaited his revulsion once he discovered this, this lack. Instead, she tells me, his

hands, when they got to the space where her breasts should have been, spread their rough coldness over the scar tissue. He sighed with pleasure, and with sympathy at the same time She was confused, she asks me: 'Was this love?'

Can she not see I am almost dead myself? That I have never understood love, and was the last person she should ask. I am a journalist, I gasp.

'Just give me facts.'

She refuses and whispers the dangerous tongue of poetry to me.

> *Did you miss me?*
> *Come and kiss me,*
> *Never mind my bruises,*
> *Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices.*

Lucia nestles further into me asking and wanting impossible answers, while reciting Christina Rossetti. I am hugging her and singing softly, or am I hugging Anna and Anna singing softly to me?

'You are in the best place now, you are lucky'.

'But Anna, my hands are not clean.' I cry, as I try to black out the case note I had read on Luna Solnick's last days, just before I had left the real world. I will not accept those words. I will never accept those words. I will keep moving.

Anna soothed me to sleep. All the ghosts of confinement slept with me.

[12]

I start shedding my journalist skin in hospital and it feels terrifyingly good. I watch it scrape off me in the shower. It's continuous voyeurism unable to not report on its own deconstruction. The tablets the nurses are feeding me give an imitation of something called sleep. The images in my head approximate dreams in the shape of poems.

In the shape of mad, bad, sad women.

Wanting deep prose sleep I only get short, disturbing poetry in my dreams, as I think about Vivien Leigh and ECT.

[13]

2009. Melbourne heat wave.

A mum and a dad at hand-over,

scared children in the back of the car.

The Time Ball Tower, Williamstown.

He grabs her temples screaming,

You and your mad, mad eyes.

She looks into his eyes and feels unsure

as to who is mad, or to turn the word

the other way: who is dammed?

The ghost of a girl beneath the Westgate Bridge knows the truth.

[14]

Something was hitting home. 'Bella the Journalist' has written this story before. What is happening? Am I dreaming? Am I writing a story? Do I need to meet a deadline? What date was the story due on that girl who had been thrown to her death?

It is so hot, is there a fire? Please, call 000.

I feel myself snap into character as 'Bella the Journalist'. I am safe as her. I know what to say. I watch myself above body; hear the dialogue come out of my mouth.

The scene plays out –

> 'Now tell me, who was the last one to see the girl move? Is that his photo?'
>
> 'Bella the Journalist' is saying.
>
> She stops breathing. She knew him.
>
> 'Is that the murderer?'
>
> She demands of her photographer, Samson.
>
> She couldn't file the story. Fuck.
>
> She replays the scene.
>
> She had met up with him out of guilt in the end.
>
> 'They tell me I am a bad man.'
>
> He had said as a way of introduction.

‘Who?’

She’d asked while watching him cooking raw meat in the restaurant he had chosen. He wanted to give her a lift to their date in his car but she’d insisted she meet him on neutral territory. Looking at him now she was relieved she had.

‘Friends of hers. She told them I’d raped her. Complete crap she was spinning.’ He muttered.

‘I see.’

She didn’t want this story, but he wanted her to have it. Since when were first dates confessionals?

‘I mean if I wanted to rape someone I would have raped a supermodel not my fucking ex-wife.’

She finished cooking her meat, nodding in agreement, while running through her head any information this maniac really knew about her. Her first name, mobile phone number, and suburb. Too much. But not enough.

‘Well I know I would like to see you again…’

He was saying while looking at her chest. She was aware of being a woman in a way that only men who could kill could make you aware of it. She felt no different to the meat he had cooked in front of her. The meat he had asked the waiter for a sharper knife to cut.

‘I tend to need to think over these things a bit….’

She stammered putting her coat on and buttoning it up to the neck.

'Are you cold?' He said with cold eyes.

'Yes.'

'You sure I can't give you a lift to the train station?'

'No. It is just up there. I'm fine.'

'But I could drive you to a closer station to where you are going?'

'No. I have a plan.'

'Oh no. A woman with a plan.'

He joked with dead eyes.

Yes, she thought, an escape plan.

She deleted her profile. She was going to be quiet now and observe. If there was no activity from her, no words published, she was safe.

She was momentarily deleted.

'She' was 'I' again.

- end of scene.

My memory was splintering as I sat in that tiny room with my fingers locked between my purple-coated toes. I watched these versions of myself merge into and out of the frames of each other.

I pick up a book. I disappear into a lightness of being. I disappear into character.

II

A Lightness of Being

A novel is a meditation on existence, seen through imaginary characters.

The form is unlimited freedom.

Milan Kundera

[15]

So we meet here, at this particular point, in between these words, this sentence.

This breath.

If you think you can follow your head, Reader, think again. For we are not in a logical, head driven narrative, I am asking you, as 'Bella the Writer', to step into *my* head and get under my skin. To dive into the formless ocean, so we can go somewhere that is not from A to B. I can't do that. I don't care about that anymore. I only want totality. Not the lead up or the point after. I only want climax. Isn't that what we all want?

Black Out.

If you are here, at this point, you never will be again. Not as we are now. We only have it like this, *now*. It is a moment, a fleeting image, not designed to be anything but what it is. The words may haunt you again, or they may not. The afterimages may be prolonged in your visual cortex, or not. The protagonist may get under your skin, or she may not. The book might mean something to you, or be one of those long forgotten experiences. There will be another total eclipse, but not at this time, in this place, with these weather conditions, ever again.

Each of us creates our own relationships with the characters in the books that haunt us. I don't dream of Kundera, but I do dream of Tereza. She has become a part of me, 'Bella the Writer', and I want to share her with you.

[16]

Tereza

Tereza's name is the Bulgarian, Czech, Romanian and Portuguese form of Teresa.
The name is derived from the Greek verb 'therizein', meaning, 'to harvest'.

Tereza is all fresh strawberry cheeks, thick thighs and tight skirts. A dark bob and naïve personality. Tereza falls in love with the wrong man. Or is he? This man is the doctor, Tomas. Tomas makes love with all his nurses, between patients. Tomas keeps an artist lover, Sabina. Sabina is Tereza's antithesis, all sex and fire and independence. Strong beauty and adventure versus homely, simple innocence. Tereza is a beautiful child who cries, and holds on too tight. She cannot play cool, cannot be false, and can do nothing but love Tomas. Tereza wants Tomas in a standard narrative way, which is, to have a family with him, to love him and be with him whenever she can. The simple beauty of that devotion is something she can't tell him, she only knows she cries if she thinks of not seeing him every day.

We watch Tereza through the lens of the book, or through the filter of Juliette Binoche playing Tereza in the film version of her. We can only resonate with her devotion to the purity of love if we are separate from her innocence. There will be a break up. There will be a death.

Tereza is a photographer. She is only comfortable behind the lens. Tereza is a voyeur of direct sexuality, yet she is a part of it. She can reach and touch you through the lens. And you too, Reader, are a voyeur, sitting safely behind the pages. You are almost with the characters. With them, but apart. The lens, like the book, is the third party, a delicate membrane, and there is always something 'ungettable' about the subject through the lens, or the page. We can see texture and movement but there is always something in-between, untranslatable, leaving you wanting but also allowing you to be other than you are.

If we put a thin lens between you, Reader, and me, Writer, we can take a character into us,

into our experience, without tainting it. We see them and experience them like we experience our dreams.

Behind the camera Tereza is able to imagine herself as invisible. Just as a reader is invisible to the characters they inhabit through the pages. Or are they? Are we ever invisible?

You, Reader, are not invisible to me. I will not give you that safety net. If I am putting my words together for you, I have imagined you. I have longed for you to hold me, to discuss ideas with me, to read these words on my body. I will not make you the silent mass that the newspaper editor chooses to view you as, the consumer without a voice or the ability to filter facts from fiction. I can't write that shit anymore. I expect more of you. I know you, because I have been you many times. I have been you to the point where I am not sure I know who I am anymore.

I should have just written the story of a refugee girl and not got involved with the real life, Luna. I could have then remained an artist, a journalist, a voyeur, a knitter of tales; a writer who constructs a story, frame by frame.

The film editor who looks deep into the face of the actress playing Tereza, an actress he will not meet, but in many ways will know better than she knows herself. He will see that special way she holds her face to the side when she is unsure. He will use the outtakes of when she was searching for a line for a different moment entirely, in the constructed story of Tereza. We are all just story.

The same film editor will work with this actress again in another film, a decade later, seeing her framed in his dark room, watching the sadness inside her eyes for hours, and wondering what is its source. His wife will have made him dinner and he will look with love at her, but it is the face of Tereza always in his soul. A face that does not exist, as she is only an illusion. A creation

inside a frame. Do we all just love characters we create? Who do we really lie next to?

An editor works in the world of illusions. It is their job to create a story out of a desert. To plant life where there are fragments. To cut the actor out of the frame and service the character only. That is why the editor of the film *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* will never meet Juliette Binoche. He remains true to the character. He remains loyal to the purity of the relationship between reader and character. There is no room for another layer.

There was no room for the real seven-year-old Luna in the Sydney Herald. There was only room for her character. And after I filed the story of 'Luna the Character', 'Bella the Journalist' should have just gone and met 'Samson the Photographer' and had sex. Or discussed the people we worked with, while flirting over overpriced Sydney food and wine. To remain true to the overall vision of the world and its reflection in the media, this is what I should have done, but that was before the line between character and person blurred for me. That was before the words on the page became sinking sand and I could no longer keep life between pages of paper.

Sometimes all that it is left is poetry and a longing for a reader to hear your shouts.

[17]

How long can the base measurement of time last? And we look at the clock. And we look at the clock. The second hand moves in weighted motion. A second hand experience, this bed, this room, this terror. The ghosts of all the souls who haunted this bed, line the walls and sheets.

Our frames of vision are splintering into afterimages and stories that we no longer know to be true or false. Why do we hold on to one image for the usual one-fifteenth of a second, while the other image forever marks our soul? And like writers and filmmakers, we are the editors of our own illusions of continuity, creating a sequence of images and stories that we call life. The smooth, sometimes rocky motion of life, are just frames sent ten or twelve per second from our human eye to our brain, and unless it starts to falter, we keep going until the cold end and even then our images flash on our visual cortex beyond our last breath. Too old for the shelf.

And the sun, that giant orange thing we orbit around in our ephemeral time, is slowing down so imperceptibly, as are you, with your chemical tears and chemical speed. 'Bella the Journalist' is covering the story of the solar eclipse.

I am going to let you observe her as a character in a book. A character in a book within a book.

Let's call this book *Palinopsia*.

III

Palinopsia

Palinopsia (Greek: palin for 'again' and opsia for 'seeing') is a visual disturbance that causes images to persist to some extent even after their corresponding stimulus has left.

These images are known as afterimages and occur in persons with normal vision. However, a person with Palinopsia experiences them to a significantly greater degree, to the point where they become difficult or impossible to ignore, often causing anxiety or depression.

[18]

So, 'Bella the Lifestyle Journalist' is sent anywhere she cannot cause political waves. What can she say about such a concrete fact as an eclipse? There is a sun, there is a moon and the dates are fixed for when they align. It is at that precise moment when she turns to her photographer Samson and sings:

C'mon baby, let's lay down here and make love.

She was quoting a Cruel Sea song they had played in the car on the way here, always his play list setting the mood of the job. Men are equipped with the music for the occasion she had learnt. Leave that part to them, and sing along when it felt right,

Because the moon is full, and the stars are out.

She sung softly into his ear while unbuckling his belt and plunging her cold hand inside his trousers. Watching the clouds part on cue.

They lay on that old highway, in the sped up twilight, alongside Turkish astronomers and termite mounds. They grabbed facts and photos from those around them, oblivious to the importance of the precious minutes of connection. Bella thought of Luna as she saw the moon take centre stage across Earth's sun. A haunted, fragile wind descended on the gathered chasers, something else was with them, connecting them to the past and the future. Venus winked slowly at them all, she knew, she knew.

A swallow looked down from her branch in the blackened morning.

They had seen the heavens align.

If the paper wanted to send her on safe assignments, she would make them unsafe. She had decided that if this structure she worked for was about creating secure narratives, it was her job to provoke, to poke. She took Samson's penis in her mouth and closed her eyes.

Journalism 101: Poke and Prod out the Story.

Tasting Samson was comforting, and she even forgot that he had told her she sucked at giving blow-jobs, while she closed her eyes and went through the facts. What did they want her for? They blocked her story on the plane hijack, they blocked her story on the timing of the troops been sent to Afghanistan. They blocked anyone with a personality, and cut their stories into something unrecognisable and then packaged them safely in a section that no one would read. The document that was fast losing its currency was the locked off newspaper, and if they were expanding this form to incorporate other spheres, 'Bella the Journalist' would lie on the grass, under the blacked out sunrise and fuck 'Samson the Photographer'. Fuck it! She pulled Samson down on top of her, his mouth on hers, and then he was instantly deep inside her, just black silence above.

The story is not what is printed. The story is in the provocation, the actions inspired by the event. The before, the after. The layers of unwritten ink that are not seen, but stain our souls red in the black of night. The invisible imprint of bodies on top of bodies, and the phantoms they create in between them. That which is outside the frame. The life that can't be styled.

Bella's editor will pick up her pen later; knitting is a woman's job, weaving together moments and connections. Taking the eye here, so it will not see there. Bella imagines herself editing her own stories, letting the floodgates fall open on the real stories, before they are sanitised for consumption. She imagines binding her editor to her chair and gagging her. Silencing the same woman who always told her, in her annoyingly faux humble way, that she didn't have any

original ideas of her own, and that was why she had become an editor. The same woman who turned a blind eye on corruption and dirty journalism for a story; who asked questions only if she had to; who had sold her soul for total control. Bella was always suspicious of these people; the ones that said they didn't want any accolades but made sure that they were at the centre of the action; the non-drinkers who claimed the head of the table and sat themselves right next to the main character. Maybe she was just always suspicious of non-drinkers? She remembered the Last Supper; more because of the page-turner about the Da-Vinci code that had forever forged itself into her psyche, than her catholic school education. With twelve people at any table, someone could not be trusted. If she were to meet twelve men a week off the internet, one would be a bad seed. If she were to attend every solar eclipse, she would have structure in her life. Dot the dot towards the creation of a self, the creation of a story that is called life. A life that was now enclosed within the walls of a book called *Palinopsia,* and a self she called, 'Bella in the Psychiatric Hospital'.

She removed the sweat soaked sheets, made her bed again and hid her head under the bleached sheets. Within moments she realised she was not alone, someone else was in the bed with her, wrapping legs around her, choking her in dance, whispering in her ear. There were two pale, ghostly women now contorting themselves around her in dialogue.

Lucia, the pale woman she had met before was saying:

'Zelda can you hear me? I am sinking.'

Zelda answered in waves. Waves of words. To herself? To Lucia? Or both of them?

'Joan of Arc. Witch at the stake. A filly. Bob. Bobbed. Too close for comfort. Too sprawling on lawns. Too sipping light drinks. Too shooting the breeze. Too literary lover, for my brother. Can I lock you away and just write letters to you? Can I find another muse now you

have exploded, imploded? Can I still publish your diary verbatim in my novel? Drink with me. Drink with me. Dance with me. Dance with me. Am I drunk or am I dancing? ScottieeeeeeeeeeeeeWheeeeeehhhhh.

[19]

Without life-blood these characters explode into art, outside the walls of time. Zelda is pacing your room with you; days upon years she paces, and even when still, she paces. She creates, inspires, and sets fire. Do you burn out Reader, at half past three, after unbearable lightness of being sex?

Where are your words sacred? Could Bella have read too much? Is she to blame as much as Madame Bovary for her fate? Does reading novels send the fragile over the edge? Could Bella's flashbacks be a side effect of immersing herself in books as lovers?

Lucia and Zelda dance with us through the clouds of memory and haze of flashback. Ghosts are only called ghosts because others can't see them.

'Why are we always so scared of what we cannot see?'

'Bella the Journalist' thought out loud one day, on yet another assignment where she had been sent by the paper to be 'the eyes of the world', to 'give voice'.

She answers her own question a little later in her life. Like we all do in the end. Or maybe we just add to the same questions?

It is much more terrifying to have the ghosts in the same frame as you; to have them sit at your table, haunt your bed at night.

Sex is always a good segue into anything.

Fifty-six minutes and seven seconds of sex, as we segue into the next frame, your mouth Reader, on my neck.

[20]

Bella was flying through low dark clouds in a small airplane. She had downed three gin and tonics and felt ok. Samson, her photographer was asleep beside her. Sleeping through turbulence.

'Turbulence is created by the airplane flying through clouds. It's just part of flying, completely safe.' Samson had said in between snores, as she tried to use facts to calm her before reaching for alcohol.

'So why is it called turbulence?' She asked to the window. It stared back at her.

Silent.

She pulled out the file on the people she was about to talk to at the detention centre and studied their faces. Common denominator? Scared eyes. She sketched out a draft structure for her profile piece, to fill in the air miles. A pen in hand, a drink in the other and she was generally steady. She looked into the eyes of the photo of the man who had agreed to talk to her. As her sleeping companion had told her:

'The eyes tell us everything. Look for the eyes in objects, the eyes in the photo.'

Can the scars of a rough crossing, losing a wife, then being separated from your daughter show in an admission photo? She started piecing together the details of Salem Solnick's life. Getting access to intake photos and documents relating to illegal migrants or refugees is a difficult process. She had spent months organising this visit, having being channeled from one department to the other. Waited through transition period, inoculation period.

Period.

Suddenly Bella felt nauseous. Unable to get out of her seat in the rough, tiny world of the small plane, she reached for the paper bag, and vomited again and again. This was the third morning she had felt like this. She pushed the reality of what might be going on with her to the side, her concentration back to Salem. When in doubt - write. She looked back at the last word she had written, it terrified her. When *did* she last have her period? Her mind struggled to remember. She had been talking at a writer's festival somewhere, she remembered having to think about what she was wearing, there had been a light rain, was that in August? *Early* August….. Surely she was forgetting something. Think. Think.

It started to rain on the little window beside her. Her tears, she thought. She didn't want to remember the last night of that trip. She had thought the fact that it was on the other side of the world was enough to distance her from such a terrible mistake.

As the plane hit the ground, she put on her sunglasses and let her own eyes moisten. She was out of the sky; at least she hadn't died in the air. That was a good start to the day. As Bella gathered her belongings she remembered a quick sketch of a rose an old lover had left on her bed with the words,

> *Baby I miss you already. Stop working so hard and smell this damn rose xxx.*

'What ever happened to him?'

She wondered the wonderings of all the childless singles who have discarded good people along the way to pursue a thing called a career.

'Probably happily married with two beautiful children….' She mumbled under her breath, but Samson picked it up anyway and prodded her in the ribs.

'Talking to yourself again, lonely heart.' He joked.

She continued to agonise over missed moments for love and happiness while she walked out into the tiny, makeshift airport, got in the waiting car and allowed Samson to negotiate their way to the detention centre. She was still nauseous and fragile as they searched her bag and clothes upon entry.

'Any chance you might be pregnant?' Said a large female guard.

'What?' Bella jumped.

'Just because you will be going through an x-ray scan, so it is best if you tell us if there is any chance you might be.'

'Why would you need to use an x-ray scan?' Bella asked.

'It is a condition of entry; you would have signed the forms before your visit was ok'd.'

'It seems a bit extreme, that's all'

'You would be amazed at what people smuggle in, up their anus, in their stomachs, their teeth, nostrils, vaginas'

'Alright, alright. No, no chance I could be pregnant.'

Bella spoke, almost like a mantra. Samson snorted with a smug laugh.

'What the hell was that for?' Bella demanded.

'Nothing.'

So they went through, their insides photographed, the unanswered prayers of their hearts the only things left unviewed.

They were inside. Inside.

She scanned the faces sitting in the common room. Looking straight into her eyes, no time or reason to look anywhere else. She saw him. His eyes told her everything: and even though there were words, there was dialogue, a scene or a chapter, it could not be reported. To write this on paper was to make it just another refugee story, just another column in a newspaper. She wanted every reader to look into his eyes as they told her about his wife drowning, his six-year-old daughter getting ripped away from him, and see directly what was happening to this man's heart. What use were her words now? Samson could take a photo of his eyes, but try as he might, with his photographer's arrogance; he knew he could not communicate this pain with his art form either.

As they left the centre that afternoon, too late for the only flight out, they went to their own motel rooms and closed the door. A year before they would have drank into the early hours to kill the reality of the story they were covering, maybe kiss, maybe just keep each other warm. Tonight neither of them felt they deserved the warmth of another body.

Bella sat in the motel room that smelt of disinfected old sex. If she closed her eyes she could hear the ghosts of the lonely, desperate men and women who had slept in this bed, unable to rest under the brown and orange weight of the walls. The neon lights showed all the ugliness of their life, on their souls. She was haunted by Salem's eyes, as he, without words, begged her to find his daughter, Luna.

'Just bring me the fucking moon!'

She scoffed to the battered wives, to the drunken miners who fucked the bi-polar motel owner's wife when she was on a manic high, to the infidels, the desperate politicians, and truck drivers who had slept in the bed before her. But even as she lay down amongst them all, she

knew that she had no other choice. Every broken, lonely heart that had ever slept in that room was looking for the moon. She fell into a dream.

[21]

Bella woke, her hands were shaking, she was holding onto something. A passport. The night started to flash through her head. She had finished her reading and was listening to others read their work, lull around in their own personality for as long as they could. Fifty-year-old woman after fifty-year-old woman, who surrounded themselves by the safety of books at home, had ventured out for something wild. To meet a living, breathing author. The one who was reading now had them all hot at the collar, flushing in their menopausal juices. She knew his reputation; gout ridden egotist, womaniser, player, alcoholic. The Picasso type. The man who just has to stand there, with his fat stomach hanging out, and women will come running. A poet. A poet.

So why did she go to bed with him that night? There had been the fact of alcohol. There had been the fact that they were put up in the same hotel, and the same driver took them back from the opening night party, at the same time. Who was she to go against the narrative arc? She was lonely but sparkly. She asked him what his new book was called, he had said, in that throaty poet way -

'Forlorn.'

'Ohhhhhhh, I am really into grief','

she had drawled.

That had been the extent of it. She invited him into her room for a glass of wine, and had woken up the next day naked, with the poet's passport in her hands. But the poet had gone. Left the festival, his headline events cancelled, his fifty-year old groupies holding their unsigned copy of his book—forlorn.

She tried to remember the evening, lots of alcohol, a discussion on Virginia Woolf, and I

suppose you could call it, sex? Pretty average really, his years of drinking meant he was incapable of getting an erection. Or so she had thought?

Bella awoke again, eight weeks later in a strange smelling motel room, the sound of morning television coming through the walls. Her mind went into location confirmation mode. It flashed back to her in images, the images she had seen on Samson's camera while they were waiting to be let through into the detention centre.

This town, this place, the hills hoist, the barbwire, the colourbond fences, the landscape of life, until death.

'Start taking photos from as soon as we get out of the airport,' she had instructed.

'I want to get as many photos as possible of this town where they have placed this centre. Sydneysiders have no bloody idea sometimes.'

Samson had been in his element. The ugly brilliance of the outback town. The shed. The small business. The dog. The pub. The overweight young mothers and kids. The men in their utes. The images kept coming at her from the motel bed. His lens had narrowed his focus to only the art in what he was seeing. If you frame anything the right way you can call it art. This was not art. This town, this life, this story, was not art.

What had Yoko Ono said? Something like - we are all artists but the best art comes from the necessity to create for survival, to not dry-up. How long could the necessity to write keep up with the thoughts in her head? It wasn't that she would dry up, she thought, she would explode! Yoko and all of us have no idea, as we sit there, or sit here, have our coffees and make our artworks, our constructs, our prose sculptures.

'Bella the Writer' sits in the bed of the heart of Australia, and it is old, smelly and dead. It has

no room for art, and no room for the moon.

'Bella as Yoko' stretched out naked over the bed, her hair dangled down to the floor, as she pictured Salem on top of her. She longed to hold him. Maybe it was maternal? To kiss his scared eyes closed, tell him he was safe, and that she would find his daughter.

The stark white sheets of the hospital bed, where 'Bella in the Psychiatric Hospital' lay, were changed daily. Her nighttime visitors still came hourly to her bed. A nurse still checked her every fifteen minutes for self-harm, but there was talk from the doctor of letting her out of ICU and into the general ward.

The words on the page formed sentences again.

In a book club somewhere in middle class Sydney a few months earlier, Bella had cursed the forty-year-old mothers, out for the night with their Pinot Noir and flourless chocolate cake, as they cried out in suburban rage at the mother who killed herself, leaving her son alive, in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. As they finish the evening, suitably smashed, the mothers choose the next book, they decide on a classic love story after so much pain. They decide on *Wuthering Heights*. Then smoke a joint before crawling home to their sexless marriage beds. They will always have books they think, as their fantasies lie smashed and fat beside them.

And what is the collective noun for all that?

[22]

Bella's stomach was thick now, her hips were gone, and her black clothes, that were her uniform anyway, could still hide a child. She was skinny, no one would notice, except perhaps the fact that she wasn't drinking as much. Though she still had moments of wanting to obliterate everything.

Obliterating the moment. Jackson Pollock, perched within his canvas on the floor, deep in harmony with the rhythm of paint. There is no centre. The whole painting is the centre. There is no moment, the whole *is* the moment. There is no individual, everything is interrelated. Take today, when the paper had sent 'Bella the Journalist' to cover a story about a murder in Melbourne; a father had thrown his five-year-old daughter off a bridge in peak hour traffic. The story was going to need interviews with friends and witnesses. She had read her notes on his history of mental illness, had a quick look at the family court system, and done her research on the failure of safety fences on bridges. All in heat wave Melbourne, all too close to home. A story has to be created out of moments that the journalist must bring together.

Bella had rung her brother to see if he wanted to catch up for a drink while she was in Melbourne, but he was busy. A fellow workaholic, but with children now. She decided to visit her parents alone.

There was a deep blue haze to the day when she arrived at her parent's home. Bella remembered this driveway, that rock, that tree. Or were they memories of photographs of her? Not the moments themselves?

No photos remained.

One image in particular impressed her visual cortex, of her, nude in a bouncing crib, red faced and happy? Each frame of her childhood seemed like a ghost story. Every happy time covered in the paint of fear and anxiety. The dark memories seemed the only honest ones. She recalled with horror finding a dead rat in a bucket of water at the place where she now stood. In silence, she pulled it out by the tail and threw it into the bush, only to find left in the water, ten little baby mice. Curled into the fetal position like tiny, water soaked, black-eyed beans. She ran, dry-retching from the terrible scene, and hid in the sandpit with the duck for the rest of the day. Why would the mother rat give birth in a bucket full of water? It still puzzled her thirty years later, as she sat there looking at the overgrown garden. Then she shuddered with sudden realisation – the mother had been trying to keep her babies safe from the heat, and in doing so, had killed them.

It had been her vision, she had steered her brother towards it.

'We can't sell it.' She stated.

The fact was undeniable.

'This was our home, their home. No amount of money can replace the connection they wanted us to have to this place, to the Australian bush.'

'The goddamned Australian bush….'

Her brother's voice faded away in the anger of the non-forgiving.

Their parents had taught them to respect the bush, the beauty of the land and the roughness of the landscape. Almost rainforest in its dampness, except for one tiny part of the year, and then it was insatiable in its dryness. In the end they died. They were part of the bush they loved, and

this house would be a wild garden in their memory. It may have seemed black to view it that way, but again Bella states for the record:

'I am a journalist. I seek facts.'

The intensity of the obsession for detail in the reports of the deaths of mothers with newborns, bodies found in baths or in cars, drove her further towards numbness. Bella had to make the story of her parents' deaths that day, and it was as simple as,

'My parents have been returned to the bush they loved. They are together. I can visit them in the garden we have built in their memory.'

Bella had seen enough tragedy, watched fatal errors kill children, innocence smashed again and again against a sea of newsprint and hungry readers. She wanted to remember love and things growing, not fire and Black Death. It is a choice, just like it is a choice to read a tabloid paper over a more respected news journal. She praised high journalism and surrounded herself in tabloid froth and bubble.

'Bella the Journalist' walked around the back of what had been her home to see the old tree that had withstood the fire. Even the engraved heart with her initials and his, with the date and the word, *Forever* was intact. What the hell did forever mean? She thought, furious. How dare he have engraved that on *her* tree, like the cuts on the face given by the men to their women in Naples?

'He branded me!' She exclaimed. Carved his name on my path to the sky.

Where was he now? She thought, and again a picture of a happily married man with children flashed into her visual cortex. Forever, was as long as a moment lasted. Till death do us part?

Anyway what is freedom and what is forever? She was pretty sure freedom was overrated. As for forever? She was standing in it.

Driving down the mountain she cursed herself for her need to create fiction. She knew, that in her head and heart, she hadn't let them go, they were still living down in Victoria, up that little mountain road, on that windy street. There would be no peace without that myth. She was a self, created out of myths.

A kangaroo leapt out from the side of the road. She slowed and stared into its clear eyes. Another survivor of this Australian bush, she thought, and of the kangaroo meat she had eaten last night. She realised everything was based on mythology now, and a deep complicit hiding from the harshness of Australian truth. I killed and ate that kangaroo's brother. My parents burnt to a painful death in terror, and we lock up innocent children in detention centres and turn a blind eye. The road kill she passed further down the mountain was the real truth – rotten, maggot ridden, forgotten and dead, dead, dead.

[23]

[24]

At some party, some night, a weekday, Bella was drinking white wine between vodkas. It was a field of couples she was used to. The opinions were flowing fast and the meal was cooking slowly. She had no babies. She thought of this fact, as she would see a sentence on a page in black and white, while she watched other people's children run around and around the rectangle suburban backyard. Making noise and breaking things. How did she miss out on this?

The rain was falling lightly, but she stayed outside and lay down on the trampoline with her glass, tasting the drops as they fell on her face. Smelling the dry earth released from its thirst. Looking up into the stars, she imagined herself floating in space, a lone star, with all the other stars representing families in their houses. Their lights shining out at those like her, alone in the cold black of infinity. Countless stars, countless families, happy or sad, but forever separate from the space they floated in. This floating world of warm safety. Someone's child climbed on top of her on the trampoline and started bouncing her towards the night sky. Children don't understand the demarcation of worlds and property, their love is as infinite as space. They are intrinsically communal and nomadic. What does that tell us, Bella mused?

It was at this point she caught sight of Stuart, her date for the evening, sidling up to the trampoline with his glass and a fresh bottle of wine. She had avoided him all night. She always hated bringing someone with her to social functions, they either spoke too much, or not enough, and either way was awkward. She could see all her friends assessing their likelihood as a couple. He would be treated with reverence, while being silently picked apart. She realised her friends couldn't imagine her with a partner any more than she could. Could they imagine her with a child though? These monogamous havens that her friends lived within, always with two sets of eyes and ears to advise? Even if you wanted one opinion, you got two. No wonder she had taken up the anonymous cold relationships the internet could provide. They were not

stars. They would not burn up. There was an endless supply of narratives to create online without even having to leave the comfort of the written word.

Stuart lay down next to her on the trampoline, looked up at the sky, and started talking about brain chemistry, and how the very act of conversation could make a permanent change on us at a cellular level. That he realised women had known this intrinsically and yet men were only just starting to find out the importance of talking. He went on and on, leaving Bella unsure if he had ever doubted the importance of his own voice, let alone talking per se. Watching for falling stars, and then feeling guilty about her alcohol soaked baby, she asked him where testosterone levels fitted into all this talking. Where did marriage fit into online dating? And how much of a narrative was he after anyway, or did he just want to fuck her? Her tolerance for smart conversation was at an all-time low since meeting Salem. She could find out what she wanted about someone without ever having been in the same room as them. If she wanted to know more than that it had nothing to do with what came out of their mouths, it was how she felt lying next to them. She did not feel good next to Stuart. He was good for online chat, very good, but this moment, this night, this star gazing precious quiet time, was not something she wanted to share with him. She needed to get out.

'I'm sorry Stuart, I should have told you. I'm pregnant. I feel really sick and have to go home now or I am pretty sure I will vomit.'

She jumped off the trampoline, bouncing Stuart's body to the stars as he grabbed for the bottle and spilt his wine all over himself. She ran out of the party, leaving the company of her friends who married early, before relationship pornography was readily available. Before love was disposable, consumable and could be bought online. She ran into cold, starless, vast loneliness.

[25]

Bella had lost her brother in the pool. Her parents were deep in conversation with another set of adults, and the sounds of laughter and the cries of *Marco Polo* from the kids in the water, was almost deafening. She had been playing with the older boys and girls, jumping and slipping over the edges then hiding under the water, and now she had lost track of him. She seemed to remember someone tugging her legs not that long ago, she thought that must have been Eric under the water, trying to let her know that he was hiding. He hadn't played *Marco Polo* before, and everything he did, he did with total dedication. So if, as she had explained, the rules of the game were to hide under water, he would have interpreted this to mean - stay under water until it was clear to come out. She hadn't qualified her instructions by reminding him that he had to come up to breathe of course. Eric looked up to her and did everything she said. She started to panic.

Eleven-year-old Bella did not understand that the body had its own will to live, and this will for self-preservation would have overridden Eric's desire to please her. His body would have taken him to the top of the pool for air, no matter how much he wanted to stay hiding or do what his older sister said. She dived under water, searching frantically for her little brother, around the floating devices, legs and pool cleaner. She was crying and lonely for him in this world of Sydney poolside kids. She wanted to play just with him in the bush like they always did, making up stories and then swimming in the waterholes near their house. She did not understand this water-saturated city, where people built swimming pools around the corner from beaches, and sprinklers sprayed endlessly over green mowed grass. In her town they couldn't water their plants or have baths because of the drought. She pushed past tanned girls bodies in Ken Done bikinis, and bronzed boys in fluorescent flowered board shorts, searching for Eric's pale scrawny legs in his old grey school trunks. She suddenly realised how much she loved those pale

scrawny legs and how much bigger the world was than the small Victorian town she came from, when she felt a solid weight smash down on her back and then,

blackness.

She was all of a sudden lightheaded and very tired, she forgot about Eric now as she watched the party from above the pool. Watched her own body curled around the Kreepy-Krawly pool cleaner in the far corner. The other kids jumping and laughing around her. Beautiful, privileged, oblivious. She watched her parents deep in conversation with these strange over-blonded women and oversized men, and then she saw Eric lying beside the dog kennel, patting the white poodle and talking animatedly away to it.

She watched this world and her own body for a long time, until she heard a scream from someone that sounded like her mother, like her mother was underwater screaming her name. All she could feel was the coldness of that sound. It ached into her bones and muscles. It ate into blackness.

She loved to swim like a dolphin, dive out into the freshwater reservoir and swim to the other side where her brother couldn't reach. She played this game where she was the last survivor of a shipwreck, washed up on a deserted island in the middle of nowhere. She built a house of sticks and set up wood for a fire, she lay down and closed her eyes till the sun had toasted all her skin, then she finally called out to Eric that she was coming home and to get ready to count how many seconds it took her to swim to him.

1, 2, 3, 5……29, 40, 41, 42….49, 30…. and so it was never accurate, but it got her powering through the water leaving the eels, sharks and giant octopuses for dead in that freshwater pool of dreams.

Who was counting now though? It wasn't Eric. Different voices, fast, reliable counting.

1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21

1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21

Then she could feel hands pumping on her chest, fingers in her throat, pressure on her jaw.

She lost track of the counting as now she was tumbling around and around in the curve of the sand and a wave. Banging her knees on her forehead, her swimmers tied in knots, and full of sand, as she resurfaced just in time to be pounded by another wave, then another. She laughed each time she got up again to see a bigger wave than the last, but the laughter was just to hide the fear until she could get to shore. She wasn't used to Sydney's beaches, she liked her quiet, calm reservoir and wanted to go home as soon as she could, away from the cousins and their surfboards and surf clothes. She wanted to disappear into a place where what you wore didn't matter, where what you dreamt in your heart was the most important thing.

1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21

She heard the counting again coming through the pain in her chest, then she lost track of the numbers and she was back on a beach waving to her father and mother as they were pulled further and further out to sea. She was too embarrassed to call for help as she watched them struggle and get weaker and more desperate as they fought the rip they were caught in. Finally two boys with surfboards had appeared from the half-light looking like Greek gods and took matters into their own hands. Paddling out to her drowning parents, they put them over their boards and took them to shore. Too exhausted to be angry with her, her parents hugged her again and again, but that night, and every night for a month, she would have nightmares of waving back to her parents as they drowned. She stood on the beach while everyone else she

knew went in the water to try to save them, each person getting stuck in the rip until it was just Bella on the beach, waving to the whole world getting sucked out and under the sea.

1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21

Then Bella felt someone alongside her, and words gushing into her with the force of the sea. Peace melted through the pain in her chest, and she was floating through silence, and words the colour of water.

'Isabella! Isabella baby, baby.'

She heard her mother calling her name. She watched from above herself as her mother held her in her worn blue and white, stripes and star bathers. Rocking her like a little baby. She could taste her mother's tears, salty sweet on her tongue, and she was looking into her mother's beautiful brown eyes. Then she felt suddenly cold to the bone and started to shake and cry uncontrollably as people piled blankets and towels on top of her while they waited for an ambulance to take her to hospital. Water bubbling out of her mouth, like a fish with round scared eyes. She stared up at a little swallow flying slowly above her.

'They just need to observe her for a while to make sure she doesn't have any water on the lungs I think Mrs. Luce.' One of her cousin's mates Jase was saying.

Jase was the hero of the moment, a newly trained lifeguard at Manly Beach, and he had saved her. Right place at the right time was how he saw it. First time he had stuck his tongue down anyone's throat since he did the Bronze Medallion exam on a dummy. Bella's parents bought him a car for his eighteenth birthday the next year. He never looked back, couldn't stop kissing the girls by then. He had the taste for it. The taste of life was ripe on him. The surfer girls were addicted and got them to save him again and again.

[26]

'You've changed my story.' Bella was furious as she confronted her editor.

'You take me off politics and then give me the soft, soppy, family gigs and expect me to not investigate the whole story. How can you remove the death of his wife and the fact that his daughter is in a separate detention centre!'

'Look, Bella, the thrust of the story is still in there, you talk about the difficulties of the refugee, their struggle with leaving their family behind.'

'He didn't *leave* his family, his wife was possibly thrown into the water to drown, and his six year old daughter was sent to the other side of the country and put in a PRISON!'

'Look Bella, I feel the same way as you about it, but the Board is not going to allow the story to go ahead with those angles. There are bigger stories and the readership is not interested in refugees. They don't want to know'.

'I'll take the story to another paper then.'

She left the offices into the hot air of the real world. Ran across to the pub and rang her friend in radio, then another friend in television. She had a quick few drinks then took her laptop to the library and sat there watching a fluorescent light flicker again and again in the aisle, strobe lighting the books.

She emailed everyone she knew about Salem and Luna's story and waited for the reaction.

Then she received her first reply.

Are you sleeping with him?

She didn't recognise the email address. What kind of a sick joke was that?

She emailed back.

Who is this?

No response.

Unable to go back to work, she wrote Salem a poem, her first poem in twenty years. She was no Anne Sexton or Sylvia Plath, but she liked her men, and she liked her drink. And when the two got to her at once, she was moved to write. The firm self she had structured with journalism and facts was starting to fracture. She was dreaming poetry again and channeling e e cummings, and she hated herself for it. Why were dead art forms the only ones that kept her alive?

He was getting to her.

[27]

and i'm not going to tell you

how every letter i write wants to be to you

but i do

and i don't want to tell you what i feel

(as i am sick of feelings)

only how the wood smells like paint as it burns

and i don't want to tell you what i dream

(as dreams bore me lately too)

only how the water tastes like lime from the tap

and i don't want to give you any more words

(as you can't want what you have yet to hold)

but here they are

so on your cool waters

i will meet you

for i trade in ordinary men for fantastic ones

[28]

‘Bella! Bella, it’s me, Anna. Wake up.’

She felt herself falling deeper into the sea. Water dripping off her body.

Anna Karenina was calling to her.

No! It wasn’t Anna Karenina, it was the nurse, Anna. She was in a psychiatric hospital, Luna was dead, characters were coming out of their books at her and she had very little energy left to distinguish between those who were real or those who were in between pages. She didn’t want to live with the truth anymore, she wanted to block out Luna and just read her story in the paper in the third person. She closed her eyes again and felt the hard sheets of ice drowning her, pushing her deeper away from the pain and the light. No, she could still help Luna. The facts can lie. She of all people knew that, the government was just trying to stop her from speaking out. The words are not real. Something smashed the beautiful pale blue squares in front of her vision and she realised it was her own hand that was now grasping Anna’s blue uniform.

‘I have to find Luna. I have to talk to her.’ She heard herself say.

‘Bella, you need to get well yourself first, you can’t help anyone until you are well.’

Enough of the popular psychology, she was drowning in that too. Is that the flip side of alcohol and hard work?

She could feel the eyes of the other patients on her now, her visions, or ‘disassociations’ as her doctor called them, were becoming less frequent, her characters were staying in their pages. This was real, Luna was in trouble and she needed to find her.

‘Please Anna, can I use your computer?’

‘Patients are not allowed to use the computers, ok Bella?’

‘Can you search for me then if I give you the details? Ring and see if she is all right?’

Anna walked away with Luna’s name and the details of the detention centre where she lived. Her eyes were sad as she scrunched the paper up, and put in her pocket. Humoring patients was at least half of her job.

Bella closed her eyes and lay down on the bed. She remembered the first time she saw Luna. She’d searched through every record of every child that had been brought into the country by boat. She felt like she was reading the *Old Testament;* of lost babies murdered by Herod. She wanted to send a satire into the paper about this fearful, barbarian infanticide that was going on, but instead she sought out the happy story, the story of a real growing, beautiful girl who relied on her and looked up to her. A girl who needed a mother. She thought she would choose life over words.

Again, this headache of breakdown. She thought about Salem and how thrown she had been after that first meeting. She had been used to grabbing some stranger for comfort, drinking with them, and then kicking them out the next morning, so she could make her story deadline. But she couldn’t let go of Salem.

She started writing him letters and poems, holding his responses close to her. Waiting for them was like waiting for a fix, and she couldn’t bear to think of living without them. He wrote to her about his life as a fisherman on the Gaza Sea, about his wife, and her dream of being a writer. He told her how he had been shot on his boat in Basra for fishing outside the Gaza shoreline, where Palestinian fishermen were forbidden to fish, and how in the hospital he had met his wife, who was training to be a nurse. They were not able to speak to each other alone for months while they were getting to know each other. Her honour was something that he was

very nervous about protecting, as he had seen what had happened to her aunt. The whole town knew about that. Instead they would write letters to each other and this is how he saw her real skill in storytelling, and started to understand what sort of a life he would have if he asked her to marry him.

Salem's wife haunted Bella, it seemed she was calling to her, through Salem, to find her daughter. There was something stronger than the man she saw in front of her that day in that small town. Salem was haunted by his wife too, as he had been since he first met her. Bella realised that Salem was the vessel for her freedom, just as the boat over had been for that small family. His letters were taking her towards feeling something again. It was not the words on the pages that affected her, but what was in-between and under the words. It was all that surrounded the marks. It was the untranslatable that stole her heart and made her cry and want again.

[29]

Trying to get past endless circumnavigating whirlpools of voices to reach a real person who worked at the detention centre was a government strategy. They count on you giving up. You could waste a day trying to find a real person, and then that real person seems to be paid to hang up on you. Bella was sedated now. She could listen to the loop of recorded voices all day, but the hospital needed the phone line. She needed to reach Luna. She closed her eyes and tried to talk to her through the mutiny of sound. Now and then the voice recording would stop, and she would wait for a real person on the other end.

'Hello?'

More silence, then it would start again. The chain of noise, the advertising, the interior monologue of salesmanship. A world made for confident extroverts who knew the system. Finally she got through to a human being, she asked if she could speak to Luna Solnick.

'There is no one called Luna Solnick here', a cold voice answered back.

She felt the pain tighten in her chest. Of course there was no Luna Solnick there.

'Are you hearing voices Bella?'

Her doctor had asked her.

'No!'

There are voices all over this country. I pick up a phone, voices. I sit on a train, voices. I sit in front of my desk, voices.

So Isabella Luce can you state your full name for the court?

Can you recount your current medications?

Objection

Can you state your relationship with the alleged refugee Salem Solnick?

Why did you make contact with Luna Solnick?

At what stage did you enter into a romantic relationship with her father?

Objection

Why were you asked to step down in your role as Political Editor of the newspaper you worked for?

How much alcohol do you drink each day Ms Luce?

Objection

I believe both your parents died in a bushfire Ms Luce, the psychiatrist we asked you to talk to, outlined this has, in his opinion, left you with an attachment disorder?

Are you aware of the potential side effects of mixing alcohol and the medication you are on Ms Luce?

Objection.

Are you currently in a stable relationship Ms Luce?

Objection. Irrelevant

What sort of stable environment would you be able to provide for the child, Luna Solnick, Ms Luce?

Then a solid, loud voice slammed down the verdict.

'I don't believe a word this young woman says. Her lifestyle and work practices do not provide the best environment for a young girl from a very conservative background who has undergone

extreme trauma and loss. The child, Luna Solnick, will be placed in state care until her father's case is heard, and there is a decision on whether they return to Iraq or stay in Australia. I recommend Isabella Luce take an extended break from her place of work in order to address her issues with substances and relationships, so that her opinions are not bled into the wider community when she is clearly in such a vulnerable state.'

Bella watched the hidden smiles, the furious pens, the recording devices shut down, as the reporters ran off to file in their story.

'The papers are dead anyway', she spat under her breath, 'soon they will be able to get inside your head to microchip a story. You will all be out of work, you bastards.'

She wanted to scratch the eyes out of that conservative, pompous judge who thought he could judge her lifestyle. Wasn't she the fucking Lifestyle Editor?

That same judge would later be caught out for possessing child internet pornography. His hotshot lawyer would appeal the charges, of course, and try to argue for the artistic merit of the images - the photographer in question was an artist friend etc, etc. - in the end money is the law in this town. It is a game, which the rich and savvy can win with the right publicists. The Sydney Herald's pin-up boys and girls are drug dealers, models and murderers, but they look good and go out to the right venues. They *own* the venues. They own the media. Nothing in Sydney is too shallow and nobody is too rich.

The judge was exonerated but the slime stuck like glue. But right now, handing down his verdict on Isabella, he was oblivious of his future. Over his morning tea of Milk Arrowroot biscuits and cappuccino he flicked over the stories of children in detention to decide what film he would see that evening in his favourite art house cinema.

[30]

Bella have you spoken to Mum & Dad? I can't get through to them?

Eric's voice, message after message.

They are missing, Bella. No one knows where they are?

Bella can you call me at Jamie's - 544 3121

Bella can you call me, we can't get in to see the house but it is not looking good.

Bella I need you, please can you come down here?

Bella answer the phone for fuck sake?

She was working three jobs, saving money to go overseas, serving coffees; reheating focaccia, or whipping cream for an iced coffee. What the fuck was she doing while they were burning? It would torment her for years. Was she making iced coffee or scalding herself on the coffee machine? She longed for the latter.

Bella what is the name of the café you work in?

Bella this is your Aunt Josephine……

Just hope everything is ok with you all, have not been able to get through to your mother?

Bella, Trudi here from Beat Magazine, you were supposed to come in at three, to the office, to interview Sandra Bernhardt, she is pretty pissed now, so hope everything is ok with you, have heard about the fires…….

She wiped the messages by holding the red button down. Gone. Panic, fear, hope, uncertainty, trust, and excitement. All gone.

A few years later in India, as Bella propped her boyfriend up with pillows in the bath, unable to move his legs or arms, paralysed from some cocktail of mosquito born flu and heavy drugs, she started to think about her mum and dad. She pictured them crouched together in the bathtub she had played in since she was a baby, cold water slowly bubbling in the heat of the fire, their bodies locked together in terror. She remembered then, in that long night in India holding her lover's hands by the bath. She had been making iced coffees that shift. She couldn't even claim to be a stigmatic.

[31]

'Bella you are doing very well and we are moving you out of ICU today.'

She froze.

'Can't I stay here a little while longer?'

The response was negative.

She felt every imprint on the walls of this room and she could not bear to leave them. She had no fight though; it wasn't like complaining to the paper about the substandard motel they had put her up in, the hospital was six thousand dollars a week and beds were scarce. She gathered her things and moved in slow motion into the wider ward. A larger home for the terrified. Her ghostly bedmates watched her leave, another agonising separation for the coiled lovers. Lucia stayed in the corner for days, heartbroken against the floor. Zelda numbed herself with parties, literary incarnations, constant mobility, unadulterated gaiety and sweating life. She threw off her black lace panties as a gift to her departing friend, saying: 'What are words!'

Bella's books and clothes now took up residence in a small box in her shared room. She pulled the curtains around her bed and sat there for four hours in silence. Is this my dust jacket? Bella thought. Am I the words inside these curtains? The curtains were pale pink; she stared at them until she could make out the slow rise of cigarette smoke staining them. They made her feel like a blonde. She wanted to go out and buy peroxide. It was the first thing she had wanted in months, and it felt so intensely useless. She was putting on weight, she looked like a human being again, her ribs were not so pronounced, and the cold had eased. She was no longer terrified to look at herself in the shower.

Cleopatra was so bloody strong, Bella mused, putting that asp to her breast. Or was it just the

ancient equivalent of taking too many prescription tablets? The women in her ward were cutting, overdosing, smoking, eating and shocking themselves; as they lay around watching television until the med line would signify the end of the day. The ceremonial coming together of patients and staff. The communion. Outside of ICU they made you line up for your meds. Bella was just one of many, many, many sad, bad, women.

'Bella, you can have visitors here between 3pm and 6pm and we ask you to limit it to family members.'

'Well that is easy. There is one and he is in Melbourne.'

Her parents were dead. Her brother, who she had put down as her next of kin, did not know what to say to her. He rang each day, and she said less and less. Her friends were terrified about what might happen to them by their association with her. They made themselves scarce. They all worked for the paper, the radio, or the government. Her world of free thinkers was a desperate joke she realised as she turned to meet her tough, new nurse who gave nothing away through her streaked blonde yoga body and tight smile. Bella forgave her the front, she would put up a wall to this world too if she was in her line of work. She herself had put up a wall of alcohol and drugs to survive working as a journalist, and the work itself was just another wall on top of that. All she could see were her walls falling down around her. The walls of her childhood home burnt to the ground and her hands black with ash that she never wanted to wipe off. She was covered in dust. Her mother and father's bodies were dust. Burnt energy, holding hands. And then what? Then where? She remembered a moment as a child in the streets of Melbourne clutching her mother's hand and asking:

'But Mum where was I before I was in your tummy?'

Again Bella closed her eyes, swimming in Dick Divers, childhood memories and tender black

nights. Again Bella swallowed the pink and white tablets and waited for a moment of peace, but each time she caught a glimpse of a little girl with a dark bob she ran in desperation, following a hand, an ankle, or a smile. Outside her window the moon wanes. Bella remembers a children's book she read, *Moon Man*, about the man in the moon who came down to earth. Humans had tried to lock him up because he was different, but when the moon waned he escaped by sliding out of his ankle chains and through the bars in his prison cell. There was hope. They can't lock up the moon? Suddenly Bella thinks she has solved it, the real reason why the government was locking up young children. She wanted get *Moon Man* to Luna right away. *The Happy Prince* was too sad, what the hell was she thinking giving her that to read? Words are dangerous if people want to interpret them literally. *Her* favourite stories and *her* sadness were not necessary to give a girl who had seen more pain and loss than she could ever imagine. Luna didn't *choose* to be locked up, but Bella did. All her stories, all her role models, all her climbing lovers and jobs were for what?

She stared at the letters tattooed on the back of this blonde nurse's neck: LUKE. She liked the letters L and K in that old style lettering. She suddenly felt happy to see that the nurse had sealed her love in ink and was proudly showing it while changing her sheets and writing up her notes.

'I like your tattoo.' Bella complimented the nurse.

'Thanks, it is not literal, it is kind of a code'

'I write in code too,' Bella replied, wondering what could possibly be coded in the word Luke. Maybe she loved Mathew or Mark or John? Suddenly she was furious at the ignorance of everyone. Those you love, die. They burn, they drown. The skin falls off you, it bubbles and melts, it gets nibbled by fish, washed away by salt, soaked and bloated. Some fucking code

cracking forensic scientist will find out what the letters *LUKE* mean on your dead body—if you are lucky. And you are lucky Bella, as you contemplate dying your hair blonde and check out other women's tattoos, while a little refugee girl is locked away for no reason except ignorance and fear.

Bella remembers the colour of the sun she had tried to describe in a poem in early high school. Her English teacher accused her of copying it from someone, or getting a grown up to help her. It was only many years later that she worked out this was a compliment. At the time she had thought she was in trouble again, just for being who she was. A different teacher in a different school graffittied her best work in red pen declaring,

This is not a poem!

So, Bella thought in her soft pink world of hard black.

This is not a prison!

The sun will meet the moon; each is on their respective path, irrespective of us.

[32]

Driving every Tuesday to visit Luna was the easy part. The hopelessness she felt on the way home was harder. At night she would switch on the computer and take herself into a mindless world of destructive, lonely chat sessions with people, if *people* is what they were. She consoled herself by living in a space in between the tangible flesh of a real relationship. She stopped writing to Salem. She hunted for the bad men, the ones that reinforced her loneliness. It was another type of bloodletting, her thirst for despots.

What is it about the despot? They live outside others' restraints. Their appetites for sex and food are encouraged and admired. If this man wants a woman, we will find him one. We will package up a blonde, troubled sex symbol in Chanel and glass beads, and bring her to him to devour. Make her high, make her low, make her sing Happy Birthday and run naked in front of the beach. Feed her wine. Feed her to the sharks.

The despot craves beauty in order to crush it. The despot is the man you want because he won't try to please you, or spoil you in an insipid, clinging way. The despot will try to crush you with his power and strength, and it is that masculine force that you want in a world of female equality. There is always the desire to be overwhelmed by a powerful personality. Is it biological?

Safe choices are for fools, and only fools are satisfied. That is the reason Bella went into his hotel room and spent the night with him. Her erstwhile boyfriend left cloying messages through his marijuana stupor of love and mothering care. Her despot held her by the neck and fucked her, came inside her, then threw her away like meat. Yes they were related to bonobos, but they were equally related to chimpanzees. And for every woman run collective Bella still valued the silverback, the honeybee. The queen. What hope was there?

Tonight she saw that the sweet side of her was always a myth. The sugar needed the lemon to taste right. The breath in requires the breath out.

[33]

Waiting at that desolate in between space of Wolli Creek Train Station in Sydney, Bella told Samson she had written the story about the eclipse before they had left to cover the event. He was furious and accused her of trying to mastermind an art-imitating-life experience, with him as one of the key players.

'You can't write about something before it happens. That's not journalism Bella. That is fucking creative writing! That is like me taking photos of other eclipses before this one and submitting them as *the* eclipse that we just witnessed. It is fucked and it is lying to the public and to me.'

Bella sat there unsure of herself for a moment, she had not wanted to implicate Samson, she was sick of everyone around her ending up getting hurt. She didn't have a whole lot of friends left. Yet her pride stopped her apologising as she began her spiel on truth and censorship;

'The public are lied to all the time, Samson, they don't give a fuck. They don't want the truth. They want softly packaged lifestyle stories. They want things to be romantic, not real. They want stories to have a beginning, a middle and an end.'

'You used me Bella. I am the only person who thinks you are still worth keeping at the paper and you set me up. You can't just have me as the romantic subplot in your story. I am real, this world is fucking real too, and like it or not the paper is paying you to write about reality.'

They both stared at the train pulling into the platform. It was raining and cold after tropical Queensland but neither of them minded the change in temperature. Bella shuddered as she felt eyes on her from everywhere; she leaned in to Samson and whispered;

'You and I both know that this paper is paid by others to write about anything but reality. You

know that I am being silenced and stalked; yet you hide behind that lens of yours and don't allow yourself to really comprehend what that means. I have been doing that too, I have been fucking hiding behind this role of journalist, it is an easy, safe place to position yourself while you watch people torture others, starve, fry and betray for profit. I can't do it anymore. If they want to keep paying me to write about bullshit, I will serve them fucking bullshit. If that is what the country wants to read, so be it.'

Samson looked at her and his eyes looked past the anger and words, deep into the water of her irises as they shined with rain and sadness. He saw her heart, exposed and frightened. He wanted to pick up his camera and capture it, but he resisted the urge. Instead he kissed the pain from her eyes, held her close, and wished her luck.

[34]

Bella curved herself around a book, as she had always done, to feel safe. The words on the page and the smell of the paper held her tight. She had sat around scenes of darkness and sexual rage before, behind the book. She had watched for the moonlight that night when she first met Salem, nearly a year ago now. She looked out at the walls of the detention centre and hungered for what it was hiding.

She lunged back into the pages of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, totally removed from the cheap motel room and small town Australia she was bunkered up in. Like Madam Bovary, she was dangerously drunk on the pages of fiction. She had felt herself read passages and then take them into her body, and before she knew it she was acting out of desire. She heard Samson in the motel room next door, moving around. She was thirsty for something, for someone who had not had unfathomable trauma like Salem or Luna. She wanted someone to block out this feeling of love that threatened her carefully controlled world. She closed her eyes, drank vodka to quench the fever and fell asleep. She could not open up that chapter again. She had begged him to come and take these photos for her. Samson was the last one on her side at the paper and besides that, he had a new girlfriend.

The fever sent her from one side of the bed to the darkness of the night sea. She heard screams and felt seaweed twisting around her. Through it all there was a girl whispering to her, whispering that she wanted to show her something, whispering to her that she knew where the true story was. She passed figures of women, mermaids, figureheads and scenes out of books that had remained frozen in time under the sea. Shipwrecked stories and submerged fictions that smiled at her to join them.

Bella woke, struggled out of the wet sheets that clung to her and got up to get some Panadol.

She had none. She could still hear Samson next door, or at least his television. It sounded like a porn channel. She knocked on the wall, loudly. The sound turned off. Silence.

She waited. She thought about asking him for some painkillers or sleeping tablets. She hated having to show him her weakness, she hated getting sick. She made her way to his door and knocked, it was freezing and her shirt clung to her. Her body was burning up.

Samson opened the door and led her into the room, he took her wet clothes off and put her in his bed; cooled her down with cold towels. Funny how sexy she was like this, he thought, quiet and needy for a change. It turned him on. He asked if he could photograph her, just like she was now, so she could see how beautiful she was.

'I am not beautiful Samson. No one has ever called me beautiful.'

'I am not calling you anything. I want to show you, so it could be a fact that you could hold in your hands.'

Bella could feel lost seas of tears about to break her to pieces. She turned away from him.

'You are beautiful Bella Luce and I am proud of your fight on this issue but I think you need to see what it is doing to you, you are wasting away.'

'That's because I can't eat.'

'Well whatever it is, you are in the half-world, the in-between. Don't lose yourself. It is a dangerous place. I have photographed lots of starving models before I got out of fashion. It is an alluring place to dwell, but dangerously close to somewhere you can't control. You don't want to end up where they do. '

'I can control this if I just can get inside the detention centre, spend more time with Luna, see

how they are treating her. Find out what they are trying to hide all the time.'

'You need to take some time off. Forget about it, you can't get past all the bureaucracy. Write the story, I'll take some pictures and the tide will turn when it is ready.'

'Don't you fucking change on me too Samson! Don't just get married, buy a house, have kids and wait for the fucking tide to turn. Just don't.'

She was crying, he was seeing her cry, Goddamn it.

Bella, tried to blink her tears away through the fever, but her body would not listen to her. She was grabbing him, scratching and biting him, he was holding her tight not sure if they were going to have sex or fight. Neither of them knew. And then they did. The thirst of fever was in both of them. They were free. Yet not so very far away were hundreds of bodies locked away, shut away, and the whole fucking country was indifferent to it. So what else could they do?

'I hate poets now, and poetry.'

She had read that line somewhere, but she flung it at him.

He grabbed her arm and twisted her to her knees, she continued.

'I hate photographers also and the voyeurs who pay so much to see a fucking picture of someone else's pain.'

He grabbed her fever pulsing body by the neck and fucked her,

'I hate this fucking newspaper we work for and the cunts who run it and the cunts who read it.'

He rammed his fist into her mouth to shut her up. She bit down on his fingers and clamped them in her mouth. All she could taste was blood. Then she slept.

[35]

Bella woke in the motel bed.

Bella woke in the psychiatric hospital bed.

Bella woke in the hotel bed at the writer's festival.

Bella woke. Looked out at the blue night, at the moon.

Bella through her bruises and fog reaches for a novel.

Bella through her fog and hangover reaches for her lover.

Bella through her pain and anguish reaches for her nurse.

She reaches for something to hold and to hold her up.

She feels the wetness between her legs, is it the sea?

No, it is red, red. Red like she has never seen before.

No limits to the time you can get fever

It was a line from *Wide Saragossa Sea*. Who was deciding which storyline she should follow? Her reading was no longer pure so how could she rely on novels to steer her through anymore? They won, she thinks. They won.

She holds her legs together, she holds her baby in, and dials the operator methodically. She speaks to the women's hospital. They tell her to come straight in. She rings a taxi.

[36]

[37]

You think you know whose baby this is Reader?

Are you close to owning what you did that night you curled up with me? Let yourself remember that night. We were alone in bed, you held me. You thought it was safe to be with me. Thought I would keep quiet if you closed the pages of me, threw me aside. Is my body not warm enough to hold a baby? Is it because I am cold, that I can't hold something warm and pure? Can I not protect the words that might come out of a child's mouth? Am I too close to the fire that took my parents? Am I too full of fire?

'Bella the Journalist' closes her eyes in the back of the taxi and remembers that windy, hot night when the flames had taken her parents. She tried to protect them, but the heat was too much, she felt it on her skin, felt the layers of time and women and haunted dreams, moist around her heart. She looks into the eyes of the stranger who is driving the taxi tonight. She wishes *he* were a *she*, as he drives her through the suburbs of Adelaide, talking about the weather. The wind, the drought, the fires. She sits on her coat, toilet paper stuffed into her underpants and stares at her phone for answers. Who to call if she couldn't make the interview, if she couldn't be 'Bella the Journalist' anymore? Couldn't hold the story inside her anymore?

Bella stares out the window at You.

You who are in the street, in your beds, reading the paper. You who are in the moon itself, looking over the walls of pain, into the hearts of starving, cold children who need love.

Is there blood on your hands? On my hands, Reader? Are we all playing Lady Macbeth?

If I printed that it was your appetite for words, for love, for desire, that caused this lady to bleed, and that child to die, could you trust my sources? If you followed one storyline to the end, what

would you choose? Could you be faithful to just one novel?

As life seeped out of Bella, she thought numbly about the story she should have written tomorrow, about the date on the newspaper that it would have appeared. She rang Samson to say she couldn't do the interview and asked him to call the paper for her, get himself another writer? She thought of the date she had circled that would have been when her baby would have been born. She thought about these numbers and tried to keep them in her head as she walked around and around the hospital looking for the reception. Numbers didn't lie like words. While waiting to see a doctor Bella watched the fingers of a man reading the paper. She could see the words dipping in and out of him as he waited for his part of a baby to be brought into the world - or not. Another life. Next to life is death. Next to freedom is imprisonment. Next to water is fire. Next to her dead baby were old lovers. None of them could create life. The sea had its own force. Its own way of drowning. The sea washed her broken body down in a swirl of mad women, before it spat her out. In the end it is no more 'Bella the Writer' or 'Bella the Journalist's' story, than it is my story, or your story. It is after all, all *story*. All ink, all blood, to be washed away in history, by those who know how to write, and those who can pay those who write.

Bella lay there with numbers and mathematical equations in her head while they did an ultrasound of her uterus and told her they could not see a fetus. She walked numbly around her room for hours before she collapsed with more blood pouring out of her. The empty contractions shook her body as she was taken into a bed where she lay for days that seemed to belong to another person. She was unable to listen to her voicemails, or write, or read. Eating seemed unnecessary, and her commitment to fighting for Luna died with the story of the baby. Luna herself had stopped eating weeks ago, and having not heard from Bella or her father, had slowly wasted away. When Samson came to the hospital to see if Bella was all right, he told her

about Luna and she collapsed:

‘Take me somewhere where I can’t hurt myself.’ Bella murmured.

Samson didn’t have to look far to find the right place for her, his years of working in fashion with drug addled anorexic models fresh out of private psychiatric clinics, meant he knew the places for those who had money. He made the necessary calls, and only after securing Bella a bed did he realise he loved her. He’d always loved her.

Bella stayed in hospital alone until the miscarriage was completed. The remains of a fairytale scraped away and the bleeding stopped.

Then she quietly left the page.

IV

A Book of Names

More Women.

Oh, I have enough on my plate!

They'll have to play

With each other.

Dorothy Porter
Akhenaten

[38]

Prologue

Novels are like dreams. Either we are able to throw ourselves into their pages with body and soul, or not. Believe they are written just for us. These words have your name on them. Breathe life just for you. Come, Reader, let me, 'Bella the Writer', take your hand. Let me lead.

Your hand is warm but hesitant, it curls into mine and when this happens my feet curl up too. But you can't see them, only read the words telling you they do. What sort of dance befits this occasion? What blot on your dance card could I be? Turning your hand over I see your lines. Life. A short line, but strong. So I ask you, small, small talk,

'Would you rather live a short passionate life, or a long stable one?'

I know what you will answer. Fate is dealing you a short lifespan. Use it well. Use it boldly.

So we are dancing. 'Bella the Writer' and 'You the Reader'. Me and You. Or are we one and the same? Dancing off the pages, out of the locked rooms of form and meaning. Above the clouds, above the novel. We can see the beginning, the middle and the end. In one stretched out line, of life. Of lives. Of your life, her life, my life. Life, that thing you read about that happens to other people.

Reader, I know your future and you trust me with your heat. I am letting you into my head, into the women that share my bed. Some are real some are fictional. They have all left scars on my soul and haunt me in this limbo of plot and sanity. If we are to be lovers, let's make poetry for the next series of moments.

[39]

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and frances is kicking and screaming

in human bondage

and zelda is reading madam bovary

and yayoi is painting moments

and virginia is reading anna karenina

and lucia is dancing words

and marilyn is reading ulysses

and yoko is reading miss smilla's feeling for snow

and sylvia is reading anne

and anne is reading sylvia

and vivien is reading macbeth

and janet is reading wuthering heights

and you are both reader and protagonist

while bella the writer dances between you all

[40]

Frances

Of Latin origin, meaning 'from France'.

'I hate making movies Mama!'

You down scotch. You get angry.

You are not a good drinker.

You get too, too .....

what's the word,

confident.

'I hate making movies Mama but oh

how you love being a Movie Star's Mamma!'

And they hate you in Hollywood.

The frosted, up its ass,

sugar coated Hollywood of the forties.

'Arrest me baby, again and again!'

So they do. Arrest you.

They arrest you at the Knickerbocker Hotel.

Take you to hell

from the Knickbocker Hotel to

the Santa Monica Jail to

the Asylum

in four easy days.

They straddle you,

wrestle you.

They straightjacket you,

buckle you in.

In.

All in front of your Mamma's

precious neighbors.

Oh, and the papers!

Tough Mamma love.

They gag your rough words,

'You Godaaaamned Bitch!'

You were revoltingly aggressive.

Mamma hated it.

Mamma hated it.

Eaten alive with ambition.

Impossible to live with.

Madly in love with the pain of theatre,

not the gloss of Hollywood.

Method Actor. You were *real* baby.

You felt, and explored

every woman you played.

If your characters slept together,

you slept together

If your character drank,

you drank.

You acted and reacted.

A deadly game of self-destruction.

You watched your best friend kill herself,

so you could play the part with *truth*.

You studied pain, weakness and love.

You wanted to be a part of The Group.

Stanislavski worshipping, confused talents.

Live theatre cannot fit into a frame

of screen time.

Oh but you try.

Yep, this life, this death,

makes for a good story.

Scrubbing your face clean of make-up every day.

Thick caked on forties make-up.

Where are you under that? Who are you?

Photographed. Eyed.

Told to walk. To sit. To lie down.

Lights! Camera! Action!

You hated everything about Hollywood,

except the money.

Skyrocketing through depression

with a hot weekly paycheck.

Tedious long waits,

camera angles on a face you didn't recognise

and no hope of grasping onto the spine

of a character.

You look in the mirror and snarl,

'Yeah, I am a bad girl. A real bad girl.

I will do bad things, I will like them.'

You smile in the mirror before the angry self you can't see beyond,

your face blotchy with tears and old make-up as you whisper,

'You lock me up in a crazy house and then tell me

I'm not acting normal!'

So you chew on your own shit and smile up at your tormentor -

who hammers you in the nose.

Oh – Prose!!!

You could always watch from outside, you were as much you, as Frances Farmer. The reader and the protagonist. Always able to submerge yourself into a role. In the end you can't tell or

separate your personality from theirs. An occupational hazard for the reader or the actor. What came first, the mad girl or the art?

Back to the script.

The WARDEN throws FRANCES to the floor and rapes her.

Then gets to her feet and throws down a notebook to FRANCES.

WARDEN: Can I have your autograph?

FRANCES smiles sweetly from her bloody nose and picks up the notebook.

FRANCES: What is your name?

WARDEN: Marian Foster

FRANCES writes

Dear Marian Foster,

Fuck You!

Sincerely,

Frances Farmer

Look in the mirror again.

A face you don't recognise,

brutal and cut stares back at you.

Powder and curling wands

covering your lust. Just.

You don't recognise the sleek,

poised creature in the movie frame

- Frances Farmer.

You take out a cigarette,

as it is the forties,

and you are still,

maybe always will be,

a movie star.

You hold the match to the cigarette, and inhale

the smoke deep into you,

through the narrow paths of materiality

and over the soul.

You exhale into the next life.

[41]

Fanny

A pet name derived from Frances

You want to eat and sleep and dream in freedom.

You want to be an artist not a statistic.

You are notorious.

You are fiction.

Those months, those years, are in black-out.

The in-between, the left-out.

The Fanny Price.

The Paris years.

The Arrival.

The Detention.

The Human in Bondage.

Insane one day, competent the next.

A refugee one day. A terrorist the next.

'On the matter of the insanity of

(- *insert name* -)'

[42]

Zelda

A nickname for the feminine name Griselda, which means 'dark battle', and also the feminine form of the yiddish name Selig, meaning 'blessed', 'happy'.

Surrounded by fire today you burn in silence,

until silence is replaced by that rare combination;

beauty, madness & talent. You make perfect biography.

Like a dancing whirligig you breakdown once, twice,

three times a lady. Insanity gripping your beauty,

hardening your eyes & mouth. Born to burn out

like a lucky star so the papers could say Zelda Sayre

died today, aged forty-eight in a fire.

Surrounded by bush today I write in silence,

until silence is split open by that rare crashing

echo of an old tree splitting & grounding itself.

Like a shooting star's violent blazing finale

across my lonely southern night's sky.

I want to cry out to the star, to the tree.

Hola! I see you! I hear you! Adieu!

I want to share these small deaths with you.

[43]

[44]

Emma

A given female name, derived from the Germanic word 'ermen', meaning 'whole' or' universal'.

Madame Bovary, c'est moi!

Cries Flaubert refusing to stay in the margin.

You, Emma Bovary, fight him for this right.

You fight Zelda too, who, like all your readers,

wants to be you. Play you. Become you.

You are the great individual of fiction.

You are desperate with the rage of unsatisfied desire.

You, unlike Zelda, did not die in fire.

You are the writer of the character as much as Flaubert.

Becoming her. You inhabit her. You see yourself as her.

Just like all the young women in Napoleonic Normandy,

who want to be you. Dance with you.

Dance through the pages of your life.

Madame Bovary, c'est moi!

You flick Charles's constant hands off your neck,

your shoulder, your breasts, your thighs.

Before the wedding you had believed yourself, in love.

You start to wonder about the meaning of the words,

bliss, passion & ecstasy. Words that looked so beautiful

in books. In books. You are in the book.

You love the sea, only for its storms.

You search for emotions, not scenery.

You remember emotions, not names.

Madame Bovary, c'est moi!

You luxuriate in angels, in gondoliers, in nightingales.

You overdo the theatrics in confessional booths.

You make love to fantasies rather than Charles.

You start to detach yourself from him, your husband.

Your husband who you bring so much happiness.

Your husband who had no desire to go to the theatre in Paris.

Your husband who couldn't fence, or swim, or fire a pistol.

Your husband who can't explain the terms you come across

in novels. In the novel. You are in the novel.

Madame Bovary c'est moi!

You want a man who knows about everything.

You want a man to introduce you to passion,

to life and all its mysteries. You don't want a man

who has nothing to teach and wants nothing.

You want, you want, you want. You are wanting.

You want the life that might have been.

The different life, the unknown husband.

Paris swims before your eyes as Flaubert creates it,

a shifting ocean glimmering through a rose-coloured haze.

You spend all your time in your room reading.

You enter into the characters,

till your own heart beats with theirs.

Madame Bovary c'est moi!

You watch with curiosity your own death.

You feel an icy coldness reaching your heart.

The arsenic. The asp. The fall from the window.

The flames, the starvation, the four walls.

You begin to scream, you curse the poison.

Your death shakes your fading frame.

[45]

Yayoi

A Japanese name meaning: 'extensive; full; fill; complete' (ya) & 'life; genuine; birth' (yoi).

She begins by blocking out the moonlight.

Standing with her hair over her white breasts.

She takes one roll of black cardboard, smoothes it out across the glass.

Origami love. Paper wraps rock.

Art can be in the ordinary. Art can be in the repetition.

Art can be in the ordinary. Art can be in the repetition.

So by now, Reader, you think we are talking about art. I hope you don't think I am singling out certain artists. In fact I believe you are also the artist. I am just the journalist, the writer, the editor, the spinner-of-tales. I am the channel for these haunted names to take shape and talk to you, through me, through books, through words on pages.

Can you believe the facts you read? The stories I create. What the biographies or newspapers tell you?

There is always a reason behind art-making. There is always a reason behind love-making: therapy, ego, creation, ambition, primal instinct, need, production, boredom. Why single out one reason from another? It is either bad art or good art. Bad love or good love.

So, like Sibui beauty, I invite you into this little tea ceremony. I invite you to take off something: your pride, shirt, or preconception of what a piece of prose needs to look like.

Close your eyes.

Now I want you to imagine yourself, Reader, as a beautiful young Japanese artist, who unintentionally makes eye contact with a young man in the street.

Your vision starts to wave and spiral. To steady yourself you hold on to this stranger. A connection is made that you do not need words to interpret. Without talking he takes you over to his bike, puts the spare helmet over your head. Strokes your face and hair till you are numb to anything but following this to its conclusion…….

Yayoi herself is looking back at her younger self, from the walls of the psychiatric hospital she calls her home, as if she was a character in a book. As a much older woman now stroking the paper against her studio wall she remembered this day as if it was one of her many yesterdays. A yesterday that belonged to one of the versions of herself she no longer recognised outside her history……..

Riding pillion against this stranger, Yayoi's vision surrendered and her other senses intensified. She held her tongue to the back of his neck. She started to create a landscape from this taste that would become her next art installation - the audience would need to be momentarily blinded to be able to take part in the work. They too would need to black out their world.

So that was how the New York happenings started, from a moment of sensory deprivation that led to a meeting of bodies. In Japan this could never have happened, the tradition of discipline ran too deep, so many of her friends from college folded their desires again and again, as a sword-smith would fold hot metal into perfect deadly form. Underneath what they really craved was more like the ritual suicide of the Samurai.

Without saying a word she walked in front of him, up countless stairs to his Chelsea apartment. She felt his eyes on her the whole way. His hand lightly on the skin below her skirt as he

whispered words in Spanish. Their breathing shorter and more intense until they reached his door and entered into a floating world.

When interviewed by those fawning sixties radio presenters she realised how far away America was from where she felt art needed to take them. This was New York, the street frisson, the hidden violence, the intensity of purpose in this city was crying out to the people. Why call this woman a hooker? This woman a superstar? This man a pornographer? This man an artist? High or low, rich or poor, black or white, what is there beyond this moment? If you can get down on your knees in the snow to assist the cab driver you hailed down wrestle a Christmas tree from under his wheel? If you can hold a tub of ice-cream to your cheek without gloves, imagining the pink capillaries in your face dancing, then, America, you are not numb, you are not yet wanting numbness.

Certain men, she had noticed, in this new adopted home of hers, had a predilection for Asian women. In fact the larger the man, the more they enjoyed a doll, and, well, Spanish men just liked women.

Then later she decided to surround herself with men that just liked men. It was safer to hide there, as she didn't want men. She only wanted peace and to make art, and yet this world she was in only wanted sex.

She contemplated this after he had lifted her easily and thrown her onto his bed, she looked out at New York's Mount Fuji, those twin towers of crowning glory. She enjoyed his silence fucking her. She did not like men's penises, she thought, as she watched his go in and out of her. They scared her. She decided one day she would work on a giant sculpture of penises to alleviate this fear.

Exposure.

Yayoi carried Hiroshima inside her; she did not need the city of New York to add to this inner darkness. Indeed, she craved beauty, safety and stillness in order to build picture poems out of bodies. She felt that in order to live her life as close to the principles of abstraction as she could, she would need to go deep into the void. Disappear into the place where her visionless periods willed her to go.

Later as they talked in broken English over tea and cantaloupe, she realised they had met before at a party. He was a friend of Andy Warhol's, of course. She liked the way they could talk about ideas and his interest in her culture. He was a musician from Valencia; he cut her melon up into little boats for her and placed them on her thigh like a small fleet. He said he had a rehearsal downtown, that she could stay if she liked and maybe they could eat dinner together. That was it: she moved in the next day and New York and that white room became her home. Her silence.

Naked, white and in a bed in a little studio apartment in New York.

Your new lover is leaving for the street below and is soon lost in its beat.

You have just made love, let's call it good love.

This is a beginning.

Everything comes down to polka dots, fragments, moments.

[46]

Lucia

A girl's name of Italian origin. Variant of Lucy, (Latin), meaning 'light'.

'First I want you to imagine your toes',

lulls the voice from the dark.

Nothing like a relaxation session, 'Bella in the Psychiatric Hospital', understands the drill from head to toe.

'I am rolling them in my hands like a boiled egg. I am sitting in front of a bowl of boiled eggs, my sleeves rolled up, ready to take the shell off. I can't speak your language, but I can smile and I have hands. The line, the dot. The dash. The abstraction of notation in music.'

Crotchet, crotchet, semibreve Breathe. Self-obliteration.

Surrender. Lose yourself in my world of hallucinations.

This is the 1930s. This is a gorgeous orgy. Naked fashion. Or is this the meditation tape I had asked the night nurse for to try to stop the soundtrack in my head? A fragment of voice and character I am largely shell through which to hear other voices, other selves, as you put me to your ear and hear my words.

'Your toes and feet are warming against my touch. The layers of skin beneath your shell are fraying into my fingers. I take a warm cloth, almost hot, to your feet. I move the cotton between each toe, one by one, rolling them in my palm till your foot is pink, warm and raw. I take it in my mouth. All of it. Toe by toe. I will eat where you have trod. I will take your words.'

As Lucia now, I contort my body into Ancient Greek statues.

I find the pulse in a vase, my lazy eye pointing off

into another world.

Draped in linen, roped in perfume and framed in Beckett's dialogue,

I am commissioned illumination.

I lie on a chaise.

My brother signs my legal rights away

for throwing a chair.

You are just too much too much too much.

A possibly fictional moment.

Paris in the 1930s.

Lucia's Irishness long since bred out of her.

She danced for him while her father took notes.

That was how it began.

I do not know if my soul has had as many brides as my body.

Beckett states while Lucia hangs

on his every word.

He then writes *Dream*, where three women are vying for his attention; Smerladina-Rima, Syra-Cusa and Alba. Lucia, You and Me. Turn it into art. The girl is just a name. Stained in ink on your page.

Beckett didn't want her, he wanted her father. He wanted to escape his words by destroying their source. Bed the source. Beat the patriarch. Behead the impulse to imitate. Find his voice, outside Joyce. Lucia is just a moveable feast, too much but not enough.

May these hands n'er be clean.

Again Reader, jump into the starring role. I invite you out on the night prowl with me and Lucia the cat. What do you think about that?

You, as Lucia, rub yourself up against sailors,

like a prowling ship cat down by the docks.

The undiagnosed heat of illness drives you there each night.

If the man you love will not touch you,

you will quench your longing with strangers,

with Spanish sailors.

Your senses sated by a man.

Your heat calmed.

Shape shifted.

Crawling out of the storm grey sea you attach yourself to seamen.

In their eyes sits loneliness.

In their bodies,

the roughness of ropes.

You believe your mermaid dance could quench their souls.

Your art would be bodies and tails.

Talk to me, talk to me, talk to me

you would whisper

Take me to your room. Give me land legs for a night.

Sex, dockyards, fish and the sea.

Bring this body back to ground.

Take this soul and place it in a room.

The mermaid Lucia led her rough man upstairs to a room on top of the bar.

One hundred years later this room would be home to a tired academic, her lust spent on philosophy not skin. One night she sees a tail of Lucia, or did she read the tale of Lucia. It was a long time ago now. She thinks over Russian Caravan tea, looking out at the sea.

Your skin smells so sweet.

You, Reader, as Lucia, whisper, as the hot, ale breathe of him reaches your breasts.

Wrap me up in your arms,

you long.

Wrap me up in your legs,

he teases.

We flap, we suck, we dive.

I see the sea in me. You think, as you taste his salt. He thinks he tastes your soul. Your tail alludes pleasure. You are only an object of desire. A muse, a temptress. We can only lie enchanted in words and sex for so long. One room is, even with ocean glimpses, one room.

And the lighthouse sends its message out to the sailors. The room is lit up by a searching light, crossing your face and heavy body.

Hold this flesh on the land, Landlock me,

is your silent plea to the sleeping sailor.

You cannot stay. Lucia the mermaid can only ever be the fantasy.

The dance of the dream.

You, Reader, step out of the role and leave Lucia alone in her fictionalised history. Leaving her body to watch it from your safe place up on high, outside the pages of the novel, above the pool, up on high. It is so easy to observe the world from outside it rather than rollick deeply in it. I forgot about that when I started writing. The characters stay in me, wash themselves onto my skin, and when you leave me, Reader, I must stay with them like a lover, or sometimes like a mother.

That is my role. I stand by my responsibilities and hold them close.

That is love.

[47]

Marilyn

Of Hebrew origin, meaning bitter.

Flesh coloured sequins knotted around breasts,

the bottom at the front, the front at the bottom.

White, white hair and white, white flesh.

An angel of the bottle, needing men,

needing art, needing need.

'Bella the Writer' had written about her before,

You, I can safely say, have read about her before.

Everyone had written about her.

Everyone had slept with her

Every pill she took did something.

Every opinion and every piece of love or lust

made its mark. Took its toll.

Powder and paint.

Ms Monroe sits down in front of the mirror,

sees this face, her face.

The black roots coming through her hair.

Scalp full of volcanic welts from the endless

peroxide burning it into blonde submission.

Picking up her Chanel *Bus Stop* lipstick,

made just for her, she draws endless circles

around and around the mirror

till the lipstick was a red stub and *Bus Stop*

red, blocked out her face.

She phoned someone to phone someone to phone in sick for her,

she went back to bed,

taking more pills than the morning before.

Hoping to get knocked out faster and for longer.

1962. Santa Monica beach alone,

she is framed and framed again and again.

Messy hair, pink sky, orange bikini and yellow scarves

draped around her body, her curves fading.

A fisherman's cardigan, wrapped around her sadness,

her legs play in the sand and frolic for the camera.

She is the sea.

She is effortless in changeable beauty and emotion.

You and I stand with her in the waves.

A brown swallow that should be in warmer parts,

flies overhead.

Brentwood housekeeper's troubled girl-woman,

no furniture, just the sex she could put into a still symbol.

A thing. A wild thing making hearts sing.

As she skips to the microphone in Korea,

hair curled, ears ringed. Wanting love.

She caged herself between her acting coach and her publicist,

till she couldn't make a move without someone saying she could.

She frees herself from herself between the sheets,

away from the eyes of these mothers,

with men who want her body.

Not your soul Marilyn, and not your baby, baby.

The baby you carry inside you.

The baby we all carry inside us.

She frees herself from herself between the pages

of books written by the great men.

The Arthur Millers, the James Joyces,

Curled up in created character she is wanted.

In books there is that greatest of things,

structure.

A beginning, a middle and an end.

Without this we are all at sea.

Without this we are unframed.

Without this we are mad women.

As Marilyn, I cry in the hospital,

wanting a mother, wanting a baby.

As Marilyn, you slide under my sheets,

you lie next to me in my single bed.

‘Mummy’ you cry in the night.

You are a child again,

Norma Jean in a foster home,

pushing off the hands of an older boy,

your mummy in a psychiatric institute.

Then you are alone again,

an adult in the Payne-Whitney Hospital

behind bars, with glass walls,

where your every move is watched by nurses

transfixed by the movie star in you.

In interviews you say -

My mamma had mental disturbances and she was taken away.

Taking an orange texta, you cross out

all the images you hate on the proof sheet.

Of you as Marilyn. Of you as you.

Of me as you. Of you as her.

As the years add on the crosses are bigger,

there are more of them, until one day

you cross yourself out entirely.

37.22.25

You weigh in.

They ask you what you weigh.

They ask you if you are happy.

Are you happy?

That question. Who is happy?

As you say, you are generally miserable.

The play of Ms. Monroe,

the one that needs alcohol and barbiturates.

Give me. Give me chemical sleep.

Seconal, Miltown, Equanil, Librium.

Give me, give me Nembutal.

Sometimes it seems so normal

to take one pill to go to sleep

and another to get up.

And Miss Monroe thinks to herself,

after her third husband runs from her -

> *All I do is take drives around the block until the drugs get me to a place where I can stand going on set in front of the cameras and crew, to be framed up for men who want to fuck me over*

And yet again I have written about her,

and yet again you have read about her,

and are *we* happy, or generally miserable?

Am I closer to understanding her?

To inhabiting her?

Am I 'Bella the Writer'?

'Bella in the Psychiatric Hospital'?

The character in my own novel?

Am I any closer to understanding how it feels to be you?

Or you, me?

And sometimes I want to shake you, Reader, so you get me.

Then I remember you won't take me seriously,

because I am only in a book of fiction.

A created persona, a Marilyn Monroe.

Looking for a home, but destined to be alone.

[48]

Molly

A Hebrew baby name, a pet form of Mary, meaning bitter.

If I could tattoo words on my body,

it would be the words of Molly Bloom,

it would be the soft snowfall I missed

this morning as I lay lazily in my bed,

it would be the kicks and flagellations

I give myself for all the things

I didn't do.

I would tattoo Molly's fleshiness

all over my neck,

my feet, my throat.

I would have my body

a walking piece

of literature and desire.

I would order you to 'undress'.

I would slowly take my layers off,

the layers I wear after I missed that snowfall,

that rare snowfall that I wrote about in fiction

seven years ago and yet

I still missed it.

Glove by sleeve by jacket by dress by stocking by shoe,

till all you see is words in blue ink,

the pain of stigmata still fresh.

yes I said yes I will

Imprinted by Joyce's letters I let you read me.

I am the performer, you the audience.

I am breathless since the punctuation went

consume my words and then consume me close your eyes breathe me in are you inside or outside my body now my body of words i am urgent i will speak over and over again to you i am earthy i am starry i am milky i am fat i am sleepy i am fantasy i am lazy drift through my dreams drift through my tongue in sanskrit in oh la la lala i am cannibal in form of durga i am a mantra a chanter i am a stream of conscious powered dream of molly i am the snow that you missed the options you didn't take the magic you slept through the miracle at your doorstep the love of your life you knocked back the child you aborted the call home you never made the last words of love you slammed the door on the epiphany you never had the guru you walked past

the letter you never sent the one that got away the call from the sea the casting you didn't go for the path you didn't see the bloomsday you didn't quit smoking the kiss you

pause

the kiss you…

pause

the kiss you…

fuck it

the kiss you miss

oh and the sea the sea….

[49]

[50]

Virginia

Blossoming; Chaste; virginal.

The wolf is at the door. The wave is at the shore.

Vanessa holds Virginia's sanity tight,

with handwritten responses

to this emotion, this success, this failing.

She could love Vita, she could love the lion.

Her pen would forever bear children.

Her heart held by the midnight society.

Her voice a combination of sensations

and the sea, the sea.

She longs to strip prose of anything

but the poetry.

She writes,

> *Let me then create you…*
>
> *in wood block print, in octopus ink.*

You lie on the spot of the old ice-cream shop,

in this lonely, in this fading,

September day.

Watching boat after boat float,

you hear someone say,

'Everyone says I love you too much'.

And you wish to be a poet;

and you wish to be a lover.

But you hide in the sand,

where you lie,

watching someone, kissing someone

between the legs,

finding a starfish on her tongue.

You hear past waves putting out past fires

of general stores, on the shores.

And you wish to be a sailor;

And you wish to be a father.

Watching boat after boat float,

from the panorama

between your arm and the sand.

You are part of the earth,

of the sun, of the water, of the moment,

of this wave outside the frame.

Even at rest Virginia is at sea.

Stroking her thighs and creating

blazing volcanoes of words and ideas.

Not novels, she can't call them that,

elegies of sensation and wave.

Yet they said she should not write,

that she should be restrained,

from that which gave her rage,

from that which gave her ecstasy.

I don't want to make waves. I just want to write in my own style.

But what if your man likes his women mad?

There is something mysterious and ungettable about them.

Leonard confesses,

while Virginia sits in the bathtub

working on her sentences.

Virginia said that she wanted a quiet life

of reading and writing.

Of writing and reading.

He gets in the bath with you,

'Bella the Writer',

wanting to make love.

He waits till the water is cold, your toes blue.

You finish your revisions then,

a dragon fly caught in a web,

you allow him in.

You are sufficiently numb, and besides

making love in the bathtub

(after a successful morning of revisions)

helps your moods.

By the time you are both having a cigarette

after he has come,

you will be at your happiest of the day.

Ritual. Quiet, simple ritual was your medicine.

'Bella the Writer' has become Virginia the Woolf .

Or are they both just parts of you, the Reader?

As Virginia picks up *Anna Karenin*a for her afternoon reading,

I almost lose you to her.

Reader, Reader where are you?

Repeat after me. Repeat after me.

Art is in the. Art is in the…

Does your book have pages?

Or are you reading my body on the screen.

A screen made of dots, broken down into

dots, dots ……

[51]

Anna

A Latin form of the Greek name Ava, meaning 'favor' or 'grace'.

Anna and I are vying for your attention,

Reader.

I kiss you,

making sure your tongue is held tight.

You are looking for my centre, for what drives me.

We are on a first date. I don't know what you are feeling,

you seem happy,

as you look through my pages

of wet ink.

Later, three months down the track,

we reconnect to see a play.

There are always words and characters,

between us.

You take my hand in the dark theatre,

we are in the centre row.

I purr,

so this is the centre,

this is the home.

I can't stop the heaviness in my eyes as I write this.

No lightness of being to be seen.

We are on a train now,

Virginia, you and me.

Reading Tolstoy of course.

Where else should one read Tolstoy?

You are making jam,

according to the way the female parliament does in *Anna Karenina*,

without water.

Passing the spoon

over frothing sugar,

shaking off the clinging jam,

leaving a plate of

yellow-red scum and blood-colored syrup.

I am waiting to get my jar,

use its safe preservation to stir

my natural sugars.

I, like one of Dolly's children,

think the scum of the jam the best part.

I wait for you to kill the fluorescent lights

disturbing my irises.

My irises that are attacking themselves.

Become my natural Bella Donna so I can see

the architecture of moments.

I am dancing with you now,

your body knows the moves

by memory of the novel.

The music stops.

You drink a coffee. Eat a chocolate.

Now I want you to imagine

meeting my words without my body.

Close your eyes and look at the page.

Am I talking to you?

Can this book whisper to you?

Or do you need my ink.

The ink I stain skin and table with in 1932,

trying to block out the pain of the cane.

Four slow strikes on the back of my legs for falsehood.

One

Two

Three

Four

Again I am not with you in the moment.

I am wandering all over our lifespan.

I am all the words and all the characters you have ever met.

I am the voice in your head.

I am the silence of the untranslatable.

The words you shouldn't trust.

[52]

Yoko

A female Japanese given name. Depending on the kanji used in writing it, it can have meanings including 'Free Child' (暢子), 'Sunny Child' (陽子), 'Glorious Child' (容子), 'Ocean Child' (洋子), 'Leaf Child' (葉子), etc.

With a teacup.

Black cup of tea.

White cup of tea.

Cut the teapot in half.

Cut my dress. Black bag.

Get in; come in this black bag with me.

Leave your baggage at the door.

Hold my hand. Touch the person next to you.

Not like that. Stop.

Joking.

Touch yourself.

Black out.

Touch yourself.

Black out.

White cup of tea.

Cut the teacup in half.

Install. Art. Create. Sound art.

A universe of sound in my mind art.

Will someone read this and think it is about them.

Are you fictionalised? Sensationalised?

Tony, get in this bag. Now!

Tony climbed into the darkness of the carpetbag.

He heard Yoko breathing beside him.

I'm pregnant.

They sat there breathing, his right leg against her thigh.

She had purple suede pants on. He ran his hand

up the suede to her stomach and held it there.

Is it mine?

Yes.

That was all he needed to hear.

He kissed her inside the black bag.

Next door a camera assistant,

skilled at changing the film-roll,

took one roll out of the magazine

and placed another one inside.

Another tedious long take of one man

giving head to another man.

Inside the bag, under the hand,

a new idea.

A blank canvas of possibilities.

Inside.

Later, Yoko would create a set of prose instructions for women wanting to get pregnant. Before IVF, before surrogacy, before donors or designer- a-la-Carte babies. Fertility rituals, which she sold for one hundred pounds each, rolled up into a shell.

Prose Instructions 1

Take one young man back to your studio.

Ask him to light the fire. Watch him take his shirt off.

Write 'Rally' on his chest in pink lipstick.

Sit cross-legged and naked under the stars.

Call out to the first shooting star you see.

Go inside and make love to the young man.

Smoke cinnamon, eat stardust.

Tell each other your deepest secret.

Take a photo in black and white.

Prose Instruction 2

Start a rumor about your pregnancy.

Write a poem to your new baby.

Bathe in goat's milk.

Paint your feet with henna.

Go to the cinema alone.

Run naked through the zoo.

Take a hair from a polar bear.

Make love in the rain.

Make love on a train.

Her hair was long and black. She was fashionably thin again, stress always helped with fashion. Not with pain. Japanese foot binding. Scissors might cut paper but are smashed by rock. She had met him earlier. She had no idea why someone as famous and popular as he was would be so interested in her work. She didn't take it seriously. She played the role of pet well. Pet freak, pet artist, pet Asian, pet whore.

He looked at her art, climbed the ladder, and ate the apple, sat inside the bag. He was like a boy in a playground that he kept coming back to. Getting faster on the swing, more daring on the slippery slide and more confident of the concepts. He had toys at home he wanted someone to come back and play with them. It was as simple as that.

Do you want to come back to my place and record something together?

Rock stars are so clichéd, she thought.

Of course Yoko was sexy. She was suicidal, older. She was from Japan, but from New York. She was the antithesis of the blonde English woman he had at home, who seemed to have changed totally since having a child. She was the perfect fusion of culture, mother, lover and playmate.

At home with her second husband, and the child they had conceived in a psychiatric hospital in Japan, Yoko tried to block out the desire to run off and play with John in his big, big house. She cooked. She stroked her beautiful girl's hair and read her stories. She thought of this marriage she was in, like she thought of everything, in terms of concepts.

The Marriage Bag

Step One: Meet someone you have a connection with.

Step Two: Climb into a black bag together.

Step Three: Take off your clothes.

Step Four: Now three of you are in the bag.

(Repeat Step Three and Four as many times as desired.)

Step Five: Space and air and quiet are now at a premium.

Step Six: Where is the audience?

She kissed Myoko's scalp, sung quietly to her and wished she could be happy in this marriage but it was feeling just like the previous marriage. The artist is the art. The reader is the book. Why do I only feel free when I am making art?

The next day she left her six-year-old girl with her husband and took up her public place in another man's bed. Another man's head. She wanted to scream. Always. She wanted to scream from morning to night.

'Bella the Writer' wants to put into words the scream she heard from the bottom of the sea, the rage of all mothers who have ever had their baby, their idea of a baby, their flesh, their blood ripped away from them through words and legal structures and words and papers and words and biology and words and broken promises and mistakes and words and death and the unknown. A lioness roar for the nothing that runs through your hands like water when all you want to hold is your baby.

Eioughhhhhhh

The desperation of life is life itself. A mother guinea pig watches as the ginger tabby cat works

out the way to get into the hutch and eats her new babies, one by one.

Yoko sitting in hospital, her baby dying, John whispering:

Art is another kind of motherhood

Eoooiii, Aghhhiueee, naaahhhoooooo

Truth is the fire of sitting helpless as your own child is dying inside of you. The moon is gazing at the earth, teaming with vines, with life, pulling the tides of the ocean.

As she lay, sticky with blood she would not let them wash from her thighs, cameras from tabloid newspapers circling the hospital, the anarchy inside her, inside the storm she screamed out her invisible motherhood. This pain can only welcome one thing. Death.

Oh. Yoko.

And when they shot him, you could not cry. And when they buried him you could not cry. You went into the studio and wrote song after song, the fury of what you wanted to say in every art form possible, would not be sated. It kept you awake at night and ran through your head at the funeral. When they read out the will and you had been left everything, you did not cry. The Japanese principles of restraint and discipline are part of who you are. You love, of course you love. You loved him; he was a very useful man and very good to you. You were good to him too of course, in bed and in art. In bed. In. Bed In.

In bed now. Yoko, with money, Yoko with status. Yoko curls that famous body around *Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow.*

[53]

Smilla

A name invented by the Danish author Peter Høeg, a *short form of Smillaaraq, meaning 'humming one'.*

This moment is about Smilla.

Or about the time I read Smilla,

or the time 'Bella the Writer',

became 'Smilla the Character'.

Or the time 'Bella the Writer' traveled home by cargo ship,

through the fjords of Norway to Sydney.

Around the world in 84 days.

Stick with me, Reader as I re-create Smilla. I spent so long with her that winter.....

If Smilla closed her eyes and rested her hands on the ice, she could feel its voice calling to her. The white cold surface reflected the sun and blinded you without dark glasses. She closed her eyes, chasing the dancing images, seeking the peace of a new land without the borders of the physical. The world that the blind knew existed, but those who could see had lost the art of finding its quiet wisdom.

The snow spoke to her in fantasies.

She felt the old sea captain's deadness of heart as he navigated his cargo into the port for the four hundredth time.

She felt the broken hearts of the women beneath the ice who lost their life to the sea. She followed the pink glow of love rising on the cheek of a young girl as she raced home on her bike

after her first kiss. She could read the guilt and self-hate in the writer who was slowly destroying himself with alcohol. She felt another hand, press against hers, or was the ice melting under her touch and colouring her sensing of the snow? She felt the touch of recognition in the narrative of her creation, the veins of her blood. The blonde Smilla was smarter than her creator but that was his intention, smarter than the blonde or brunette Hollywood creations that drowned in their own sex appeal. Smilla, released from the book that type cast her as a depressed, cool blonde, imagines herself sitting on a warm beach on her fifty-fifth birthday…

She has retired from her job and she is at the start of her new life. She has these visions again and again. Once she had to be woken up by her yoga teacher, as she had been deep in this dream long after the class had ended their meditation.

'Smilla.'

Her teacher had gently called to her from deep within her reverie, her touch felt like hot lava on her thigh. A dog barked and she woke up instantly and bundled up her things, embarrassed. She did not like being touched or singled out in any way, she had chosen this yoga class because she could hide in the back as there were so many people. The idea of them all seeing her asleep on the floor as they left, maybe even snoring, mortified her. The touch of the yoga teacher had startled her. Later that night she tried to read the latest journal article on the effect of climate change on ice loss in Greenland but all she could think of was the touch of this yoga teacher. She read the same sentence over and over,

> *Surface meltwater that reaches the base of an ice sheet creates a mechanism for the rapid response of ice flow to climate change. The process whereby such a pathway is created through thick, cold ice has not, however, been previously observed.*

She knew all about the science of why ice melts but she had not felt it in the way she believed ice itself experienced it. She had always thought the process was akin to the body warming up, and how that worked on a molecular level. She had never felt comfortable with that analogy, however, as she knew it was the dissolving of shape that was the most fundamental change. And this could not be equated to the human body, or blood, warming and loosening. The experience of touch, however, had triggered another, deeper experience, that seemed akin to the process that ice sheets go through as they melt. The touch seemed to penetrate through her skin, and change its structure to a more fluid, malleable shape.

The touch had left her longing.

[54]

Sylvia

An Italian female given name of Latin origin, with English-language cognate Sylvia.
The name originates from the Latin word for forest Silva, meaning 'spirit of the wood'.

And so he drove you to Yaddo.

You looked at him all the way.

Your self a writer.

Your self a wife.

Your self with foetus.

Off you go to Yaddo.

Yabba Dabba Doodo!

Sitting in your little white bed,

like the bed in the hospital,

like the bed at Winthrop,

the bed at Smith.

I am always in little beds,

little white beds.

Isn't this lovely!

Telling lies.

And that dark poet

after that dark poet

slept in that bed in Yaddo

wanting to soak up the silver girls craft.

Sleeping with the ghost of Sylvia Plath.

I will sleep with her in the artist's colony

but not in the madhouse.

And now I do. Oh yes now I do.

And is this too fluid, this prose?

Are you ashamed to read such liquid utterance?

Such Molly Bloom?

Reader of the book. Viewer of the frame. Dreamer of the dream.

So the silver girl types out dreams of the mad, at Massachusetts General Hospital. Tapping the unconscious outpourings of another Smith girl, another, and another, each with their basket of orange tablets, with their name on the front. She sees one college girl after another come and go, through those hospital doors, and she types. Tap, tap, tap. She taps their words.

Then there was Aurelia, there was the biography about the biographies of her, the secrets, the confessions, of daughter to mother, mother to daughter, lover to lover, the autobiography of the poet. The poet selves.

The sad, silver girl is not dead when I chant her *Fever 103*. Her hot, pulsing voice is on heat through me. The arguments over anyone, let alone a rich little silver girl, comparing herself to a Jew in the Holocaust continue. The victims of the victims are their children. The black pain of the heart has a scale. Is the Western writer free to write about the refugee girl? Is art ever art

if it is born in hysteria? One man's exotic is another man's wife. I wake up and gasp at the woman beside me in this little white bed, in my little room. A woman who is caught in her bell jar forever. And a rock star croons, *I wish I had a Sylvia Plath*. While Plath is writing Ariel poems in a white heat of mania and death wishing. Burning with addictive energy. The lethal combination of loneliness and alcohol. The furies of addiction killing her art. *So she can get me pretty loaded on gin.* In a Boston writing class they once all sat. The Kings and Queens of confessional poetics. Her, blonde and willowy. Her, dark and sex. One bit at lips till they were purple with blood. The other just wrote about it. They both wanted to die.

[55]

Anne

French form of Anna.

A fly will insist on settling on my teacup. A man I have not yet met will insist that I write to him. It is not enough to just be a mother and wife. I try to explain to Billy, my mother in law, I need more than that.

'Why don't you just make poetry a hobby?' Was her inevitable response.

Sitting alone near the phone. With pills. Always with pills. I look out at the pool from my window, and imagine my husband naked in there at the end of the evening, once the kids are asleep, and he has cooked the meal, and we have had a few cocktails. That is my favourite time of the day. It is the getting to that time that kills me. Just the getting to it. Sometimes, since he has been in therapy too, I wonder about this bubble of a world we have created for ourselves here in Middle America. I don't have to leave except for appointments to see the psychiatrist or the hairdresser. I get the shopping done for me. I get paid enough to attend my readings, $250 a read, and usually a new man who will love me for a night. Keep me alive another day.

Yet the new man's letters do not come anymore. It seems the more love I get the more I need. I refuse to abandon any of them for the other. I need them all, and *more.* It is a narcotic of the highest order, the idea of someone loving you completely. But then what?

It's not that I want to go to bed with you Reader; I just want to be sure you love me.

Later as the afternoon creeps by and my visits and phone calls are over I may write a poem. I may start to prepare for the reading next month. I may read. I can't begin to get under the skin of Henry Miller, or Salinger, but I admire them so much. I wrote a fan letter to Saul Bellow,

thinking nothing of it, and then felt so strange when he wrote back. I felt elated, then cold. Like I did when that young girl wrote to me about my poetry, saying all these things about what I meant to her, and how I had given her hope, and I just felt so messed up. I mean, I can put these things on paper, I can phrase something, and pretty it up, but my life is a mess. Salinger's life may well be a mess too, Bellow's probably is or why would he write back to me? Where are the lives that are not lonely and searching for meaning? Not in literature darlings.

I grow so tired, and then I have massive leaps of creative energy where I can't keep out of my studio. I write and I smoke and I talk and I write and I smoke and I talk. I am so nervous about my health, my talent, my reputation, my children, and the men in my life, and my mother in law. I put it all in my pipe and smoke it to the page. Smoke it down to the page. Trance like I watch Anne outside Anne. I see the parts of all the characters in myself and her.

Anne swims back and forth in her suburban pool, paid for by her Radcliffe scholarship for women artists. Her mantra going back and forth in her head. 'I'm going to spend my whole life getting well and then it is going to be over.' Action always keeping anxiety at arm's length. Swimming over the dead women she wanted to be. The celebrity and fame she had won stopped her getting honest answers about her work.

'Is this any good?'

'Am I any good?'

Her seductive style had created a counter transference problem, so she was sinking in lies. Swimming through them, back and forth, lap after lap.

Then cocktail hour.

All sleek and clumsy with husband or lover or daughter.

‘I’m alive, I’m alive. I’m seething, I’m burning. If you come too close you’ll get burned.’

Then Sleeping Beauty routine:

‘Please stay. In thirty seconds I’ll be asleep.’

She grabs your hand, clings to it in the hotel bed. A stranger to keep her afloat.

‘I’m in such a panic I won’t sleep that even drugged I think I’m not sleeping.’

She confides in open confessionals.

Then the morning suburban contentment. Climb out of bed. Chirp to the world that I am awake. Scrambled eggs. Flip the radio on for soft music, coffee and read in the sun. My working day starts when I wish. My typewriter waits for my fingers. I am a queen of my art form, a raven-haired beauty whose fire is burning me out.

[56]

Vivien

Vivienne is a common female first name derived from the Latin 'Virus', meaning 'alive'.

Twelve thirty nine am in a dense London snow.

An actress slides across the West End holding

an actor's ankles in some mad childish dance.

King and Queen of their art. All pale beauty &

lavender eyes. When drinking is your love

child and your womb lies adoringly cold,

how long before poetry becomes murder?

Ten forty five pm in a warm pink theatre.

A stage manager resets the stage as Elizabeth

in purple boots and fur sinks scotch with Richard.

Natasha blonde & bruised holds Liam to her chest.

Olivier and Vivien quote Hamlet.

While Lyn and Albert watch them all

from their portrait on the dressing room wall.

Seven fifty five pm they stand by high on

beginners call. Locking kohl lined eyes, their souls

connect beneath masks. Harnessed script, sex and fire.

They kiss for luck. Commence the show.

She reaches for her lover's face pushes her small hand

into his mouth. She has his words. Her white skin

defying the insatiable fury within.

Three am is not the time to leave such fiery

scorpions of the night alone. Jealous of the

air her mate breathes if it is not with her. The actress

laughs, drinks, flirts till the last man leaves, drapes herself

over the actor and then if they still have it,

they fall into their old stage rhythm of fingernails,

teeth, bruises, the play within the play. Lights out.

Close your eyes. Darkness.

Could you see a light shining?

An afterimage?

A ghost-like imprint of her.

She is dressed in endless green velvet

corseted beyond modern understanding.

Red petticoats and political scarletting.

1939. Hollywood moment.

Rhett holds her temples,

I will crush you.

Willing her to love him

They are trapped by their games.

Had they blasted you yet Vivien?

Without anesthetic.

Your pretty little mouth

biting down on the bit.

She comes to me again and again in a dark cinema.

Blue eyes, black hair and pale skin.

She is desire and earth together, without interval.

As Vivien sailed out exhausted from Melbourne to Hobart, she gazed down at the sea in Port Phillip Bay. She thought she saw her daughter, looking up at her from the waves, a little girl desperate for her mother

'Suzanne' she cried to the child in the waves.

'Suzanne I am sorry, I forgot your birthday.'

Then, like a kitten splashed by water, she ran inside to be patted to sleep by her lover. Olivier was grumpy from his knee operations and no fun at all really.

'Oh Dan, I wish people didn't keep comparing every character I play to Scarlett O'Hara. Thanks be to God we are leaving this rotten country.'

Olivier believed that they were theatre people and belonged in no country, only on the stage, or in the rehearsal room. She would take the part, she decided then. She would always take the part, no matter what the cost. As the company sailed across from Tasmania to New Zealand to England, they rehearsed *Antigone,* and she began to prepare for Blanche.

Meanwhile Tennessee Williams was conjuring speech to poetry on the page.

So Olivier would direct her in it. He would push and pull her into brutal submission. Night after night she would go through the character's breakdown, and she would leave the stage white, distraught and shaking.

It is like a bulldozer ploughing through me each night

Vivien wrote to her first husband. A husband who loved her forever.

I can't shake off the part. I can't. It is strangling me in its harsh lighting. I am like a fading butterfly with this talent that I have fought for getting swamped by Blanche's madness. I must crawl over glass to make this play work.

The slip from character to person. Acting or unlicensed therapy?

'My role doesn't suffer, but I do',

Vivien cries, shivering in the corner in weakness before her cue.

The critics stoned and stoned her. She put her soul on the line and they kicked it again and again and the audiences came from miles around to see her break.

'Where does *she*, Vivien Leigh, live inside this!'

She cries to the lover in the boat,

to the mirror before she goes on stage,

to the assistant paid to hear her,

to the man who wants to sleep with her…..

Back on the boat, before he left her, before the final break, she whispers to the waves below,

'Darling daughter, do not ask me to remember your birthday and I will not trouble you for the future.'

She sails over seas, reading F Scott Fitzgerald. Loving two men, her lungs doused with tuberculosis. This is the moment of cracking-up. The parts she plays, the notices she gets. Lady Macbeth. Waits. Lady Macbeth waits.

Then he left her. He left the party that she had stood at the gate of, ordering to its attendants,

'This is going to be the greatest party of all time. No one is going to leave!'

Like a cat, turned to a panther she waited, claws out for the end of the run. The theatre blood that kept them alive, the thrill of a new project can eclipse all else when the parts are full of passion and fire. You can prolong the inevitable dark hatred that has made the real life unbearable. You channel it all into the role. The fake family of the theatre, the future that is the

film and its years of pre-production. The future is the present moment. Extending it always, making leaving the party impossible.

Inside the glass heart was always fragile. The breakable part of her was *her*. The terror, anxiety and fear integral to her great beauty. A beauty that held you in awe, like only fragile beauty can. Black curls, lavender eyes, languages teaming out of her mouth, as she flirts with young girls who look like her.

In the frame.

Later, of course, they would throw her in. The man can only stay with the lioness for so long, before craving the calm peace of someone less beautiful. It is the woman who provides for his pride, that the male most needs in the end. Passion fades. Fires go out.

Give me a woman who pays the bills rather than burns things up in style.

The stars end in dust. The moment of passing passion, is always, passing. Vivien thought to herself, as she stared beneath the painted blues and greens of that ocean.

This is real, this is not an artwork. This life you have chosen, this divorce, this marriage. This contract is more real than the paper it is written on. The beauty of the sea, she came to realise, was that it swallowed up the oxygen that allowed things to burn.

But why doesn't he call? Why doesn't he telegram?

Then he did. In front of the whole world, and so she replied in front of the whole world.

The marriage is over. This partnership. This great love. This fairy tale. This farce is over.

Vivien goes on performing that night with burned temples. She turns her back on the men and the demanding sea, and watches her Renoir instead. Stroking her ever-faithful cat, Poo Jones, his fur filled with party after party after alcohol soaked party.

She needs you to give her life. Reader, take hold of Vivian's hand.

I won't mind, she is *irresistible. I* know that.

It is late, one night after a theatre show.

You are the only one left who can drive.

She has a towel under her arm for you and smiles.

'Let's go and drive to that beautiful place we found on the coast'.

You drive and drive until you find the moon reflected over the water, right where you want to swim.

She looks at you and says

'Let's do it.'

You know just what she means. You take your clothes off and run and dive into the sea. You watch her swim out, further out to sea till you can no longer see her and you think this is it. You will be the final person left in this woman's famous life. It will be your story that tells of her disappearance. But then, she emerges, smiles at you and you race naked back to the house for breakfast of bacon and eggs. You have never felt more alive.

And is this You, or the 'you' in a book you are reading?

Or are you reading?

Am I 'Bella the Writer', or am I Vivien Leigh, talking through 'Bella the Writer'?

I am an actress. Maybe I was a great actress. I am talking to you through these pages. I am talking to you through any medium. Just to say, that love is stronger than death. I will ask for

Larry. I will ask for forgiveness. I will present my role in death as carefully and professionally as my roles in life.

Yet, dying is like slipping

into a wonderful warm bath. Letting the heat soothe the parts of you that feel more painful than the others, heavier, wounded. Slowly your heart rate slows in the heat, you look around in peace at those outside, and close your eyes, as you lay your neck back on the tub. Steam covers the world outside the small rectangular space you inhabit. You don't crave a cigarette, or cough with tuberculosis on your lung. You don't want for alcohol or the latest magazine. Death's smell is sweet after the months of dying that you have covered yourself with. The ecstasy of St Teresa finally speaks to you, in its true dramatic sense, and every role you have ever played makes sense, to your bones. The light is perfect through the smoke, the toned down palette of colour, just right for death. You breathe contentment in and close your eyes to life. It is the end of one part only. That is all I broke the frame to tell you Reader, the end of one part of the story only.

[57]

Gruoch

The name Gruoch is a bit of a puzzle. It appears in a single Latin document for the Queen Macbeth, and no Gaelic female name matches it. Possibly it was a cleric's phonetic attempt at a Gaelic original. Although historians have stuck with Gruoch

Come, come, come

Lady Macbeth says, taking your hand now,

smearing your innocent palm with her red-hot guilt.

Even sex cannot quiet this soul torture.

I, 'Bella the Psychiatric Patient' play

Lady Macbeth in this hospital,

again and again…..

I awake and hear that the King is visiting.

He has put his words down on the page now.

Before the last murder. I mean in the first murder

I was the strong one.

He was weak as piss that husband of mine.

I saw our destiny,

our time to shine and begged him to act upon it.

He was weak in all senses.

Happy to be satisfied serving another King.

This was not what I was born for.

That is the point.

The moment of madness is not one moment.

I know that now. It starts so small,

like a spot that cannot be seen,

microscopic and it unravels,

reveals itself when you are alone.

You can cover it up in company.

Entertain with banquets into the night,

drinking wine, and being with Macbeth.

Yet he is turning away from you.

His sex makes him weaker,

yet makes him stronger.

The first read. The role Vivien longed to play.

The woman who jumps out a window.

That moment before the jump.

Before the fall into the water,

before the push, before the bullet hits,

the flames take hold, the asp bites.

That is the slowest second of your life.

The last second. The fatal second

[58]

Janet

An English baby name meaning 'Gift from God'.

I am Janet.

Framed in red hair and pain.

I am Janet Frame,

I say it again and again,

I know her words and life,

I can tell it to you in first person.

Removing the membrane,

the artifice, the frame,

means I can feel again.

I was too dirty to have friends at school. If you were unclean you could not hope to skip with the other girls, at the most you could turn the rope forever. One of the other dirty girls offered to do that. Nora Bone said she would 'core forever'. She would turn and turn the rope until skipping came and went as the game of choice for the popular girls. Then there was hopscotch and marbles and then elastics and sticks and kiss and catch and Ouija boards, and then I discovered poetry and reading, and didn't need the popular girls anymore. Maybe I never had, maybe they needed Norah Bones and me more than we needed them.

So I would sit doing 'silent reading', though that never made any sense because the world in my head was anything but silent. I had always thought that I was the world, before I understood books. I had often known there must be sadness and loneliness that was deeper than my own. A sadness that belonged to the world that you could breathe into your lungs if you climbed to

the top of the mountains behind our little railway shack in Southland, New Zealand. I could listen to the wind moaning through the pages in my book in that green, cold place on the rock I would run to with my new library books ready for 'silent reading'. I began to see the links between the world of the living and the world of reading while out there on my rock. It was as if I had never noticed the angels whispering through the grass, the call of the wind and ghosts, and the way the words on the page became part of my decisions, my sister's future, and the dreams of my dad and mother. The wind comforted me and became the soundtrack of the words on the pages. The lonely sadness of the world was something I was used to living in New Zealand. I was comforted by my books just as my sister Myrtle was comforted by her dancing. It was the way each of us knew we were alive, until we swapped, and Myrtle became still, in death. Another Frame etched on the family gravestones. My dad also lost all his anger then, and became fearful.

So now I read and become Lady Macbeth, my monthly blood, which smelt stale and refused to stop coming through my homemade sanitary towels, linked me to her. The blood I wrote about in bad poems sent to the local paper about our boys at war, the blood of the animals that our country makes its money from. Blood was everywhere. My sisters and I became the Brontes, reading our poems to each other and running though the moors that were Oamaru.

Outside this world of a plump, red haired scared shy girl, was another girl reading her dreams of being a Cathy or a Lady Macbeth, rather than a background person.

[59]

Catherine

An English girls name, meaning, `Blessed, pure, holy`.

And I remember playing her, Catherine,

out on the wiley, windy moors.

I remember being her, Catherine,

The last time she was able to run freely she was sixteen.

Yorkshire moors.

Dark night, dark hair and a black raving heart.

I was recreating Bronte bleak,

while running from emus and alcohol fueled flirtations.

I wished to pry open the moments like oysters,

so the shell would cut my hand before I ate the flesh.

My hands, as Catherine's hands,

picked up a rock and smashed the animal open,

shell and meat mashed together.

I crunched both in my mouth,

wanting both pleasure and pain.

Always.

And 'Bella the Writer' remembers chanting.

I saw your grave, Charlotte.

I saw your grave, Anne.

I saw your room, your little books.

Your drawings.

Your idle hard lives.

Your black home, your black cat.

Your cough, your Scarborough.

Emily, I felt you as Catherine,

I felt you haunting the moors,

The bruised violet brown that covers

the mountains, the floor, the skin.

In death, in coughing up your life,

they sent you away to the sea.

Where those gulls haunt the air

with their lonely cries.

And the black sand and the little lanes

meeting the piers, and the moody fishing men.

I ran, around and around looking for your grave.

You are so alone out there in death,

away from your sisters, your parsonage.

It is as if you knew you would be outcast.

On the coast, alone,

looking out towards that grey mass of water,

surrounded by the Yorkshire moors.

I wanted to hold you, take you home.

But what is home?

Wild, cold, wet imagination ran through you in life.

It ravaged you.

You are writer, character, and reader in one.

[60]

Bella

Bella is a female name. It is a diminutive form of names ending in -bella, such as Isabella and Annabella. Bella is related to the Italian and Latin words for beautiful

I searched the bookshelves for you

in that riverside bookshop

of my dreams

and then nightmares,

before neutral territory.

Swaying form of creation,

there is no end, there is no beginning,

there is the movement of space and time

along a sculptural line till I find you.

I tried to find you in French,

in sculpture and asylum,

but you were beyond my language.

I try to catch you in a form that is tangible,

so I can craft your essence into a frame,

but you are too slippery,

too three dimensional

for that.

When I find you I will ask you so many questions.

I am what I read, that is all.

I am what I write, and you are what I write.

How can a narrative structure contain the self?

And then there is you.

You, who I did not read about

as a moody twenty-four year old.

There are the thousands of you,

fallen into the sea,

your sand prints washed away by the tide.

Lost to my scrabbling need for words.

No memoirs of luxurious, biting passions.

No kicking, stockinged arrests full of hate.

Just a drowning off my country.

Just a drowning,

Written on this body.

I was only ever a vampire for my own kind.

If there was blood I wanted it to be Vixen Red.

And you don't respond so I want you more.

[61]

[62]

Epilogue

Do you experience this book with your mind?

Or with your body?

Do you *see* the images as you read, or *feel* them?

Are you visual, or visceral, or both?

On your boat trip across the sea

as Frances, or Marilyn, or Vivien, or (--)

Do you hide behind the pages, Reader

of your first class ass,

and watch the steerage passengers

bare their breasts to suckle their babies then

roll around the deck, like animals on heat?

Do you watch a seventeen-year-old girl shriek

with each thrust of a hulking, grunting man three times her age?

Do you watch her pulling him in deeper,

deeper inside her,

rolling on top of him,

still not enough for her,

more men beneath her

and beside her

and all over her?

And continue to stare as,

even with them all spent

she lies face up,

her dress smeared with sperm,

her eyes rolling back,

teeth chattering,

while her hands continue

to caress her body…

Oh to be illiterate,

to make it with an insane woman.

Anything was permitted.

Guess who's gone crazy?

Frances Farmer.

NO!

Guess who's gone crazy?

Marilyn Monroe.

NO!

And that Australian man who stood by as they drugged that woman on the holiday cruise boat, and fucked her here, and fucked her there, and left her to die. Was he turned on as she took her last breath? I covered that story for a paper once, or did I just read it? Or was I there? I get confused these days. 'It's a good story isn't it?' I remember someone, could have been my editor, yes, she was explaining how readers will always flip past the story about the boat carrying a family off the coast of Indonesia that had sunk without a trace,

because –

'Where is the sex in that?'

The readers want to read about the woman who died on a cruise ship after being given a tablet they name, Ecstasy, because, that could have been *them.* Put the reader in the story, and give them sex.

'Bella the Writer' will decide that she cannot kill her characters. She must sit with them and let them kill themselves. They sing to her from the walls, as they burn to the ground. The thing with architecture, when it is good, it needs to be seen, the structure and the materials need to be exposed. Good characters are the same, a writer must not destroy their own fire, let them be. If you employ an architect you must not get in their way. If you are Vivien or Marilyn, you will need a lover in times of loneliness, to numb the pain between the early morning hours, the matinees, and the evening performances. You will need someone to hold you when the great men leave you for safer choices, when the alcohol and cigarettes cannot balance with the sleeping tablets. When you have forgotten why you still need love. When you are not able to give love to anyone who might need you to, because all you are is need. Then you will need your lover so you can tell which moments between waking and sleeping are worth living. You will need to be able to see the frame of the structure we live in, outside the layers and layers of walls and people and words.

The book sits alone and waits for you to find your own meaning outside the words on the page. Waits for you to inhabit the role of Reader. Waits to dissolve you, to plunge you, again and again into the pages of a book, into the distance of a name, into the third person.

V

A Sea in Fever

Here we go mother on the shipless ocean.

Pity us, pity the ocean, here we go.

Anne Carson
Decreation

[63]

The moonlight did not reach the sea floor unless it was shining in full. Be it storm moon, rose moon, old moon or ice moon; hot moon, wolf moon or honeymoon. The equation was always the same, the cries of the women and girls reached out to each other, like an echoing shell. The listener hears their silent sobs through the one ocean. *She heard her babies' cries but the sea wanted her and held her fast. She had named her girl after the moon. Italy had seemed the flipside of Iraq, a place of beautiful women who were adored in all their flesh. She tried to send her dreams up through the currents, she tried to write them on the sand but the sea wanted her silence only. It washed away her words, caressing her away from her land life.* My mother took red flowers to my father with his coffee every morning in a warmed mug, she then took yellow paint to her eyelids to boost the sun in her gaze, and kissed the pink torn skin between my toes. *A dark haired woman takes off her hijab, and lets her thick hair free from obedience, the glass of the mirror alone sees her like this and reflects her beauty to the sea.* And somewhere in suburban Australia a woman picks up a magazine in a supermarket and sees a picture of Luna's cousin in a frame. A girl from Basra, adopted by celebrity parents, has no idea that her little playmate's body organs have started to shut down in a detention centre in South Australia. The luck of the dice, the Russian Roulette of the world. The woman closes the magazine and leaves the supermarket with a bitter taste in her mouth. The perfect family framed for consumption, to leave the reader feeling starving. *The Salem witches and wild roses, the naughty girls, the innocent girls, the children overboard, the murdereresses, the poetesses, the actresses. Their long tresses and their dresses swirling out into the sea's arms. She was their mother now, she clung to them tight.* What the sea wants. She wants. *If she had not given birth to a girl. If she had not wanted to give her the moon. She would have stayed in a man's world. In Basra, women did not check in to private psychiatric hospitals or write confessional autobiographies. They looked into this world through a small frame in a sea of black cloth. Duty and tradition and ritual hide all but their eyes. I am property. I am property. But still my Islam is about peace. My Islam is about modesty. My Islam is about love. This is my Jihad.* The motherless

find the daughterless in the red tide. The fake and the real, the refugee and the traveler, the faithful and the faithless. The propaganda and the silence. The fact and the fiction. The hurly burly of truth. *A woman on a train says to another in Sydney, 'I don't even know where Christmas Island is.' And the other one answers, 'No, and I don't care.'* When I am silent I cease to exist. *They sought the glue of the written word every day for it anchored them to this world. The letter or poem allowed for beginnings and endings, the novel allowed for love stories, for the impossible. For life. What the sea wants. She wants.* You want me to forget I had a mother and father but I won't. You want me to forget the taste of love, the smell of family. I would rather die. I can follow your words. I can read your stories. I can live by them *shut up stop talking shut up stop talking* Deep in the thunderbolt of the sea, under the darkness of memory the pressure of water was breaking and crushing her frame. She had tried to keep the oxygen in her lungs as she sunk. A bubble cave inside her. The sounds of the first piano piece she learnt, the first cries of her baby, the hands of her husband, and the smile of her mother all accompanied her towards her seabed. She watched the scene on the boat from above. Saw men roughly push her daughter to the deck, she screamed at Luna to not fight them, but no words came out. She saw her husband with his head in his hands and she saw the fear on everyone's faces. She smelt the fear on the Australian soldiers the most and it confused her. Why were they so scared of these exhausted children and families? They could not hurt them. They were at their mercy. Mercy. *And somewhere, in some book it is written, the people will establish cities. If you should pass by it or enter it, avoid its salt marshes, for the earth will swallow some people up, pelting rain will fall and earthquakes will take place in it. And somewhere in another book it is written, I was alright for a while. I could smile for a while. Then I saw you last night, you held my hand so tight.* And from the bottom of the sea she sings to her child. She sees her as the small baby she held close, she sees her as the young child running towards her, she feels her growing inside her belly, she grabs at the quickening that jolts her body awake. She sees Luna in a continuous stream of connection. She cries through the weight of water, longing for her form.

There is no Mother without her words. *When she is silent she ceases to exist.* A child will soak up whatever love is offered to it in order to grow. She knows this as she hears her husband's prayers and her child's cries, it is painful, but it is a sacrifice and she has lived a life of them. *Luna is writing to her mother under the sea off the coast of Australia. So close she had come to this mythical land, a land she had described in stories over and over to Luna to reassure her. Luna knows her mother is dreaming of her, crying tears the colour of water over her. She wants to join her under the sea. She wants to be forever off the coast of Basra.* How can I 'Bella the Writer' inhabit Basra? Basra with its waves of forgotten women, its chaos of Western interference, its killings of honour. I imagine Basra calling to Luna like a prophet. The words that killed her aunt and cousin holding no weight under the ocean. Maybe there she will be safe? *When they came to talk to her she had forgotten how to speak. She would only write. She drew a picture of her father and wrote his name underneath. They looked him up on their computer and saw that he was alive but in another place. This place, they explained, through interpreters of interpretations of strange logic she could not follow, was a place just for men, so she would not be able to see him. But he is my father? She thought this question, but she had no words.* Give me the ending. *The sea was black with guilt, the sea confessed. What would we all confess?* I turned my back on her, wanting life. I listened to the deafening sound of Australian ignorance and I fed them the words they wanted to hear. I stood in silence as they lied. I gathered facts and interviewed sources and wrote the profile and packaged it up inside a story called 'Luna'. *Case summary 5: LS, aged six, was detained as an unlawful non-citizen at Woodville IDF. Her father had been earlier detained at a separate facility. After approximately six months in detention she turned 7 and was contacted by her father. DIMA had earlier attempted to remove LS and her father from Australia after they were not granted refugee status. Just before she turned 7 a court case for LS's foster placement commenced and was later rejected. After her seventh birthday, LS remained in the detention facility for 15 days. In total, LS spent 515 days in Woodville IDF.* When I am silent I cease to exist. When you don't live in the real world you are always an afterimage, always a story, always a character, always a creation, always a ghost. *There is no Papa*

without his words. She is told she is in a house of detention, she puzzles over what that means - I am only in the past or in the future? I need to know where the end is. I must create an end where there is none. *At what point did Luna become a plotless self?* Is Luna alone, a swallow, at the feet of her cold fictional, happy prince? Turned to stone? Covered in the pure beauty of words? Or is she fixated on the beauty of an ending? *My father threw me off the bridge in front of my brothers on the way to school, I wanted to wipe the tears from his eyes as he did it, and tell him he would be OK, but there was no time.* Luna heard a cry, it woke her from something. She still reached for her mother's body. It still wasn't there. *'Why can't you be like the Happy Prince?' asked a sensible mother of her little boy who was crying for the moon. 'The Happy Prince never dreams of crying for anything.* She thought of her papa, she smelt his body, it soothed her back to sleep. *Time is slower for children and the night looms larger. They do not understand the cycles of the moon and sun. I snuggled up next to her until sleep came, her hair falling over my face. I imagined her alone in there and loved her like a mother loves a daughter. I became a mother. I 'Bella the Mother', created her.* Then she was writing. In a fever of confession the words poured out. Honey from her mother's hands, sticky with love and wisdom, feeding her own left-handed pen grip. Her mother's dreams pouring out of her from the sea to the pen. Words which would be later put to trial by lawyers of insurance companies on the treatment of children in detention and be found to be the words of a hysteric. Just another girl whose brain chemistry was disturbed by her refusal to eat *and the bruises on her arms were fading into time* Luna imagined the angel of her mother looking down at her, like the Happy Prince. She saw the world's fear and loneliness hidden behind closed doors and under bridges. *A little blonde girl was holding a blue stone. Her feet bare and frozen. She wrapped her hands around the precious shining object not noticing the bird that had delivered it to her, it's own wings cold and aching. The tiny lights peeping out from the terrace buildings were not a patch on the bright clear white of the stars. Thick as a blanket across the midnight blue sky.* And if it is written in ink its words will be washed away in the sea. The words and rules that hold us all here, that held us all there. The words that

Luna wrapped herself around tasted like blood. She hungered for them. Her mother called through the words, calling her home. A broken halleluiah echoes from the sea to the moon. It wraps you up, Reader, into the swirling sea, and creates me, Bella, as Luna the moon girl dreamer. I take her, scoop her story out of her, flesh out her tiny frame into the third person. *The sea wants all our tears, it is the resting place of our tears. The sea is the moon river of all our lost girl tears*. And this is how it inevitably ends, with the sun setting, and the moon rising. With a day of ravage and beauty washed away yet again by the moon, as she calls the tides in. The moon then calls the sea to her, to watch a little girl place her rocks in a row under her bed, counting her day's find. Smiling. Those rocks will be there in the morning, just how she sees them now, each one is unique, each has its own patterning of colour, picture, smoothness and story. *As the little girl closes her eyes on the day, the moon holds back rain for as long as possible, but soon it falls, covering the world in an unbearable lightness of being.*

VI

Luna

"What is it she wants?"

"To live. Just to live. And to hear myself say the name."

"Horrors! Cut out her tongue!"

"What's wrong with her?"

"She can't keep herself from flying!"

"In that case. We have special cages."

Hélène Cixous
Coming to Writing

[64]

She never wanted to not be with her. She wanted to be a writer like her mother, cook like her mother, dress like her mother. She wanted to drown like her mother now, at six. She wanted the sea to take her too. She wanted this but it didn't come.

The boat was full of water. Her mother held her tight, whispering to her that they were going to another world and that they would always be together.

If you die Mum, I want to come with you,

she had said to her mum when she was younger.

The next thing she remembered she was awake in a larger boat, with strange men and women around her speaking in a new language. A language she had heard on television in the bars at home when she had sneaked inside their smoky walls to watch the men playing cards.

She reached everywhere for her mother's face, her chin, her eyes, her breasts, her legs. She wanted to crawl inside her mother's tunic, as she often did to hide away, but there was nowhere for her to hide. She was exposed, and lay sprawling on the deck. She got to her feet, ran to the edge of the boat and scrambled over the side, yelling to her mother down in the sea. She knew she was down under the waves. She tried to jump, but the people held her back. She screamed and bit them but she could not get away.

'Mamma!',

she yelled down

and down,

beyond the places where the light reached, down into the place where her mother's body was twirled, like seaweed around an old shipwreck.

In words men held Luna down to the floor of the boat like some wild catch from the deep. They shouted to her, slapped her. She spat at them with all the fury of her six years. They locked her away, out of sight, with the other survivors from the sinking. Fear tasting ripe and retched in their salty mouths.

[65]

The seasons did not pass in a way she remembered in this place of waiting. She caught sight of leaves falling from time to time, and the weather appeared colder, but the sun shone most days. Luna waited for the signs of change that she was used to seeing over the Sea of Serenity. In the years before she heard the talk and sounds of war, she had heard birds singing and had marveled at the twisted faces of pain on the sculptures in the city. When her mother explained that the pained expressions on the sculptures were really pleasure, Luna was puzzled. The day before they left home she felt the same confusion when she heard her uncle and father discussing the difference between friendly and unfriendly gunfire.

'In Rome', her mother had described to her one day, 'there are sculptures everywhere. The Christians were very good at telling the story of their God through paintings and sculptures. We will go to Rome one day, Luna. We will see the beautiful angels and women sculpted by Bernini.'

Luna remembered her mother showing her pictures of women carved out of marble and bronze, looking towards the sky, their eyes closed, clutching their hearts.

'Are they having a heart attack, Mother?' She had asked one day.

'No, my Luna, she is seeing her Allah. She is feeling love.'

Luna carried this image of what love must feel and look like with her from that moment. She was terrified of ever feeling love. She did not like to see that woman with her eyes nearly shut, her throat swollen and her lips parted. If that was love, she saw no difference between love and the terrifying scenes on the streets in the aftermath of a tank. Those soundless screams, and

sightless, twisted faces, were the same faces she had seen on mothers as they held their bleeding babies to their chest.

She saw the sister of a girl she went to school with, held tightly to her mother's breast. The same parted lips, the same dead eyes. Love, she concluded, was everywhere, but not something she was ready for yet. She wondered why her mother wanted to go to Rome when you could see the same pictures she described in real life in Basra. There were a lot of things she planned to ask her mother when she was a little bit older. She would think of them as she ran home from school, watching soldiers pulling down sculptures, but then the spring air would overtake her thoughts, and she would spend the whole afternoon singing songs with her friends in the street and playing Five Rectangles.

She tried to play the same games in the detention centre with the other girls, but they would draw the rectangles and throw the stones, but they would never sing while they were playing.

Luna heard whispers about the men in other centres not eating. Burning themselves, harming themselves. She woke up and reached for the book Bella had given her. She read it again and again like a mantra, to stop her thinking about her father and if he was one of these men, and then she knows he is.

[66]

'He looks just like an angel'

'How do you know?' said the Mathematical Master, 'you have never seen one.'

'Ah! but we have, in our dreams,' answered the children; and the Mathematical Master frowned and looked very severe, for he did not approve of children dreaming.'

Luna sat in the fluorescently lit common room curled around these words.

She looked around at the other children. She counted the posters on the wall.

She saw the twisted face of the sculpture of St Teresa in her memory.

[67]

It was a Tuesday and she did not come.

It was a Thursday and she did not write.

She took on the role of every character and lived inside the pages of *The Happy Prince.*

She stopped eating the food of the land of detention. Her senses became heightened. She lay shivering like the little swallow of the story, at the feet of the prince. Her heart burned with ecstatic love.

[68]

[69]

Somewhere she heard the sound of planes. She could hear birds and smell flowers that were strangely familiar. She tasted her mother's cooking in her dry mouth, when she closed her eyes she could imagine the flavours of her favourite dish. Chicken hidden under rice, raisins, apricots and cardamom. She waited for the next wave of hunger to strike her and then she remembered straining the sheep's milk in muslin, to make yoghurt cheese. Each time they came to force-feed her with their tasteless meats and potatoes, she closed her eyes to smell the food she made with her mother and her appetite was sated.

[70]

It was a Tuesday and she did not come.

It was Thursday and no one came.

It was a day, like another day, into a day and she did not come

[71]

Across the seas of days and storylines Luna saw herself above her body.

She traveled across the waters of time and found the eleven-year-old Bella floating above her body, outside the frame. She whispered to her of love and forgiveness, even in death. Pulling the tides of meaning together, she breathed life back into Bella, life and many, many words. She gave her the words of the sea.

[72]

After the seven-year-old Luna read her last words on a page, and took her last breath on the earth, the characters flashed in afterimages across her visual cortex.

Afterimage

From a place high in the sky I saw outside the walls of the detention centre for the first time. I followed the sun towards the backyards with colourful clothes stiffly pegged on square clotheslines. I saw brown dirt and rows and rows of termites and ant's homes, as I followed the road as far as I could towards the sea. I saw the children playing in the school playgrounds and climbing trees, trees like I had never seen before, full of knots, and vines, and other birds. I couldn't stop flying, following the wind and the road, the sun baking my wings. As I came to the sea I twisted and dived my body deep into its coolness. My mother whispered her love to me from the moment I felt the weight of the water. I closed my heart around her voice and plunged up for air. Plunged into freedom. *I see row upon row of holes in the land, and giant machines lifting and digging, further and deeper into the soil. I hear Bella's voice talking to me about writing, and truth. I look down at my father, he is younger and stronger than I have ever known him, he is sailing his fishing boat on the sea, his eyes shining into the horizon. I see fire blazing across the sky, smoke overtakes my eyes and I almost fall into the flames. I turn upwards to see a little girl, free falling from a bridge, her eyes filled with terror. I kiss her and cradle her fall into the sea, whisper for my mother to look after her. I break the surface and fly towards the smells of Basra, seeing woman after woman through their windows curled around books in lamplight. I rest at a window high up and see Bella in a little bed staring out in fear at the sky. I smile at her through my new form, and want to tell her that I am free at last, and that I forgive her for not coming back to see me. I wait on a tree for the shadow of the moon to cross, and make love to the sun, and I smile at Venus as it appears. As the winds and twilight shroud the Earth I leave Bella in the arms of the man who loves her, the man who will hold her hand until she is eighty-four and takes her last breath. Bella doesn't know it yet as she makes love to him under the solar eclipse but she will have a great love. The path of love's trajectory follows its own space and time. I follow the line of the bush towards the flames, I see the arms of a man and woman wrapped around each other as the fire takes them out of this world. Their eyes locked on each other. My tears fall down over their bodies, cooling them so*

they feel no pain. I look up and see two falling stars in the night sky. The moon shines down on me now as I watch my papa as he takes his first bite of food in days. He gets stronger but his heart is broken. I call to the moon with my eyes to look out for him and then fly on past endless windows where people who are free, lock themselves in their little rooms, where people who are lonely, sit in front of computer screens, while the streets and parks below them are empty. I feel so happy to be a bird, to fly, and see what for so long, I had not been able to. She plunges back into the ocean as her mother scoops her towards her, rocking her in stories of all she has heard and seen under the sea. She tells of a beautiful, tuberculosis-ridden woman who looked down at her from a large ship, with the green eyes of a mother cat hunting for her kitten. She thought she heard her cry out 'Susan' before the sea took her past further boats full of scared families, waiting for arrivals that are uncertain. She rocks her in the stories of wave after wave and boat after boat that floated across her sea. *Luna lets the sea take her to a sad blonde woman, running in and out of the waves, posing for a camera on the beach but longing for the silence of the sea. She follows her through the paths of stars to her last night and watches the lonely movie star take tablet after tablet and fall into blackness. She follows another blonde movie star into loving and loathing, tossing and turning, and the up and down of drowning, and the in and out of breathing, and the numbing and succumbing to alcohol, and the endless leaving, and the kicking and the screaming. She whispers of the mermaids calling the sailors from the sea to the shore and back again, kisses the ankles of the beautiful Lucias and Zeldas in their European skirmishes, she dances her way around the toes of a red haired dreaming writer in cold seas, and the tide calls again and again to the sea, calling it in, pushing it away, calling it in, pushing it away. She entwines her hands around the long, cold fingers of a lonely woman as she presses them around stones in her pockets, and waits with her as the tears of the water soothe her pain. She waits with Sylvia as she puts her children to bed for the last time, kissing their little heads and feeling so hopelessly alone. There are birds watching us all. When Anne found no one at the end of the phone she held her hand and blew warm air on her face so she could sleep. She brought sleep to the strong, determined pain of the Yokos and the Yayois in their lonely nights. She held all readers and all writers and*

all children overboard. She was the seaweed, the coral and the tears. She became the waves, the temperature and the sand. The promise of change. Searching the clouds for signs of tomorrow's weather she hears her mother calling her in for dinner. She lies in the water for a moment in her own shadow before sinking into her mother's arms. The voices of the past and present bubble into each other and the images of shipwrecked lives undo, into the cool blackness of the water, while Luna dances across the waves towards home. When I get there I will write. When I am free I will write. I will write it all down. You will be autobiography. I was the orange skinned baby they named after a blue moon. I was the blue baby you held tight under a pink moon. I was any baby held tight by any mother. I was any pure love held and detained and frozen in dreams. I was everything that didn't eventuate, any love that stayed unrealised. I was your lover, Reader, I was the carrier of your child and dreams. I lost you and then I found you again. I was Luna, the moon girl dreamer. I am art. I am in the walls and words you surround yourself. I am in the sky each night. And then I am gone.

So is Luna real? Is Salem real? Did 'we', that overused word, throw her mother overboard? Does she call to us from the sea? Why is she nameless? Doesn't everyone real or imagined deserve a name? A destiny? Yes, Bella reflected onto her blank page, before writing the word 'Lunation' at the top of it, in some important way, there is no third person.

THE BOOK OF AMBIGUITY

The story I have to tell is the story of writing's violence. I want to write what I cannot write. The book helps me. The book leads me astray, carries me away. *It* wants to write. It wants me to write *it*; I want to write the book I am pursuing with my dreams. Will I ever get it written?

Hélène Cixous (2002)

That feeling of nearness to the shapeless ghost, ambiguity, is what I want most, what I want to put inside a book, what I want the reader to sense. And because it is at once a thing and a nothing, the reader will have to find it, not only in what I have written, but in what I have not written.

Siri Hustvedt (2011a)

The excess, the ecstasy, the madness, the overflow, the larva, the primal, the violent 'cracks in the soul' that reverberate through Hélène Cixous as she writes 'books', form the foundation of this thesis; an exploration of the process of creating a book - The Book of Ambiguity. And what is this Book of Ambiguity? *Those who need clarity will ask.* Books that defy category, that resist boxing that resist the very pinning down of writing itself. *Books that use layers, multiple points of view, history, music, academic writing, genre writing, poetry, documentary and prose to create alternative visions of the world that challenge more conventionally confined, singly driven narratives.* Books that create space for what is not there, that leave space, that invite interpretation, that encourage a reader to sense, that come from everywhere and lead to anywhere. *Books that destabalise structure and take readers to new territory to leave them hungering, refusing the safety of literary limitation.* Books created out of an ecstatic surrender to the writer's dreams. *Central to this sort of book is the writer as outlaw*. According to Cixous literature '*cannot be a literature enclosed within borders. That is the first thing. Literature is a transnational country. The authors we read have always been the citizens of the other world, border-crossers and out-laws. And they have always strangered their own language'*.[1]

[1] O'Grady 1996

INTRODUCTION

This thesis posits that books that defy clear generic categorisation provoke an ecstatic connection between writer, reader and character. This connection forces reader and writer to identify their ambiguous humanity as beings that are both independent and connected to others. Books of Ambiguity, as I call such books, impel the reader to fill in the gaps in interpretation, to question the structures and truths within the world of the book, and society itself. Instead of the reader being told what to think, The Book of Ambiguity encourages participation, and therefore a questioning of the certainty of any one fixed meaning, or universal state of being. The Book of Ambiguity requires the reader to be comfortable with the tension of various outcomes, the vagaries of genre, multifaceted narrative voices, and difference in general. It is not a safe, predicable text, but rather one that refuses to sit comfortably within one genre or another, or to fall into formulaic structural patterns with definite conclusions. Its characters do not present as obvious tropes, but instead inhabit ambiguity. The Book of Ambiguity, therefore, confronts the reader with his or her own role within the creation of the world of the book. Such books employ ambiguity to instill tension, discovery, and ultimately change within the reader. The Book of Ambiguity asks the reader to look at the world differently, to inhabit and play within a shared, liminal, ecstatic space created by the writer, in order to highlight the ambiguity of the human condition.

This first part of this thesis argues that this movement towards ambiguous forms of the book, although not confined to one gender or another, has a particular relationship to women's growing participation as writers in a post-*Madwoman* age. Post-*Madwoman* writing is what I have termed writing since involuntary incarceration and the deinstitutionalisation movement that commenced in 1960, but took until the late 1970s to be finalised (Willis, Reynolds & Keleher 2012). I will also discuss how this style of writing actively engages, by highlighting the artifice of the third person, and thereby encouraging reader and writer to inhabit ambiguous states. Post-*Madwoman* writing is created out of a feminine pleasure, or *jouissance,* and its rhythms are not the same as the writing found within traditional texts. No longer bound to realist conventions, such as those discussed by Gilbert and Gubar's 1979, *The Madwoman in the Attic,* the post-*Madwoman* era is a site where the writers' connection to their bodies, their desires and their madness, is unbound. This site I call The Book of Ambiguity.

In the second part of this thesis I apply this abstract definition of The Book of Ambiguity and post-*Madwoman* to Siri Hustvedt's *The Shaking Woman*, Dorothy Porter's *Akhenaten* and Anne Carson's *Decreation*. In these close readings I analyse how these writers employ ambiguity, both formally and thematically, in order to challenge fixed concepts of gender, sanity, genre and the erotic. I use secondary sources and interviews with Hustvedt, Porter and Carson to determine links between their writing processes and the books they create. In Siri Hustvedt's *The Shaking Woman or a History of My Nerves*, even the title is inter-generic, playing with a fictional title/role and a personal history. Hustvedt uses herself as a medical object, as owning hysterical symptoms, while exploring the ambiguities of medical diagnosis. *The Shaking Woman* has secured Hustvedt's reputation in neuroscience and led to her invitation to give the annual Sigmund Freud Lecture in Vienna. This development alone shows just how far women have come in their freedom to disclose themselves and to question the social structures that assert what is 'normal'. In an interview in *cordite* in 1998, Dorothy Porter says she writes best 'when what I am working on is part of a larger canvas, when I'm working on a tapestry. This might be a female thing [...] stitching away' (Minter 1998, p. 5). In *Akhenaten*, Porter demonstrates how this process challenges the formal boundaries of poetry and novel, while presenting a narrative about the ambiguity of gender, sexuality and history. Anne Carson's *Decreation,* combines poetry, philosophy, libretti, prose, documentary, screenplay and essay, while investigating the ambiguity of creation and ecstasy. Carson's multi-faceted analysis of the writers Simone Weil, Sappho and Marguerite Porete, addresses the ambiguous question of how writers can both create and decreate. How can writers seek ecstatic distance from themselves, while still being bound to the human body? Porter, Hustvedt and Carson seek to be delivered from formal boundaries in order to express the ambiguity of life.

In this thesis I will work toward a definition of The Book of Ambiguity and its relationship to Hélène Cixous' concept of *écriture féminine* and Simone de Beauvoir's ethics of ambiguity. It is my intention in this thesis to use the theoretical lenses of both Cixous and de Beauvoir, to present a new era of writing that I call post-*Madwoman*, which I argue, has in turn given rise to The Book of Ambiguity. I do not make specific claims about gender and process, or gender and genre, in *The Book of Ambiguity*, rather I offer a Cixouisan definition of *écriture féminine*; that is, a feminine style of writing that is not gender specific. I have chosen Hustvedt, Porter and Carson not because they are women, but because they write a range of novels, poetry and essays that I believe best exemplify The Book of Ambiguity. I am aware that even though these writers are

from different countries (America, Australia and Canada respectively) all three are highly educated women from white middle class intellectual backgrounds that have afforded them particular opportunities. I am not arguing that women from other cultures are not writing Books of Ambiguity, for example writers such as Clarice Lispector, Toni Morrisson or Banana Yoshimoto could equally have been chosen, and indeed in future research work I intend to analyse these particular writers' Books of Ambiguity. Nor am I unaware that for many women *any* form of self-expression could still, in 2015, lead to punishment, or even death. I do not deny that male writers also produce Books of Ambiguity, for instance, there is a wealth of scholarly attention paid to Michael Ondaatje's particular 'mural' style (Quiazon 2006; Williams S 2009): Cixous has also written widely on James Joyce and his embodiment of *écriture féminine (*1980; 1987*).* I believe *mingled with all kinds of colours* is a unique study of the intersections in process of the lesser known, but no less significant, work of Hustvedt, Porter and Carson, and their creation of Books of Ambiguity in a post-*Madwoman* world. The scholarly and critical material available on these writers positions them as important players in moving the book outside 'the chastened made-to-order' text (Cixous 2002, p. 411).

Methodology

mingled with all kinds of colours is a creative writing, practice-led thesis, and therefore is multidisciplinary, involving professional activity, creative practice, and reflexive and academic research. So, although the thesis examines the philosophical and sociological dimensions of ambiguity, it does not claim to be a philosophical or sociological thesis, and although it also engages in close literary analysis of specific works by three women writers, it is neither a literary nor a gender studies thesis. This 'bowerbird' approach, as Tess Brady (2000) calls it, means that, unlike research undertaken by more traditional schools, a working, rather than specialist knowledge is required over a range of disciplines. The academic research and creative practice have informed, guided, and co-*mingled* continuously throughout the writing period, and this reflexive process is stylistically echoed within the structure of the thesis that follows. Haseman and Mafe stress the knowledge-making process of the creative practice in tandem with research:

> while there are emergent outcomes within creative practice, it is when this potent and somewhat unruly discipline is co-joined with research that creative practice-led research becomes truly emergent in its outcomes. What was a creative work becomes part of some other order of understanding that is research. The research is also changed by this interaction. (2009, p. 220)

This thesis is inherently connected to the relationship between a writer's research process and how this process shapes the form and themes of the final creative product. *Lunation* remains a silent, but thoroughly interconnected parallel piece of writing that has shaped and driven the structures, methodologies, philosophy and arguments within this research component. So, although *The Book of Ambiguity* aims to be read as a linear, academic thesis with a central argument, I do not wish to totally divorce it from the 'unruly' discipline that Haseman and Mafe describes the creative practice to be. Therefore, before each chapter I offer a short poetic 'fever' on the central theme of the chapter, in order to allow ambiguity to *mingle* with the thesis' wider themes of ecstasy, gender and madness. I have called these introduction pieces 'fevers' because a fever is a state that disorientates, possesses and transforms. Webb and Brien in 'Addressing the 'Ancient Quarrel': Creative Writing as Research' highlight this identifying role of poetry:

> Poetry is, as the etymology of the word 'stanza' implies, associated with a 'standing place' or 'stopping point', and thus affords a sort of viewing platform, a perspective from which to view what lies ahead before plunging down into it. (2011, p. 190)

These 'fevers' are designed to work as 'viewing platforms' for the chapter ahead. A fever can be defined as a state of heightened activity and excitement. The body is said to be in fever if it gets hotter than thirty-seven degrees Celsius. The body overheats and the heart beats faster. The anthropologist Victor Turner could easily be describing fever when he defines the liminal state as a process of becoming: as a state of deep emotional intensity, like water reaching its boiling point (1967, p. 55). In fever nothing is linear, nothing is sure and no fever is the same. Fever is fluid, dangerous, fervent and borderless; it can incite rebellion and change. In extreme cases people come out of fever forever changed; body and mind are depleted of all energy, form *re*formed, consciousness withdrawn from the circumference, from the external world of multiple desires, towards the centre of the fever. The fever is a place where the ambiguous is graspable, the body is fragmenting and yet also in a state of extreme unification.

This thesis is an academic thesis, relying on literary theory and textual analysis; however, I am interested in situating the experience of creative writing within the experience of the human body. I am interested in reclaiming, or at least repositioning the relationship between reader and writer as bodily persons. In situating the experience of a book, as a physical experience that can provoke human connection, fevers and shared ecstasy I seek to avoid de-humanising the experience, or breaking it down into a set of universal or generalised principles or systems. An inevitable side effect of structuralism, literary theory, or semiotics is that the terminology used is impersonal, clinical, and theoretical. As Terry Eagleton points out, the problem with relying

on narratological or structuralist terminology to describe the reading process is that the person can be killed off to, 'examine more conveniently the circulation of the blood' (2008, p. 95). Tzvetan Todorov predicted this inevitable criticism to his structuralist approach to literature when he argues that we do 'not require the biologist to abandon these misleading abstractions designated by the words: blood, nerves, muscles', and that if the critic does not choose a particular set of theoretical tools 'we achieve nothing at all' (1969, p. 4). In this thesis I am borrowing elements of structuralism and narrative theory and re-situating them within the physical body. In so doing I am not taking away from the importance of narratology, semiotics, structuralism or literary theory, rather, I am interested in employing them in a way that can express the ecstatic connection between two people that reading can invoke.

The Person (s) in Creative Writing and Reading

In most works of creative writing there is at least two people: a writer, we might call (*I*), or the first person, communicating with a reader, who we could call *(You*), or the second person. And often, there is also a third person we will call (*x*). This third person (x) is a created character through which writer and reader communicate, but in an important philosophical way this third person does not exist. By using first, second and third person in this way I am departing from the traditional usage of these terms in literary theory, and deliberately simplifying the many variations and sub-classifications narratologists such as Gégrard Genette (1983) or Tzvetan Todorov (1969) have put forward for narrative classification. The third person, or (x), in creative writing helps both reader and writer be transported into some other reality, and can be employed to communicate that which might not be easy to communicate directly. If the veil of third person is viewed as just that: a membrane, a construct or a persona, much like the Wizard of Oz's pyrotechnics in the 1939 film of the same name, underneath the words is just one person, meeting another, in a very intimate way. Without the guise of a third person, writer and reader are vulnerable, and within that vulnerability there is the potential for deep connection and a shared ecstasy. The central relationship of reader and writer within the book is laid out in the equation below:

First Person (*I*)➔ (Third Person (x)) ➔ Second Person (You)

This diagram is of course simplistic, and theorists such as Roman Jakobson and Umberto Eco have created similar, more detailed, diagrams depicting how a message is passed between two

people through the act of writing and reading. Jakobson's diagram (reproduced in Sebeok) illustrates how this message will vary depending on the context and the code of communication used (1960, p. 353), while Eco's diagram in *A Theory of Semiotics* (1976, p. 142), expands over a page of possible aberrant readings, presuppositions and shared codes and sub-codes between reader and writer. The intricate number of variables within these diagrams indicates that the exchange between the two persons involved in the act of reading and writing can never be entirely predicted. Ambiguity can never be fully removed from even the most 'closed' (to use Eco's terminology) text.

Ambiguity creates the eroticism of the creative reading experience, and the ongoing circular desire for reader and writer. The desire of (*I*) for (*you*), and (*you*) for (*I*)—to employ the concepts from the diagram above—this desire is sustained by the limitlessness of (*x*). The media, the culture industry, literature and language itself, rely on continual consumption within a capitalist society. The reader ideally will always desire another book, another story and another experience, because the market cannot afford to lose the consumer to the one book or artwork. Desire cannot turn into love. One of the most powerful forces of control within this endless cycle of consumption is the categorising of the formless into form. The Book of Ambiguity exposes the constructions and artifices that literature relies on. This direct, intimate ecstatic meeting place that the book can provide, though often only fleetingly, is what gives creative writing its power. It takes the reader out of the comfortable notion of being a fixed individual, and connects him or her with the ambiguous connections to all humans. It asks the reader to observe the fiction of the existence of a third person and to instead move into an ecstatic engagement with another person.

Theorists such as Eco and Wolfgang Iser argue that each text has an ideal reader: Iser's 'implied reader' and Eco's 'model reader'. The concept of an ideal reader adds a further abstract 'person' to the communication exchange between writer and reader, a 'person' who is 'able to deal interpretively with the expressions in the same way as the author deals generatively with them' (Eco 1984, p. 7). Eco believes that the more 'open' to interpretation, or ambiguous a text is, the more 'closed' its model reader is, while Iser (1978) argues that a text is dependent firstly on the reading subject being the implied (ideal) reader able to decode a text, and secondly on a willingness by that reader to allow it to transform him or her. I argue, however, that this imagining of a theoretical reader is limiting, and takes the writer outside the body. It is

pornographic, rather than ecstatic. It positions the book as a predetermined set of themes and formal constructs dependent on a fantasy person, rather than a book as its own 'character' and a person as a three dimensional, fully fleshed body. Instead, I put forward that moments of ecstatic connection, or *jouissance,* between reader and writer are possible within The Book of Ambiguity, without the ideal reader meeting the ideal writer and decoding ambiguity: without a reader even *achieving* transformation. What is essential for ecstatic connection, I believe, is a committed movement *towards* the unknown of another person: and a shared willingness to inhabit, or even get lost in, the vulnerability of ambiguity.

Defining Ambiguity

Hustvedt's definition of ambiguity is central to this thesis and worth quoting at length:

> not quite one thing, not quite the other. Ambiguity resists category. It won't fit into the pigeonhole, the neat box, the window frame, the encyclopedia. It is a formless object or a feeling that can't be placed. And there is no diagram for ambiguity, no stable alphabet, no arithmetic. Ambiguity asks: Where is the border between this and that? [.....]
>
> Ambiguity does not obey logic. The logician says, "To tolerate contradiction is to be indifferent to truth." Those particular philosophers like playing games of true and false. It is either one thing or the other, never both. But ambiguity is inherently contradictory and insoluble, a bewildering truth of fogs and mists and the unrecognizable figure or phantom or memory or dream that can't be contained or held in my hands or kept because it is always flying away, and I cannot tell what it is or if it is anything at all. I chase it with words even though it won't be captured, and every once in a while I come close to it. (2011a)

For Hustvedt, ambiguity is not something deliberately vague, doubtful or uncertain, but something truthful and outside restrictions of language or form. This distinction is essential to The Book of Ambiguity, as I define it within this thesis, and to the process of creative writing in general. For in creative writing, or the humanities more broadly, when seeking to find new truth or knowledge, the researcher (or writer) is inherently aware that there is no one absolute truth within language. As Hustvedt's definition explains, although they might come close, the creative writer will never fully capture broad philosophical concepts such as ambiguity in any fixed or absolute truth. As Webb and Brien point out: 'Any research paradigm involves processes marked by ambiguities and uncertainties, rather than precision, or confidence – this is the basis of experimentation' (2011, p. 193). It only remains to try to be as clear and precise as possible while acknowledging the ultimate limitations of a thesis based in language, rather than logic. Hustvedt's definition of ambiguity above highlights this ability to work within the elusiveness of pure truth or certainty.

The essential connection between ambiguity and poetry is not new. Perhaps the poet John Keats most famously articulates this in his idea of Negative Capability, where he posits that 'man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason' (1958, p. 277) and this sentiment is echoed by conventional literary criticism. William Empson asserts at the beginning of *Seven Types of Ambiguity* that all good poetry is ambiguous (1961, p. xv). He states: 'The object of life, after all, is not to understand things, but to maintain one's defenses and equilibrium and live as well as we can' (1961, p. 247). It would seem theories of ambiguity in literature are often connected to deeper philosophical questions about how humans view themselves within the world. In Chapter One of this thesis, which serves in some ways as a literature review, as well as an argument, I identify The Book of Ambiguity's relationship to previous literary forms and philosophies of ambiguity through research methods such as archival investigation. In a thesis of this length there is not the space to have more than a cursory look at all the philosophies, theories and literary styles on ambiguity; therefore, I have chosen to focus on the creative and philosophical writings of Hélène Cixous and Simone de Beauvoir. In particular I am using Cixous' 2002 essay, 'The Book as One of Its Own Characters', and de Beauvoir's 1948 book, *The Ethics of Ambiguity,* to define what makes The Book of Ambiguity unique within the field of philosophy and literature. Cixous and de Beauvoir refuse easy categorisation as philosopher, theorist, poet, novelist, dramatist or activist. They are both deeply personally present in their work, and the private is forever connected to the public. Both Cixous and de Beauvoir challenge previously held conceptions of what society, gender, sanity, sexuality or the book itself should be.

Throughout the research and writing period of *mingled with all kinds of colours* the themes of ecstasy, madness and sexuality/gender have emerged consistently. These themes have formed themselves into a symbolic tripartite foundation for *The Book of Ambiguity*. Ecstasy, madness and sexuality are widely written about in philosophical, religious, literary or gender studies. There is not the space to review the academic field for these themes, although certain landmark texts such as Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic*, or key concepts, such as *jouissance* are discussed in some detail. Instead, I have chosen to use these three themes like colours on a palette: to 'mingle', to give depth and contrast to the greyness of ambiguity. This image of colours mixing and mingling, provides a metaphor for the methodology of this thesis, as Tess Brady articulates:

> Like marbling on paper. Into a bed of water oil paints are applied, raw colours, one after another. By running a comb through the water the oil paints are swirled

> together to form a marble pattern. There are blues and reds and purples where the colours have combined. There are dark shades and lighter hues folding into each other. Paper is applied and takes up the colour so that the whole, the marbling on the page is the thing we remember, not the tubes of paint containing the separate raw colours.
>
> So too with creative writing. The academic and the creative slid into one another, nestled side by side so that one fed on the other, one became the other. (2000)

This description of marbling and swirling Brady describes, is also relevant to the way I have used the two key theoretical texts throughout this thesis. These texts: Cixous' 'The Book as One of Its Own Characters' and de Beauvoir's *The Ethics of Ambiguity* fold into both the creative and the academic work.

Simone de Beauvoir and The Ethics of Ambiguity

Simone de Beauvoir's 1948 philosophical text, *The Ethics of Ambiguity,* pinpoints human beings' capacity for ambiguity as central to their existential condition. Simone de Beauvoir questions the idea of gender itself in *The Second Sex,* arguing, 'Woman is not a fixed reality but a becoming' (2011, p. 46), exposing the ambiguity of one of society's most entrenched defining binaries. Throughout all her works, de Beauvoir is interested in the ambiguous existence of being human—a being who is free and yet always shaped or constrained by the situation he or she is in. In *The Ethics of Ambiguity* de Beauvoir takes Jean-Paul Sartre's concept of existentialism (1958), and moulds it into a more optimistic philosophy, arguing that it is only through having projects that are in relationship to others that one is given meaning as an individual in the world. She writes that:

> [an] ethics of ambiguity will be one which will refuse to deny *a priori* that separate existants can, at the same time, be bound to each other, that their individual freedoms can forge laws valid for all. (de Beauvoir 1976, p. 18)

This does not mean she believes harmony between individuals is always possible, or that one person's freedom will not impinge upon another's freedom, if not actively deny it. Central to de Beauvoir's ethics of ambiguity, is the ability to accept failure as a condition of life, but this failure, she argues, is not a reason to stop striving for the freedom of all peoples. Simone de Beauvoir writes that:

> failure is a very condition of his life, one can never dream of eliminating it, without immediately dreaming of death. This does not mean that one should consent to failure, but rather one must continue to struggle against it without respite. (1976, p. 157)

Simone de Beauvoir is uncomfortable with her own privilege, and writes about her guilt at not being a woman of action, actively campaigning against atrocities. In her autobiographical essay,

'Hard Times: Force of Circumstance, Volume II', de Beauvoir writes: 'I am not a woman of action; my reason for living is writing; to sacrifice that I would have had to believe myself indispensable elsewhere' (1992, pp. 182-183). Simone de Beauvoir may not be the 'women of action' she so admires, but she is engaging with a different form of action, as by reflecting human existence to others, she *urges* action. Citing the example of the Algerian War, Karen Shelby writes:

> Beauvoir did what she deemed most appropriate through both her writing and the other risks she took in order to make public her opposition to the war and the continuing use of torture as a weapon. In so doing, she sought to make French citizens aware of the crimes being committed in their names, and that they perpetuated through their apathy. (1999, p. 13)

The Book of Ambiguity confronts the reader into challenging an apathetic existence in a de Beauvoirian sense.

Simone de Beauvoir identifies the importance of oppressed peoples communicating their situation through writing and believes literature to be unique in its ability to situate the individual within the domain of another. In a meeting organised by the communist student magazine *Clarté* in 1964 in Paris, billed as a confrontation between the 'new novel' and 'committed literature', de Beauvoir asserts that writing is:

> an activity carried out by human beings, for human beings, with the aim of unveiling the world for them, and this unveiling is an action. (Moi 2009, p. 190)

Simone de Beauvoir's philosophical goal is to communicate the need to consider others, not as obstacles to individual freedom, but rather, as lending possibility and purpose to this freedom. Literature provides de Beauvoir a way to step outside of her own situation and challenge abstract rationalism in a way her philosophy cannot. Throughout de Beauvoir's life she worked between fiction and philosophy. She viewed fiction as a 'privileged site of inter-subjectivity' where reader and writer can enter into another world, thereby seeing things from another point of view (Kruks 2012, p. 131). Sartre and de Beauvoir both turn to literature to try to explain this ambiguity of existence, as they could not express it fully through philosophy. Both writers have been criticised for not allowing their fiction and philosophy to converge in a lively way, often creating flat characters due to a preoccupation with needing them to express ideas or ethics (Deutchser 2008, p. 48). Indeed Deutchser questions the fundamental futility of expressing the ambiguous condition using either philosophy or literature:

> can there really be clear and unambiguous statements about this ambiguity in philosophy, any more than there can be in literature – particularly if the former has turned to the latter because faced with that very dilemma? (2008, p. 54)

Perhaps Deutchser is right that neither philosophy nor literature alone can express the concept of ambiguity, therefore writers need different and evolving forms. No *one* form is enough.

Simone de Beauvoir does not see that ambiguity can ever be eliminated from life; she sees it as integral to life itself. For de Beauvoir, ambiguity is the thing that makes us human for: 'the original scheme of man is ambiguous' (1976, p. 23). In this sense de Beauvoir's thinking is linked to the postmodernist situation at a metaphysical level which, according to Susan Ross:

> has come to embrace ambiguity in its rejection of sure and absolute foundations for human knowledge [.....] It is the perceived fluidity of conceptions of self, of society, of previously thought-of absolutes, of the lack of foundations that suggest that ambiguity is not something to be avoided, dismissed, or even resolved, but embraced. Ambiguity, postmodernism says, is our very condition. (1998, p. 65)

Kruks, in a new reading of de Beauvoir, believes that the recent renaissance in de Beauvoir studies is because de Beauvoir embraces the inevitability of human failure; that she is able to express the impasse between liberal rationalism and post-structuralism (2012, p. 4). Kruks outlines that this ability to sit comfortably with ambiguity goes against Anglophone philosophy where, 'ambiguity is most often recorded as a fault, as indicative of the failure to properly achieve clear and distinct ideas' (2012, p. 6). In this sense, de Beauvoir challenges such definitions of ambiguity, by believing ambiguity can be a quality of phenomena, or experiences themselves, a state that must not be just tolerated, or solved, but respected.

Simone de Beauvoir believes that women particularly inhabit such an ambiguous site. She writes of women:

> she is there, but hidden beneath veils, she exists beyond these uncertain appearances. Who is she? An angel, a demon, an inspiration, an actress? One supposes that either these answers are impossible to uncover, or that none is adequate because a fundamental ambiguity affects the feminine being: in her heart she is indefinable for herself: a sphinx. (2011, p. 278)

This elusive quality of 'woman' has had a significant influence on the way female characters have been portrayed in literature by men, and the small numbers of women, writing in the early nineteenth century. For Western literary genres were: 'after all, essentially male – devised by male authors to tell male stories about the world' (Gilbert & Gubar 1979, p. 66). Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, sees economic independence as essential for human freedom, and criticised bourgeoisie women in particular, who, she writes, existed on an economic level 'as parasites' (2011 p. 129). As women have moved closer towards material independence from men, changes in literature and the depiction of female characters have occurred. It is not enough to position women as mere objects in books; their characterisation needs to be as detailed as their male counterparts. Women, according to de Beauvoir, inhabit ambiguity more so than

men, for a woman is always defined as 'Other', and 'her ambiguity is that of the very idea of Other: it is that of the human condition defined in its relation with the Other' (2011, p. 167). Simone de Beauvoir's central argument in *The Second Sex* is that it has been woman's inability to engage with the world through projects outside the domestic front that has led to her unhappiness and shallowness. Simone de Beauvoir writes that women have been handicapped by a society that 'denies them any means of expression' (2011, p. 262) and that in order to define oneself, 'one must first have realised oneself in work or acts. Man has only a middling interest in his domestic interior because he has access to the entire universe and because he can confirm himself in projects' (2011, p 485). Women are hence kept from being 'complete' persons because of this lack of projects outside the home, and therefore remain 'subjugated, secondary, parasitic' (2011, p. 497). In the era of The Book of Ambiguity women are more engaged in projects and writing; this has led to a questioning and re-visioning of the book and form in general.

For de Beauvoir, freedom is vital to living an engaged life, and yet freedom is constantly changing and needing to be questioned. The Book of Ambiguity asks readers to participate in an active way, and in so doing to examine the vagaries of freedom. Simone de Beauvoir's ethics of ambiguity call for humans to see their own being as unfixed, subjective and always in relation to others. The Book of Ambiguity is one that provokes readers to challenge society by empowering them to engage with the texts and sit outside the frame of their own subjectivity. Simone de Beauvoir outlines that:

> it is the miracle of literature, which distinguishes it from information: that an other truth becomes mine without ceasing to be other. I renounce my own "I" in favor of the speaker; and yet I remain myself. It is an intermingling ceaselessly begun and ceaselessly undone, and it is the only kind of communication capable of giving me that which cannot be communicated, capable of giving me the taste of another life. (1965, pp. 82-83)

The Book of Ambiguity overcomes the boundaries of separation and allows a moment of ecstatic connection with the writer and reader, to 'taste another life', to 'intermingle' and to be 'undone' within another. In such a place of communion with another, the reader must at the very least, question the ethics of denying one person's freedom over another's, even if a solution cannot be given. The Book of Ambiguity inhabits a feminine ambiguity of conflicting, fluctuating, inexpressible, intermingling desires. In this sense The Book of Ambiguity is firmly grounded in a de Beauvoirian ethics of ambiguity. The Book of Ambiguity is one that has come about through women *and* men, feeling safe to be able to challenge rules of religion, the state,

and society through literature. It is this commitment to political and ethical questioning that links de Beauvoir and Cixous.

Héléne Cixous and écriture féminine

The concept of *écriture féminine* (feminine writing) is one of Cixous' and French feminist thinkers' most important theoretical formulations. Unlike the female writing of the Victorian asylum era, *écriture féminine* is writing that is not repressed or bound within codes of realist, masculine genres or orders. It rejects the language of rationality and linearity. It does not need to hide within doubles or codes. It is a free, feminine flowing of writing from the female body. It is a discourse linked to the emotions, the unresolved: the unconscious, unnamable and ambiguous. It is both utopian and experimental and as Dani Cavallaro explains: 'ecriture feminine seeks to write that for which no language yet exists – namely, the silenced, the marginalized and the repressed' (2003, p. 119). In a post-*Madwoman* era *écriture féminine* is able to do this in a more open way than previously, without the fear of involuntary commitment by the ordered rationality of the patriarchal state. Andrea Nye writes that, for Cixous, women are:

> bodies in a sense that men are not. It is women who allow drives to surface in hysteria, who allow their feelings to colour or distort thought. Men on the other hand sublimate and control their impulses. (1998, p. 199)

French thinkers such as Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva believe *écriture féminine* is always linked to the body. However, the body is not the body as object, which the female body has so often been positioned as, but the body as text. The mode of writing Cixous and other French feminist thinkers call for is a writing that challenges and liberates from all previous constructions of femininity created by the patriarchy to 'legitimize its oppressive practices' (Cavallaro 2003, pp. 119-20). Cixous writes that women have for too long been turned away from their bodies by 'stupid sexual modesty' and that 'everything is yet to be written by women about femininity: about their sexuality, that is, its infinite and mobile complexity, about their eroticization [...] A woman's body, with its thousand and one thresholds of ardor' (1976, p. 855). This process of writing is essential to the creation of The Book of Ambiguity, as it is a process that encourages a disturbance of the conventions of genres such as classic realism, and in doing so creates new languages and new forms that are closer to formlessness and outside classification.

Ecriture féminine is only metaphorically feminine and can be written by both men and women. Although not limited to women, Cixous acknowledges that:

> It is much harder for man to let the other come through him. Writing is the passageway, the entrance, the exit, the dwelling place of the other in me – the other that I am and am not, that I don't know how to be, but that I feel passing, that makes me live – that tears me apart, disturbs me, changes me, who? (Cixous & Clement, 1994, pp. 85-86)

The style of writing Cixous proposes here is essentially ambiguous, as it is driven by process rather than form. Susan Sellers (2003, p. 95) writes that Cixous distinguishes the difference between those who chase after words in order to 'crucify' their meaning, and those who language 'creates' and who are central to the process of writing. *Ecriture féminine* is an emancipatory type of writing that challenges genre and gender boundaries. It is possibly better explained as —writing *in* the feminine — or writing as a way of thinking and as an antidote to the silencing of women throughout history. For feminist thinkers from Woolf, to de Beauvoir, to Gilbert and Gubar, the history of writing has always been in the hands of men, positioning women, and women's writing, as other. Cixous' *écriture féminine* is deliberately linked to the female body and pleasure. The female body is multi-erogenous. Writing is both pleasurable (a pleasure that has been long denied women) and a way out of enslavement. It is a political process. Cixous rallies women to:

> Write, let no one hold you back, let nothing stop you: not man; not the imbecile capitalist machinery, in which publishing houses are the crafty, obsequious relayers of imperatives handed down by an economy that works against us and off our backs; and not *yourself*. Smug-faced readers, managing editors, and big bosses don't like the true texts of women – female –sexed texts. That kind scares them. (1976, p. 877)

Cixous believes that, with *écriture féminine* the writer is able to move towards, and be faithful to, an essence of the other, over the patriarchal norms of genre coding, but Cixous knows that this essence cannot ever be totally reproduced in writing: the writer can only get close to it. In this sense Cixous' *écriture féminine* is always ambiguous and can never be fully contained. Cixous challenges the idea that language has to lock things into classification systems. For Cixous, writing in the feminine, 'has something in common with the breakthrough of the unconscious in the deviant language of psychotics or hysterics' (Nye 1998, p. 201). There is a flow of thought and language that is outside the rules of traditional language and grammar. Cixous writes, 'I love long, segmented, maddening, auto-erotic, obsidional sentences, convoluted hypotaxes, distillations, stills, alchemy dreaming of the Whole and of Gold' (2002, p. 413). Nye observes that the language *érctiture féminine* is calling for is akin to nature: 'A woman's language would not seek to project on nature an alien rigidity that could only, in the end, represent itself, but would expressively flow without closure or boundary' (1998, p. 201). It is this boundary-breaking process of writing and language that is employed in the creation of Books of Ambiguity. The book becomes part of the writer's experience; the writer, book and reader cannot be separated.

As Cixous says, 'I live in a book. I travel a book. And the other way round' (2002, p. 415). The writer is *inside* the book.

Cixous' form-breaking essays and books are perhaps the best example of *écriture féminine*. Her style of writing is, as Cavallaro states, 'language that is neither linear nor goal orientated but insistently conveys the fluid, interweaving of thought, memory and voice' (2003, p. 125). It is linked to the concepts of formlessness, postmodernism, the poetic, experimental, and the inter-textual, which I will discuss in Chapter One of this thesis. Cixous will not be limited by form in her writing, for writing for Cixous, and de Beauvoir, is a site for questioning, challenging and seeking. Cixous is a 'hungry' writer; there are references to her wanting and passionate seeking throughout her work. In one of her essays in *Stigmata* she opens saying – 'I want the beforehand of a book' (1998, p. 25) and goes on to want more:

> I want the world of pulses, before destiny, I want the prenatal and anonymous night. I want (the arrival) to see arriving. Acts of birth, potency, and impotency mingled are what I'm passionate about. The to-be-in-the-process of writing or drawing. (1998, p. 26)

And in 'voice, i' she writes:

> at the bottom I am really a questioner. I cannot even imagine that I will get to the end of the questions [.....] I would never understand, I do not cease not to understand, simply the things I do not understand renew themselves incessantly. (Cixous & Conley 1984, p. 66)

The example that Cixous gives through her work is of a style of writing, and a writer, engaged in a seeking out of pleasure, of what is outside the edges, of the ambiguous and that which is outside language or form. Cixous is a writer who is aware of her inability to ever get to what she truly wants in writing, and yet she realises, that it is only through writing, that she might get close to it.

Cixous, like de Beauvoir before her, wishes she could be a political activist but comes to terms with her position as someone who has many privileges and is most suited to challenging the inequality in society at an ethical level through her writing. Cixous writes:

> I think that I am only a writer, and when I say that, I think that other women are completely militant [...] they struggle for women, for their lives. I do not compare myself to them, I consider that they advance the woman's cause in a much more active and more immediate way than I do. (Cixous & Conley 1984, p. 59)

Although she sees the limits of writing, she writes that 'I need to do what I am doing' and part of what Cixous believes she is doing is championing for a 'feminine textual breakthrough' (Cixous & Conley 1984, pp. 59-60). Cixous is therefore not content with one form of writing

expressing what she wants to say; she moves between theory, writing for performance, fiction and memoir. What is constant, however, within her writing is the fluid open style of *écriture féminine* that seeks to challenge conventional genre boundaries. Cixous desires a textual revolution; she sees literary liberation as the road to political liberation from the word of a male god or the laws of society, largely penned by men (Cixous & Conley 1984, p. 56). As Catherine Clement writes of Cixous in *The Newly Born Woman:*

> Combining autobiography and philosophy, literary analysis, utopian speculation, she transforms herself into the woman whose shrieks and steps mark her as pure demon, frenzied desire, immediately outside all law. (Cixous & Clement 1994, p. 117)

Cixous' curiosity and hunger has driven her away from the confinement of the classic novel to a distinct fluid literary experience of *jouissance.* It is ecstatic surrender to the creative act, to the unknown, that links Porter, Hustvedt and Carson to Cixous. Cixous acknowledges this force of process in forming the book, 'It wants to write. It wants me to write it; I want to write the book I am pursuing with my dreams' (2002, p. 403). This book, I title, The Book of Ambiguity. The book created in a Cixousian state of *jouissance,* becomes an engaged, erotic space, a space where the writer cannot be removed from his or her writing. It is not possible to discuss *jouissance* without a brief overview of the history of the concept.

Jouissance

Jouissance in this thesis represents a site of abandonment of form, control and being; an erotic, liminal space out of which The Book of Ambiguity can emerge. Although *jouissance* has become almost clinical in its overuse by theoreticians, it still remains a concept that is unstable and ambiguous. *Jouissance* is rarely translated, as most translators believe there is no equivalent word in English to convey the eroticism of the French term. The Book of Ambiguity is created from this site of untranslatable ecstatic surrender, a place outside, or in-between language and gender, a place driven by the body's urges. *Jouissance* by its very nature prevents disambiguation, or any sense of closure, for it is a state of pure desire. There is not the space in this thesis to write in detail about the different theorists who have written on *jouissance,* or the many different concepts there are for the word. *Jouissance* is the force that drives *écriture féminine*, a form of writing that Cixous identifies to be feminine writing across genres. Although the style is not limited to the female gender, as Cixous sees humans as essentially 'bisexual', it is intrinsically linked to the female body. Cixous writes: 'I do not believe in sexual opposition nor in sexuality that would be strictly feminine or strictly masculine, since there are always traces of original bisexuality' (Cixous & Conley 1984, p. 56). I am aware that any discussion of

gender binaries or bisexuality might be viewed as supporting the binary system or supporting simplistic illusions of socially constructed gender norms, however, I argue that Cixous uses the term 'bisexuality' to identify a particular fluidity of gender and process within writing. For Cixous, males and females are capable of a body that is multi-erogenous and orgasmic, yet she is careful to outline that sexuality is 'neither one nor the other'; instead Cixous believes that there is equilibrium, or a movement between male and female, between the modalities of masculine and feminine writing (Cixous & Conley 1984, p. 56). This movement is akin to what Anne Carson calls, 'the 'floating' gender in which we would all like to rest' (Aitken 2004) or what Porter calls writing with a 'bisexual flavour', as she describes that she likes 'feeling fluid' when writing, rather than feeling locked into the category of 'lesbian poet'(Digby 1996, pp 16-17). April Callis (2009) writes about the erasure of bisexual identities or bisexuality from academic scholarship since the introduction of queer theory in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Callis argues for the reinstatement of the term bisexual as a means of expressing the continuums between the oppositionals of masculine or feminine/ male or female/ or homosexual and heterosexual. Callis writes that bisexuality disturbs binaries, rather than confirms them, for bisexuality,

> does not allow gender to be wholly tied with sex object choice. If a person is choosing both sexes as erotic partners, her or his gender cannot be matched with sexuality. A woman who sleeps with men and women cannot be read as either feminine or masculine without causing gender trouble. Either her gender is constantly changing (with her partner), or her gender does not match her sexuality. Further, by desiring men and women she has really removed herself from either gender category, as "men and women" is not an option in either masculinity or femininity. (2009, p. 228)

This thesis will therefore employ the term bisexuality, as it is particularly relevant to the notion of ambiguity within the writing process, as articulated by Cixous, Porter, Hustvedt and Carson. In this sense I am problematising the concept of bisexuality and identifying it as a fundamental element of The Book of Ambiguity. I will therefore, rather than erase the term, henceforth italicise it, for it is the Cixousian concept of 'neither one nor the other' that this *bisexuality* expresses. The other term I italacise throughout The Book of Ambiguity is *Madwoman*; in order to reclaim it as a particular, often universal state in process, rather than a fixed title of patriarchal oppression.

Jacques Lacan outlines a distinction between Phallic and Female/ Other, or Supplementary *jouissance* in his seminar titled *Encore* (1975), but it remains obscure. Confusingly, Lacan also outlines a third type of *jouissannce* in his paper, 'La Troisimine' (1975). Bruce Fink, a Lacan translator and scholar, writes that, 'Lacan's characterization of a Phallic jouissance and the

Other jouissance seems to remain something of a work in progress' (2004, p. 186). Zizek outlines similar concerns when he talks about the reactions from feminists to Lacan's inability to define feminine *jouissance,* contributing to a continual 'tabooing of women' (2005 p. 151). Due to the wealth of contradictory secondary sources on Lacan, and his own inability to clearly articulate feminine *jouissance* outside the organ of the phallus, I will be using a Cixousian definition of *jouissance* within this thesis. For Cixous, the difference between phallic and feminine j*ouissance* lies not within the bodies of men and women, but within their libidinal economies, that is, the ways in which pleasure is expressed in the body. The feminine libidinal economy is fluid and written across the whole body, incorporating all genders, while the masculine economy is centered on the phallus and thus excluding the feminine. The site of *jouissance*, adopting the Cixousian definition, allows for transgression of form into the nameless, the formless and the ambiguous. It is always a place of truth and is not limited to one voice. As Dufourmantelle writes:

> In jouissance, truth and the subject make a single body; truth carries the subject away to the place where the latter can no longer pretend or lie, can no longer go back on his or her word. (2007, p. 44)

Surrendering to the unknown is what Cixous acknowledges as the force behind *écriture féminine*. Cixous is concerned with the passionate creation of writing itself, divorced from the purpose of the text. It is this connection to hedonism, self-pleasure, confession and indulgence that has given rise to the most profound attacks on Books of Ambiguity, and female writing in general; seeing Hustvedt's books being labeled as masturbatory, Carson's as self-pitying, and Porter's as foul (Doll 2008; Potts 2002; Porter 2000).

It is important to illustrate that the concept of feminine *jousissance* and *écriture féminine* are part of a wider discussion on women's writing and pleasure. For French feminists Cixous, Irigary and Kristeva, *jouissance* is not determined by the phallus, or lack thereof, but is a form of sexual rapture and the very source of woman's creative power. Irigaray highlights the problem of defining female pleasure in a phallomorphic culture; she writes of woman, that 'She resists all adequate definition [...] And her sexual organ, which is not one organ, is counted as none' (1985, p. 26). Irigary is particularly concerned with distinguishing 'feminine' characteristics of process, plurality and diversity, from 'masculine' characteristics of correct meanings and linear narration. She urges women to write and to speak through their bodies, without beginning and end:

> This life – which will perhaps be called our restlessness, whims, pretenses or lies [...] Speak. Between us hardness isn't necessary. We know the contours of our body well enough to love fluidity. (1985, p. 215)

Kristeva highlights this connection between women's writing and their growing liberty within society in her triptych titled 'Is there a Feminine Genius?' (2004). In analysing the writing of Collette, Melanie Klein and Hannah Arendt, Kristeva argues that all three women use words, not to merely communicate ideas, but rather: 'For them life is thought and thought is life, and in this way they attain the highest state of felicity in which to live is to think-sublimate-write' (2004, p. 500). For Kristeva, writers are aware of the danger of losing themselves in the yearning of their drives to 'think-sublimate-write', but through their ability to sit within the unease and 'dizziness stemming from an ambiguity' (1982, p. 10), writers are able to create a book that is woven without borders.

For all its untranslatable echoes throughout theory, *jouissance* is always tied to ecstatic pleasure, and Cixousian *jouissance* is always linked to writing. It is through writing that Cixous and other French feminists believe women can be liberated from limiting norms, and the power structures that define sexuality and sanity. Feminine *jouissance* is particularly unsettling as it upsets linearity, or goal focused desire, and is therefore feared as an insatiable, all-consuming hunger. This fear has led to the silencing of women through using terms such as *Madwoman* or 'hysteric'. According to Klement:

> the hysteric's body speaks a feminist challenge to Freud and the other agents of patriarchy. The hysteric's symptomatic body challenges them not at the level of the signifier but on a libidinal level with a libidinal surplus, or surplus *jouissance*, that the patriarchal signifiers could not contain. (2010)

In order to challenge the patriarchy, which they believe to have suppressed women's *jouissanc*e, feminists have reclaimed the hysteric. *Jouissance* is the force that gives rise to poetic impulses or 'volcanic eruptions' that cannot be contained in theory or form. Ecstatic surrender to the creative act lies at the heart of the argument I posit for meandering formless creations of Books of Ambiguity. It is within the process of creation that writers such as Hustvedt, Porter, Carson and Cixous emerge out of volcanoes with books of *larvae*, books of ideas, books of halfway points between autobiography and fiction, theory and poetry. It is within the nearness to 'the shapeless ghost' of ambiguity that the brokering of genre emerges – the lyric novel, the book in a box, the shaking woman.

Summary

The Book of Ambiguity presents both reader and writer with an active site of exchange, and the ability to inhabit the characters or situations presented by the book. This engagement, as used by writers of The Book of Ambiguity, challenges the notion of the individual as a separate entity, disconnected from others. The Book of Ambiguity incites empathy, and ultimately a reexamining of the way society creates dogmatic truisms of gender, sanity or race while oppressing individual freedom. In this introduction I have summarised the main concepts of Hélène Cixous and Simone de Beauvoir as they pertain to this thesis. I have identified The Book of Ambiguity as a book created through a Cixousian process of *jouissance,* available to writers in a post-*Madwoman* era. This new freedom allows for ambiguity to be reflected in both the form and content of the book. It allows for writers to position themselves as openly ambiguous about sexuality, gender or sanity, while following their creative desires in bold defiance of any conventions of form dictated by institutions, whether they are literary, scholarly, critical or editorial.

I have outlined the relationship between my own creative writing project and research component, as well as the multidisciplinary methodology I am using for the thesis as a whole. In so doing I identified the metaphorical merging of colours, as indicated by the overarching title of the thesis, *mingled with all kinds of colours,* as central to the structure and themes within this argument. The title of this thesis is essentially about an ecstatic, creative act that blends multiple ideas, colours and textures. Dorothy Porter's final poem, written from her hospital bed, and published in the posthumous collection *The Bee Hut,* articulates this ecstatic condition. The poem illustrates a woman who is at once three people: the *writer* Dorothy Porter, a more generic third person *character* of a woman in a hospital bed and a *reader* of moments. A woman *inhabiting* the poem, a woman inhabiting the world *as* a poem; and a woman who, even on her deathbed, reaches out to the brightly coloured neon sign outside her window—to *compose* a poem.

> Something in me
> despite everything
> can't believe my luck.
>
> (Porter 2009, p. 139)

I

SEX, MADNESS & ECSTASY

I am not the first person you have laid next to in the night. *You are not the first person who has laughed at my stories.* These are not my first stories. *And when I am close to you in the dark*. Breathing you, kissing you – *I am your skin.* And you are the book – the book I am in. *And when your* and when you *and when my* and when I *when I* when you *then* I am *and* you *are* *and we* be*come* reader *and* writer and sometimes I see the third person *the one that we could create* if we both wanted the same story. *I reach out to hold him to my chest*. And he is momentarily graspable.... *but you close the pages to his realness,* he remains a character in a book. *Utterance* and it feels enough when I lie beside you. *When I wake and I hear you breathing.* When you jolt in your sleepy sentences and I hold you to your grammar. *When I whisper at two am and you answer.* When I move my cold feet towards you & you curl them into your warm prose. *In that moment I am your first person*, and you are the 'you' of my second person. *And we are third person entwined* in skin, night and story.

CHAPTER ONE

Towards the *Shapeless Ghost*: Ambiguity.

In this chapter I come towards an abstract definition of The Book of Ambiguity, a book that 'won't be captured' or classed into 'one thing or the other' (Hustvedt 2011a). The Book of Ambiguity is a moving, volatile text in *process* and therefore the creative impulses behind its formation provide the best path towards definition. Identifying a writer's process can occur by observation, or reading interviews and essays by the writer, in Books of Ambiguity, however, the writer imbeds herself into the text, identifying, often openly, as narrator or a particular character. The Book of Ambiguity is written in a state of ecstatic play. The writer, driven by passion, curiosity and a thirst for knowledge, refuses the territorial borders of genre. This drive for what might lie in the liminal propels the writer into new areas. Once within this liminal site, I argue, the writer reaches an almost ecstatic state of *jouissance* that is outside language. Once at 'boiling point', to use Turner's description of the liminal phase (1967, p. 54), the writer is able to shape language into new forms, and in so doing challenge ideas and stories that appear fixed or without complexity. This ecstatic state provoked by The Book of Ambiguity refuses the reader the stability of a fixed third person narrative, a narrative that exists independently of the reading experience. Instead, the book created in this way becomes an active, liminal site of exchange between writer and reader. Describing such a state takes the writer outside, or at least to the very borders of, language; therefore The Book of Ambiguity is best described by comparing and contrasting it to pre-existing literary genres or artistic and philosophical movements.

The Book of Ambiguity and Genre

A published book is generally an object with a title, and sometimes a subtitle, that will position it within a genre, form, or sub-form. Jacques Derrida calls this a 'remark of belonging' that is designated to the book, and usually unable to be removed from the consciousness of the reader (1980, p. 11). This 'stain' of form, or belonging that is imprinted on the reader, provides clues as to how to read the book. It is this limiting quality of genre that Derrida contemplates in his essay 'Law of Genre' declaring that: 'As soon as the word "genre" is sounded, as soon as it is heard, as soon as one attempts to conceive it, a limit is drawn' (1980, p. 3). This compulsion to group and order the formless is an ancient one. Crowley and Hegarty write that:

> theories of genre are symptomatic of this thirst to order, to name, to describe, and in some cases prescribe, types of literature and give outward definition to texts by dressing them in frock coats that give the connotation of a combination of academic respectability, commercial viability and normative codification. (2005, p. 108)

Given how fundamental to the world form is, it is arguably impossible for the book to stay outside the world of genre classification. Derrida asserts as much, writing that: 'a text cannot belong to no genre, it cannot be without or less a genre. Every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genreless Text' (1980, p. 61). Removing the ambiguity between forms is perhaps one of the most essential functions of language. The text that resists category is not generally comfortable for the reader let alone the market economy and therefore language and rational thought has sought to bring these in-between creations within classifications. Literary works that defy genre classification have therefore gained titles such as; intergeneric, postmodern, pastiche, mosaic, patchwork, verse-novel, intertextual or mongrel. The literary establishment will always seek to ground The Book of Ambiguity within a form, even if that form is ever changing.

Writers of Books of Ambiguity reject the need to simplify life or art into categorisation. Instead they seek to go where language can't go, to seek, in Hustvedt's words, the 'dream that won't be held in my hand' (2011a). These writers entertain the possibility of a Derridian 'degenrescene': whether texts can exist without boundaries, limits or edges (1980). In order to create authentic books not limited by artificial classifications of knowledge, the writer of The Book of Ambiguity favours a polymathic opening of the invisible borders between the scientific and cultural disciplines. Ambiguity is a deeply embedded feature of postmodernism, poststructuralism, globalisation, deconstruction and hybridisation. Ambiguity produces anxiety in those who search for fixed meanings, and has led to poststructuralism being labeled 'a cult of ambiguity' (Eagelton 2008, p. 130). While postmodernism's embrace of the ambiguous has served to illustrate, 'if not a total dispensing with all traditional structures, a recognition that all these human structures are partial, incomplete and open to change' (Ross 1998, p. 72). The Book of Ambiguity inhabits the in-between. It is a book that is between; fiction and fact, prose and verse, memoir and textbook, image and text, art and science. This indeterminate threshold engages the reader to become collaborator, rather than mere passive consumer of one fixed form. In this sense, The Book of Ambiguity is the antithesis of the safe, formulaic novels created by publishing companies such as Mills and Boon where the writer is secondary to the genre fiction the brand is known for. By refusing the safe boundaries of genre fiction writers of Books of Ambiguity revitalise the direct communication between writer and reader. Ambiguity is not employed by the writer merely to be deliberately obscure or different, but as a technique of

political engagement and emotional force. In this sense The Book of Ambiguity is related to art movements such as FLUXUS that deliberately flout existing structures.

The term intermedia, was coined by FLUXUS member Dick Higgins to describe art that dispensed with traditional structures. For Higgins, intermedia is work that blurred, 'ambiguous distinctions among such different media as text-based, painting, sculpture, environment and performance' (Yoshimoto 2005, p. 197). FLUXUS was an avant-garde group of artists that emerged in the 1960s in New York with a particular interest in the political possibilities of art that resisted definitions. The group created artworks across genres, and expanded possibilities of individual forms. Yoko Ono, one of the founding artists involved, believes, 'art should be almost free like water' (Yoshimoto 2005, p. 55). Ono criticised the 'strange, false value that people create on artwork' and attributes blame to the institutions that demand closed formal categories of art (Yoshimoto 2005, p. 58). A random internet search will now, in 2015, illustrate hundreds of intermedia degrees offered at universities around the world, illustrating that the cross-disciplinary, inter-disciplinary or multi-disciplinary has become adopted by the mainstream. Thus genres, as Wilkins states, are processes that are, 'formed, negotiated and reformed, both tacitly and explicitly, by the interactions of authors, readers and (importantly) institutions' (2005, p. 1). The writer of The Book of Ambiguity is aware of the need to have a relationship with these stabilising generic reference points, and the institutions that uphold them, in order to reach an audience. To be published, funded, placed in a bookshop, or critically reviewed, books *generally* need to engage with current genre boundaries and the language of publishing conventions. I argue, however, that The Book of Ambiguity does this in a defiant, provocative way by both resisting and playing with the markings of genre or form. The Book of Ambiguity is a shape-shifter.

As I have outlined, art forms and literary genres do not remain static; instead the artists, writers and institutions that create them are in a continual, dynamic relationship. As Wilkins (2005) asserts in 'The Process of Genre: Authors, Readers, Institutions', genres themselves *are* processes. The Book of Ambiguity is itself in the *process* of becoming, in Cixousian terms, one of its own characters. A 'character' that may inhabit thriller and romance genre simultaneously, move between illustrations, ephemera and documentary, or call itself both poem *and* novel. The Book of Ambiguity is a book *in process*; remaining deeply attached to both the poetic form, with its heightened language of ambiguity, and the novel form, in its most broad definition.

The Book of Ambiguity and the Novel

From about 1680 when the term 'novel' started being used on printed books, replacing the earlier 'Romances' or 'Histories', the novel has been in constant development. It was in 1760, however, with the publication of Lawrence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy,* according to Ruland and Bradbury, that the novel 'began its experimentally subversive history' (1992, p. 83). Bahktin describes the novel as a creation in process—a living genre that continually reincorporates other genres into it. Therefore, the novelist, in a Bakhtinian sense, is a traveler, for, 'Only that which is itself developing can comprehend development as a process' (Bakhtin 1981, p. 7). This insatiable and irreverent quality of the novel and the novelist also describes The Book of Ambiguity and its writers.

Writers of Books of Ambiguity play with the signifier 'novel', resisting the limitations publishers, marketing departments and literary theorists have put on the form. Novelists are particularly vocal about championing the novel as a limitless form. Roberto Calasso outlines in an interview with *The Paris Review*, 'There is nothing that cannot be part of a novel' (Zanganeh 2012, p. 145), while Hustvedt writes, 'There are no rules for writing novels. Those who believe there are rules are pedants and poseurs and do not deserve a minute of our time' (2009a). It would seem the novel has no limits, apart from what the taxonomists of texts have applied to it. Even the arbitrary limits often cited, such as having to be over a certain amount of words, fictional, or written in prose, are artificial. This means hybrid demarcations such as 'verse-novel' are not necessary stipulations, as any-*thing* can be a part of the novel. Catherine Addison outlines, 'even theorists who most rigorously prohibit verse from the novel category make exceptions that blur and confuse its boundaries' (2009, p. 555). The novel has spawned sub-genres and forms within forms. In practice, as novelist Ali Smith observes, 'forms cross over all the time. A novel that does not cross an invisible border into music and poetry and theatre wouldn't be worth writing' (Gurria-Quintana 2008, p. 89). That being said, the word 'novel' is not without a set of historical and formal expectations that are transferred to both the reader and the writer. Virginia Woolf wrote in her diary when she was at work on *To the Lighthouse* (1927): 'I have an idea that I will invent a new name for my books to supplant "novel" A new .....by Virginia Woolf. But what? Elegy?' (Lehman 1987, p. 86). Woolf longs for an absence of demarcation; longs to write a book outside the Derridian mark of belonging. I argue that it is the particular *process* of writing, the Bakhtinian 'ever questioning, ever examining' (1981) that has led certain writers such as Woolf to extend the boundaries of the novel to include collages of poems, essays, philosophical asides and autobiographical moments.

The boundaries of 'novel' may be artificial, but in a market place that relies on booksellers, publishers and marketing departments the word has become overloaded with expectations. The dynamic form of the novel can, and often does, become stagnant. The Book of Ambiguity is intrinsically related to the novel; however, it is not a novel that sits safely within the closed boundaries of genre fiction or formal boundaries set by publishers or the literary establishment. It is a book that will 'tolerate all kinds of freedom [....] not texts of territory, with neat borders, with chapters, with beginnings, endings etc.' (Cixous 1984, p. 57). The books that Cixous summons from her late night 'larvae', revel in textures, individual passions and intellectual miswanderings; they are both subject and object, free and yet bound by interpretation, and in that sense mirror the essential ambiguity of de Beauvoir's existential human condition. The Book of Ambiguity desires to wrest the reader out of the comfort of fixed genre fiction formulas. It asks the reader to think beyond the surface level of society and language by entering into the inherent ambiguity of the poetic.

The Book of Ambiguity and the Poetic

The poem and the poetic often hold multiple meanings and require a reader to be able to sit within uncertainty. William Empson, who famously articulates seven discreet, but ambiguously indiscernible types of ambiguity, believes ambiguity to be more elaborate in poetry than prose, because, 'ambiguity is a phenomenon of compression' (1961, p. 31). Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, published in 1930, departs from the New Critics view of the poem as a taut, closed structure that can be studied independent of the reader or author. On the contrary, Empson regards the author's intent and the reader's response as integral to the poem (Eagleton 2008, p. 45). Empson's ambiguities 'can never be finally pinned down: they indicate points where the poems language falters, trails off or gestures beyond itself' (Eagleton 2008, p. 5). It does not serve this thesis to itemise Empson's seven ambiguities as they intersect and cross over continuously. It is Empson's descriptions of the dynamic engagement required by writer and reader, in order to produce and enjoy poetry that are relevant to *The Book of Ambiguity*. Empson defines ambiguity in the broad sense to mean:

> an indecision as to what you mean, an intention to mean several things, a probability that one or other or both of two things has been meant, and the fact that a statement has several meanings. (1961, p. 4)

Empson believes ambiguity is central to the beauty and complexity of poetry, and it is the reader, in particular, who creates the ambiguity. The reader's response will vary depending on

his or her social context, creating multiple alternative responses to 'the same piece of language' (Empson 1961, p. 1).

In reality the boundaries of poetry and prose cross over all the time; however, the novel is familiar to the modern reader, while poetry can often inspire fear. Empson observes, nearly a century ago, that poetry can fill many readers with discomfit and embarrassment. Most readers want to understand and have control over what they read; poetry, according to Empson fills them with anxiety, 'like that of not knowing, and wanting to know, whether it is a wall or a sea' (1961, p. 239). This inability to sit with the discomfit of not knowing or understanding is, according to Empson, one of the reasons poetry is challenging for readers. For poetry to be properly appreciated, Empson believes, the reader needs to react sensitively to the poem initially (which he calls a feminine reaction), and then turn a logical eye to the poem and analyse it (which he calls a masculine reaction). Empson believes poetic language is living and includes various meanings and layers, in contrast to prosaic language, which he believes is flat, useful, but non-ambiguous language. Poetic language demands that readers be alive to possibilities and to their emotions. Empson is demanding an ambiguous*, bisexual* form of participation by both the reader and writer, reminiscent of Cixous's *écriture féminine.*

Poetic language is a feature of The Book of Ambiguity, because such a book is created through an ecstatic process of creation. Empson believes all great poetry to be ambiguous. He writes: 'there is always an appeal to a background of human experience which is all the more present when it cannot be named' (1961, p. xv). However, Empson warns that the poet should never deliberately try to be ambiguous; rather, there is merit in striving for clarity (1961, p. 239). The ambiguity will arise through the impossibility of absolute clarity, through striving to express what falls outside language. Certain elements of human experience, as Empson states, 'cannot be named'; the words must be arrived at through the process of writing itself. The writer must find a word, or series of words, to communicate his or her experience, which will always be dependent on the context of the particular writer and the particular reader. Poetic language frees the writer and reader to make connections outside the dominance of the linear narrative often presented in the novel. Empson writes:

> the reason, then, that ambiguity is more elaborate in poetry than in prose, other than the fact that the reader is trained to expect it, seems to be that the presence of metre and rhyme [....] makes it seem sensible to diverge from the colloquial order of statement, and so imply several colloquial orders from which the statement has diverged. (1961, p. 30)

Poetry, therefore, gives reader and writer permission to inhabit multiple options and ambiguities, and allows for uncertainty and doubt. Poetry is not totally distinct from prose, nor

is poetry or prose totally distinct from the multitude of other literary forms. Ali Smith writes: 'We make form and form makes us', this has never been more apparent than in the digital age (2012, p. 7).

The Book of Ambiguity and the Digital Age

This thesis is not specifically concerned with the future of the book in a technological age; however, the new possibilities afforded by a networked generation reflect many of the central values of The Book of Ambiguity. These values include broadening the definition of what a 'book' may be, while encouraging more direct engagement between reader, writer and text. With the advent of electronic books and other technologies, the book, and the way it has previously being defined, is in the process of radical change. In the last three decades sales of e-books have grown exponentially and now e-book formats surpass traditional print books in sales (Stein 2013). Publishers are also responding to a digital climate and the new freedom it has given them to present work. As Liate Stehilik, a publisher from Random House articulates:

> You can do a novella, you can do a short book that leads into a longer book, or a book that bridges two different books from the same author. Before, you might have thought […] We don't have to feel limited by format in the way that we may have done before. (McMillan, 2013)

Eco may challenge futurologists who predict the death of the book saying: 'The book is like the spoon, scissors, the hammer, the wheel. Once invented it cannot be improved ', but it seems the printed book, as it has been known for five hundred years, might soon be a thing of the past (Carriere & Eco 2012, p. 4). Robert Stein, a pioneer in digital publishing, and Director of the Institute for the Future of the Book, posts in his blog;

> At the beginning I simply defined a book in terms of its physical nature — paper pages infused with ink, bound into what we know as the codex. But then in the late 1970s with the advent of new media technologies we began to see the possibility of extending the notion of the page[…]Without an "object" to tie it to, I started to talk about a book as the vehicle humans use to move ideas around time and space. (2013)

No longer bound in time and space, e-books are also changing the way reader and writer can engage with each other. The reader has a more active role than ever before. There is less censorship, and books can be downloaded, cut up and traded. It would seem we now use the term 'book' metaphorically. The book is in the process of being re-made, and the relationship between the reader and writer sits at the centre of this new development.

The Book of Ambiguity and Texts of Bliss

The Book of Ambiguity is one where both writer and reader seek each other out within the erotic, ambiguous site of the text, where each engage as co-producers of the experience of the book. The writer Dennis Cooper articulates this in an interview with the *Paris Review* saying, 'Everything in the book is half mine and half the readers', and the characters are just the enunciations of my ideas' (Silverberg 2011, p. 186). Writers of Books of Ambiguity are aware of the power structures and genre codes within society but empower the reader to think outside such structures and genres by engaging actively with the text. Where writer and reader travel together into the liminal, to where language, meanings, utterances and rationality are not stable. In this unpredictable space, reader and writer take part in an ecstatic exchange that often challenges the concrete categories that society sets down as facts. Roland Barthes calls books that operate this way — texts of bliss.

In his 1975 book, *The Pleasure of the Text*, Barthes asserts that the ability to write freely and authentically in a way that will engage the reader as collaborator is an endless struggle against Literature. This Literature, with a capital 'l' he believes is purely an invention, and always in servitude to the culture industry that is constructed within a capitalist system. Barthes therefore makes the distinction between texts of pleasure (readerly texts) and texts of bliss (writerly texts):

> Text of pleasure; the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a comfortable practice of reading. Text of bliss: the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomfits (perhaps to the point of certain boredom), unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language. (1975, p. 14)

Barthes is aware that his delineation between texts of pleasure and texts of bliss is not clear-cut. He also realises there is a need for both in our culture, that readers simultaneously seek out the consistency of selfhood that pleasure texts give, as well as the collapse of subjectivity that bliss texts provide. Mass culture is concerned with providing an endless supply of books, films, and television shows that do not reach into the erotic space. Their purpose is to provide the reader with something they are familiar with in an endless stream of plots, characters, crises and resolutions, whereas 'The text of bliss is absolutely intransitive [...] an extreme continually shifted' (Barthes 1975, p. 52). According to Barthes even such intransitive texts of bliss will eventually be assimilated by Literature. Therefore, the writer of blissful texts needs to perpetually revisit the place of *jouissance* and truth, in order to avoid creating books that are

imitations of his/her original creations. True freedom from form then remains illusory, like the hunt for ambiguity it can be there in mere flashes before these forms become assimilated by culture and given names or labels.

Writers of blissful texts interrogate the world, its language, social structures and culture. Blissful writing does not follow realist codes or current popular forms. The writer, according to Barthes, maintains plurality and difference through pleasure and the body.

> The writerly text is a perpetual present, upon which no *consequent* language (which would inevitably make it past) can be superimposed; the writerly text is *ourselves writing*, before the infinite play of the world (the world as function) is traversed, intersected, stopped, plasticized by some singular system (Ideology, Genus, Criticism) which reduces the plurality of entrances, the opening of networks, the infinity of languages. (1991, p. 5)

The writers of writerly books need to engage with their own desires and actively seek out the reader. The reader and writer are intrinsically imbedded within Barthes definitions of these two different texts. The act of writing and reading needs to be therefore creative and active. Both writer and reader must have a desiring relationship to the text and to each other. Writing texts of bliss, rather than texts of pleasure or 'prattle' (Barthes 1975, p. 4), must come through desire and neurosis according to Barthes, or they will be frigid texts. He writes that texts:

> which are written against neurosis, from the center of madness, contain within themselves, if they want to be read, that bit of neurosis necessary to the seduction of the readers; those terrible texts are all the same flirtatious texts. (Barthes 1975, pp. 5-6)

Yet Barthes cautions that unless the writer actively seeks out the reader within the process of writing, the writer cannot guarantee that the reader will feel the same pleasure that they, the writer, feel when writing the text. From this seeking out of the reader, a 'site of bliss' is created, which can be likened to the erotic space (Barthes 1975, p. 4). The writer does not need the reader nor does the reader need the writer per se, what both need, is the *site* where they can meet. The book becomes this site, where reader and writer can free themselves of the names and certainty of dominant culture, or what Barthes calls, *Doxa*, or 'dead repetition' (1975, p. 71). This site of ambiguity is where reader and writer can meet in language, language that is free from stereotypes and repression. The sort of text that communicates to the reader through bliss does not allow the reader the safety of a comfortable genre or form. Instead such texts seek the dissipation of forms and selfhood. However, as Barthes articulates, this is best achieved through a combination of pleasure and pain, through euphoria or *jouissance*.

Jouissance, steeped in ambiguity, is central to the formation of resistant texts that fight the solidification of *Doxa*. Barthes writes that, 'The text you write must prove to me *that it desires me*. Writing is: the science of the various blisses of language, its Kama Sutra' (1975, p. 6). *Doxa* seeks to eradicate difference by naming all art forms and ideologies, and bringing them safely into Literature and the culture industry. Barthes believes both conservative and left wing discourses aim to cover over otherness and difference, particularly in relation to desire. Barthes believes language has an inherent erotic violence. He writes: 'I am interested in language because it wounds or seduces me' (1975, p. 38). Cixous announces at the start of 'The Book as One of Its Own Characters', that 'The story I have to tell is about writing's violence' (2002, p. 405). Both Barthes' writerly texts and Cixous' *écriture féminine* instruct the writing subject to write from the body, with both its pleasures and perversions. Writing from a place of ecstasy can shatter the solidifying *Doxa* and reach the 'frozen sea inside us all' (Kafka 1904).

The Book of Ambiguity and the Taboo

The Book of Ambiguity is a formless, ecstatic site where reader and writer reach towards each other. It is an unfixed, formless text, where taboos can be transgressed. The Book of Ambiguity can never be contained within the 'hermeneutic circle', where a literary work is regarded as a closed whole, where 'individual features are intelligible in terms of the entire context, and the entire context becomes intelligible through the individual features' (Eagleton 2008, p. 64). The Book of Ambiguity is reliant on the reader seeking the writer where language and form can't go: into *jouissance*. The Book of Ambiguity is not whole, in a hermeneutical sense; it is incomplete, desiring and unstable. It seeks a reader to complete it, in a sexual sense, to be empowered as a co-creator. As Hawkes writes, the book can offer the reader, in 'its intensest moments, copulation' (1989, p. 114), where order breaks down in a text and 'overt linguistic purpose is suddenly subverted, and so 'orgasmically' transcended' (1989, p. 115). Sex, or 'copulation', Dufourmantelle argues:

> allows us to experience just what is untouchable in the other. That other who can be explored, restrained, enveloped, consoled, hurt, and brought to jouissance unveils in the rawest and most exposed intimacy the fact that some part will always escape [....] there is something untouchable in the body itself. (2007, p. 9)

The Book of Ambiguity provides the site where reader and writer seek each other through a text that will always escape formal or thematic clarity. Its ambiguities evade the readers, taking them towards the untouchable, but never providing certainty, absolute truth or wholeness.

This is because desire and the erotic depend on otherness, and The Book of Ambiguity is a desiring, ecstatic book.

Simone de Beauvoir writes: 'Eroticism is a movement towards the Other, that is its essential character' (1970, p. 446). Writer and reader share an ecstatic desire for the 'Other', when engaging with The Book of Ambiguity; both hunt for this paradoxical space, get close to it, but it remains elusive. The book provides the erotic playground, and the characters, in the shape of 'third persons', are inhabited in order to explore dreams and taboos outside the rules of society. Esther Perel writes that erotic pleasure allows us to trample on cultural restrictions and provides, 'an alternative space where we can safely experience our taboos. The erotic imagination has the force to override reason, convention and social barriers' (2007, p. 59). The process of writing and reading The Book of Ambiguity is thereby an erotic experience, in that it does not resolve; instead, it unsettles. The reader and the writer are left wanting—yet erotically charged. This is the addictive lure of Eros. The Book of Ambiguity craves a reader. It is dependent upon reaching towards another through the complexities of genre and market forces. Ideally the writer reaches as many readers as possible, but readers generally read for pleasure, seeking the safety of forms they are comfortable with. Taking a reader into an erotic, unsettling place requires strategic manipulations of genre, for there is always the danger that the reader will retaliate by refusing to meet the writer in the book.

The link between eroticism and reading, or eroticism and the acquisition of knowledge has been discussed since Socrates. Readers of Books of Ambiguity do not just read a book about what they know, expect, or have seen before; instead they *engage* with a book that takes them outside their knowledge and experience. Eroticism, according to Zizek, 'strives outwards and overflows the adjoining domains precisely because it cannot find satisfaction in itself, because it never attains its goal' (2005, p. 127). This connection between eroticism and insatiable knowledge seeking is written about in Plato's *Phaedrus* (370 BC). Socrates saw the desire for knowledge and the desire for the erotic as intrinsically connected, believing that Eros was located in the very *process* of knowing. As Carson explains:

> we think by projecting sameness upon difference, by drawing things together in a relation or idea while at the same time maintaining the distinctions between them. A thinking mind is not swallowed up by what it comes to know [....] In any act of thinking the mind must reach across this space between known and unknown, linking one to the other, but also keeping visible their difference. It is an erotic space. (1998, p. 171)

This stretching into the unknown of *jouissance* is what The Book of Ambiguity asks of both writer and reader. The Book of Ambiguity demands the danger of the erotic space, not the

safety of the genre book. It refuses a comfortable, stable conclusion and in this sense is the antithesis of the type of 'warm-hearted' book Andrew Soutar predicted there would always be a market for. A book:

> that leaves you thinking that you've just had tea in a sweet-smelling, whitewashed country cottage—hot tea with cream and toasted scones, and an old lady in a white cap to pour out the tea. (Starr 1921, p. 136)

Carrierre would call books such as these 'mediocre', insisting that great books are affected by every single reading, 'A great book is always alive; it grows and ages alongside us, without ever dying. Time enriches and alters it' (Carriere & Eco 2012, p. 158). The fictional Dorrigo Evans, in Richard Flanagan's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, echoes this distinction between good and great books when he says, 'A good book [...] leaves you wanting to reread the book. A great book compels you to reread your own soul' (2013, p. 28). Cixous believes that it is the soul itself that is seeking when a book is read, 'The Soul seeks an image in which it can resemble itself' (2002, p. 414). Books of Ambiguity demand both reader and writer disperse all previously assumed forms, selves, or genres and find a space to communicate outside of these safe creations. This experience is outside language and form, and provides a state of transformation. The erotic unsettles the reader/writer and allows him/her to play roles, to go somewhere unexpected and outside rational thought structures. The reader is destabalised by a book that does not conform to a previously held stereotype or is not easily named or classified. Forced to engage in questioning his or her understanding of what a book is, the reader is in a more open position to question society and him or herself within it. As Starr writes about the possibility of the novel:

> Literary art should not merely excite, but exalt the soul [.....] I wish the novel to mirror the unity of life, or, in other words, to show that all possible individuals are latent in every man and that each person may ultimately identify himself with every living object in the universe. (1921, p. 27)

The writer and reader are only able to reach this state of exaltation by openly and passionately engaging in a quest, driven by desire for connection with another. In order to create such an ecstatic site, the writer must remain open to his/her unconscious and enter into a state of truthfulness where new forms can emerge, untainted by the constraints of history, the market or theory. This is not to say that the writer, or reader will ever reach Starr's goal of universal identification as both are constrained by their social and historical selves: their own facticity. The Book of Ambiguity itself, as I have outlined, is also always in relationship to current literary forms and is bound by its history. However, by communicating in a state of *jouissance,* writer, reader and book are more likely to find moments of transportation and truth. This

transformation, possession, and disorientation that The Book of Ambiguity encourages between reader and writer has many parallels to the dynamism and crisis of threshold states of liminality of *becoming* which anthropologists have termed liminal states.

The anthropologist Victor Turner, who built upon the work of Arnold van Gennep, describes the liminal state, as one that is 'betwixt and between', or as a place of 'fruitful darkness' (1967, p. 55). Turner looks at the process of 'becoming', as a state of deep emotional intensity and gives the analogy of water getting to boiling point. Turner writes about the necessity of an ambiguous identity when in the liminal phase, calling the liminal state, one of the 'ambiguous passenger' (1967, p. 47). Van Gennep defined the liminal stage as a transitional rite, whereby participants often go through a series of painful rituals, changing, becoming nameless before redefining themselves to occupy a new role in society (2004, p. 53). The writer of The Book of Ambiguity must write within this liminal space of 'becoming', thereby challenging the reader to enter this place also. The liminal state is one where individuals step outside gender boundaries (Turner 1967, p. 54). This wild, charged creative space of liminality takes the participants outside taboos, binaries and the law.

The Book of Ambiguity and Social Change

Writers of Books of Ambiguity are driven by the belief that the book can engage the reader and provoke social change. Therefore, apart from their formal ambiguity, the themes these writers choose to explore in their books centre around the unraveling of stereotypes within society. The writer encourages the reader to reflect on, and inhabit other people's lives and in so doing urges an understanding by the reader of the ambiguity of humanity. The Book of Ambiguity is a tool employed by the writer to explore the contradictions of authorial positions and the artifice of the book. The writer of The Book of Ambiguity wishes to inhabit the third person and encourage the reader to do so, in order to dissolve the artificial boundaries between 'us' and 'them.' In this sense the creators of these living and changing texts are acting true to type of the de Beauvoirian 'artist and writer', as set out in her hierarchy of men in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Simone de Beauvoir's artist is one, who when acting authentically, seeks to not only explore the limitations of an art form, but the limitations of existence itself (1976, p. 69). Through this exploration, de Beauvoir believes, is found the highest form of freedom; for only through liberation of others, can one liberate oneself, because of our ambiguous existential condition. In this way the artist resists the perils of the lower form of 'sub-man' or 'serious man', those who

she defines as men, or women, content to live within the safety of an unexamined life (de Beauvoir 1976, pp. 42-50).

Simone de Beauvoir, like Sartre, is a great champion of the individual; however, she argues that the individual is only defined through his or her relationship to the world and to other individuals (1976, p. 156). Simone de Beauvoir builds upon this to say that individual freedom is only possible through the freedom of others and identifies that often one person's freedom is at the expense of another's. She views this ambiguity as the fundamental failure of the human condition. According to de Beauvoir this ambiguity *is* our very condition, and that the writer must use this paradox to drive us to pursue freedom for not just one, but for all. She argues that even if oppression and inequality can never be fully eliminated from the world there is no excuse to consent to failure. Rather, de Beauvoir writes 'one must consent to struggle against it without respite' (1976, p. 157). The writer of The Book of Ambiguity uses words and the transformative power of the book to urge for universal freedom. In her fiction, as well as her philosophy, de Beauvoir is concerned with the writer as activist, as needing to engage an audience. In this sense, de Beauvoir sees the limitations of philosophy, art and literature to reach a mass audience, to provoke change. In *The Mandarins*, de Beauvoir's central characters, Robert and Anne Dubreuilh, often thought to represent Sartre and de Beauvoir herself, debate this dilemma:

> "Haven't we always agreed that one doesn't just write for the sake of writing?" Robert said. "At certain times, other forms of action become more urgent."
>
> "Not for you," I replied. "First and foremost, you're a writer."
>
> [....]
>
> "There are a lot of things that have to be prevented before one can afford to amuse oneself writing books that no one might ever read."
>
> I stopped dead in the middle of the street. "What?" Do you believe that too? That people will lose interest in literature?"[...]
>
> "But a world without literature and art would be horribly sad."
>
> "In any event, there are millions of men at this very moment to whom literature means absolutely nothing." Robert replied. (1972, p. 53)

Dubreuilh discusses the dangerous numbing effect of pleasure and the compromises required to reach a mass audience when he challenges Henri Perron, believed to represent Albert Camus, as to why his newspaper reached more people than his:

> "Yes, you do reach a lot of people." Dubreuilh said. "But you yourself just gave the reason why. If your paper pleases everybody, it's because it disturbs nobody. It attacks nothing, defends nothing, evades every problem. It simply makes for pleasant reading." (1972, p. 150)

The Book of Ambiguity requires the writer to be a revolutionary. A revolutionary of form: to seek to engage a reader, through poetry, into challenging the absolutes set down by institutions. Simone de Beauvoir, through the character of Anne, champions Robert to keep writing, believing that his books are able to effect change in people. Anne writes that upon closing Dubreuilh's books:

> you felt yourself overwhelmed with anger, disgust, revolt; you wanted things to change [....]you find yourself thrown in among people, and all their problems become your concern [...] There's no gap between the political ideas and his poetic emotions. (1972, p. 59)

This connection in revolt and ecstatic transformation between writer and reader is what The Book of Ambiguity aspires to.

Summary

In this chapter I have come towards an abstracted definition of The Book of Ambiguity, by explaining its relationship to literature that falls in between classification of form and genre. I have described a book of often-heightened poetic language, of metaphor and double meanings, a book that demands reader and writer to be engaged actively in the process of analysis, in both a masculine and feminine way. I have argued that the writer of The Book of Ambiguity does not write from a goal-orientated, phallic site in the body, but from the whole body.

This style of writing writes through madness and dreams, and provokes a challenge to conventional genres in the spirit of Cixous' *écriture féminine.* Cixous urges the writer to write from both a place of *jouissance* and madness in order to challenge existing forms of language, narrative voice, and the selfhood of the reader. In order to write Books of Ambiguity, the writer needs to surrender to *jouissance* and move beyond boundaries of form, history and genre. The writer is able to do this, according to Barthes, by visualising an erotic site where both writer and reader meet, thereby ensuring a text is created that is desirous and unique. The state that both reader and writer enter is a liminal, transformative space that is outside the stabilising forces of consumerism, the culture industry or patriarchy. It grants textual liberation and a site of communication that is both blissful and dangerous. It surrenders any fiction of a third person, and exposes reader and writer in naked *jouissance.*

The Book of Ambiguity is thematically concerned with our ambiguous human condition but it is never didactic. Ambiguous in both form and content the overall effect of The Book of Ambiguity is a literature that reflects the inescapable ambiguous existence of humanity in the de Beauvorian sense. The Book of Ambiguity acknowledges that stability and equality are ultimately impossible states; however, striving towards them is not meaningless. In this sense, The Book of Ambiguity is a book that is political, ethical, and subversive: and *always* antithetical to definition or containment. For ambiguity, according to Ross:

> is an *invitation* to change, not a demand for it. But such a situation means that those involved must be able to tolerate, at least for a time, a certain 'lack' of order. This "disorder" allows for dimensions of the situation to reveal themselves, or to be uncovered by questioning. (1998, p. 69)

The Book of Ambiguity has only as much power as its reader gives it, indeed if the reader chooses not to engage with it, or with art itself, it is an entirely useless mode of social change. The creators of Books of Ambiguity find themselves in a climate where there is a greater tolerance of 'disorder', a greater number of women writing and a movement towards embracing the unclassifiable and untamable, a time I term, post-*Madwoman*.

I remember waves and volcanoes of sound *I remember feeling*

feeling *the state of feeling* words took me there

then left me here

I remember seeing beyond the outlines of boxes I remember laughing at boxes

I remember sleeping in my dreams my mouth burned in your arms *Your arms couldn't hold me anymore* I climbed out the window of the confessional booth *you tried to pull me back by my legs* but my eyes had seen beyond *I remember how I was a character in your dream* or was I a dream in your character

and I wouldn't fit back in anywhere not in your arms

not in your red, or blue or yellows

all I know is *I was* everywhere

CHAPTER TWO

Post-*Madwoman* Writing

In this chapter I argue that The Book of Ambiguity, created through the liberating liminal state of *jouissance,* heralds a new era of post-*Madwoman* writing. I outline how the label of *Madwoman* has been used to oppress women from antiquity to the present. Using the writings of Michel Foucault to identify how the power structures within society allow confinements of the 'mad' to occur, I illustrate how institutions control the 'abnormal' so the prevailing 'normal' can dominate. I posit that since involuntary incarceration was abolished in the 1960/70s, women writers have been able to reveal their own 'madness' and sexuality. I argue that in a post-*Madwoman* age, the *Madwoman* is no longer confined to attics or to doppelganger characters in gothic narratives; instead, experiences of madness and sexual taboos are now abundant in books written by both men and women. The fear of confinement is no longer relevant in a post-asylum, post-*Madwoman* age; an age that enables writing that reflects instability, open-endedness, fluidity and formlessness, rather than the fixed, hardness of rational form. The Book of Ambiguity is created by this liberation from the confines of the fixed binaries of sanity/insanity, male/female, reality/dreams and form and formlessness. I argue that once the inherent ambiguity of certain preconceived truisms is exposed, a fluid definition of the book becomes possible. Ambiguous, fragmented narratives of post-*Madwoman* writing emerge, and a new form of book is demanded.

The Slipperiness of the Formless

According to Anne Carson, fluidity of form has throughout history been associated with the feminine, creating persistent binaries between masculine form and feminine formlessness. Anne Carson's essay 'Dirt and Desire: Essay on the Phenemology of Female Pollution in Antiquity', from her 2001 book, *Men in the Off Hours*, outlines how philosophers from Plato to Aristotle have regarded 'women as formless creatures who cannot or do not or will not maintain their own boundaries and who are awfully adept at confounding the boundaries of others' (2001a, p. 135). Carson argues that there is a deep mistrust in 'the wet' of woman, as it has the ability to corrupt dry male rationality and self-control that *he* needs to maintain form (2001a, p. 140). The element of water has not only represented the feminine historically, but also the subconscious and dreams. Extending from Carson, Cixous often uses the terms 'dreamer' and

'writer' interchangeably: in 'The Book as One of Its Own Characters' she asks 'Has the writerdreamer, the dreamerwriter plunged into the dregs of the soul far away from the world of writing?' (2002, p. 419). Dreamer and writer here are disconnected from the rational world and 'plunged' into the formlessness of the soul. In 'voice, i' Cixous remains in conflict with the rational boundaries of the book and its genres, wondering 'can one write water, can one read water?' (1984, p. 53). Writers such as Cixous reach towards possibilities beyond the concrete and rational, behaving like Sylvia Plath's 'Lady of the Shipwrecked' in her poem 'Finisterre':

> She does not hear what the sailor or the peasant is saying –
>
> She is in love with the beautiful formlessness of the sea.
>
> (1981, p. 169)

Writers of Books of Ambiguity urge the reader to meet them within this formless 'sea' and in so doing often provoke fear or anger from the institutions, readers and critics who insist on the boundaries of genre. In order to stay outside form the book has to remain *in process*, remain fluid or 'wet', thereby disrupting the imposition of form by the very changeability of the liquid state. Plath uses the metaphor of the sea in the poem above as an example of the elusiveness required to be formless. Bataille's definition of formlessness or *informe* is also liquid, calling formlessness as being 'something like' a gob of spittle (1995, p. 51). Bataille's discussion of the *informe* in his 1929 piece for *Documents Magazine* describes a state akin to ambiguity. The *informe* falls in-between forms and is perhaps always out of the grasp of definition or theory, and always bound to fail. In this sense Bataille's *informe* is reminiscent of de Beauvoir's ethics of ambiguity, a state that, within the boundaries of language and humanity, will always remain out of reach.

This inability to harness or define form or female sexuality within patriarchal language has led feminist thinkers such as Cixous, Kristeva and Irigary to rally women to embrace writing from the multi-orgasmic, *bisexual* body. Irigary writes that '*women have sex organs more or less everywhere [...]* Hers are contradictory words, somewhat mad from the standpoint of reason' (1995, p. 97). Kristeva urges women to access a pre-Oedipal language, before gender is determined, she believes this poetic language is born out of pleasure and through its polymorphic nature, breaks down binaries set up by the dominant power structures of society (1982). Cixous describes the challenge women are up against from the power structures:

> Write, let no one hold you back, let nothing stop you; not man; not the imbecile capitalist machinery, in which crafty publishing houses are the relayers of imperatives handed down by an economy that works against us and off our backs; and not yourself. Smug-faced

> readers, managing editors, and big bosses don't like the true texts of women – female-sexed texts. That kind scares them. (1976, p. 877)

These writers urge women to challenge the narratives, forms and histories that have been predominately created by men, to use formlessness to erode the ancient and prevailing formal structures used to confine women due to fear of their sexuality.

Confining women and their sexuality is an ancient practice. In fifth century Greek society women had no legal rights, were feared by males, and were largely restricted to the domestic sphere (Simon 1978, pp. 244-260). Men, however, were encouraged to be socially engaged in society, and to have sexual affairs with men and women. The ancient Greeks held the belief that female hysterical symptoms were an expression of unmet sexual needs, and believed her relationship with a male doctor was a way to fulfill these needs. As Simon outlines, 'Hysteria as a culturally sanctioned dumb show in which patient, doctor, and family all participate has a continuous history from antiquity to present' (1978, pp. 243). Since antiquity women have played the role of confessor to male doctors, who have provided an audience and collaborated in a created female persona. Women, it would seem, have had a long history of understanding the ambiguous creation of first and third person selves, of understanding the masks we all wear. Such masks have been used to navigate the social construction of insanity that has historically been employed to subjugate difference and the female body.

Out of the Asylum

Since Foucault's influential writings on madness and society we have entered the post-asylum, post-*Madwoman* era; however, gender stereotypes are still deeply imbedded within the power structures. According to Foucault's 1964 study, *Madness and Civilisation*, it was in the seventeenth century that society started to 'intern' or 'confine' the mad; previously madness was linked to the 'presence of imaginary transcendences' or vapors (Foucault 2001, p. 54). Foucault documents this journey from 'ship of fools', to prisons, to *Hôpital Général*, to the Victorian asylum era. In doing so, he critiques what he sees as the three main forms of social control patriarchal society has created—the prison, the hospital and the asylum. For Foucault these structures provide the discourses that encode normality, criminality and insanity, in order to control individuals. With the birth of the industrial age and the labour force, those who were seen as idle or useless to society could be condemned to 'other worlds' as they were seen as

possibly infectious to society. Madness became linked with poverty, as both had become social problems for the city and the long history of confinement began. The Age of Reason, as Foucault calls it, was an age with a need to determine its own profile of what constituted 'unreason', and under the broad definition of 'unreason' institutions started to lock the 'entire population of madness' away (2001, p. 54). Foucault's possibly simplistic history of madness, has come under attack by various philosophers and historians for trying to give voice to the mad at all using the language of reason (Derrida 1978), or for too neatly demarcating the period that began confining the mad (Still & Velody 1992). Foucault himself towards the end of his career acknowledged he had perhaps been too focused on the exterior dominating structures of power, and was now interested in exploring the techniques used in dominating the self. The self, for Foucault, however, is a construct, and is forever in relation to the power structures that are constantly monitoring bodies and sexuality.

In *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1* Foucault asserts that it was through the pathological creations of 'hysterical woman' or 'nervous woman' that society, under male authority was able to domesticate and confine women: for women were seen, in the Victorian age as 'thoroughly saturated with sexuality' (Foucault 1990 p. 104). The gender distinction between male 'madness', and the socially constructed 'insanity' of the *Madwoman* is reflected in literature and discussed by Foucault and other thinkers. 'Madness' often focused on deviant (usually male) behavior that was seen as largely a personal choice and a matter for the police, while 'insanity' was seen as female, pathological and needing to be confined and cured by a male doctor. As Katarzyna Szmigiero puts it in her 2008 paper 'They Wouldn't Make Good Ophelias - Reality of Experience in Women's Madness Narratives', men were seen as bad, with the potential to become good, while women were deemed mad and unable to control themselves. Szmigiero observes this gender bias to be entrenched in modern psychiatry that 'more willingly pathologises irregular female behaviour over male deviancy' (2008, p. 2). The Victorian era's embracing of asylums and limited tolerance of deviance and disorder is reflected in the literature of the nineteenth century gothic novel, which responded thematically to a society concerned with a need to maintain public safety and order. Women writers, often forced to write under male pseudonyms, responded to this paternal social control through writing books that were full of codes, doubles and alter egos. Books such as *Jane Eyre* (1847) were read as political 'palimpsests' by a 'feminine imagination operating from within a prison of gender and sexuality in order to subvert patriarchal oppression' (Federico 2009, p. 217).

These *Madwoman* books, as discussed in Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* were written in an era where involuntary commitment to asylums was the norm.

It is important to outline a brief history of de-institutilisation and the current forces towards constructing and defining 'madness' before examining the way this has been reflected in literature. It wasn't until the 1950s through to the 1970s when women and other marginalised groups struggled for civil rights, that there was any real mainstream discussion about civil rights for the mentally ill:

> Until the 1960s, the voice of paternalism asserted the need for involuntary commitment. But as African-Americans and women struggled for civil rights, there was renewed discussion and activism about civil rights for the mentally ill. (Curtis 2001)

The growing civil rights movement, combined with the advancement of psychiatric treatment and the pressure on overcrowded psychiatric hospitals and asylums led to the process of deinstitutionalisation. In 1955 in Australia the federal government had recommended a move towards deinstitutionalisation, under the pressure of funding twenty-four large-scale and overcrowded psychiatric hospitals (Willis, Reynolds & Keleher 2012). The long period of confinement and control by the mainstream patriarchal state had come to an end; no longer could persons be involuntarily confined because they were not deemed 'normal' by the state. Moving 'madness' out of asylums and into the community has led to a growing social acceptance of diversification that reflects this ambiguity of reason and unreason.

Since deinstitutionalisation there has been a growing reliance on *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (the *DSM*) classification system to define specific mental disorders. This has coincided with a steady rise of competing patient (or madness) narratives to challenge the concept of definitive diagnosis of psychological disorders. This growing visibility of mental health-related conditions however has not, according to Darian Leader, led to any further inquiry into what 'madness' actually is. Leader believes that in the last fifty years many contemporary authors 'write as if the problems of madness have just been solved by genetic or neurological research' and that drugs will cure most conditions (2011, p. 5). Leader also asserts that there is more pressure than ever to behave in uniform ways and to 'fix up' individuals with a mental-health issue as quickly as possible and put them back into the workforce in the post-asylum age (2011, pp. 3-5). He blames the erosion of inquiry on the over reliance on the DSM classification system, which lists mental disorders and explains how to cure them in a superficial

and limiting way. All diagnosis is based on visible presenting symptoms according to the DSM, and for Leader, who is particularly interested in psychosis, 'madness' can never be reduced to these visible, external symptoms (2011, pp. 31-34). Perhaps, if Leader's thesis is true, the inquiry as to what 'madness' is needs to be shifted from the doctors to the patients in this new era, from the DSM to experiential narratives.

Narratives are not necessarily about categorisation. As Launer points out in his 1999 paper, 'A Narrative Approach to Mental Health in General Practice', standing between the world of stories and the word of classification is often an impossible position. Launer is aware that 'a diagnosis is actually no more than a linguistic construct' and can be manipulated to suit the power structures of society and be of very little use to the patient (1999). He is in favour of collaboration between patient and doctor, creating the 'story' from a set of circumstances, including the patient's narrative and any testable scientific data to come towards an agreed, though perhaps ambiguous story. As Launer's paper outlines, doctors more and more are turning to patient narratives when treating mental illness. The shifting, ever changing DSM manual provides only half the story, for as Foucault asks in *Madness, The Invention of an Idea:*

> Is it possible to understand everything? Is not the essence of mental illness, as opposed to normal behaviour, precisely that it can be explained, but that it resists all understanding? (1990, p. 75)

The definitions of what madness and sanity are have been revealed as imprecise. Challenges to the power structures of psychiatry, the asylum and the church have led to a more dialogic engagement between the individual and the organisations of social control.

Since the 1970s it is no longer appropriate or possible, at least in Western society, for people to be incarcerated, by family members or friends, under the label of 'mad'. This label, in the past had been used to confine infidelity, anxiety, post-natal depression, homosexuality or alcoholism, and it was women, with lower status and less economic power, who were more vulnerable to these confinements (Wallace 2012). Women are still the overwhelming majority of people who are treated for psychiatric illnesses (Hustvedt A 2011 p. 305); therefore a movement towards collaboration, rather than clinical classification of their psychology, provides opportunities for women to tell their own story. Through writing personal narratives of 'madness', rather than tacitly accepting diagnostic labels of 'hysteric' or 'psychotic', women have challenged the black and white labels used in psychiatry. I have outlined the threat to

rational thought that women have posed since antiquity and shown how the links between female pleasure and madness are deeply imbedded in literature, society and medical belief. Experiential narratives of 'madness' have led to an opening up of story and writing itself. The female writer no longer needs to write within the constraints of Victorian realism; instead, growing economic and sexual freedom, at least in Western society, has given her access to alternative forms of writing and questioning. I believe that the acceptance of 'madness narratives' and the growing number of women writing has led to a rise in books that challenge the ambiguity of existence, linear narrative, finite definitions, gender stereotypes and inequalities within society. Examples of women who were locked into institutions for short periods, or in some cases their whole lives, by family members abound; famous ones include Zelda Fitzgerald, Lucia Joyce, Marilyn Monroe, Yoko Ono, Sylvia Plath and Camille Claudel. As Nancy Pelosi stated famously upon passing the Affordable Care Act in America in 2010, 'From now on being a woman will no longer be considered a pre-existing medical condition ('Nancy Pelosi' 2012). Female bodies are not purely objects that can be manipulated and separated from their own individual story. The stories of the hysteric or the neurotic cannot be seized upon by science, nor can the church employ the idea of demonic possession or stigmata for their own gains. Women cannot be used as 'living illustrations' as they were in the Salpetriere Hospital in 1870's Paris, where hypnotised patient's bodies were often signed, like works of art, by doctors engraving their name in the woman's flesh (Hustvedt A. 2011, pp. 37-49). Post-*Madwoman*, women are taking control of their own bodies through writing their own stories and reading the stories of other women.

The patriarchal power structures have long been aware of the threat to control and social order that books would bring to those they tried to subjugate, indeed 'Parents were warned to keep books out of the hands of their daughters, and husbands were admonished to make sure their wives were kept away from novels' (Hustvedt A 2011, p. 103). Post-*Madwoman*, authors can talk about their periods of madness without risk of confinement and use experiences such as madness and sexuality to push writing into new spaces. Women can no longer be declared as 'morally insane' if they have a sexual appetite or write about feeling sexual pleasure (Selden, Raman & Widdowson 1997, p. 136). That is not to say stigmas around mental illness and female sexuality have disappeared, or that the perhaps more subtle forms of control through medication are not real, but there has been a significant shift. Women are able to write books with their own names on them, and can even admit within them to periods of ecstasy, adultery,

bisexuality, to periods of being a *Madwoman*. Stereotyped 'madness' is as unpalatable as stereotyped 'blackness' or 'homosexuality' in contemporary literature. The ambiguity of these experiences is more widely accepted and expected within books in the post-*Madwoman* age. This does not mean there are not complex and subtle ways of oppression of difference within society, but women and men are free to read and write their own stories, in most Western societies at least, without fear of incarceration. Post-*Madwoman* writing has changed the way women are depicted in literature and also the way women (and men) are writing.

Out of the Attic

Without fear of being institutionalised, women (and some men) are challenging conventional genres and forms through a process of writing that is connected to the unconscious and the irrational. This writing is what I call post-*Madwoman* writing and has given rise to The Book of Ambiguity. These narratives break out of the confines of medical authority or genre borders to reflect and speak of emotions, sexuality and dreams. This sort of writing, integral to The Book of Ambiguity, coincided with the dissolution of involuntary confinement. No longer confined symbolically within male texts, women writers were liberated. Their subversion did not have to be indirect or ingenious, as it had been in the nineteenth century (Gilbert & Gubar 1979, p. 83), but could be openly challenging of the rational voice of the patriarchal repression and male texts. The Book of Ambiguity openly embraces madness within it, employing forces, previously seen as threatening (the unconscious, madness, female desire, dreams and fluidity) to challenge and move beyond previous constraints placed on the book.

From the first female autobiographies, such as St Teresa's Life (1562-65), Estelle Jelinek notes that female writers, intent on validation and acceptance 'required a greater outpouring of feelings and less structured forms than its male equivalent' (1986, p. 21). Jelinek also observes that women do not shy away from admitting their failures, while men have tended to focus on their careers and achievements in autobiographical writings. Szmigiero concludes:

> Women try to write an apology of their life choices while men do not consider they need to vindicate or apologise for anything. Thus the experience of being pronounced insane appears to be an ideal subject matter for women's autobiography. (2013, p. 2)

The confining genre labels used for selling and categorising books have led us to terms such as 'female confessional', 'narcissistic narrative' or 'madness memoir' and to formulaic books that are the antithesis of The Book of Ambiguity. Books such as Nikki Gemmel's *The Bride Stripped*

Bare (2012), Susannah Cahalan's *Brain on Fire: My Month of Madness* (2012), Elizabeth Wurtzell's *Prozac Nation* (1997) or Emma Forrest's *Your Voice in My Head* (2011) probe descents into mental illness and sexual taboos for a readership hungry for scandal, erotica and madness. These non-ambiguous books seem to have been written for the popular market, or for Barthes' culture industry, employing a linear narrative style, ill-suited to the timeless, formless states of dreams or madness.

Arguably the most famous *Madwoman* in literature is Charlotte Bronte's Bertha, from the novel *Jane Eyre*. Gilbert and Gubar argue that Bertha represents Jane's own imprisoned 'hunger, rebellion and rage' (1979, p. 339). Bertha is Jane's psychological double and between the two characters Bronte is depicting the divided self of women in Victorian England. This practice of female writers creating a fictional mad self for their protagonist is discussed in detail by Gilbert and Gubar, as is the concept of women being confined to the labels of either 'angel' or *Madwoman*. Gilbert and Gubar argue that the double of Jane/Bertha represent the 'difficulties of Everywoman in patriarchal society' (1979, p. 339) and that women writers need to free themselves from representing 'woman' within this dichotomy alone.

The difficulties women writers faced in representing their feelings of confinement to the domestic sphere are illustrated in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (2013). In this short story, the unnamed narrator discovers her trapped bizarre double behind the wallpaper in the room she is confined to due to her 'madness'. This doppelganger, representing according to Rigney, 'not only the protagonists own divided self but all women who are imprisoned, bound and inhibited by a society which insists that women are childlike, merely decorative, and incapable of self-actualization' (1978, p. 123). In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the narrator submits to being confined within her own house, under the care of her physician husband and her 'madness' is documented by weaving narrative voices, hallucinations, points of view and memory, as Ward observes, the constant shifting of voice and tense mean that 'readers begin to lose their grip on the text as the narrator loses her grip with the experience of her reality' (2003). This early Book of Ambiguity with its unnamed narrator challenges the reader to actively create the text. The significance of *The Yellow Wallpaper* is worth mentioning, as Gilman penned an ambiguous narrative of madness at a time when she was a married woman in America, when the legal doctrine of *femme covert* was still in place. Gilman was, for all intents and purposes the property of her husband and therefore risked involuntary incarceration if the character of the book was associated with her. Gilman had been diagnosed with nervous

exhaustion and neurasthenia before the publication of *The Yellow Wallpaper*, as were many other middle class nineteenth century women. Gilman sought medical help regarding her nervous condition, which was probably post-natal depression, and was advised to:

> Live as domestic a life as possible. Have your child with you all the time. Lie down an hour after each meal. Have but two hours' intellectual life a day. And never touch pen, brush or pencil as long as you live. (Golden 2013, p. 55).

The Yellow Wallpaper, written forty-three years later than *Jane Eyre*, shows a remarkable shift in the depiction of madness, which coincided with the loosening of the rigid gender roles of the pre-industrial era. As women negotiated their entry into the public arena they were also confronted with social pressure to remain at the centre of their homes and confined to the domestic sphere. The ambiguity of these messages led to a rise in the pathologisation of the feminine and the diagnosis of nervous disorders (Ward 2003). Even though women's independence and economic freedom were still a long way off, Gilman's experiential narrative paved the path for a slow transition away from the *Madwoman* in literature being confined to the attic or the asylum. The stereotyped depiction of the *Madwoman* was becoming less and less satisfying and as she started to take centre stage in literature, the ambiguities of the *Madwoman* and her condition demanded attention.

Scholars have written widely on Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* and Bronte's *Jane Eyre,* and though these books are not of primary focus within this thesis, I believe they are pivotal texts, along with the confessional poetics of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, to map the movement from *Madwoman* to post-*Madwoman* writing. Rhys' prequel to *Jane Eyre* establishes that the *Madwoman* need not be confined to the protagonist's double: the protagonist *herself* could be mad. With the publication of Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* in 1966, the *Madwoman,* as a character in her own right is confirmed.

Rhys wrote *Wide Sargasso Sea* using multiple narrative voices, including that of Antoinette (Bertha) and Rochester. By giving Bertha a voice, Rhys creates her as a rounded character, rather than a stereotyped depiction of *Madwoman*. *Wide Sargasso Sea*, with its intoxicating hybrid of memoir, poetic writing, novelistic rewriting, dream, and history is trans-textual, thereby transforming the text into a plural space that exceeds its own single text status, Kaup labels this as—'mad intertextuality'. Kaup defines 'mad intertextuality' as: 'the connotative conjunction of women and madness in a vast cultural space, in different disciplines such as philosophy, psychoanalysis, psychiatry and literature, feeding

each other and exceeding any single textual manifestation' (1993, p.12). Kaup's thesis, *Mad Intertextuality: Madness in Twentieth –Century Women's Writing*, which she initially started writing as a 'daughter' of Gilbert and Gubar's *Madwoman in the Attic*, argues that the increase in madness narratives in the twentieth century has seen a shift away from gothic institution narratives of the sixties towards, what she labels the 'visionary' mad narratives of the seventies, where, no longer a victim, the *Madwoman* is newly empowered, and 'the ultimate issue is the control of the liminal experience' (1993, p. 139). Kaup argues that attempting to associate Cixous' association of feminine writing with visionary mad narratives of the seventies, such as Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* (1972) or Marge Percy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), is deceptive, as Kaup believes such texts impose closure and control, even while celebrating madness as a disruptive mode of insight' (1993, p. 139). Kaup's study does not however investigate books written after the 1970s, a period, I argue that is Post-*Madwoman*, a period where female writers are able to inhabit liminality, without feeling compelled to force their protagonists or books into rational or patriarchal linear quest narratives.

Coinciding with the phasing out of involuntary incarceration from the 1950s through to the 1970s was the development of the confessional school of poetics. Although M.L. Rosenthal apparently first used the term 'confessional' in his review of Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* (1959), revivifying an earlier use of the term, it is Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton who have become the most well-known writers of confessional poetics. Women writers would seem to have an enduring fascination with writing about the experience of madness and its external threat to their person. Confessional narratives that explore previously taboo subjects such as female sexuality or madness have given voice to the experiences of being a woman in a patriarchal society. Critics have dismissed the confessional school of writing as emotionally indulgent, unsophisticated, defiling, narcissistic, cathartic and often driven by unpredictable rages or irrepressible urges (Gallagher 1996, p. 96; Williamson 1983, pp, 170-178; Gill 2007, p. 12). The confessional poetics of Plath, Sexton and women writers in particular were perceived as 'volcanic, eruptive, leaky, somatic, natural, irrational, out of control and grotesque' (Gill 2007, p.14). William Pritchard believed the genre to require no skill and have no future, belittling the audience of Anne Sexton's poems by describing them as 'a few unhappy college students, probably female' (1978, p. 391). Therefore, although the confessional genre is not limited to women writers, the criticism of the form is leveled squarely at the feminine

character of it. The intimacy of the genre disturbs and appears to terrify critics such as Pritchard who would prefer to see experiences of madness and female sexuality safely confined again. The genre plays with the first person in a complex way and does not allow the reader to sit safely behind the pages of a constructed 'story'. As Sexton wrote in her ninth Crawshaw lecture: 'one writes of oneself [....] in order to invite in [....] to find the way, out through experience' (Sexton 1972, p. 1), and in her first Crawshaw lecture she reveals, 'I like to lie. I like to confess. I like to hide' (Sexton 1972, p. 2). The confession, as Foucault outlines:

> has spread its effects far and wide. It plays a part in justice, medicine, education, family relationships and love relationships, in the most ordinary affairs of everyday life and in the most solemn rites; one confesses one's crimes, one's sins, one's thoughts and desires, one's illnesses and troubles [.....] Western man has become a confessing animal. (1990 p. 59)

It would seem Western man is still not nearly as much of a confessing animal as Western woman.

The shift from protagonist's double as *Madwoman* in *Jane Eyre,* to protagonist as *Madwoman* in *Wide Sargossa Sea*, has made a further shift still to allow the author herself to be a self-proclaimed *Madwoman* protagonist is her own writing. Just a brief survey of examples include: Janet Frame's *The Complete Autobiography* (1990), Kate Millett's *The Looney-Bin Trip* (2000), Joanne Greenberg's (Hannah Green's) *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden* (1964), Lori Schiller's *The Quiet Room* (1994), Kate Holden's *In My Skin,* (2005), Nelly Arcan's *Whore* (2002), Maria Cardinal's *The Words to Say it* (1983), Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005), Siri Husvedt's *The Shaking Woman* (2010a) and the confessional and post-confessional poetics of Sandy Jeffs, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. I argue that the shift to *Madwoman* as protagonist and the reclaiming of *Madwoman* that has occurred with post-*Madwoman* writing, has led to books and writing that plays with the boundaries of form. Jelinek, argues that women's embracing of a more fragmentary narrative is due to women having a weaker sense of self than men. On the contrary, I believe that due to their long history of playing roles within confession, from antiquity to now, women have an acceptance of their own mental states that enables them to write from a place of freedom, thereby creating inter-generic, ambiguous works. Women as historical confessors, to an often-controlling patriarchal force, have a deeper experience of the subtleties required when creating their narratives of self. This is why, the 'narcissistic narratives', as they are sometimes patronisingly called, of Plath and Sexton, are deeply concerned with the role of the reader and their relationship to the confessor. The reader cannot hide in these texts for they are actively involved in a creative way. The writers of such texts are

always aware that truths are arbitrary and that they, as writer, are in a discursive relationship with the reader.

Confessional narratives and The Book of Ambiguity blur the lines between fiction and reality, and third person and author. Such works question the artifice of the book itself and draw the reader into close relationship with the writer and the created work. The confessional allows the writer to explore the notion of madness as a social construction that is not as fixed as the DSM manual would like it to be. It is only through confessional narratives that the experience of 'woman' can move beyond the objectified *Madwoman* that has bound the experience for so many centuries. The fear of such confessional narratives being volcanic, leaky, irrational and out of control (Gill 2007, p. 14), mirrors the fear of women's bodies and sexuality in general. It would appear that women writers, by moving beyond the closed doors of religious or medical confessions to male priests and doctors, have taken the experience of the confession into the book. In a post-*Madwoman* age books are no longer kept from women for fear that they may 'tax their already frail female system' (Hustvedt, A 2011, p. 103), instead they are writing the books themselves. In doing so these writers are challenging the labels given to women, exposing the stereotypes and artifice of fictional characters, and redefining the limits of the book. In a post-*Madwoman* age there is a move away from conventional linear narratives towards writing of layers, multiple points of view, history, music, academic writing, genre writing, poetry, documentary and prose. A movement towards a style of writing that leads to the creation of The Book of Ambiguity; a book that articulates alternative visions of the world and challenges oppressive power structures; that exposes the innate ambiguity of sexuality and madness. Exposing concepts such as sex, gender or madness as roles that can be played with by the writer, rather than fixed determinates, disturbs the natural order and decorum of society. Post-*Madwoman* writing falls in-between the forms created by the institutions that control the economic market, and in doing so plays games with form, rather than remaining subservient to the controlling powers that create it. In their attempts to elude categorisation and confinement, women writers move between platforms of communication and ambiguous biographies, not wanting to be defined as one thing or another.

Into the In-Between

As men have created most of the established art forms and genres, in women's hands they fluctuate. Women's evolving independence has allowed them to free themselves from pre-existing forms and categories of art making. Yoshimoto argues that: 'Although many male artists intrinsically worked in intermedia art, most of them soon redirected themselves to produce saleable paintings and objects', whereas women, who have been working outside conventional categories long before it became fashionable, remain indifferent to the vagaries of the economic market (2005, p. 197). Artists such as Yoko Ono and Yayoi Kusama, who have become recognised only recently with the rise of postmodernism and postcolonialism, refuse to be locked into stringent art-form categories, or notions of female sexuality or madness. Ono and Kusama, who incidentally have both spent time in psychiatric hospitals, create art that is often deliberately anti-institutional and ambiguous. Yoshimoto believes these Japanese women artists work between artistic categories in order to free themselves from the hierarchies of the establishment they find themselves up against (2005, p. 197). Their work often comes from a deliberate questioning of woman or art as object, and a challenge to institutionalised definitions of what art is. Women, as I have outlined, have been likened to nature, water, and formlessness, and are often coveted for their body and mystery. Women are so aware of their bodies as an objectified space that it is often impossible for them not to view themselves as created objects, as women, 'becoming', in the de Beauvoirian sense, 'woman'. Therefore, art that is concerned with exploring the spaces *between* art and life, and utilising the artist's body, challenge this objectification. For these artists and writers the process of art making is a process of discovery and truth seeking. It is by its very nature outside the market, anti-institutional and ambiguous.

This fear of ambiguity, of what lies outside language, is seen in the way rational thought continually strives to confine 'madness'. However, 'madness' defies finite labeling, as the equally fluctuating and ever-shifting diagnosis of syndromes in the *DSM* would suggest. For what is 'normal' and what is 'abnormal' are shifting signifiers, created by power structures with an interest in preserving the status quo. Mental illness categories, like art forms, are obvious examples of the arbitrariness of language. Institutions and doctors are trained to look for boundaries and to categorise; if illnesses (or art forms) do not fit into neat categories they can be seen to taunt the overriding structures set in place to create objectivity. Outside of frameworks and borders, institutions have no organisational power; this is why liminal states

and liminal personae ('threshold people'), who are 'necessarily ambiguous', are feared because as Turner argues:

> these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremony. (1967, p. 359)

It is also why writing that refuses to comply with the conventions of form is so powerful, and so often consumed by Barthes' Literature or culture industry; for the image that stays with the reader is often the one that defies classification. The form that asks of you, that plays with your memory and sense of certainty, is the form that has the most political power, for it asks reader and writer to question and to be curious. It is through this curiosity for ambiguity, and the ability to sit within the discomfit and pain of transition that *écriture féminine* has repositioned the way the *Madwoman* is depicted in literature.

Summary

In this chapter I have outlined how for centuries the writing of books has largely been restricted to men, with women often having to mimic male genres and write under male pseudonyms. The very real fear of involuntary confinement played heavily on women if they were to be seen to be questioning the patriarchal order of society by expressing sexual desires or questioning male authority. Since Gilbert and Gubar's study on nineteenth century women writers, I posit that we have entered an era of post-*Madwoman*, where books can directly challenge what constitutes sanity, and the linearity of narrative itself. I have argued that women writers, since the early confessionals and autobiographies have brought a more fragmented narrative style to the book, as well as a more direct, intimate relationship between the reader and writer.

Post-*Madwoman* writing, such as Cixous' *écriture féminine*, boldly embraces the irrational, formlessness of language and its infinite possibilities. It challenges the previous constructs of rational thought and form and allows the book to be 'one of its own characters'. The Book of Ambiguity is one that has come about since the structures that have held women away from writing have been broken down. It has only been since the ability to express the ambiguity of sanity, sexuality and truth itself became possible in society, that The Book of Ambiguity could come of age. The Book of Ambiguity is the opposite of the scientific *DSM*, whose origins can be traced back to Aristotle with his fixed, determined definitions of illness, reproduction and gender. The Book of Ambiguity has come of age because we are in a time in history where

there is dialogue between medical and psychological thought, truth and fiction, mind and body, male and female, sanity and insanity, and writer and reader.

In the first part of this thesis I have come towards an abstract definition of The Book of Ambiguity, a book that asks both reader and the writer to step into a liminal state between genre, art form and reality. I have argued that within this erotically charged space, the manufactured labels of 'mad' or 'woman' are disengaged and a 'book' can be formed from a Cixousian *jouissance.* This book, ambiguous in form and content, is written out of a hunger to explore the very notion of ambiguity itself. It is a book that questions and challenges through a de Beauvoirian ambiguous humanism. The Book of Ambiguity posits that humanity is based on ambiguity, and that freedom and individuality are only possible in relationship to others. The Book of Ambiguity asks writer and reader to denounce the pretense of a third person in order to meet outside language, outside character and outside the frame.

II

AURAS, OCTOPUSES & LAVA

It kaleidoscopes in dancing zigzags in front of the eye Cixous said that one writes madness in order to keep it at one's side and not fall into it.[2] Is that what Jack Nicholson is doing as Jack Torrence in the 1980 film *The Shining* when he types and types torrents of *all work and no play makes jack a dull boy* all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy *ALL WORK AND NO PLAY MAKES JACK A DULL BOY?* The fiction of the writer, the madness of the writer, writing endless, childish sentences where no one can see. What are you doing in there? I am *writing*, writing. WRITING. *Mad: from the Old English gemaedde, meaning 'out of one's mind'*. There is the memory that is not the memory, the character that is the writer, the narrator that is the reader, the fact that becomes the fiction, that tips from fiction to fact and back again, from madness to sanity and back again. The withholding, the decentering. *It kaleidoscopes in dancing zigzags in front of the eye in dizzying black holes and sparkles* The transforming of truth into shapes as impossible to hold as auras of light. Narratives that move like ghosts. *Is the sea ever still?* 'Foucault asks: *is it possible to understand everything? Is not the essence of mental illness, as opposed to normal behavior, precisely that it can be explained but it resists all understanding?'*[3] And Lear pleads, as he succumbs to dementia; *Oh let me not be mad, not mad, sweet Heaven. Keep me in temper, I would not be mad*. Don Quixote's excessive reading drives him into madness: *Finally, from so little sleeping and so much reading, his brain dried up and he went completely out of his mind.* While St Teresa of Avilla, also an addict of romance novels before she resolved to enter the church - before her transverbation took her beyond borders, to a feverish rapture or rupture: of catalepsy and ecstasy, hysteria and entrancement - to the border of consciousness and unconsciousness, sanity and insanity, disease or genius, rational or irrational. Bronte and Rhys, Jane and Antoinette - the madwoman *before* the attic. *In fever you lose yourself* Porter wonders if some of the most deeply passionate experiences of her life have happened between the covers of a book and warns us against ignoring that ancient, silent cry: Ravish me![4] *The aura kaleidoscopes in dancing zigzags in front of the eye in dizzying black holes and sparkles of ambiguous madness*

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[2] Cixous 2002, p. 407

[3] Foucault 1962, p. 75

[4] Porter 2010a, pp. 82-83

CHAPTER THREE

Ambiguity in Siri Hustvedt's *The Shaking Woman*.

Siri Hustvedt's Book of Ambiguity, *The Shaking Woman or A History of my Nerves*, as the dual title suggests, refuses to formally place itself within a particular genre. Instead the book collaborates the research form of the essay, the narrative propulsion of the mystery story and the personal revelations of memoir. The ambiguous form mirrors the central narrative and themes of the book. Personal perspectives and reflection move in and out of extensive research, as Hustvedt seeks answers to why she has developed a violent shuddering when she speaks in public: why she has become—the shaking woman. This combination of story and academic writing provides an alternative to the closed medical textbooks that are uncomfortable with the ambiguous, in-between space of what lies outside absolute diagnosis. In the title essay of the collection *A Plea for Eros*, first published in an earlier book of essays, *Yonder*, Hustvedt openly states her plea that:

> we not forget ambiguity and mystery, that in matters of the heart we acknowledge an abiding uncertainty. I honestly believe that when we are possessed by erotic magic we don't feel like censoring Kafka or much else, because we are living a story of exciting thresholds and irrational feeling. We are living in a secret place we make between us, a place where the real and the unreal comingle. (2006, p. 60)

In all of her books, Hustvedt is present either directly, or as a masked character or doppelganger. Her novels and essays are deeply connected with her own experiences, in Hustvedt's ambiguous worlds 'the real and the unreal comingle'.

Hustvedt is known largely for her novels: *The Blindfold* (1992*), The Enchantment of Lily Dahl* (1996), *What I Loved* (2003*), The Sorrows of an American* (2008*), The Summer Without Men* (2011b*)* and *The Blazing World (2014a*). She has also written four books of essays: *Yonder* (1998), *Mysteries of the Rectangle: Essays on Painting (*2005), *A Plea for Eros* (2006) and *Living, Thinking, Looking* (2012a) as well as a book of poetry, *Reading to You* (1983*)*. Hustvedt's works will often appear in conversation with each other, her real life relationships and family members are thinly disguised within her books. The landscape of Hustvedt's novels, essays, fictional and real world are ambiguously interplayed to create a place of erotic thresholds where reader, writer and character can 'co-mingle'. This blurring of the borders between writer and character is taken to the extreme in *The Shaking Woman* with the narrator splitting and becoming both the 'I' of the shaking woman, and the 'I' of Siri Hustvedt the writer. The book is about a writer going in search of her protagonist while knowingly occupying both roles. *The Shaking Woman* also examines the ambiguous borders between narrator, writer and character, and in so doing, the

artifice of the third person. In choosing to be both subject and object of her own study, Hustvedt fractures many long held dialectics.

In this chapter I will discuss the thematic and formal elements of ambiguity in *The Shaking Woman*. I will also position the book within Hustvedt's overall ambiguous oeuvre, with the understanding that a writer's books, characters and obsessions are in an ongoing state of co-mingling rather than in discreet isolation.

Thematic Ambiguity

Central to *The Shaking Woman* is Siri Hustvedt's quest for ambiguity: the ambiguity between schools of medical thought, between madness and sanity, mind and body, psychiatry and neurology, author and character, the spoken and the unspoken, and within the very notion of a unified self. The book opens with the death of Hustvedt's father, and though the two were very close, she reports that upon hearing the news: 'I didn't weep, I wrote. At the funeral I delivered my speech in a strong voice, without tears' (2010a, p. 2). However, two and a half years later, when invited to speak at a service in her father's honour, Hustvedt tells the reader she launched into her first sentence: 'and began to shudder violently from the neck down. My arms flapped. My knees knocked. I shook as if I were having a seizure' (2010a, p. 3). The book that follows is Hustvedt's quest to understand how this unique event becomes a recurring behaviour, and eventually a core, maybe inevitable part of who she actually is. Hustvedt's experiences take her outside her own concept of a discrete and whole self, forcing her to question her own subjectivity:

> But who owns the self? Is it the "I"? What does it mean to be integrated and not in pieces? What is subjectivity? Is it a singular property or a plural one? I have come to think of the shaking woman as an untamed other self, a Mr Hyde to my Dr Jekyll, a kind of double. Doubles in literature almost always torment and sabotage the desires and ambitions of their originals and, often, they take over. (2010a, p. 47)

It is only once Hustvedt incorporates her auras, hallucinations, migraines and eventually her shaking into her concept of selfhood that she is able to view herself as a cohesive, albeit ambiguous, self again. It is through refuting absolute diagnosis or half accurate clinical classifications that Hustvedt comes to an acceptance of her shaking condition.

The Shaking Woman presents the reader with the possibility that everyone is an acculturated self in flux. Hustvedt, by inhabiting both narrator and character, challenges the notion of an

uninvolved third person. Meaning is always mediated through personal perspective. As Hustvedt outlines:

> Is it possible to drain any person of subjectivity, whether she is an analyst or a researcher in a laboratory? Even in the lab, human beings must interpret results, and those interpretations cannot be expunged of the interpreter's thought, language and culture. There is no third-person or birds-eye view detached from a breathing bodily presence. (2012a p. 228)

The reader of *The Shaking Woman* is confronted by this concept repeatedly. Borders between the illness that afflicts the writer, the patient, and the objective observer shift constantly. As Hustvedt writes, the particular nature of psychiatric or neurological illnesses undermine the notion of a fixed self, as sufferers define themselves as *being* bipolar, or by saying, 'I'm epileptic, whereas:

> No one says, "I am cancer" or even "I am cancerous" despite the fact that there is no intruding virus or bacteria; it's the body's own cells that have run amok. One has cancer. Neurological and psychiatric illnesses are different however, because they attack the very source of what one imagines is one's self. (2010a, p. 7)

Hustvedt's experience of shaking causes her to question the foundations of her selfhood, and the book is a quest to internalise the experience into her own narrative. Hustvedt seeks to find and define illness as part of her person. She writes:

> I have had a much harder time integrating the shaking woman into my story, but as she becomes familiar, she is moving out of the third person and into the first, no longer a detested double but an admittedly handicapped part of my self. (2010a, p. 190)

The 'I' within the book is at once Siri Hustvedt the writer, and Siri Hustvedt the character: and ultimately a fictional creation of both. The reader steps into the character created by this 'I', by the experience of first person narrative. Allowing an imagined transcendence of self and connection between reader, character and writer.

The Shaking Woman is also narrative about the repercussions of the ambiguities of the ever-changing *DSM*'s categorisations and definitions, as decided upon by the American Psychiatric Association. Although it is her imagined and real diagnostic journey that is the central story in the book, Hustvedt gives numerous examples of specific cases that highlight the ambiguity of categories of symptoms, Hustvedt states:

> Categories, borders, distinctions and metaphors such as ladders, roots, theaters, computers, blueprints, machinery, or locked rooms are both necessary and useful, but they have to be recognised for what they are: convenient images to aid comprehension – which necessarily leave out or misconstrue or distort an ambiguous, shifting reality. It is human to want to pin things down and give them a name [...] .all abstraction comes at a cost. Doctors need diagnoses, names for groups of symptoms, and so do patients. (2010a, pp. 186-7)

Diagnosis cannot eliminate ambiguity. Diagnosis comes from two Greek words, *dia* - 'apart' and *gignoskein* – 'to learn', and is essentially about the knowledge that separates one thing from another in order to bring coherence and order. However, these classifications are dependent on language, interpretation, and constantly changing fields of knowledge and belief systems.

This Book of Ambiguity is full of 'tales from the world of *Between',* of what lies outside language or classification (Hustvedt 2010a, p. 122). Moving between philosophy, psychology, phenomenology, history and anecdote, Hustvedt's book abounds with ideas, reminiscences and theories of the 'Between': tales of the right and left-brain creating an in-between language, tales that uncover the language of lullabies, split-brain personalities, hallucinations, incantations, twins and Tourettes sufferers. Hustvedt ponders if her inability to accept her father's death led her towards writing *The Sorrows of An American*, a book incorporating her father's letters and her own words. Hustvedt describes these words, as words which: 'fell somewhere between us – not his, not quite mine – somewhere in the middle' (2010a, pp. 125-6) and believes this blurred persona may have been a hysterical creation, allowing her to function through her grief; a transitional creation to soothe her through the loss of her father, much like a child's dummy or blanket. Language is communication that occurs between people, indeed it only exists 'inbetween' two people; as Hustvedt points out, children who are brought up in isolation do not develop language. She goes on to say that 'I' only exists in relation to 'you', the reader of the narrating 'I', that an 'other' is needed, or, at the very least, an imagined 'other'. Hustvedt's experience of writing *The Sorrows of an American* persuades her that this 'I' can also be a ghost, or a possession of self. According to Hustvedt:

> There is, however, in my mourning a blur of betweenness or a partial possession by a beloved other that is ambivalent, complex, and heavily weighted with emotions I can't articulate. (2010a, p. 126)

This 'betweenness', as Hustvedt calls it, of self, allows for Hustvedt to consider the shaking woman as a fragmented part of herself. As she writes:

> The shaking woman is not the narrating woman. The narrating, interpreting woman continued on while the other shook. The narrator was a fluent generator of sentences and explanations. It is she who is writing now. (2010a, p. 54)

Hustvedt is here highlighting how an autobiographical self, in narrative and in life, is fluid, and ultimately, a language construct that the writer can manipulate at various times.

Hustvedt's own fluid, autobiographical self permeates all her work, creating a shared narrative space that bleeds outside the borders of her books, her dreams, her reality, and even into her

husband Paul Auster's books. In Hustvedt's first novel, *The Blindfold*, her protagonist has a torturous relationship with Stephen, who she eats with at The Moon Palace, a fictional restaurant that is also the title of Auster's 1989 novel. Stephen is having an affair with Lily, a character Hustvedt analyses further in her next novel *The Enchantment of Lily Dahl.* Stephen's friend George, an obsessive photographer with a sense of the macabre and 'an appetite for ambiguity' (1992, p. 57) has many parallels with Hustvedt's real-life notorious stepson Daniel Auster, who could also be read into the character of Mark in *What I Loved* or Rune in *The Blazing World*. In *The Blazing World*, Hustvedt writes herself into the book as Siri Hustvedt: 'obscure novelist and essayist' (2014a, p. 272), and in a footnote at the end of the same page, this co-mingling and playful exposure of the artifice of the third person is taken to the extreme:

> Which works by Siri Hustvedt Brickman/Burden has in mind are unclear, although in Notebook H, she notes that the author's novel The Blindfold is a 'textual transvestite" (2014a, p. 272).

Hustvedt is here writing as Harriet, her fictional protagonist, who in turn is writing an impression of Hustvedt's writing, as Brickman, Harriet's invented male persona. This blurred ambiguity of narrative territory is a technique used by Hustvedt to reveal herself as an author, creating imagined worlds for the reader.

This co-*mingling* of forms and realities, or entering into an artwork as a character, ghost or as a declared 'I' is hardly unusual to artists. In *Mysteries of the Rectangle*, Hustvedt writes of Goya positioning himself within his paintings, and his need to liberate himself from commissions and prescribed genres (2005, p. 96). Hustvedt describes a personal connection with Goya's un-commissioned works, which interestingly coincided with his own period of sickness (2005, p. 62). What marks these works according to Hustvedt is:

> a new freedom and mystery that made it hard to say exactly what the pictures are about. His works seem to splinter meaning, sustain contradictions, and suspend themselves in an ambiguity so tantalizing I can't stop looking at them. (2005, p. 62)

Hustvedt observes that every *body* we see on a canvas is 'a trace left by another body, the artist's, and what we see in front of us is the ghostly product of that absent being' (2005, p. 94). Goya was one of the first artists, according to Hustvedt, who 'chose to implicate himself in the story he was telling—becoming simultaneously artist, witness and subject of the historical event he chose to record' (2005, p. 94). Hustvedt, as with Goya, does not try to disguise the connections or crossover between her own life and the fiction she is creating. The ambiguity between artist and audience is one of her overriding concerns. In her first novel, *The Blindfold*, Hustvedt's protagonist Iris Vegan, (Iris being Siri spelt backwards and Vegan being her

mother's maiden name) is a young graduate student who has various sexual adventures and identity crises. Hustvedt has said that despite the character having her name, living in the same apartment she used to live, doing the same jobs and attending the same university, 'She and I aren't the same person, but she's close to me' (2006, p. 32). This doppelganger character even has the same migraines as the shaking woman, and is hospitalised after a very bad case of an ambiguous illness:

> My body had become the meeting place for ridiculous symptoms, but what I had was still a headache, and headaches had very little clout on the neurology ward [...] I felt that if only I could articulate my illness in all its aspects, I might give a trained ear the clue that would make me well, but my words were always inadequate. (1992, pp. 91-93)

Iris is a victim of the abstraction of medical diagnosis just as the shaking woman is nearly twenty years later.

Hustvedt asserts that ambiguity is inherent within diagnosis of psychological illness and exposes the long fictional history of the female hysteric or *Madwoman*. Hustvedt'*s The Shaking Woman* presents a post-*Madwoman* vision of the world, filled with the ambiguities and emotional resonances of art, while refusing to acknowledge the constructed borders between it and science. What distinguishes *The Shaking Woman* from medical or scientific texts is Hustvedt's openness about ambiguity. It is a challenge to books that aim to tell any definitive story of illness and the mind, or claim ethical certainty. For science, with its linear deductions and case studies, can never really be free of the influences of subjective experience, as Hustvedt argues:

> The truth is that personality inevitably bleeds into all forms of our intellectual life. We all extrapolate from our own lives in order to understand the world. In art, that is considered an advantage; in science, a contamination. (2010a, p. 138)

Hustvedt's acknowledgement of arguments, counter-arguments, contaminations, personal story and contradictory accounts is mirrored by *The Shaking Woman's* formal ambiguity.

Formal Ambiguity

Hustvedt's Book of Ambiguity, *The Shaking Woman*, refuses to be easily categorised into memoir, novel, essay, self-help book or social study. Therefore, it is free to behave without the formal characteristics associated with any specific genre; it is at once openly objective and subjective, factual and poetic. Hustvedt's writing is not exclusively intellectual, though it is often highly technical and detailed. *The Shaking Woman* is a cool, scientific book, with Hustvedt examining herself as a doctor would, and also an idiosyncratic book, about a writer and reader

musing on her own process and inner life. It is both the story of *The Shaking Woman,* and *A History of My Nerves*. Hustvedt uses form to connect her reader to the concepts within the book at a personal, rather than abstract, level. Specifics, details, character and first person narrative allow for suffering to be felt bodily, and for empathy to be gained by the reader. Case studies, statistics and dry data distance the reader from the experience and connection to humanity is lost. Hustvedt, in the tradition of the writer Oliver Sacks or the physician Rita Charon is interested in narrative medicine, the concept that reading patients' stories can give great insight to understanding illness and pathology (Hustvedt 2010a, p. 27). Sacks, according to Hustvedt, acknowledges: 'not only the twists and turns of medical history but the genuine ambiguities that arise when we try to attach names to phenomena that resist clarity' (2010a, p. 157). In medicine diagnosis of illness involves abstracting the illness and its symptoms from the patient, whereas in story, the ambiguity of the individual experience is not diluted or distorted to fit within the broad, cold categories of medicine and science.

The Shaking Woman starts as a story, or a memoir, using all the techniques of fiction, before weaving itself into an intellectual essay about subjectivity:

> WHEN MY FATHER DIED, I was at home in Brooklyn, but only days before I had been sitting beside his bed in a nursing home in Northfield, Minnesota. (2010a, p. 1)

The language is simple and accessible, yet from the start Hustvedt ambiguously splits herself. Hustvedt is omniscient narrator: present, but not present at the death of her father. In this opening statement Hustvedt's use of words and sentence structure creates a ghost of herself, a memory of the person she was when she was sitting with her father a few days before. Instead of starting the sentence with 'I was at home in Brooklyn when my father died', Hustvedt inverts the traditional first person memoir narrative, positioning her father's death as central to the story. As the story continues Hustvedt progressively moves between the voice of a storyteller and the voice of a researcher. The details in the opening passage of the book are of concrete places: Brooklyn and Minnesota; or familiar objects: the 'vase of flowers on the windowsill' (2010a, p. 1) and 'the ugly fluorescent light in the small room' (2010a, p. 25). Hustvedt reassures the reader early on by using fictional devices. When she shakes in front of an audience for the second time, Hustvedt builds the narrative tension by including dialogue she hears around her: 'She's shaking' or 'I think she's having a seizure' (2010a, p. 29). When she talks about taking her father back to his nursing home, she reports him saying: 'It's good to be home, even though it's not really home' (2010a, p. 25). This line of dialogue highlights the character of Hustvedt's father, but also the ambiguity of language. How can something be

home even if it is not home? This small line has many nuances; it conveys the sadness and strength of a man who can never return to his home, while also hinting at a splitting of self, a self that is longing for two places. There is a ghost-like construct within the layered ambiguities of where a body physically is and where the mind, memory, or heart may be. Similar concepts of the ambiguity between mind and body are explored later by Hustvedt in more technical language: 'The mind/body problem is still so vexing, so entrenched as a duality that it becomes almost impossible to think without it' (2010a, p. 79). The same problem is considered throughout by her pervasive rhetorical questioning: 'Who are we, anyway?' What do I actually know about myself?' (2010a, p. 69), or 'Who is the dreamer in the dream, the 'I' that walks and talks and drives around in cars at night? Is it the 'I' of daylight? Is it another 'I'?'' (2010a, p. 185). The book's continual questioning of self, along with a deepening abstraction away from specific objects and times, into philosophical concepts, takes the reader into the ambiguity of time, place, character or self. Simone de Beauvoir believes literature to offer a mode of 'knowing' that is deeper than abstract rationalism, by re-situating the reader into a 'privileged site of inter-subjectivity' (Kruks 2012, p. 131). Hustvedt, like de Beauvoir, is aware of the limitations of philosophy, or the objective essay, to engage the reader on anything but a cerebral level.

The Shaking Woman reflects de Beauvoir's philosophical ethics by presenting humans as unique individuals, but always in relationship to others, the culture, and historical time they are born into. In this sense Hustvedt is acting as a de Beauvoirian 'Artist and Writer'. According to Martha Nussbaum, ethical issues can never be satisfactorily explored in abstract systemisation, but require a 'literary narrative of a certain sort' for the reader to experience the imagined possession of another person's lived experience (1992 p. 7). As Hustvedt writes:

> Reading is the mental arena where different thought styles, tough and tender, and the ideas generated by them become most apparent. We have access to a stranger's internal narrator. Reading, after all, is a way of living inside another person's words. His or her voice becomes my narrator for the duration [....] the more compelling the voice on the page is, the more I lose my own. I am seduced and give myself up to the other person's words. (2010a, pp. 148-9)

Reading fiction or memoir allows readers to take themselves outside themselves and, as Hustvedt states; the more compelling the voice is, the closer the reader can get to ecstatic connection with the character and writer of the book. Hustvedt's language is sexual here, she argues, if the words she reads are compelling enough, she will be 'seduced' and 'give myself up to the other'. This seduction and surrender to another person's words is, I argue, only possible within ambiguity. The Book of Ambiguity engages the reader to experience the form of the

book in a new way. There is not the formulaic narrative arc that allows a reader the comfort of an autopilot. The reader can only be seduced if the experience offers something new, something erotic or something 'other'. *The Shaking Woman* does this, for it cannot simply be placed in fiction, essay or memoir. Appignanesi, in her review of Hustvedt's book for *The Independent* writes:

> *The Shaking Woman* is an invigorating antidote to the emotional squelchiness which too often inhabits misery memoirs and illness narratives. Hustvedt is a calm traveller on the storm-tossed seas of the self. If her odyssey provides no ready answers and immediate cures, it deepens understanding. The self she gives us is capacious and never altogether knowable. It is the self novelists engage with; one that, happily or not, escapes the confines of diagnostic manuals. (2010)

The 'capacious and never altogether knowable' self that Appiganensi discusses is essential to The Book of Ambiguity. *The Shaking Woman* could be titled memoir, meditation, or scientific study, but these categories fail to include the engagement with the fictive, novelistic presentation of self within the book.

A fractured sense of self appears to steer the form of *The Shaking Woman* in unconscious ways. Imagination, rather than linear argument, guides the book forward. The book moves in and out of various disciplines and schools of thought but always goes back to personal reflections and experiences, over the opinions or categories of doctors or scientists. The book's discussions include the history of hysteria from ancient Greece; possible artists who may have suffered epilepsy from Vincent van Gogh to Marcel Proust; the religious auras of Simone Weil and St Teresa; and multiple references to writers such as Dickens, Rilke and Tolstoy. Hustvedt's argument is circular and each answer leads to a further question in her search for an understanding of her mysterious symptoms. The book is not set out in sequential chapters, but rather random groups of thoughts, placed together with breaks of white space in between. The fragmented order of these prose pieces seems to mirror the randomness of the thought process. These pieces of prose place the objective alongside the subjective and fiction alongside non-fiction. Each discrete section of text is distinguished by having the first few words capitalised, as if a new thought comes on top of the next, taking over from the last one in volume and urgency. Some of these groupings start like fiction, such as 'THE DOCTOR IS TALL' (2010a, p. 155), some more like diary entries 'MY FANTASY STORY' (2010a, p.153) and others behave like topic sentences of an essay 'EXPLICIT MEMORIES THRIVE ON PLACES' (2010a, p. 100) or an extract from a medical text book 'PRORANOLOL IS ALSO USED' (2010a, p. 41), and often, just to drive the story on to its ambiguous resolution, 'I CONTINUED TO SHAKE' (2010a, p. 39). Fragment upon

fragment are layered together and build towards an acceptance by the writer of the fragmented nature of her own story of 'self'.

This formal ambiguity seems not without a feminist agenda. Hustvedt discusses the historical encouragement of boys to read non-fiction and girls fiction arguing that:

> The not-so-subtle underlying message is that masculinity aligns itself with non-fiction while femininity is associated with frivolous "made-up" stories. Real men like *objective* texts, not the *subjective* wanderings of mere fiction writers, especially female ones, whose prose, whatever its character, is tainted by their sex before a single word has been read. (2010a p. 149)

Her digressions and formal wanderings in and out of philosophy and fiction could be likened to those of Cixous' *écriture féminine*. There is no real resolution to her quest, or to the book itself. Formally the book circles closer and closer to a central point of self-understanding and an ownership of the ambiguity of her condition:

> It seems to me that going backward sometimes means going forward. The search for the shaking woman takes me round and round because in the end it is also a search for perspectives that may illuminate who and what she is. My only certainty is that I cannot be satisfied with looking at her through a single window. I have to see her from every angle. (2010a, p. 73)

It is Hustvedt's investment and attention to the personal and the imagined that moves *The Shaking Woman* away from more easily categorised books of cultural or social studies.

Formal ambiguity distinguishes Hustvedt's *The Shaking Woman*, from the linear madness memoirs I mentioned in the previous chapter, and from books written by psychologists or historians about madness. Her arguments against the DSM are not new, with Greenberg's *The Book of Woe; The DSM and the Unmaking of Psychiatry* (2012) and Kutchins and Kirk's *Making us Crazy: DSM: The Psychiatric Bible and Creation of Mental Disorders* (1997) just two noteworthy examples of the case against modern psychiatric diagnosis. Psychologists and psychoanalysts such as Greenberg have a lot to gain from dismissing the DSM. What makes Hustvedt's book unique, and perhaps more ethical, is that it is a personal story, written by a highly learned novelist, who has subsequently become highly respected in the fields of neuroscience and psychiatry, rather than a psychologist who has a clear motive for presenting an alternative to the DSM. Hustvedt's thematic arguments might be the same as Greenberg's, but formally the books are very different. Greenberg writes that the DSM:

> reflects what is best about us: our desire to understand ourselves and one another, to use knowledge to relieve suffering, even if it results in a kind of reductionism that insults our sense of ourselves as unfathomably complex and even transcendent creatures. It also

> reflects what is worst – the desire to control, to manipulate, to turn other's vulnerabilities to our advantage. (2012, p. 25)

Greenberg consistently uses pronouns such as 'we', 'our' or 'us', while Hustvedt's voice is softer and more personal, employing 'my' or 'I'. *The Shaking Woman* is not a handbook, or a formal attack on the DSM; it is an alternative book entirely. It is a Book of Ambiguity. Hustvedt avoids the didactic, authoritarian tone of Greenberg and his linear counter argument. There is no overall arching argumentative structure that places information within logical structures; instead Hustvedt might discuss Lacan in detail and then quote a philosopher such as Wittgenstein in passing. Sometimes these stories are highly researched and footnoted, such as the six page case study of the synaesthesia patient called S (2010a, p. 103), while at other times Hustvedt introduces the reader to an anecdote from someone she once knew, with no academic grounding. For example, after the detailed six-page analysis of patient S, Hustvedt's next paragraph begins, 'A friend of mine told me a story about his wife' (2010a, p. 109). Eclectic facts are set against personal stories. Not case studies, but stories.

What Hustvedt charts in this Book of Ambiguity, is the story of a *particular* shaking woman, in contrast to the abstract lack of story within medical texts. *The Shaking Woman* engages the reader to immerse him/herself within the book and its characters rather than skim through for particular chapters. *The Shaking Woman* is comprised of hundreds of ambiguous stories. Textually, stories are very different to the often clinical, dry case studies of sociological or medical textbooks where subjects are presented as archetypes. Case studies often lack detail as they are created fictions to serve as an example. Often the narrator is presented as the rational, patriarchal guide, assisting the subject move from sickness to health; or from madness to sanity. There are not the layers of ambiguity, or the cyclical tangents that appear in story or truth. Hustvedt's writing, by contrast, is always embodied in herself, her unconscious, her dreams, her own experience, imagined characters or ghosts. Hustvedt does not stand outside her stories, for Hustvedt herself *is* the story. She inhabits other times with body and mind. She imagines being St Teresa or the girls of Salem, and muses that she too would believe herself to be possessed, for she would have been steeped in the religious beliefs of the age (2010a, p. 8). Hustvedt's ability to immerse herself within her characters serves to illustrate the way history, story and memory work together to create a particular sense of self. This technique invites the reader to immerse herself in other characters and historical periods also. It engages at an imaginative level and thereby encourages the reader to transcend his or her own self. The

reader cannot just apply a totally systematic reading of theoretical concepts to *The Shaking Woman*. It cannot be read as impersonal case studies that read as contrived, or seen from a distance: it must be experienced as an intimate moment between the reader and the writer.

Hustvedt seeks to situate the reading experience outside language and the rules set out by the power structures that define art and form. Hustvedt writes about Goya's breaking the rules of art by hiding himself as a ghostly presence within his pictures, mirroring the role he has given to the viewer, while acknowledging the role of the author within its creation (2005, pp. 132-139). Hustvedt contrasts Goya's ambiguity with the paintings of his contemporary Jaques-Louis David:

> In these works by Goya, the inside can't be separated from the outside. The horror exists both outside the artist in the world and inside his own head. Perception is also emotional. We are not in David's world of clean borders and sharp edges that delineate difference, order and wholeness. (2005, p. 138)

This description of Goya's paintings could accurately be applied to Hustvedt's books that, like Goya's works, are full of images of sickness, nightmares, dreams, hallucinations and ghostly appearances from the author. In *What I Loved,* Hustvedt explores these same ideas when her protagonist Leo buys a painting by an unknown artist, Bill. When Bill asks him why he is interested in the picture Leo says:

> I told him. We sat down on the floor with the paintings in front of us and I said that I liked ambiguity, that I liked not knowing where to look on his canvases, that a lot of modern figurative painting bored me, but his didn't. (2003, p. 12)

The painting obsesses Leo, much like Goya's painting obsesses Hustvedt. Leo believes he can feel the painter, the subject and himself within the work. The unseen is more important than the seen. Leo mistakes the artist's shadow for his own. When he buys the painting, his wife Erica appraises it saying: 'It's like looking at another person's dream isn't it?' (2003, p. 5). It is this ability to expose the unseen and the artifice of formal boundaries that makes Hustvedt's work so particular, for she finds a way to hunt for, and situate ambiguity in words. In searching for the ambiguous Hustvedt often finds it where other scholars have overlooked it, as they strained for disambiguation. Hustvedt outlines how in June 2003 she went to the Prado to see the painting 'The Third of May', and investigate a shadowy space in the left of the canvas had always bothered her. Here her essay takes us into narrative:

> What had Goya intended to convey with these shadows? Who are the two draped figures? [...] and then I looked at the area below them and began to imagine that something was there [...] and then suddenly I saw a face – Goya's face – emerging from the shadows. (2005, p. 109)

This discovery was new to the art world at the time, and the many critics, including Robert Hughes, who have written extensively on Goya. In this piece of ekphrastic writing and *The Shaking Woman* Hustvedt finds a way to use words to describe what she is sensing, as well as seeing. Hustvedt's approach to the visual is consistent with her approach to formal categorisation in general; that is, that there is no fixed, objective *anything,* that can be exhaustedly defined by words, and thus separated from the ambiguity of personal experience.

Attempting to isolate the formal ambiguity from the thematic ambiguity has its own abstraction challenges, as the two intersect constantly. Hustvedt does, however, concede that categories have their place:

> Without categories, we can't make sense of anything. Science has to control and restrict its windows or it will discover nothing. At the same time, it needs guiding thoughts and interpretations or its findings will be meaningless. But when researchers are trapped in preordained frames that allow little air in or out, imaginative science is smothered. (2010a, p. 79)

The Shaking Woman is 'imaginative science'. Hustvedt, unlike the trapped researchers she mentions above, does allow a 'little air in or out', of the restrictive frames of formal categories. Hustvedt combines first person, story, imagined scenarios and personal revelations with obsessive medical, historical and scientific research. Hustvedt challenges the notion that all clinical research has to be objective and dry, or that memoir or fiction need be lightweight or emotionally highly-strung. Hustvedt acknowledges that:

> Beauvoir is right that much of science (as well as much of analytic philosophy) proceeds from an anonymous third-person view of a paralysed world, which can then be broken down into legible truths. (2010a, p. 144)

With *The Shaking Woman*, however, Hustvedt presents a book that is subjective and objective; philosophical and fictive; imagined and real; scientific and artistic. Its form challenges the idea that knowledge can only be gained by non-fiction, and that forms cannot bleed and mingle, into and out of each other.

The Ambiguity of Madness

The Shaking Woman, and Hustvedt as the shaking woman, elucidates the ambiguity of the concept of madness. As a post-*Madwoman* writer, unafraid of ambiguity or being committed into an institution, Hustvedt uses herself as a guinea pig to talk about the philosophical problem of

self and ambiguity. In 'Siri Hustvedt in Conversation with Paul Auster', Hustvedt regards *The Shaking Woman* as:

> a way to use myself as a medical object. I had a convenient and mysterious symptom [....] it's a small, intense examination of how you can see the same symptom from many points of view. (2012)

In the same interview she outlines her interest in phenomenology and the first person experience, claiming to use her own experience to enhance her argument, 'never for its own sake'. Scientists and doctors have been observing their own behaviour and patients' behaviour to gain knowledge for centuries; it is rare however to have a writer put him or herself forward within both story and essay to explore the field of neuroscience. It is rarer still for this writer to be a woman, openly declaring herself as *Madwoman,* while at the same time exposing the inherent ambiguity of the concept itself. In the early part of this century women writers would need to hide these experiences within their fiction, if they wrote about them at all, or play puppets for male doctors lecturing about the characteristics of a hysteria that they had diagnosed. What makes *The Shaking Woman* unique is that the writer is able to tell her own story and frame it within a highly sophisticated study of the science and knowledge around it. Since the publication of *The Shaking Woman*, Hustvedt is in demand at medical conferences around the world, and as she outlines: 'in medicine and psychiatry [....] that book has made my reputation' ('Siri Hustvedt in Conversation with Paul Auster', 2012). This achievement highlights that a woman can be taken seriously as both patient and an intellect in a post-*Madwoman* world.

Hustvedt's obsessive interest in neurology, psychiatry and psychotherapy started long before her shaking. All of her books reference these obsessions and narrowly disguise her own experiences of hallucination, migraine and neurosis. However, as she outlines in *The Shaking Woman*, it was her research for the novel *Sorrows of an American* that intensified her obsession:

> when I decided to write a novel in which I would have to impersonate a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, a man I came to think of as my imaginary brother, Erik Davidsen.....To be Erik, I threw myself into the convolutions of psychiatric diagnosis and the innumerable mental disorders that afflict human beings. (Hustvedt 2010a, p. 6)

Hustvedt moves from exploring themes of madness and identity within her fiction in the third person, to using the first person possessive pronoun in *The Shaking Woman.* In her fiction her characters are often involved in a crisis of identity or periods of 'madness' and often with clear markers that they are parts of Hustvedt herself.

One of the most enduring categories for women has been that of *Madwoman* or hysteric. Hustvedt reclaims the title of hysteric, as Cixous did in 'The Laugh of the Medusa' (1976). Unlike the women who played the character of *Madwoman* or hysteric for doctors such as the notorious French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot, as previously discussed, Hustvedt owns the hysteric as part of her*self,* and uses her experience to expose the mutability and limitations of language. *The Shaking Woman* reveals the many overlaps between religious fervour and hysteria, between epileptic and hysterical fits, and between psychiatry and neurology and exact diagnosis. After imagining her possible medical and therapeutic paths fictionally in *The Shaking Woman*, Hustvedt goes through consultations with real doctors and therapists before forming her own diagnosis of hysteria, only to find that hysteria (according to the current *DSM* anyway) no longer exists. In fact over the last forty years the term for the condition has changed several times from conversion reaction, to hysterical neurosis, to dissociative (conversion) disorder and to the current conversion disorder (2010a, pp. 11-12). Hustvedt's book highlights the ambiguity of madness, by documenting the ever-changing categorisations and definitions of the *DSM*. As Hustvedt explains:

> The DSM does not tell stories. It contains no cases of actual patients or even fictional ones. Etiology, the study of the *cause* of illness, isn't part of the volume. Its mission is to be purely descriptive, to collect symptoms under headings that will help a physician diagnose patients [...] The fact is that all patients have stories, and those stories are necessarily part of the *meaning* of their illness. (2010a, p. 36)

The Shaking Woman demonstrates that a writer can be both hysterical and sane, and that a book can be both personal and highly intellectual. The Book of Ambiguity is a book that is in-between many genres, and like Hustvedt's shaking woman, can inhabit more than one form simultaneously. In *The Shaking Woman* the writer becomes 'a doctor and a patient in the same body' (2010a, p. 30). Hustvedt emerges from the book not as a victim of madness or hysteria, but as a seeker of truthful understanding, and ambiguity itself. Siri Hustvedt, is a post-*Madwoman* writer who presents as ambiguous herself by refusing the gendered boundaries of writing. Hustvedt's *The Shaking Woman* is an example of the writer's ability to work across these arbitrary divides of: 'masculine/feminine, serious/not-so-serious, hard/soft' in the tradition of Cixous' *écriture féminine* (Hustvedt 2014b, p. 125).

The *Madwoman* is both literary creation and medical statistic in Hustvedt's books. Her female protagonists are universally hovering towards 'madness' and are highly sexually charged. Mia, the protagonist in *The Summer Without Men* is diagnosed on the first page with 'Brief Psychotic Disorder, also known as Brief Reactive Psychosis' and hospitalised after her husband leaves her

(2011b, p. 1). In this book, also peppered with poems, dialogues, illustrations, philosophy, direct addresses to the reader and numerous autobiographical crossovers, Mia is left 'floating', after her husband Boris 'abruptly took his body and his voice away' (2011b, p.13), and is 'locked up'. Interestingly Mia does not forgive herself for this 'madness', she states, 'I don't like to remember the madwoman. She shamed me' (2011b, p.2). In *The Blindfold* Iris narrates:

> in January I finally went to pieces. By then I had seen several neurologists with no luck. It was Dr Fish who put me in the hospital. He gave me giant pills of Thorazine [...] My thoughts were a madhouse of insight and delusion. (1992, p.179)

Lily, in *The Enchantment of Lily Dahl*, perhaps the least fragile of all Hustvedt's women, is still plagued by strange hallucinations. Lily is painfully alone in her own head, with her maternal figures being Marilyn Monroe and a lonely old neighbor called Mabel.

In Hustvedt's books sexual obsession, memory, madness and art seem to be in a constant cycle of cause and effect. In *What I Loved,* Bill talks about what he found attractive in Lucille:

> I know. I feel bad because I liked the craziness in her. I found it dramatic. She was very beautiful then. People used to say she looked like Grace Kelly. It's awful, but a beautiful bleeding girl is more compelling than a plain bleeding girl. (2003, p. 100)

Inga in *The Sorrows of an American* is described by her brother Erik as:

> suffering from absence, what used to be called petit mal seizures, which resolved themselves as she grew older. What has remained with her are migraines and their auras and something fragile in her personality. (2008a, p. 25)

Harriet, in *The Blazing World,* is ultimately dismissed by the art world, as not capable of the authorship of her own work, because she had sought psychiatric treatment after the death of her husband. Rune taunts Harriet, saying: 'People know, people know about your illness' (2014a, p. 299). When she queries him, 'My illness?', he puts his terms in her mouth: 'Your mental breakdown' (2014a, p. 300). This is enough for Harriet to doubt herself: 'Did I have a mental breakdown? Was that a mental breakdown I had after Felix died? Yes, probably' (2014a, p. 300). Here, Hustvedt, as a post-*Madwoman* writer is drawing attention to the problematic relationship the *Madwoman* still has in authorship, at the same time she is critiquing the idea of authorship, gender binaries, language and madness.

When Hustvedt's work is at its most ecstatic, reader and writer are able to 'lose themselves' in the book and the characters. Hustvedt identifies this experience within her non-fiction often. In an essay about reading Charles Dickens' *Our Mutual Friend,* Hustvedt discusses how the act of reading allows her to leave her own world and inhabit the world of another (1998, pp. 93-

117). Crucial to this experience is the ambiguity of pronouns. Hustvedt discusses the way Dickens employs this technique to illustrate the 'murkiness' between the living and the dead, the sane and the insane, the body and the abstract notion of the self. In all her works Hustvedt is interested in how the book and language can enfeeble the seemingly stable, conventional boundaries of writer, character and the reader. Hustvedt writes:

> all pronouns are shifters, and they have a fragility that nouns don't have, a greater motion and flexibility [...] When learning language, children acquire pronouns last of all words, and aphasics lose them first. Schizophrenics may confuse I and you, as if the difference between them can't be grasped. I is not a simple designation but a complex one. It is where we all live inside language. Losing it means losing ourselves. (1998, p. 117)

The Shaking Woman explores the complexity of the designation of 'I', and how the stories and words used to diagnose illness or madness can be used to confine people. Hustvedt reclaims her own sense of who she is at the end of the book, as an 'I' that contains the shaking woman. The last line of the book reads as if she had found herself, with the declaration: 'I am the shaking woman'. However, as Hustvedt concludes in her essay 'O.M.F Revisited', finding ourselves is just a 'trick of Dickensian 'fancy', based on mutual understanding of shared stories' for:

> When I tell you my life, I give it the shape of a story and that story is myself [...] it discovers its singularity through others and then through the structure of language itself, which is both inside us and outside us. (1998, p. 131)

As Hustvedt articulates here, our selves are created through words, and words and categories are limited and can never encompass the ambiguity of the individual experience. The language, words and structures available are not up to the task of giving voice to experiences of madness, sexuality or ecstasy. These experiences take us outside language for:

> language is not identical to the world, and in all of us there lived the muffled forms of what came before language. Every once in a while, those forms return in the delirium of a fever, or in a dream. (Hustvedt 1998, p. 131)

These fevers and dreams, take us outside the confines of a language created to confine and define, towards The Book of Ambiguity.

The Aura: A Conclusion

Ambiguity and the 'Between' haunt Hustvedt's books both thematically and formally. Her body of work inhabits a shared narrative space of art, madness, longing, loneliness, hallucinations and migraines. Perhaps it is the aura, the 'strange and wondrous' experiences of black holes, stars, euphoria and weird visions that are the most consistent and persistent destabilising image within Hustvedt's Books of Ambiguity (Hustvedt 2008b). Hustvedt has experienced migraines and

their accompanying auras, 'lifting feelings', or hallucinations since childhood (Hustvedt 2008b). These episodes that refuse to be easily explained by psychiatry, neuroscience or critical writing remain distinctly personal, visual and 'Between'. Whichever definition of an aura one chooses, the connotations are ambiguous. The word *aura* is derived from the ancient Greek word for breath or breeze. Definitions focus on its intangible, invisible quality even when explained in medical journals. One thing that is consistent, however, is that the aura is an elusive sensory experience that remains non-fixed. Auras often precede a migraine or epilepsy, but there are also silent migraine auras, which occur without the subsequent headache. These dancing auras can distort the world as a solid place with the self as a fixed entity within it. The aura is a shape shifter.

Hustvedt's books generally recreate the overwhelming feeling of strangeness and fragility of the aura. Her plots and characters appear as not quite a dream, but not quite real. Even in her essays and memoir writing Hustvedt is an unreliable narrator, suffering from visual disturbances, hallucinations and ambiguous symptoms. Throughout her books characters dissolve into others, images and artworks reveal and distort both what is real, and what is not. In *The Blazing World*, Harriet argues that an artwork is unable to stand alone without its creator, that artworks were only appreciated by the aura of the artist and 'Every woman artist faces the insidious propagation of a male status quo' (2014a, p. 72). However, at the end of the book, when she dies and the art world declares her a *Madwoman,* Harriet's artworks are described as 'shivering rainbows' of 'reds and oranges and yellows and greens and blues and violets' with 'their auras blazing out all around them' (2014a, p. 379).

Hustvedt, and her many doppelganger characters, hover on the boundaries of near madness, straddling roles and genders, being both muse and obsessive voyeur. In *The Blindfold* Iris looks at a disturbing photo of herself and her migraine aura distorts it even further:

> The image was changing [...] I noticed a small black hole in the face [...] The hole was devouring the entire image [...] It was over, and I could feel pain in my head. I suffer from migraine and am susceptible to nervous tricks and minor hallucinations, but I have never been able to right off these experiences as aberrations that are purely neurological, because while they are happening I am convinced that I am seeing the truth, that the terrible fragility and absence I feel is the world [...] the raw, voiceless place that exists beyond the muttering dreams of everyday life, where you cannot ask to go but must be taken. (1992, pp. 67 - 68)

Iris is here confronted with the precariousness of identity, and how the notion of a single, unified self is an artificial construct that can only partially be resolved with the language locator, 'I'. On seeing the photo George has taken of her, Iris does not recognise herself:

> The person in the picture seemed to bear no resemblance to myself [...] but then I saw myself, and I had a peculiar sensation of recovery [...] I tried to catch it, but it was like the fragment of a dream that surfaces for a moment during the day [...] then retreats – as quickly as it came – into unconsciousness. (1992, p. 62)

This description echoes Hustvedt's search for ambiguity that closes *The Shaking Woman*:

> a bewildering truth of fogs and mists [...] or dream that cannot be held in my hand [....] I chase it with words even though it won't be captured and, every once in a while I imagine I have come close to it (Hustvedt 2010a, p. 198)

In Hustvedt's world, the aura is a liminal experience that brings her, her characters and her readers into a state of ambiguity.

It opens its eight legs out to the sea Is any utterance, any object, any moment, by its very existence - of *a* form, of *a* gender? If I want to be formless, ambiguous or genderless will I always have to run from words? Running from the words - poetry, trans, memoir, butch, essay, epicene, prose, post, blog, androgynous, photography, queen, journalism, neutrois, novel…. Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* belonged to neither the male nor female sex fully, instead: *she seemed to vacillate; she was man; she was woman; she knew the secrets, shared the weaknesses of each. It was a most bewildering and whirligig state of mind to be in.*[5] Can I be free, not one or the other, inexact, like the warless, genderless Gethenians of Ursula Le Guin's 1969 *Left Hand of Darkness?* Or the gender abolished people of Ledom, as created by Theordore Sturgeon in his 1960 book, *Venus Plus X?* *The octopus opens its eight legs or arms out to the sea* Is it the fear of confinement in one gender alone that leads Calliope, the protagonist of Eugeneides' *Middlesex,* to flee? Is language the harness used to restrain the feverish freedom of the genderless and ambiguous? Calliope thinks so: *Emotions in my experience aren't covered by single words. I don't believe in "sadness", "joy", or "regret". Maybe the best proof that the language is patriarchal is that it oversimplifies feeling. I'd like to have at my disposal complicated hybrid emotions I'd like to have a word for "the sadness inspired by failing restaurants" as well as "the excitement of getting a room with a mini-bar." I've never had the right words to describe my life, and now that I've entered my story, I need them more than ever.* [6] I enter my story reading today's - June 20th 2013 - Sydney Morning Herald, a day that Australians can now exist outside the gender binaries of male or female on their birth certificate. I enter my story on another day- April 15th 2014 -- to read in the same paper that India's Supreme Court has ruled for the allowance of a third gender. Third meaning other? Or the constitutional Other?

In fever you lose yourself Have alternative worlds become *the* world? Then we will need another alternative won't we? Or will we now be free? *The octopus opens its eight arms or legs out to the sea and embraces it in its genderless, colour-shifting state of ambiguity.*

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[5] Woolf 2007, p. 475

[6] Eugenides 2002, p. 217

CHAPTER FOUR

Ambiguity in Dorothy Porter's *Akhenaten*.

Dorothy Porter's *Akhenaten* employs ambiguity both thematically and formally to challenge the confines of character, history, narrator, sexuality and the book itself. *Akhenaten* is a Book of Ambiguity, a decadent, deviant book that blurs boundaries between poetry and prose, while encouraging the reader to engage as co-producer of the text. I argue that Porter openly inhabits Akhenaten as a mask for her own exploration of sexual ambiguity, eroticism and gender distinctions. In the introduction to the first edition of *Akhenaten,* released in 1992, Porter tells the reader that while on a trip to West Berlin to see the bust of Nefertiti it was: 'the smirking, distorted, oddly beautiful face of Akhenaten that put out tentacles to my imagination. A strange confession from a feminist poet' (1999a, p. xiii). In the third edition of *Akhenaten,* released in 2008, Porter writes an updated introduction, stating she now realises the 'engine' behind the book was to: 'live as passionately as Akhenaten did. To take glorious risks' (2008, p. xv). Writer and historical character merge; genders, times, humans and gods dissolve, blur and multiply in the immediate directness of the poetic narrative. I posit that these techniques of ambiguity urge the reader to engage in passionate intensity with the book and to break the boundaries between writer, reader and third person character. Porter, as Akhenaten, intensifies the ambiguities of the pharaoh's sexuality and is able to confront inherent mainstream literary taboos by writing openly about incest, *bisexuality* and multi-gendered bodies. In so doing, Porter urges the reader to examine his or her own attitudes to the ambiguity of gender and sexuality.

Although known predominately for her verse-novels; *Akhenaten, The Monkey's Mask* (1997*), What a Piece of Work (*1999*), Wild Surmise (*2002*)* and *El Dorado (*2007); Porter has also written two libretti; *The Ghost Wife* (1996) and *The Eternity Man* (2003); two works for young adults; *Rookwood* (1991) and *The Witch Number* (1993); an essay, *on passion (*2010*);* nine books of poetry; *Little Hoodlum (*1975*), Bison (*1979*), The Night Parrot (*1984*), Driving Too Fast (*1989*), Crete (*1996*), Other World*s (2001) and the posthumously published *Love Poems (*2010*)* and *The Bee Hut (*2009). This chapter presents a close reading of *Akhenaten* as a Book of Ambiguity, but will also examine

how Porter employs ambiguity within her other works, in particular in relation to gender and sexuality.

Thematic Ambiguity

Akhenaten explores and illustrates the ambiguity of gender and sexuality through the fictionalising of the title historical character and his kingdom. Porter credits Bruce Beaver's *Charmed Lives* (1988) and its central character Tiresias, as the inspiration for *Akhenaten*. She outlines that when reading Beaver's: 'weird and warped and strange bisexual narrative it suddenly flashed into my head that I could do something similar with Akhenaten' (Digby 1996, p. 2). Reading everything she could on Akenhaten, Porter says she found enormous 'hypothetical space' to weave an androgynous creation of a pharaoh who constructs his own image: 'fetishising himself, almost like a David Bowie figure' (Digby 1996, p. 3). Porter's Akhenaten, reigns over a world where men and women experiment with sex with males, females, prostitutes, children, priests, family members and their gods. Porter believes *Akhenaten* to be a seminal book for her because:

> I did what I wanted to do. The things I'd wanted to do finally came together in AKHENATEN. I'd wanted to write a long narrative poem, and I wanted to explore things like gender, sexuality and history. AKHENATEN's about everything. But I was nowhere near the centre of the poetry scene at that time, living in the blue mountains, isolated, neglected, bitter and feeling pissed off [.....] and in the wilderness I thought "Well fuck everybody" and wrote the book I wanted to write. (Minter 1998, p. 4)

Choosing to give voice to Akhenaten provides Porter the freedom to explore the blurred boundaries of sexuality and other taboos within society.

Akhenaten confronts the reader with the inherent ambiguity of gender by inverting stereotypes of masculine strength and female weakness. Historically Akhenaten reigned as Egyptian pharaoh from 1378 BC – 1362 BC, but he wasn't ever supposed to be king, as we are told in the first poem of the book:

> I was only a second son
>
> they all thought I'd die
>
>
> Amun would climb
>
> on my face
>
> and spread his black bum
>
> over my eyes and mouth (2008, p. 3)

Akhenaten wets the bed, has 'wheezy lungs' a squeaky voice and a 'horseface'. His appearance is cross-gendered and mutated. More interested in cats and religion than playing with other boys, Akhenaten is presented as weak, emotional, and having more traditionally feminine characteristics. Inversely, the women in *Akhenaten* have the more traditional masculine strength. Akhenaten is depicted as being dependent on both his mother, and his childhood friend and future wife Nefertiti, for reassurance and guidance. Akhenaten's father is also portrayed as weak; Porter contrasts him with Akhenaten's mother in 'My Mother':

> My mother is a politician
>
> and a good one
>
> she loves power
> loves paper-work....
>
> my father plays
> in his inoffensive way
> with his health
> or his harem
>
> Mummy plays
> with gods
> Mummy frightens
> iron. (2008, p. 10)

Akhenaten's masculinity is unravelled by Porter's portrayal of him as a boy, and the repeated use of 'Mummy'. It is his 'Mummy' that Akhenaten wishes to emulate, not his father, and from early childhood when she becomes his best friend, he is indebted to the other strong female in his life, Nefertiti:

> it was Nefertitti
> who let me talk
> myself out
> and held me

while I bawled

stinging snotty tears

my tiny cousin

whose brains and beauty

cut everyone down to size

cleaned me up

and became my best friend. (2008, p. 9)

Nefertitti is seen in this poem as the one with strength and beauty; Akhenaten in contrast, is depicted as a bawling, snotty baby. In the poem 'Like No One Else', Porter mocks the artifice of gender stereotypes as masks that the majority of people hide behind; it is in gender fluidity that Akhenaten is able to assert his difference, and thereby his power. From the start of their relationship as young lovers, Nefertiti masterminds the creation of Akhenaten as pharaoh and god. In the poem, 'Like No One Else' she tells Akhenaten:

You don't look awful

Nefertiti says

you don't look like anyone else

in the world

only a god could have

your face

that's why people stare

do you want to be ordinary? (2008, p. 28)

Nefertiti is characterised as not only the intelligence behind Akhenaten's public image, but also conjoined within it. Without Nefertiti Akhenaten would be ugly and unpopular: 'I can't lose her/I'd be ugly again' (2008, p. 115). It is through his relationship with Nefertiti that Akhenaten is able to harness androgyny and to create a pharaoh that appeals to both men and women.

Porter portrays Akhenaten as markedly different to the masculine appearance that was attractive at the time. Historically Akhenaten is depicted in sculptures with breasts, an elongated skull, thick thighs, long fingers, and a prominent belly that suggests pregnancy. Medical researchers have explained Akhenaten's appearance with a list of possible syndromes including Froehlich's, Klinefelter or Marfan Syndrome, and more recently Aromatase Excess Syndrome (Digby 2006, p. 5; Parsons 2006; Eshraghian & Loeys 2012) Porter ignores this research and suggests that the reason for his strange appearance is not medical, but a careful crafting of his image in sculptures. The poem, 'My Statues' dramatises her theory:

> Bek's my pet sculptor.
> He does what he's told
> like any inspired artist [...]
>
> Bek watched me draw for him
> my ka's belly and groin
> in the sand,
> my stick trembling.
>
> Is that you, Pharaoh?
> He said and his voice
> shivered [.....]
>
> give me a beautiful mouth
> for Nefertiti
> but the rest –
> and I finished the ka's gross
> breasts and swollen thighs
> in the nauseating sand –
> is as I'm showing you
>
> this is who I am. (2008, pp. 31-32)

In this poem, Bek, Akhenaten's sculptor is depicted as 'doing what he is told', while crafting a version of his employer that is physically nothing like him. In ancient Egypt, statues were the way to win popular adoration, and the pharaohs crafted them as images of propaganda (Simpson 1982, p. 266). Akhenaten draws himself as part Nefertiti and part immortal. By fashioning himself as androgynous, Akhenaten is being strategic as he plans to replace the pantheon of male and female gods that had proceeded his reign with a mono-god, Aten, or more precisely, Akhenaten *as* Aten. Akhenaten creates himself as vessel for Aten, a god that has possessed him in a feverish way, a god that he has 'gorged on' (2008, p. 4) from an early age. Once he succeeds in convincing his people to worship Aten, through him, Akhenten becomes the supreme power within Egypt.

Porter uses Akhenaten to speak of her own dislike of boundaries and locked off definitions in the telling poem, 'Borders', which I quote in full:

> Mother, tell this
>
> to the bigots and the priests
>
>
> in sex and art
>
> I'm like a Hittie army
>
> I don't recognise borders
>
>
> I heap male and female
>
> into one silky dune
>
> and dig in my toes. (2008, p. 129)

Porter's colloquial language and humour provoke the conservative forces within ancient Egypt, but also within contemporary society. Akhenaten is challenging the ambiguous borders of gender and art. Akhenaten's development from a wheezy boy playing with cats at the start of the book, to an arrogant leader, is demonstrated in this poem. He is no longer seeking advice from his mother, his wife, his priests or his god; instead he is asserting his ability to create his own rules and take what he wants. The character of Akhenaten is depicted by Porter as an ambiguous creation: part child, part man; part male, part female; highly sexual, and yet obsessively religious. Porter, in this Book of Ambiguity is able to employ historical fact and don

the mask of Akhenaten, to expose the contemporary cultural borders and taboos that 'the bigots and the priests' have created around sexuality.

In Porter's world sex is raw and powerful, it is 'fucking', not 'making love', and never glossed over with 'pretty' language. Sex, bodies and skin link humans to the natural world, and the passion Porter sees as fundamental to life. Sex presented this way is highly controversial, particularly in 1992 when *Akhenaten* was first published. Porter's publisher viewed the book as 'Egyptian pornography' and worried that it would need an R rating (Digby 1996, p. 20). Porter uses explicit sex and direct language to present an alternative world not bound by modern interpretations of gender or sexuality. The reader inhabits the intimacy of each sex scene by Porter's use of direct address, immediate language and dramatic monologue. From Akhenaten's first sexual experience with Nefertiti in the poem 'Our First Time', through to his first time with his daughter in the poem, 'My Daughter', the reader is confronted with both rapturous sex,

> when her tongue filled
> my mouth
> for the first time
> my cock went beserk
> it wouldn't listen
>
> now it flops sticky
> and happy
> in her hand
>
> and I'm not embarrassed! (2008, p. 20)

and then in the later poem, a disturbing abuse of power.

> she's still
> my best friend.
> it hurts, she shivers
> I stroke her face
> "Daddy" (2008, p. 100)

Porter presents these scenes in the first person, without commenting or judging. Porter achieves the contrast of Akhenaten as a boy experiencing sexual pleasure for the first time with his 'best friend', to the image of him as a father violating his daughter with a remarkable economy of language. The first poem depicts a sexual experience for pleasure, with a young lover, with a 'cock' that is 'beserk' and 'sticky' and 'happy'. Porter's language and imagery create a moment that is joyful, silly and thoroughly contemporary; in contrast, the next poem is full of sadness and pain. The brevity of the language and the contrasting images of loving and hurting shock the reader, as does the use of the one word of dialogue given to the daughter. Akhenaten's battle with himself over his responsibility to produce a male heir is presented to the reader directly before the poem, 'My Daughter'. Akhenaten has a duty to his kingdom, the ethical ambiguity of the individual and social responsibility is presented in these two poems, 'My Duty' and 'My Daughter', and central to this chasm is gender:

MY DUTY

I don't have a son

not even

by Kiya

does Aten prefer women?

my kingdom

prefers boys

boys of the blood

my father married

my sister Sitamun

for sons

she coped

my duty

I push it around

on the plate

which of my girls?

I'm not hungry. (2008, p. 98)

Porter mirrors Akhenaten's thought process and inner turmoil by the use of line break. The sex he has with his daughters is dutiful, and in direct contrast to the pleasure he gets out of his sexual relations with his wives or his brother.

Porter's complete immersion in the character of Akhenaten means the reader, by association, inhabits incest, heterosexuality, *bisexuality*, homosexuality, pedophilia and polyamory, through the characters and the author. The reader is often imaginatively 'in bed' with the characters Porter creates, and although disturbing, by contemporary ideas of sexuality, the reader is called upon to identify with the characters and their struggles to control their sexual urges and fulfill their duties. Porter acknowledges that she often has a specific person in her head as she is writing, and in her books the protagonist dissolves and 'the reader becomes my lover in a way' (Digby 1996, p. 21). Through connecting with the reader this way the borders between character, reader and writer dissolve and in so doing the fiction of an unambiguous line of separation between the historical situation of Akhenaten, and the reader's own domestic and political situations are blurred. The reader is thereby forced to check his or her judgments on what is 'normal' in relation to gender and sexuality, and in so doing realise that an alleged 'normal' is a fiction anyway, and can never be viewed outside a historical or social context. The direct contemporary dialogue and explicit, stripped back language challenge judgment of what is sexually perverse and what isn't. Porter urges the reader to question any moral reading on another's sexuality by her unpatronising engagement with both reader and character. The character as mask or third person slips away and Porter's intimate relationship with the reader takes over. One example of this is the way Porter manages to portray the genuine conflict Akhenaten feels about needing to provide a male heir through his own bloodline by using humour and dramatic dialogue. In 'Vicious Memories,' an estranged father has drunk too much and is asking his daughter about her mother, who refuses to see him:

Are you happy?

”Is there any more wine?”

Are you happy?

She tips up her cup
its empty

”I don’t like fucking my uncle
any more than I liked fucking
you.”

Only twice!
Little girls have
such vicious memories. (2008, pp. 140-1)

This situation is familiar, and yet disturbingly not. The daughter in the poem above could be anyone’s daughter, as she and Akhenaten’s other daughters, are rarely called by their name in the book’s dramatic dialogue scenes. The direct address, lack of character names and use of straightforward language immediately involve the reader. In ‘Vicious Memories’, Porter gives the daughter the power in the scene to assert herself, as her mother Nefertiti has done by leaving her father. Akhenaten’s repeated questioning: “Are you happy?” belie his own unhappiness, and his horrified exclamation: “Only twice!” reads as an aside, calling for the reader to empathise with him—as if fucking your daughter was the ancient equivalent of forgetting to pick her up from school. Porter often presents typical domestic situations in her poems then adds a confronting twist such as this. She lures the reader in through the techniques of narrative, music, humour, drama, plot and direct language and then attacks them with the power of poetry.

Akhenaten’s overall weakness of character is displayed by his inability to defy the conservative Egyptian tradition of needing to produce a male heir, thereby surrendering to the concept of the sovereignty of the male gender. Though prepared to destroy all Egypt’s earlier gods in order to create his own mono religion around Aten and write love poems to his brother, Akhenaten is not willing to allow a woman to be his successor. This weakness turns Nefertiti,

his most powerful ally, from him and ultimately leads to his downfall. His father-in-law Ay finally withdraws his support too, telling him:

> You're our plague.
>
> I have the cure.
>
> Tut will be king.
> Amun's king.
>
> The party's over
> you've always been imaginative
> find your own way out. (2008, p. 160)

Akhenaten has become the plague itself and the plague must be ostracised for order to be restored. The statues that Akhenaten so carefully crafted to showcase his own beauty and androgyny are torn down and chipped away at by the end of the book. His personae and power were inextricably linked to his relationship with Nefertiti and the gender ambiguity they were able to project combined.

Ultimately *Akhenaten* is as much a parable of the dangers of excess as it is of not seizing your time in the sun. Porter draws her inspiration from mythology and the classical dramatists. Believing in the Dionysian warnings about moderation, immersed in the grand narratives of Homer or Euripides, Porter writes that these ancient poets show: 'what happens in graphic, unsparing detail if you respect it [the power of Dionysius] too little or live with it too much' (Porter 2010a, pp. 19-20). In her work Porter expresses a defiant 'feral feminism' that rages against borders but she does not profess to a totally hedonistic worldview (Digby 1996, p. 5). Rather, Porter's plot is a classic Aristotelian tragedy, with its protagonist's *hamartia* bringing about his downfall. Akhenaten's hubris in believing he is a god led to him being overthrown. Akhenaten and his 'randy' smelling city are afflicted by a great plague, a biblical and ancient image of cleansing and purification. However, Porter's version of classic Greek tragedy is not as simple as that. Porter refuses to make it clear one way or the other if she has a moral position on the way Akhenaten chose to live his life by ending the book on a direct question to 'us', the

readers—from the writer *as* character. Akhenaten, stripped of his kingdom, but still hungry for life asks:

> Why does eternal life
>
> make us so ravenous? (2008, p. 168)

This final image mirrors Porter's own last words, where from her deathbed, she is seen reaching towards the images outside her hospital bed:

> Something in me
>
> despite everything
>
> can't believe my luck. (2009, p. 139)

Porter discusses this identification with Akhenaten openly in interviews saying:

> I found out as much about him as I could and then I trusted my own intuition. And obviously I used myself. Any book like this is clearly masked autobiographical writing. (Digby 1996, p. 3)

The ambiguous morality presented in *Akhenaten* reflects de Beauvoir's ambiguous humanity: the fundamental paradox of the human condition is that the desire for personal freedom often comes at the expense of others. Akhenaten's ravenous lust, combined with his irreverent attitude to borders and limitations is both his downfall, and that which brings him pleasure and success. In *Akhenaten* Porter has created a Book of Ambiguity that thematically highlights the ambiguity of gender, sexuality, history and morality. In the next section of this chapter I will examine how Porter employs ambiguity formally within *Akhenaten* to challenge conservative literary conventions and ideologies.

Formal Ambiguity

Akhenaten resists formal categorisation; it is lyrical and colloquial; small and yet operatic; ancient and modern. Porter is highly critical of pretentious poetry in her creative works and in interviews, refusing to place poetry above popular music or genre fiction. Postmodernism and genre parody allow her to subvert and mock the pretensions of literary hierarchy or patriarchal, academic structures. She writes:

> some of my stunts are informed by postmodernism as well. The genre crossing of the monkey's mask is a postmodern cliché, as was its non-privileging of high culture over pop. (Licari 2007)

In light of this, *Akhenaten* could be viewed as an ambiguous hybrid of pop song, history, erotica, libretti and epic poetry. Porter challenges artificial borders to create her own formal style: a style that often ambiguously undercuts the grand themes she seeks to explore. Porter has no regard for the purity of genre codes or the borders of literary categorisation. In all her work she challenges the notion of poetry as an idealised, and often un-read form. Porter sees the power of combining poetry and genre fiction to show that poetry could 'work the streets' and 'get its hands dirty' (Licari 2007). In an interview with Ball, Porter says:

> One of the reasons that the crime genre is so popular is that it deals with life and death issues: violence, fear, murder, moral disorder, while poetry often veers off into private meditation and reflection or into simplistic political poetry. I've always had a yearning for poetry to engage again with these big issues mainly dealt with in popular fiction [....] I want to have the intimacy of poetry, I think it's what modern poetry does sublimely, combined with a bigger picture: the soul engaged with a threatening world. (2007)

Porter, through her refusal to stay within previously determined genre or gender borders creates ambiguous books that are both intimate and yet universal.

Akhenaten's revolutionary stance against Egyptian society could be seen to mirror Porter's own, against the conservative patriarchy of Australian poetry in the early 1990s. With *Akhenaten,* Porter challenges the cerebral exercises produced by 'a handful of superannuated academics' and the borders of poetry and prose directly (Ball 2009). There is a powerful defiance in Porter's voice:

> I agree with Ezra Pound that only emotion endures. I've got a problem with a lot of stuff that's theory driven. I think it can end up an incredible wank, and can back itself into a corner. And poetry has been backed into such a corner this century, so I think it's time to turn it. (Minter 1998, p.3)

In his 2009 entry on Porter for the 'Poetry International Web', Michael Brennan claims that Porter achieved her aim. Brennan writes that Porter's work, 'more than the work of any other Australian poet, renewed and extended the form in Australian literature while also opening up the world of poetry to a whole new popular readership'. Wanting to reach a popular readership drew Porter towards the ambiguity of the verse novel:

> I love stories. I read novels by the bucketful. But I write poetry. I wanted to fuse what I felt was best in prose fiction with poetry. I wanted to write a poetry that would hook readers in with every charm I could work. (Licari 2007)

Porter is committed to finding an audience for poetry, linking her to de Beauvoir with her commitment to engaging the reader into action. Porter and Beauvoir ask reader and writer to give up security, for freedom and integrity. By refusing to revert to a position of silent oppression created by the status quo, as many female poets did in Australia at the time, Porter

breaks all the 'so-called rules' of form, claiming: 'I'm always a person who has gone my own way, for good or ill. I'm not a cliquey, 'join-the-group' sort of girl (Minter 1998, p. 2). Porter calls passionately for a poetry that is vital, truthful and rule breaking. To illustrate this intense difference between the poetry she wished to write and the obscure, academic, theory driven poetry she loathed, Porter compares the two schools to genuine or fake orgasms respectively. For Porter: 'Poetry's like sex – you can't fake an orgasm [....] I like clarity, I like honesty, I like pizzazz, I like passion, I like a pungent use of colloquial language' (Minter 1998, p.4). The poetic form for Porter is alive, ecstatic and in creation. The character and process drive the work, pieces are often written out of order then weaved together like a mosaic; the shape is formed out of Porter's own inhabitation of character, and her relationship with the reader as lover.

In this Book of Ambiguity, Porter employs poetic techniques with a dramatic arc, to take the reader into an ecstatic, intimate place of formal liminality. Porter destabilises the boundaries between poetry and prose, masculine and feminine, and the erotic and pornographic, thus suggesting an ambiguous Cixousian sexuality. Porter's combination of the poetic and the dramatic, with the economic and the lavish, serves to disable the reader's preconceptions of the book he or she is reading. Her form is transgressive and uncontained. Sensual imagery, more associated with the erotic, is juxtaposed against pornographic images and colloquial language. This liminality takes the reader outside the safety of gender or fixed literary forms, and into a place of ecstatic engagement with the book and its central character. In Chapter One I outlined how Turner refers to this ambiguous space of 'in-between' as a liminal, ecstatic site of transition. *Akhenaten*, being not quite novel and not quite poem, creates an in-between space where reader is able to inhabit an ecstatic connection with writer and character.

Porter's contemporary language, humour and fast moving plots are carefully structured to create an entry point for the reader. The reader, engaged with the characters and the plot, is often unaware he or she is even reading poetry. For example Akhenaten asks Nefertiti what she talked about with her female lover, who the reader later finds out is a whore:

> I asked her what they'd
>
> talked about
>
>
> "Our children!"

Did she recognise you?

"No. And she faked
an orgasm for me.
Very touching
she made so much noise!"

Did you come?

"Oh, she would have
made Osiris come!'

What did she do to you?

"She stroked me with ebony
she sucked me like an oyster
so professional." (2008, pp. 62-63)

This poem is a dramatic dialogue between Akhenaten and his wife. The characters are distinguished by the double line break, and Nefertiti's dialogue being put within inverted commas. The simple language and ease of the short lines of poetry reflect the everyday goings on of mothers talking about their children, a woman faking an orgasm, and a man wanting to know how to make a woman 'come'. Porter refuses any deliberate obscurity in order to engage readers in her books. Her poetry is clear and uncluttered and combines popular genre fiction with high poetry. The formal ambiguity thwarts the reader's expectations, as he or she becomes engaged in poetry that employs the techniques of theatre and prose.

The simplicity of Porter's language does not detract from its power, or make the work less poetic. Another example of Porter using humour and contemporary language to engage the modern reader in poetry is seem in the poem 'I Lay Out My Pens':

I've had a lovely morning
wasting time [...]

I lingered over

breakfast with my wife

who looks gorgeous

smeared with melon juice

then Parenefer poured me

a jug of beer

that got bottomless

during his fart concert

oh, I pissed myself

laughing

at his anal rendition

of Amun's Sed Hymn (2008, p. 49)

Akhenaten and poetry are not revered or kept at a formal distance. In this poem Akhenaten calls his wife 'gorgeous', while latter 'pissing' himself laughing at a 'fart concert'. From the ease of the first line in first person, 'I've had a lovely morning', the reader is lured into the world of this Egyptian pharaoh. The bawdy pun on 'bottomless' is reminiscent of many throughout the book, a technique that seems to purposely mock the high lyricism of more formal styles of poetry. Elizabeth Parsons analyses Akhenaten as a character Porter employs to 'undermine structures central to the dominant discourse' by giving her pharaoh protagonist, 'the language and experience of the Australian suburbanite' (2006). Porter is able to transport her readers into another historical setting through her use of recognisable language and experiences, thereby challenging their preconceptions of what poetry is and whom it is written for.

Symbolically, Porter is able to present the tragedy of Akhenaten's entire life within short blocks of poems that sequentially build upon each other, with a narrative drive that appears almost inevitable. The poems within *Akhenaten* work as individual poems, as well as within the structure of the overall book. Indeed many of Porter's poems from her verse novels are published independently of the book they were created for. The individual poems in *Akhenaten* work like the chapter breaks of a novel, forcing the reader to pause at the end of each piece. As Ball observes, 'The whole space between each poem has a role in the overall meaning, creating

a silent narration between the author and reader' (2007). The poem titles are largely simple and read for information and plot momentum; sometimes, however, they provide an omniscient parallel narration to the poem itself. An example of this is the title of the poem 'Married Gods' where Akhenaten and Nefertiti are seen to be behaving as gods. The poem hints at their hubris with the lines: 'my queen and I/can do anything' (2008, p. 64), but it is the title of the poem that makes it explicit. This technique of using the poem title to provide omniscient narration is also seen in the poem 'The Last Straw' (2008, p. 120), where Nefertiti finally leaves Akhenaten after their daughter Ankhie's baby (who is Akhenaten's baby also) dies, and she finds him in bed with his brother Smenkhkare. At other times the poem titles are ambiguous in their relationship to the content, such as the intimately titled, 'My Daughter' (2008, p. 99) or 'Little Brother' (2008, p. 119) and the double titled ambiguity of the final poem 'Epilogue – Eternal Life' (2008, p. 165). The shortness of the lines combined with the sparseness of the pages is in direct opposition to the excesses of Akhenaten. The lack of adornment in the language works to free the reader from the background details of the historical setting, and place him or her within the narrative itself.

Porter's poetry is concise, with generally no more than one idea or image presented on each line. This makes the book accessible for the reader, who might be opposed to or frightened by poetry, but comfortable with the form of popular song lyrics. The line break and line indent encourage readers to linger over images and create their own meanings outside of the one presented. When Nefertiti leaves Akhenaten, Porter uses the indent to expose Akhenaten's inner weakness and reliance on his wife:

> She told me to look
> in the mirror.
>
> She was leaving.
> I wouldn't see a God
> she said
> I'd see myself
> I'd see why she was leaving. (2008, p. 122)

The line indent breaks the reader's line of vision, causing the reader to give further attention to the thought behind the intention. This poem ends with the repeated image of Nefertiti

confronting Akhenaten with himself, not his ambiguous, god-like creation. Porter uses repetition to highlight important images, much like a pop song does:

> look in the mirror
>
> she said
>
> you will see yourself
>
> you will see why
>
> I am leaving. (2008, p. 122)

The repeated lines and words 'she said', 'look in the mirror' and 'leaving' are written in libretto style, acting as refrains, and taking the book into the territory of the operatic. Porter introduces this new formal technique once the reader has engaged with the previous merging of drama, prose and verse. In this way Porter highlights the relationship between opera and the modern pop song, and the inherent drama in each of them. For Porter, forms cross over continuously. The important dramatic moments of the book are highlighted through repetition and rephrasing. These start to intensify as the book nears completion. Nefertiti's leaving of Akhenaten forces him to confront his humanity, and signals his downfall.

The universality of Akhenaten's tragic downfall is intensified by the use of ambiguous formality and direct language. Akhenaten's popularity starts to wane as he loses sight of the artifice of his own creation. Akhenaten's blind hubris is to be his own downfall and he is destroyed in the same way he was created, by the image-makers of ancient Egypt. Yet Akhenaten remains defiant, or blindly possessed, to the end. In the final poem of the book, the rhythm reflects the content, of hammering, chiseling and working:

> the workmen of the new king
>
> have arrived with chisels
>
> and hammers
>
> they have orders
>
> to cut down my city
>
> and cut out my name
>
> but Ramesses can't cut down the Sun (2008, p.167)

The repeated use of the pronoun 'my', illustrates Akhenaten's self-obsession and delusion. By capitalising the word 'Sun' after the repetition of 'my city' and 'my name', Akhenaten is positioning himself as Aten, and further, as the sun itself. The myth of Icarus resonates here, not just because of Akhenaten's sun worship, but also for his ambition. Porter uses the Icarus myth throughout her work, according to Plunkett, in order to: 'express a life-risking, exhilarating poetics, going beyond the permissible into the extreme and the sacred' (2010, p. 28). Porter challenges all previous permissible boundaries of Australian poetry with *Akhenaten's* formal ambiguity, while also encouraging the reader to identify poetry's relationship to modern and ancient forms of popular culture, such as drama and song. Akhenaten has lost sight of his audience, in a way that arguably poetry had done when Porter set about challenging its borders with this formally ambiguous work. Porter successfully lures her reader into poetry with the familiarity of the novel form: with its direct language, first person narration, dramatic dialogue and character. Once the reader is sufficiently embedded in the story of *Akhenaten,* Porter is able to employ the formal devices of poetry to secure the reader into an intoxicating, sensual world of sex, taste, touch and excess.

Akhenaten is situated within the liminality of a feminine erotic text and a masculine pornographic work. The abundant images of sexual fluidity, perfumes and pleasure in *Akhenaten*, transport the reader into an unsuspecting, liminal site of transformation. Porter's books encourage an orgiastic participation in the taboo through her use of clear, unadorned language and sensual imagery. The ambiguity does not lie in the reader needing to wrestle out the meanings. This does not mean that her writing is not poetic: it is rich in metaphors and imagery. It is Porter's direct voice that strips away the layers between character, writer and reader, and that gives her writing such raw, erotic power. In 'Nefertiti Rides Me', the poem opens with the title line, and then abounds in sexual imagery:

> Her cunt
>
> slippery on
>
> the hot skin
>
> of my belly.
>
> She's sticky
>
> with my glue –

that high stink

of seed! (2008, p. 35)

The voice is raw, there is a repetition of pronouns of 'my' and 'me' and 'her', as the characters are conjoined with each other in the sexual act, the ambiguity of whose sexual secretions belong to who contributes to this merging, as does the sibilance within the poem with words such as 'slippery', 'sticky', 'seed', skin', 'sap', 'salt' and 'stammering'. Porter's poems are full of intoxicating images of tastes, fluids and perfumes, positioning the reader within the world of ancient Egypt's sensual pleasures while juxtaposing these images against modern situations and dialogue. In 'Smenkhkare' the reader is told that 'we smelt the flooding Nile// a breeze of mud/and wet donkey shit' (2008, p. 113). The rational dry form, so often described as masculine, is subverted through Porter's imagery of wetness, the sea and bodily fluids. At the end of 'Smenkhkare', a poem that shows Akhenaten forgetting all practical details of time and space, 'floodwater' itself becomes: 'our perfume' (2008, p. 113). Yet, for all the intoxicating imagery of wetness and formal 'flooding', Porter invariably uses accessible language and a simple line break.

Porter's language is at times direct and unadorned, as seen in the poems, 'My Duty' and 'My Daughter', but at other times her language is richly poetic, encouraging a feverish, in-between ecstatic state to conjure the languidness and decadence of Egypt. The book abounds in repeated imagery of lotus flowers, sleep, the moon, incense, fever, drunkenness, hippos, sleeping, beds, harems, panthers, wine, gold, jewelry, stickiness, water, fish, blues, greens, pinks and reds, heat, tongues, breasts, penises, thighs, honey, desert, lily pads, lions, snakes, dripping and melting, crocodiles, stroking of breasts and skin and cats. Akhenaten's city shimmers like 'wet silk' (2008, p. 47), and words such as 'lingered', 'lush' and 'luminous' create a sense of decadence and slow motion. Body parts are 'swollen', 'sticky', 'slapping', 'silky', 'sweaty', 'snotty', 'squirting', 'sprawling', 'slippery' and 'sunken'. The scents of incense and myrrh: 'purr around us/like throngs of invisible/scented cats' (2008, p. 5) and Akhenaten can smell Aten on his breath (2008, p. 13), while Nefertiti sniffs Aten's hands and sways in 'Their mead scent.' (2008, p. 34). Akhenaten first introduces us to his brother through the sense of smell: 'His nose/in my things/or sniffing in my ear/while I'm composing poems/for the glory of Aten' (2008, p. 53), and when Akhenaten falls from his painted pond into the lotuses they splash him back 'with a drenching of scent' (2008, p. 82). Indeed the whole book is drenched in scents and perfumes. Relationships and bonds are made through touch and scent, rather than

political conversation. Akhenaten can smell the 'randy' crowd when he is made king (2008, p. 93) and can smell the violence of the Assyrian Ambassadors before he meets them (2008, p. 96). He is also aware of the perfumes he uses to disguise his own scent:

> Under all the lotions
>
> under all the perfumes
>
> I stink
>
> worse
>
> than my dead father. (2008, p. 87)

Porter creates an ambiguous sensual playground, where pleasure and perfume are employed to hide violence, rape, murder, incest and greed. The heady aromas, sensuality and sexuality that the reader is confronted with in the book are employed to intoxicate and surrender him or her into ecstatic engagement with Akhenaten and his world.

Though deeply flawed, Porter manages, through first person dramatic monologue, humour, and the grandeur of poetry, to present Akhenaten as a sympathetic character who, against the odds, the reader cares about. Akhenaten is never judged by Porter, for indeed it is Porter herself channeling him, not through her intellect, but through her nervous system:

> When I was writing Akhenaten I was all ears for anything that happened to me or to anybody else. It just poured straight into that book. I wanted to be very persuasive so every poem had to go through my nervous system. (Digby 1996, p. 14)

This connection between writer and character is central to The Book of Ambiguity and its persuasive power. Porter believes poetry is a form that 'has long been widening the boundaries of characters behaving badly' (Ball 2009). The reader simultaneously identifies, and is repelled by the character through the intimacy of poetry. In turn this experience highlights the inherent ambiguity of humanity, and the individuals within society. In 'Truce' Nefertiti cries out to Akhenaten:

> "None of my girls
>
> are safe from you"
>
> my wife says
>
>
> at least
>
> we are talking (2008, p. 105)

The use of direct attacking dialogue from Nefertiti in this poem, and his daughter in 'Vicious Memories' is contrasted with Akhenaten's asides which allow him to create an alliance with the reader. Although often critical of first person 'looking-out-the-window-this morning' poetry writing, Porter believes the first person in dramatic monologue can also be a way to get around this indulgence and stagnation (Licari 2007). In the same interview Porter states:

> My favourite use of the first person voice is in dramatic poetry - where the voice is used to create a character and from that character go exploring foreign territory. The use of "mask" in a poem can in fact be a liberation from the self indulgence of the first person voice.

Through the mask of the dramatic persona Porter is able to draw readers in, and then confront them with their own inhabitation of sexual situations considered morally confronting or taboo in contemporary society. Akhenaten, through his historical validity, allows Porter to explore the multi-faceted desires of humans in explicit, straightforward language. The reader views everything through the lens of Akhenaten, or Porter inhabiting Akhenaten. Porter does not present Akhenaten as pharaoh or god-like creation; instead the reader is presented with a child-like, insecure ruler, who is heavily reliant on Nefertiti and his sycophants. Nefertiti is revealed as the stronger character, able to manipulate the gender bias of her society in her favour. For, although women were unable to rule in Egypt, Nefertiti uses a weaker man for her own power and pleasure. In many ways this is what Porter does by choosing Akhenaten as the first person narrator of *Akhenaten,* rather than Nefertitti. In 'Nefertiti Rides Me' Porter positions Nefertiti as in control and on top of Akhenaten, forcing him to keep moving until 'she growls like the desert' (2008, p. 35). By positioning Akhenaten as a figure both created and destroyed by Nefertiti, Porter is able to reveal the ambiguity of gender, power and sexuality.

I have examined how Porter employs ambiguity formally and thematically in *Akhenaten* to destabilise the reader and challenge the rigid boundaries between gender, sexuality and genre. As a Book of Ambiguity I have demonstrated how *Akhenaten* demands an engaged, ecstatic connection between reader, writer and character. In the next part of this chapter I examine the way Porter uses ambiguity to challenge the binaries of masculinity and femininity and to present the inherent ambiguity of gender and sexuality.

The Ambiguity of Sexuality

Sexuality and gender are not synonymous terms, but are often blurred ambiguously together. The Book of Ambiguity is created within a Cixousian *process* of writing: writing that defies and confronts gender or sexual boundaries. As I argue in Chapter Two, such a book has arrived due to the freedom women writers have, in a post-*Madwoman* era, to give voice to their sexuality, and to question the stereotypes set up by the concept of the *Madwoman*.

Porter's work and life transcends the borders of gender, sexuality and the physical world. In interviews Porter is playful about gender and sexuality, and refuses the titles of 'lesbian poet' or 'female poet':

> I think a lot of my writing has a bisexual flavour rather than a strictly lesbian flavour [.....] I refuse to have myself categorized and fixed – it is a way both of marginalizing and dismissing women's poetry which is about sex. They say, oh yes, that's heterosexual poetry, straight poetry and that's a good girl who is writing about her husband; and that is a bad girl who is writing about women. I think that most women's sexuality is harder to pin than that; it often depends on what is happening to them at the time [....] I like feeling fluid. I think sex is a mercurial thing, just as unfixable as personality. (Digby 1996, pp. 16-17)

Later, in her posthumously published essay *on passion*, she writes:

> that sexual segregation, wether in straight or gay circles, is poison to both sexes. And after a lifetime of oscillation and muddle I now know that for me sexual passion is bisexual. (2010a, p. 82)

This fluidity to sexuality and gender allows Porter to inhabit Akhenaten, and present the reader with a wealth of sexually complex characters. In her interview with Digby, Porter talks about viewing sexuality as a part of one's self at a particular time, and confessed to deliberately using people and characters to explore her own sexuality:

> I use people I know, I mish them up, but the touchstone for all my characters, whether it is Akhenaten or Jill or Diana or the twins or Carmen, is myself. (1996, p. 17)

Throughout her intense career Porter continued to channel Akhenaten as she further subverted genre and gender stereotypes, refusing to conform to what her gender or her genre was 'supposed' to be doing. Porter in her own life struggled against the social forces of caution and restraint placed on her by her sex, envying what she saw as the freedom of the gay male (Porter 2010a, p. 74). In her essay *on passion,* Porter admits that often her gender held her back from what she wanted to experience: 'I am so sick of being a cautious and frequently frightened woman. It's a brake on a passionate life, and it's an ever vigilant bore' (2010a, p. 75). As Porter outlines in her revised introduction for *Akhenaten*, it was through inhabiting Akhenaten that she was able to let go of this fear and live boldly. *Akhenaten* took Porter into new

professional and personal territory and taught her how to live ecstatically. The 'character' of the book refused to be confined between the pages. The book, in a Cixousian sense, is its own character, and in as such, often writes itself, for 'Between authors and books, not everything can be taken for granted' (Cixous 2002, p. 403). Porter's books, characters and life 'co-mingle' (to use Hustvedt's term), as she borrows, '*mishes* them up' or dons the masks of historical, fictional or real persons. It is limiting to examine one of her books independent of the others, or in isolation from her passionate determination to expand the narrow definitions of what could, or could not be, called poetry. Porter followed *Akhenaten* with *The Monkey's Mask*, a book that: 'floods the dams designed to contain genres' and brings poetry and ambiguous sexuality to a popular audience (Plunkett 2010, p. 26).

In her books Porter combines the rawness of poetry with simple plots that weave around troubled characters at war with their environment and the borders that society sets out for them. Porter inhabits, and urges the reader to inhabit, characters that attack the bigotry in society, outsiders who break the rules and are generally sexually ambiguous. Her detective protagonist Jill in *The Monkey's Mask* openly declares her female vulnerability, yet also inhabits a traditionally masculine crime genre role. In *El Dorado*, Bill, the male detective, is haunted by his manhood, wandering why his best friend Cath, who shares a central role in the verse novel, envied it so:

> Why did you see my boyhood
> as gloriously invulnerable?
> Why do you so want it?
>
> Now I'm alone
> fragile and useless
> knowing –
> you wouldn't envy
> my manhood, Cath,
> as it wilts
> under superior cunning
> and strength (2007, p. 332)

Cath, herself is preoccupied by gender and her childhood:

> I wasn't a complete bloody failure
>
> as a girl
>
> despite what my mother
>
> told the world. (2007, p. 51)

The killer's gender in *El Dorado* is also a subject of much discussion between Cath and Bill. Bill refuses to believe a woman capable of murdering children, while Cath is convinced the crimes are feminine and maternal. Men and women do not slip into their gender roles naturally or in stereotypical fashion in Porter's world. Throughout her work, Porter insists on the complexity of gender and sexuality in relationships. Bill, from *El Dorado* and Dr Peter Cyren, from *What a Piece of Work,* are both called 'sissies' by their fathers (2007, p. 344; 1999, p. 119). This borderless crossing of sexuality manifests itself in the incestuous yearnings of Akhenaten for his brother, Smenkhkare; Alex for Phoebe in *Wild Surmise;* and Jill's obsession with Diana, her married lover in *The Monkey's Mask*. The lure of sexual jealousy and the taboo consumes most of Porter's characters, many are tortured by these obsessions, and risk their own loving relationships for them Nefertiti begs Akhenaten to leave his brother alone (2002, p. 116), while Daniel, Alex's husband in *Wild Surmise* asks:

> how long have you been seeing her?
>
> do you like her cunt better than my cock? (2002, p. 130)

In *El Dorado*, Porter's final verse novel, her preoccupations with gender, sexuality and passion are ever present. Cath, like both Jill in *The Monkey's Mask*, and Akhenaten, is weakened by her passionate nature and sexual obsessions.

The addictive lure of lust and life is something Porter does not shy away from. Akhenaten cannot decide if his new love is for his brother or his 'poppy juice':

> It wasn't the same
>
> with Nefertiti.
>
> There are no poems
>
> to describe
>
> holding your own brother

in your arms. (2007, p. 126)

Alex in *Wild Surmise* compares her married love for Daniel to the obsession for Phoebe:

> I never loved Phoebe
>
> as I loved you [...]
>
>
> Like Europa she was a mystery
>
> I wanted to conquer
>
> and crack. (2002, p. 282)

Cath in *El Dorado* sees the same duality:

> Cath wanted to love a woman
>
> like she loved Bill
>
>
> that tranquil sure-footed
>
> certainty.
>
>
> Why did sex create
>
> such chaos? (2007, p. 142)

Cath, is losing her ability to solve the crime due to her sexual obsession, claiming she is unable to think straight with her 'sex drunk hormones' (2007, p. 104), while Jill compares her obsession for Diana to a drink that takes her right over the edge (1994, p. 100). Royal discusses the ambiguous nature of these lesbian relationships as representative of the crimes Cath and Jill are unable to solve, positing that Porter is deliberately portraying unresolved crime in order to: 'subvert the tradition of the conservative logic upheld by detective and crime fiction' (2012, p. 8). I would argue, however, that the crimes in both *The Monkey's Mask* and *El Dorado* are resolved. It is the inner yearnings of the characters that are not. Just as Porter died yearning for more, her characters remain passionate and conflicted about sexuality and its ambiguity. Sex will not be contained and though the crimes are resolved, Porter's worlds remain sexually dangerous, ambiguous and charged. Incest, pedophilia and bestiality all find their way into her work. Explicit sexual language, combined with the economy of poetic language is employed within the narrative arc of genre fiction in a formally 'feral' way, not to

deliberately subvert detective fiction, as Royal implies, but to write passionately and without the borders or boxes of male or female, or poetry or genre fiction.

Porter's *bisexual* driving narratives break the pre-conceived boundaries of poetry, as Brennan writes:

> She gives the reader a sensually and intellectually stimulating ride through the crossing of genres, the conflagrations of contemporary sexuality [.....] her poetry and verse novels alike couple intellect with an, at times raw immersion in sexual energy. (2009)

For Porter, sex and poetry are intrinsically linked, and she will often have her protagonists articulate these crossovers. Jill in *The Monkeys' Mask* muses:

> I never knew poetry
>
> could be
>
> as sticky as sex. (1997, p. 140)

Sex eases out of its boundaries in Porter's poetry and men and women are depicted as subject to their desires and cravings. Psychiatrists have sex with their patients, teachers with their students, mothers with their sons, fathers with their daughters, priests with their pupils and pharaohs with their gods. Yet the ambiguous sexual obsessions of her characters haunt them, but to compromise and deny passion is not an alternative in Porter's Books of Ambiguity either. Daniel in *Wild Surmise* dies of cancer envying his wife's study, which he sees as a 'charged space' of 'creative industry', compared to his 'corporate world' of 'user-pays university' full of admin email nagging him 'like sandflies' and students demanding Distinctions for a 'lazy dead poem' (2002, pp 160-162): Maybe it had given him cancer/ giving in/giving up (2002, p. 162). The irony is that Porter, a force who did not 'give up' or 'give in' would also die of cancer. Porter, a self-confessed pagan did not imbue a Christian morality to life choices or outcomes. Andrea Goldsmith says about Porter, in an interview with ABC Radio National's *The Book Show*:

> For somebody who was such an embracer of life, who had such life about her, she always was aware of the dark side. She always was aware of mortality. (Koval 2010)

Perhaps this is why her books provoke an ecstatic connection with the reader, for they express the ambiguous and tenuous position of his or her very existence.

The Octopus: A Conclusion

In this chapter I have presented Dorothy Porter as a post-*Madwoman* writer who redraws the boundaries of genre, gender or sexuality, in order to create Books of Ambiguity. I have focused on her 'verse-novel' *Akhenaten,* and analysed how this book formally and thematically presents ambiguity, in particular in relationship to sexuality or gender. Perhaps the octopus metaphorically best encapsulates *Akhenaten,* Porter and her other ambiguous creations. The octopus is a constant motif for Porter, appearing in almost all of her books; it is the cover image of *Crete,* and the key metaphor in *Wild Surmise.* Having no bones, the octopus is one of the most flexible creatures in the sea, and is able to change its sex to adapt to a situation. Most octopuses start off as males but can disguise and change their gender on cue if required. With three hearts, theirs is a short, but passionate life. Reproduction is a cause of death: male octopuses live only a few months after mating, while females die shortly after their eggs hatch. In *Akhenaten*, Porter openly inhabits the *bisexual* Akhenaten, and through the power of her direct voice and language, encourages the reader to also empathise with his struggles. Porter's *Akhenaten* could be described as a multi-directional, octopus like, interconnected poetic narrative that challenges all formal boundaries.

Through her genre-bending, gender-dissolving Books of Ambiguity, Porter takes the reader into an intoxicating, sexually fluid world where, like Phoebe in *Wild Surmise,* the reader can lie naked at the bottom of the black sea in the many loving arms of a giant cephalopod. Porter invites reader, writer and character to breathe in unison, so that any imperialistic authorial voice recedes and finally disappears, and in this seeping of selves find that:

> There was terrific tranquility
>
> in just lying still
>
> and not proving anything. (Porter 2002, p. 289)

It moves in a violent chemical wave Ecstasy slips outside form, outside language, outside grasp. *Ecstasy takes us somewhere where we can touch what is untouchable in the Other and in us, to where the Other becomes us*. Ecstasy is liminality, is *jouissance*, is Dionysian. It takes us to the edge, makes us *edgemen,* neither here nor there. It takes us beyond the borders placed on us, by us, or society, beyond customs and conventions, beyond words and their origins *Prophets and artists tend to be liminal and marginal people, "edgemen", who strive with a passionate sincerity to rid them selves of the cliches associated with status incumbency and role-playing and to enter into vital relations with other men in fact or imagination. In their productions we may catch glimpses of that unused evolutionary potential in mankind which has not yet been externalized and fixed in structure.* [7]

It collapses the distance, collapses the senses, collapses time. It cancels out the possibility for a moment that we are living, only to die. *In fever you lose yourself* It is a quest for annihilation, for decreation, for death while living, for time and language to stop, to be stopped up. Stopped up with skin, scents, tastes, words, grunts, saliva, sweat, fear, blood, sperm, come, coming, tears and love. *It moves in a violent chemical mix of silicon, oxygen, aluminium, calcium, magnesium, iron, sodium, potassium bubbling, slushing and liquidifying* It is what you want, but can't have. Want, can't have. Want, want, want….. *Can't always get what you -* It abandons comfort for knowledge, is the wilderness between then and now. It is the now, wanting then. Wanting 'now' to be both 'now' and 'then'. As Carson writes: *The experience of eros is a study in the ambiguities of time. Lovers are always waiting. They hate to wait; they love to wait. The lover perceives more sharply the difference between the 'now' of their desire and all the other moments called 'then' that line up before and after it. One of these moments called 'then' contains her beloved.*[8] One of these moments contains the final moment. *Ecstasy abandons comfort for knowledge, for love, for death - for art*. As Ethan Lord says in 'The Blazing World' - *In order to sell art, you had to 'create desire', and 'desire' he said "cannot be satisfied because then it's no longer desire. The thing that is truly wanted must always be missing. "Art dealers have to be magicians of hunger*"[9] To be in pure rapture, to exist absolutely, to make the end point both goal and fulfilment. *Lava moves in a violent mix of silicon, oxygen, aliminium, calcium, magnesium, iron, sodium, potaasium bubbling, slushing and liquidifying then freezing into crystals and volcanic glass in shape-shifting ecstatic state of ambiguity*.

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[7] Turner 1967, p. 128

[8] Carson 2009, p. 117

[9] Hustvedt 2014a, p. 87

CHAPTER FIVE

Ambiguity in Anne Carson's *Decreation: Poetry, Essays, Opera.*

In this chapter I will analyse how Carson uses ambiguity, both thematically and formally, to fragment the divisions between reader, writer and character, thereby taking the book into the realm of the ecstatic. *Decreation* uses prose and verse, the personal and the theoretical, and humour and dense philosophy to contrast and illuminate each another. Books of Ambiguity are books of ideas, and Carson's books show her relentless pursuit of knowledge. *Decreation* refuses the borders between academic and creative writing and is full of references to Virginia Woolf, Sigmund Freud, Immanuel Kant, Georg Hegel, John Keats, Jacques Lacan, Tom Stoppard, Samuel Beckett, Emily Dickenson, Sylvia Plath, Sappho and the Ancient Greek classicism she is schooled in. The core of the work, however, as the title suggests, is an analysis of Simone Weil's notion of decreation: a process Weil describes as the, 'dislodging of herself from a centre she cannot stay because staying there blocks God' (Carson 2006, p. 167). I will examine how *Decreation* articulates the 'big problem', as Carson calls it, for any writer involved in a quest for decreation of self, for: 'To tell is a function of self', so how can one both create and decreate? (2006 p. 172). *Decreation* explores this contradiction, and also the ambiguous space between: pleasure and pain, male and female, near and far, something and nothing, bad and good, awake and dreaming, madness and sanity, sublime danger and sublime salvation. These thematic ambiguities are woven into ambiguous forms in *Decreation,* the reader is as much the arbiter of thematic or formal definition as the creator.

This chapter examines *Decreation* in detail, but is also a study of ambiguity within Carson's wider works. Carson's books play with the way words sit on the page; they include illustrations, photographs and collage and expand the possibilities of the book as a work of art. Literary forms speak and spill into each other and often present the same ideas from different angles. The themes of ecstasy, gender, madness and ambiguity are echoed subliminally in her books and the reader can find clues for one work within another. Carson's obsessions talk to each other within individual books, and from one book to another. In *Eros, the Bittersweet* (1998), she introduces the reader to the ambiguity of ecstasy and explores the meaning of Sappho's fragment 31, which she later translates in *If Not Winter* (2002a), and analyses in detail

in *Decreation*. Carson's books share narrative space; *The Beauty of the Husband* (2002b) references a short talk, 'On Defloration', she is writing for both *Plainwater* (1995) and *Glass and God* (1998). Her books are usually made up of fragments of ideas that are thematically linked. *Autobiography of Red, a novel in verse* (1999) gains a sequel with *red doc* > (2013), yet, even in sequel, Carson's narratives remain unresolved. The titles of Carson's books, and the individual pieces within the books, alert the reader to the arbitrary nature of formal category. *Nox* (2010) is an epitaph for her dead brother in the form of a book that comes in a box, made up of various repeated phrases, definitions and ephemera. Her modern adaptation of Sophocles' *Antigone,* titled *Antigonik* (2012), is a genuine collaboration with illustrator Bianca Stone and the designer of *Nox*, Robert Currie. Carson attributes meeting Currie, her husband, who she calls 'the randomizer', as the reason her work is moving into a more 'interdisciplinary abyss' (Anderson 2013). Carson's collaborations include performances with dancers, Estonian singers, Icelandic rock bands and academics such as Judith Butler. In spite of such diversions, however, Carson remains a passionate advocate for the importance of the materiality of the book as a physical object. *Nox* is a replication of an original handmade book, not available in digital form. David Morris asks if this insistence on the book as an object is not just elite nostalgia, and then answers his own question by drawing upon the centrality of Eros in Carson's work, and what Carson has called 'the erotics of reading':

> The love of books is no platonic affair conducted purely on the plane of minds [....] What bibliophiles prize – rich paper, fine inks, colourful illustrations, artful dust jackets, hand-tooled leather – belongs securely to the realm of the senses [...] Carson – philosopher and poet – refuses to separate sense and meaning from the poetic materiality of books. (Morris 2011, p. 5)

The senses are never divorced from rational argument for Carson, just as the personal cannot be separated from the intellectual. Carson's books encourage the reader to surrender into this erotic, sensual, personal space of the book, while engaging in a passionate connection with the pursuit of knowledge from antiquity to the present.

Thematic Ambiguity in Decreation

Decreation is a both a thematic exploration, and practical example of the sublime, within a Romantic tradition. The sublime is inherently ambiguous and formless. According to Kant's 1790 *Critique of Judgement*, the sublime is distinguished from the classical idea of perfection or beauty by its formlessness; beauty is always connected with the form of an object and thus has boundaries, while the sublime is formless (2008, pp. 55-64). The sublime is connected to the

ecstatic and ambiguity, for it contains the pleasure within the pain. The sublime understands the terror within the fascination and the repulsion within the beauty. *Decreation* examines how artists work towards moments of ecstatic surrender to a higher being, or purpose, in order to take themselves out of the artwork. Carson undertakes to show how three women writers she admires, Sappho, Porete and Weil, each feel compelled to lose themselves in ecstatic creation, in order to bring themselves closer to a pure state of love, or ecstasy. To create, as Carson phrases it: 'a sort of dream or distance in which the self is displaced from the centre of the work and the teller disappears into the telling' (2006, p. 172). Ecstasy has been a recurring motif for Carson ever since her first study of the ambiguous nature of the condition, *Eros the Bittersweet*. Ecstasy is from the ancient Greek, *ekstasis*, which Carson articulates as:

> the principle of being up against something so other that it bounces you out of yourself to a place where, nonetheless you are still in yourself, there's a connection to yourself as other. (Aitken 2004)

This is the thematic thread of *Decreation*. Carson's Book of Ambiguity destabilises the readers' central notion of a self, and the traditional definitions of what a book should look like. In so doing, the reader becomes close to, what Carson calls, the 'joy of the Sublime', by stepping inside 'creative power for a moment, to share a bit of electric extra life with the artist's invention, to spill with him' (2006, p. 46). In 'spilling' into the artist, or writer's inventions, the reader inhabits a place outside his or her usual roles or structures, and is better able to appreciate the artificiality of formal boundaries.

The process of interweaving, mingling, or 'spilling', reader, writer and character together in a longing for something other than the physical state, starts at the very beginning of *Decreation*. The book starts with a series of short 'Stops', or personal poems centered on the writer's dying mother. The first in the series, titled 'Sleepchains', introduces Carson and her mother, linked together on a journey across a 'shipless ocean' that presumably symbolises death (2006, p. 3). The first line of the book is in the ambiguous voice of Carson *as* protagonist, linking herself through insomnia to both her subject and her reader: 'Who can sleep when she—'(2006, p. 3). In the fourteen short poetic 'Stops' that follow, Carson moves both closer and further away from her mother, who she calls, 'love/of my life' (2006, p. 5). Carson juxtaposes images of her mother's longing for death with the ordinariness of the neatening of paperclips and spines of books, and Hegel and Beckett are referenced alongside domestic images such as, 'dogshit in darkness' (2006, p. 15). Pervading the poems is a longing for death, for release from the everydayness of the self that needs to hang clothes on the washing line and worry about the

price of a long-distance phone call. There is a desire throughout these first poems to join the 'angels and detritus' and leave the threshold of the body (2006, p. 7). Carson's thesis in *Decreation* reflects de Beauvoir's ethics of ambiguity; it is only in death that there is any true resolution to our essential ambiguous human condition, or as Weil writes: 'Perfect joy excludes even the very feeling of joy, for in the soul filled by the object no corner is left for saying' (Carson 2006, p. 170). What Carson puts forward in *Decreation,* however, is an argument for at least brief moments of the totality of joy, where writer and reader can disappear or transcend the limitations of the human condition. One way to leave the limitations of the physical body is through sleep.

Sleep, as an ambiguous state between death and life is explored in the first of the four essays in *Decreation,* 'Every Exit is an Entrance: A Praise of Sleep'. This essay, Carson points out, has the intention: 'to burrow like a mole into different ways of reading sleep', from both a personal perspective and through literature (2006, p. 19). In so 'burrowing', Carson looks at the theory and history of sleeping, through writers such as Keats, Lacan, Kant, Woolf, Elizabeth Bishop, Homer, Stoppard and Plato. Carson tells of the ancient temple of Asklepios at Epidauros, where 'sick people slept the night in order to dream their own cure' and the Lacanian idea of sleep being able to 'look back at us' (2006, p. 22). The connection between dream, sleeping and waking, links Carson's wanderings in her essay to her first poem: 'Sleepchains'. Sleep is a way to step outside oneself. Carson writes of having a dream as a child of waking, and walking down into her living room to find it 'sleeping' or '*incognito*'. She goes on to explain this as the term she wishes to employ to praise sleep:

> as a glimpse of something *incognito*. Both words are important. *Incognito* means "unrecognised, hidden, unknown." Something means not nothing. What is *incognito* hides from us because it has something worth hiding, or so we judge. (2006, p. 20)

According to Carson, *incognito* is woven through Plato, Homer, and Woolf, and represents the difficulty any writer has in portraying characters that contain something 'ungraspable in ordinary sentences' (2006, p. 39). Sleeping and dreaming, are ambiguous states of consciousness that provide the writer with tools to create characters and worlds that enclose layers beyond language: secrets.

Carson, in keeping with many of the poets she discusses and admires in her books, is interested in negation. Negation is used to define what is, by what it is not. To say, 'Something is not nothing', is an example of what Carson calls: 'the dialectic of absence and presence that is

implicit in negation' (1999b, p.114). Carson discusses the paradox inherent in negation in her book, *Economy of the Unlost,* and how this 'undissembled ambiguity', as Paul Celan calls it, preoccupies all poets. Carson writes:

> To be 100% serious about nothing, about absence, about the void which is fullness, is the destiny and task of the poet [...] He is provoked by a perception of absence within what others regard as a full and satisfactory present. His response to this discrepancy is an act of poetic creation. (1999b, p. 108)

In *Decreation* Carson explores how writers and artists have strived to document ambiguous concepts, states and emotions that defy definition, such as the sublime, sleep, ecstasy, love, decreation and the act of poetic creation. In her second essay in *Decreation*, 'FOAM', Carson uses Longinus' treatise, *On the Sublime,* to explore the relationship between ecstasy and artistic creation, with a particular focus on the filmmaker Michelangelo Antonioni. In this short essay, and its accompanying rhapsody, 'The Day Antonioni came to the Asylum', Carson analyses the sublime or ecstatic moment, calling it at one point 'Spill' and another 'Foam'. She defines the sublime as the joy of being 'inside creative power for a moment, to share a bit of electric life with the artist's invention, to spill with him (2006, p. 46).' It is this connection and 'spill' between creator, viewer and character that takes the borders between the roles away for a moment and allows for ecstatic ambiguity, or 'foam' as Carson calls it. Carson writes: 'Foam is the sign of an artist who has sunk his hands into his own story', where, 'The passionate moment echoes from soul to soul', and the character, reader and writer merge into one (2006, pp. 46-47). For Carson, the 'sublime creator', is 'a man wildly lost in his own art, hurried out of himself' (2006, p. 48). She gives the specific example of Antonioni stepping out from behind the camera while shooting *Story of a Love Affair* in 1950, and crossing 'down into *Story*' to slap his actress, Lucia Bose, in order to obtain the desired psychological performance from her (2006, p. 48). Carson also cites Antonioni's use of *temps mort*, running the camera after the actors think the filming is over, or his use of mirrors to draw attention to spaces off screen, as examples of spillage. Antonioni applies these specific techniques in order to create spillage or passionate moments. Carson writes that these passionate moments create 'echoes from soul to soul' and allows an opening up of power between the creator and the audience (2006, p. 46). This ecstatic state, according to Carson, and Longinus, is ultimately only understood and experienced at the level of the soul. It is dependent on danger, or the state of being outside structure. In attempting to understand the psychology of the sublime from the perspective of being an audience, Carson quotes Longinus:

> Touched by the true sublime your soul is naturally lifted up, she rises to a profound height, is filled with joy and vaunting, as if she herself created this thing that she has heard. (2006, p. 46)

This decreated, ambiguous space of spill and foam, blurs all lines between audience, artwork and creator is for Longinus the sublime, and Carson, the ecstatic. Carson writes at the start of this essay, that after reading Longinus' work *On the Sublime*:

> you will come away from reading its (unfinished) forty chapters with no clear idea of what the Sublime actually is. But you will be thrilled by its documentation. Longinus skates from Homer to Demosthenes to Moses to Sappho on blades of pure bravado. (2006, p. 45)

Perhaps, it is fair to say a similar thing about Carson's *Decreation;* the book provides the reader with a thrilling journey of documentation; thematic clarity may be of less importance than the experience of the book itself.

Carson's *Decreation* explores the ambiguity of madness, sexuality and gender. The rhapsody that follows the essay on the sublime is told through the point of view of a patient of indeterminate gender who lives within the asylum Antonioni sets out to film. In choosing the patient to narrate, Carson is able to express the ambiguity of madness. The unnamed patient tells the reader how s/he keeps his/her eyes on documents as: 'Documents are how most of us ended up here' (2006, p. 53). The rhapsody follows his/her observations of the director of the asylum, an ambiguous character simply called 'she' or 'her', who represents the authority figure in his or her daily activities. When Antonioni enters the asylum, 'at the wrong velocity', for days in the asylum are 'two hundred years long', the patient, whom for Antonioni is the focus of the artwork, challenges the rules and role of the contained subject (2006, p. 55). While 'she', who is reading the situation from 'her place by the wall' comes over to Antonioni to explain why the patients are all yelling:

> *The patients are afraid of the light*, she explained, *they think it is a monster*. This kind of spontaneous misinformation is typical of the medical profession. (2006, p. 55)

Carson inverts the traditional authority structure by giving the patient the narrating voice in this rhapsody, which makes the piece humorous, and also allows further exploration of the sublime and decreation. The patient goes on to tell the reader that s/he is not sure how smart 'she' is, saying that once s/he had tried to describe evolution to her saying:

> how in the beginning people didn't have selves as we have selves, there were arms heads torsos what have you roaming about by the breakers of the shore of life, ankles unattached, eyes needing brows, until at last what made the parts come together as whole creatures was Love – (2006, p. 55)

This description, albeit told to the reader through the device of the *Madwoman,* who acts like Shakespeare's fool character, echoes the decreated states longed for by Weil, Sappho and Porete. The patient's theory of evolution speaks of a time before individuals needed 'selves' and

where the path to creation was through 'Love'. Love is at the heart of Weil, Sappho and Porete's movement towards a decreated state.

For Carson, gender ambiguity can be seen as a potential path towards decreation and liberation. Carson's third essay uses the metaphor of a solar eclipse to examine the experience of nature decreating itself, or as Emily Dickenson described it: 'reversing nature' (Carson, 2006, p. 149). The sun and moon, often used as symbols of male and female energy, have become one, and this experience of gender totality is seen consistently in *Decreation.* Carson, when interviewed by the *Paris Review,* talks about this preoccupation with gender and gender's limitations:

> I wouldn't say I exactly felt like a man but when you're talking about yourself you only have these two options. There's no word for the 'floating' gender in which we would all like to rest. (Aitken 2004)

In *Decreation* Carson articulates this dilemma throughout her poetic 'Sublimes', 'Gnosticisms' and other formal meditations. Gender ambiguity is seen throughout other poems and essays in *Decreation*; 'Bits of girl sigh like men' (2006, p. 77) and in a short interrogative piece called 'QUAD' Beckett is asked about his characters: '*does sex matter*', and he responds, '*Sex indifferent'* (2006, p. 120). Virginia Woolf, another of Carson's literary heroes whom she recreates, observes her Sapphic lover Vita as 'a spontaneous childlike man' (2006, p. 152), and Porete is charged and burned at the stake for being a 'fake-woman' (2006, p. 180). Carson describes Weil in her opera: 'She did not want to be a woman. She wanted to disappear' (2006, p. 223). It appears that eclipsing gender is one way towards decreation. In 'Stanzas, Sexes, Seductions' she opens the poem with the statement: 'It's good to be neuter' and goes on to call her personal poetry, which has long been the confined space of the 'female poet' a failure:

> My personal poetry is a failure
>
> I do not want to be a person.
>
> I want to be unbearable. (2006, p. 72)

In this study of decreation, Carson the writer is ever present within the text, even though the personal stories or references are very few. As Pollock comments, we are:

> always aware of her fervent personal stake in what she is writing. That is to say she may be discussing figures distant from her in time and place, but in these essays she almost always seems to be writing about herself as a writer. (2008, p. 7)

This is even more apparent in Carson's poetry, as the quote from her poem above makes clear. Pollock calls Carson a post-confessional writer: a writer who, like her literary

heroines, is interested in finding ways to take herself away from the centre of her poetry (2008, p. 6). In a note on her methodology Carson asserts: 'There is too much self in my writing', though she is not interested in removing herself at the expense of her works 'soul' (1999a, p. vii). Carson wants what Weil, Sappho and Porete want: to take both self and gender out of the writing - to become 'unbearable' (2006, p. 72). To disappear into ecstasy, and into her own work, to enter into the plurality of sex(es), to: 'Drink all the sex there is./Still die (2006, p. 72).

Decreation is a ravishing of the self. The book's title opera, 'Decreation', examines the ecstatic longing of the women at the centre of Carson's study. Marguerite exclaims:

> Jealousy he is truly!
> For he has parted me
> from myself
> absolutely
> by a ravishing farness nearer than my own self! (2006, p. 210)

and Simone Weil sings:

> Undo this creature!
> Excess,
> Flesh,
> Brain,
> Breath,
> Creature.
> Undo this creature.
> (2006, p. 235)

Although Sappho herself does not appear in the opera, she is present within the character of Aphrodite, the goddess she worshipped. As Carson writes in her title-essay, many historians claim Sappho was a priest of Aphrodite's cult, and used her poetry to teach her doctrines (2006, p. 162). Carson argues that Sappho was an ecstatic, and that her love poems could be viewed, not just as conventional erotic poetry, but also as a way to teach readers about the theological or spiritual nature of love. In considering Fragment 31 of Sappho, Carson focuses on the triangle set up by the poet watching the object of her love with another. The

relationship between the writer and this situation is not one of jealousy, but a personal experience of *eksatss,* of standing outside herself. Carson writes that Sappho sets up the traditional stage for jealousy, 'but does not dance to it' (2006, p. 160), instead the lover focuses inwards on herself:

> for when I look at you, even a moment, no speaking
>
> is left in me
>
>
> no: tongue breaks and thin
>
> fire is racing under skin
>
> and in eyes no sight and drumming
>
> fills ears
>
>
> and cold sweat holds me and shaking
>
> grips me all, greener than grass
>
> I am and dead – or almost
>
> I seem to me
>
> (2006, p. 159)

This description of the ecstatic condition given by Sappho leads Carson to draw parallels between Sappho and Porete's visions of an annihilation of self. In *The Mirror of Simple Souls,* Porete talks about moving from a passionate desire for God, to an ecstasy where the individual will, or soul, leaves the body behind in order to conjoin itself with God:

> And thus the Soul parts itself from this will and the Will parts itself from such a Soul and then renders itself and gives and goes back to God, there where it was first taken, without retaining anything of its own. (2006, p. 163)

This ravishing is as violent as Sappho's poetic description in Fragment 31. Porete faints three times in anguish before being able to dislodge her Being, 'from the centre of itself' (2006, p. 165). Like Porete and Weil before her, Carson sees the self as an obstacle to the purity of writing, to the sublime experience of totality.

Carson is not interested in judging Porete, Weil or Sappho from a safe place in the history of feminism. As she writes:

> We need history to remain ordinary. We need to be able to call saints neurotic, anorectic, pathological, sexually repressed or fake. These judgements sanctify our own survival. (2006, p. 180)

The experience of passion is central to all Carson's writings, and writing is her central passion. Indeed *Decreation* is an exercise in Carson decreating herself as a writer, in taking herself away from the self of her personal writing, which she believes to be unsuccessful. Carson describes the ecstasy of her own first experience of reading Sappho in Ancient Greek: 'we read Sappho together, and it was simply revolutionary', and in the same interview, claims that finding writing and Greek, was responsible for, 'whatever mental health I have' (Aitken 2004). Carson is fascinated with ancient Greek's 'otherness', comparing entering this strange 'otherness' of the ancient language and culture to the principle of ecstasy:

> of being up against something so other that it bounces you out of yourself to a place where, nonetheless, you are still yourself; there's a connection to yourself as another. (Aitken 2004)

Central to *Decreation* is Carson's struggle to take herself out of her writing, to stand alone, but connected to another.

A crucial theme in *Decreation* is the writer, Carson, learning to accept the death of her mother, and in doing so accepting death itself. Carson's mother is both: 'the love of her life' and the creator of her life. This can be expressed in the movement from the first poem 'Sleepchains', where we see the protagonist chained to her mother in sleeplessness on a shipless ocean, through to the final piece of the book titled, 'Longing, A Documentary', where a woman drives along an empty highway to a river. The closing lines of 'Longing' and the book itself are particularly powerful:

> *As usual she enjoyed the sense of work, of having worked.*
>
> *Other fears would soon return.*
>
> (2006, p. 245)

The protagonist is a woman artist, who uses her work to allay her fears. There is recognition in this final image that there can be no resolution or, 'eventual reconciliation' with fear. The process of work, of creation itself, is the only thing that can assuage the loneliness of living. Creation brings the artist closer to decreation, closer to ecstasy, while at the same time paradoxically, as Carson points out in the title-essay, puts the artist in the centre of the creation, of the 'telling'. It is this inherent contradiction that lies at the thematic centre of *Decreation*. Ecstasy and decreation are ambiguous, contradictory, and elusive states. Carson

hunts for ecstasy in *Decreation* as Hustvedt seeks ambiguity in *The Shaking Woman*, ever so often coming close to it, only to lose it again. Writers of Books of Ambiguity are philosophically engaging with de Beauvoir's ethical ambiguity and the existential condition of being both free, yet bound to the society and historical period they are born into. A writer is always faced with the contradiction of his or her freedom to write, and give voice to, characters that have no voice. Weil famously undertook to starve herself in sympathy for the people in France who didn't have enough to eat; the ambiguity of her freedom and wealth in comparison to others was something writing alone could not quell. If decreation is 'an undoing of the creature in us', Weil achieved this through refusing to eat, Porete and Sappho also achieved a form of decreation through martyrdom and suicide respectively (Carson 2006, p. 179).

In *Decreation* Carson puts forward an alternative solution to death for our ambiguous condition, whereby writing, or 'telling', offers its own decreation, its own ecstatic and momentary loss of self. In writing - writer, reader and character - are momentarily joined. The jealous triangle of god, lover and self (Carson depicts as present for Porete, Sappho and Weil) is unified. Three becomes two, and eventually one. As Carson writes from an ecstatic dream in in her title-essay:

> We have said that telling is a function of the self. If we study the way these three writers talk about their own telling, we can see how each of them feels moved to create a sort of dream of distance in which the self is displaced from the centre of the work and the teller disappears into the telling. (2006, p. 173)

This ecstatic moment is a place where fear is momentarily not present. There is no first, second or third person, the writer becomes one with the characters within the writing, and at the same time is able to step outside the writing and act as reader.

In *Decreation* Carson presents the reader with an enormous range of ideas and images that challenge and provoke the finite categorisation of gender, freedom, love and our existence itself. Carson's book offers experiences of the sublime, ecstasy and decreation, and encourages the reader to engage in the creation of the work itself. As co-creator, the reader is brought closer to a sense of decreation, or a sublime annihilation of self within the creative work that is *Decreation*. I have discussed how Carson's *Decreation* explores thematically Weil's concept of decreation, or 'undoing the creature in us' (2006, p. 167), I will now argue that Carson also sets about to 'undo' form within this Book of Ambiguity.

Formal Ambiguity in Decreation

Carson's work refuses to stay within the confines of genre, gender, or the book itself; they are fragments of translation, thoughts, scholarship, philosophy, memoir, essay and poetry that reflect and build upon her own obsessions. As Dan Disney concludes in his paper 'Sublime Disembodiment?', '*Decreation* is written as a series of parts which have the appearance of Sapphic fragments' (2012, p. 37). Fragments have edges where 'words go missing' creating 'a sort of antipoem' according to Carson in her translation of Sapphic fragments (Carson, 2002, p. xiii). Such edges create the reader as 'edgemen', in the way Turner describes those in a liminal state, who strive to enter into 'vital imagination' with other men, beyond the boundaries of clichés (1967, p. 128). This meeting of Carson and reader, allows the reader to imagine that beyond the edges is: 'everything you ever wanted her to write' (Carson, 2002, p. xiii). As a classicist and translator, the ambiguity of translation, and what lies between and beneath language and myth, is a constant lens in Carson's work. Carson writes that:

> A translator is someone trying to get between a body and its shadow. Translating is a task of imitation that faces two directions at once, for it must line itself up with the solid body of the original text and at the same time with the shadow of that text where it falls across another language. Shadows fall and move. (2001b, p. 41)

Carson talks about spending years translating one scene or character from Aiskhylos' *Agamemnon,* or Sophokles' *Elektra* before realising that: 'what is ungraspable has to stay that way' (2009, p. 4). Carson's introductions to her translations of her plays, *Grief Lessons* (2008), *Sophokles Elektra* (2001b) and *An Oresteia* (2009) are full of examples of the impossibility of removing ambiguity from translation and language itself. Carson believes:

> there's something about Greek that seems to go deeper into words than any modern language. So that when you're reading it, you're down in the roots of where words work, whereas in English we're at the top of the tree, in the branches, bouncing around. (Aitken 2004)

Carson moves constantly between these two registers, the 'roots of the words' and the 'bouncing branches'. Carson's work is grounded in the classicism in which she trained, the roots of words are defined and she is never content with superficial translations, the source of quotes and translations are as important to her as etymology.

Throughout *Decreation* Carson dissolves and mocks formal generic boundaries. Carson's work has been held up like a precious unclassifiable gem, as Aitken says of her writing: 'It didn't feel like a poem, it felt like falling into a painting, or as if someone had handed me a jewel' (2004). Her poems are not poems, her essays not essays, her operas or oratorios not operas or

oratorios; and yet they are. Each form both breaks out of its mould and spills into the others, creating new forms out of the translations and shadows of the old. Containing thirty-four short lyrics, four essays, a screenplay, an oratorio, an opera libretto, a documentary shot list, footnotes, an ekphrastic poem, an interview and three illustrations, *Decreation* is the most formally ambiguous of the three works being analysed in this thesis, and certainly the most difficult book to do justice to within its constraints. *Decreation* is not, however, a random group of formal experiments, but rather a composition of writing in a variety of genres moving between classicism and contemporary life, and from the personal to the universal. Finding formal distinctions obscure, Carson wonders why people worry so much about them: 'The boundaries between "forms" (poetic, prosaic) are invented by us. The separation of "academic" from "creative" enterprise is demonstrably false and futile. Why pretend to respect categories like these?' (Bush 2000). Carson's epigraph at the start of *Decreation* reinforces this attitude towards formal categorisation and serves to introduce the musicality of her book, and the tone in which to read it: 'I love a poetical kinde of a march, by friskes, skips and jumps'. Imbedded within the 'poetical kinde of a march' that is *Decreation,* is indeed a deep sense of love, a love of knowledge, experiment and play. The epigraph is referenced as sourced from Florio's 1603 translation of Montaigne's "Essay on Some Verses of Virgil"; already the reader is introduced to layers behind words, the translations of translations. The reader may be about to have some fun poetically, but he/she will also be expected to work; before the book has started the reader is introduced to Florio, Montaigne and Virgil. *Decreation*'s epigraph is both the quote, and the quote's source, for both have equal weight on the page. Carson's background in the classics and ancient languages has equipped her with the ability to look at the ambiguity within language throughout history, and gives her work a formal ambiguity that incorporates modern forms with ancient ones. For Carson, form and language are constantly in process, and can never be read at just the surface level. The fragments of this Book of Ambiguity can be read in random order, and each piece gains from the other pieces. Forms play into forms, in order to undo form itself.

Decreation is a collage, of essay, poetry, images, libretto and screenplay. The formal names Carson employs for her individual pieces are playful and subversive: poems are called 'sublimes' or 'stops' or 'gnosticisms', essays are called 'praises', and are followed by 'rhapsodies'. Each piece relates, through title or word play, to another. Carson's use of form

destabilises her authorial presence, in order to lose herself within the 'telling' and connect the reader. According to Pollock, Carson does this:

> by using every technique of depersonalisation at her disposal, from quotation, imitation, parody, and critical analysis of others, to various kinds of dramatic technique, including experiments with screenplay and libretto. (2008, p.8)

In this sense Carson is incorporating the documentary technique of the sublime, as she attributes to Longinus in the first essay of *Decreation*. Ultimately, however, just as Sappho, Porete and Weil have to move through themselves, in order to then lose themselves in the 'telling', Carson too must move through herself. To move beyond her own grief about her mother's death, till her own voice 'spills' into the larger landscape of the sublime. In order to decreate herself, Carson needs to move through herself and conjoin with her love, her mother, her creator. The book begins with a series of short, lyrically and formally playful poems, Carson calls 'Stops', then moves through to the title-essay and opera 'Decreation'; and ends with the meditative coda: 'Longing; A Documentary'. It is impossible, therefore, to do justice to the eight or nine distinct genres in this 245-page book in this thesis, so as I have focussed largely on the four essays within the book in the first part of this chapter, I have chosen to look in detail at the opening poems and the coda. *Decreation* is intricately interconnected and layered, and the journey from the opening poem to the closing coda is best observed through analysing these two pieces together.

Carson uses formal 'spillage' to create ambiguity and ecstasy within *Decreation*. In the first poem, or 'stop', 'Sleepchains', Carson achieves formally, the 'dream of distance' that her literary heroines have done in their ecstatic writing. It is worth quoting in it its entirety:

Who can sleep when she –

hundreds of miles away I feel that vast breath

fan her restless decks.

Cicatrice by cicatrice

all the links

rattle once.

Here we go mother on the shipless ocean.

Pity us, pity the ocean, here we go.

(2006, p.3)

The interruption in the syntax at the end of the first line gives the effect of an overwhelmed speaker, out of breath and thought, falling silent. The silence contains the absence of the mother, and the words. The edge of the fragment is illustrated on the very first line of the book: the erotic absence of another is depicted by the dash into nothingness. The pronouns 'she' and 'I' of the first two lines are united into 'us' and 'we' by the end of the poem, as both subject and object move together over the ocean. The reader of *Decreation,* after having read the book as a whole, becomes aware of 'all the links'; however, even at first reading the poem has great depth. Carson uses the sequence of 'Stops' that follow to build the clues about her mother's death, so that it is really only by the third poem that the reader understands that Carson's 'love' is for her dying mother. The repeated hard 'c' sound, in 'decks', 'cicatrice by cicatrice' and 'links' imitates the rattling of the links of chains. This images is resonate of the mind bringing the links together and also with the grip of ecstasy that Sappho experiences in Fragment 31, as discussed by Carson in the title-essay of *Decreation*. The form of the poem starts to replicate the links of a chain, and the tone of the 'Stop'. Carson experiments with typography throughout the 'Stops'; the form entwines with the thematic within her work, lines become breaths, moving closer and further away from creation and herself. Carson, like Sappho, upon moving closer to the object of her love, is moving deeper within herself. In this sense the opening of 'Sleepchains' is intensely erotic and spiritually charged when it is read in isolation. The biblical references to breath moving across the vast ocean are 'spillage' moments from Carson's translations of Longinus quoting from Genesis on the sublime, which come later in the book. The 'vast breath', therefore, could be read as god, moving the speaker, closer to the object of her love. The breathlessness created by the line breaks, the arrangement of the words on the page, and the shortness of the 'Stops', encourages the reader to engage with the formal creation of the book. To undertake a journey on the ocean with the writer, to step off the edge of the fragment into the white space, the unknown: 'here we go'.

The central image of the poem, 'Cicatrice by cicatrice', starts a rhythmic chant, prayer or incantation that allows for the process of moving through the self; moving from 'I', to 'we'. In contrast with the simple language of the rest of the poem the word cicatrice jars; it requires more work to understand its resonances. A cicatrice is a scar. The word is of Latin origin and is not commonly used in English, but Carson will often jump to words that give added meaning in their original untranslated form. Of course rhythmically the word has added weight, with three syllables it has a softer, more poetic sound than the harshness of 'scar', however, I don't think

this is the main reason Carson is using the term. Carson is neither interested in making language deliberately accessible or ambiguous, as a classics scholar she would be aware that the bible often refers to the cicatrice of a wound, and again it seems that Carson is evoking a movement towards god, a spiritual loss of self in god. Carson is not putting herself forward as a stigmatic, but perhaps here, as an ecstatic, as one who through her work aims at decreation. The body of the child bears an obvious scar, link, or chain to their mother where the umbilical cord is cut. The loss of the mother, the creator, is evoked by the image of a 'shipless ocean'. Carson, Weil, Sappho, Woolf and Porete are all childless. Their work is writing, not childrearing. The cicatrice link ends with each of these writers. Therefore their writing is essential for leaving their mark on the world, to give a momentary peace to their fears, within the vastness of an empty ocean. The writing is the mark: the cicatrice. The marks on the page, their complexity, their beauty and their shadows, are highlighted as much by the words Carson chooses not to use, as much as the words she uses. In this way, each 'Stop', each piece, each word and each mark are scars on the page, with an often untold, ancient story. Carson's use of typography also contains echoes to previous forms and historical periods, from the ancient Platonic dialogues to Dadaism, to modern graffiti. The marks on the page can become concrete poems, jarring the reader's expectations, or use blank space to take the reader outside the words, and into their own creation, or decreation.

'Sleepchains' is linked through the vast connectedness of water and loneliness, to the end piece of the book: 'Longing, A Documentary'. By choosing to label this piece formally as a documentary, Carson asks the reader to imagine the rules of this particular form, with its connotations of factual details and action; however, this piece does not conform to any of the proposed formal expectations. There is no dramatic action or dialogue, no resolution or discussion of an issue: the reader is almost more confused by the end of the piece. The action of the film is simply a woman, of no distinct age, name or appearance, driving to a river to process photographic film by moonlight, and then leaving along an empty highway. This short coda is full of repeated, unadorned, and almost clichéd images of night, river and moon. There are no specific indications of where the action takes place. The most detailed description in the entire piece is of the photographic equipment the woman packs, which contains: '4 x 6 trays, photographic papers' and strobe lights that are too big for the trunk of the car and need to be put in the back seat (2006, p. 243). These specific details are in marked contrast to the rest of 'Longing,' where nothing is particularised, but remains abstract in time or space. Interestingly

enough, Carson's specification of '4 x 6 'also occurs in 'The Glass Essay' when she references Emily Bronte's notebook that her sister Charlotte had stumbled across:

> It was a small (4 x6) notebook
>
> with a dark red cover marked 6d.
>
> and contained 44 poems in Emily's minute hand.
>
> (1998b, p. 25)

Throughout 'The Anthropology of Water' Carson references her work materials, both notebooks and photographic equipment. In 'Longing', the work materials are given more weight than the worker; the art, over the artist; the telling over the teller. The work materials for the writer are the books, the paper and the words. The scars, or marks on the page allow the reader to bring their own experiences to The Book of Ambiguity, to leave enough space for the erotics of the reading experience to engage the reader and create spillage moments of connection and resonance, in almost a subliminal way.

Carson uses formal spillage to create subliminal connections between history, her other books, and individual fragments within the books themselves. According to the Macquarie Dictionary (2014), subliminal is connected to the sublime, through the Latin word *limen*, which is a *threshold*: a point of entering or in psychology the 'point at which a stimulus becomes perceptible or is of sufficient intensity to produce an effect; the limen'. In philosophy and poetics, something is sublime if a piece of writing is raised to this intensity and a connection can be made between the writer and the reader: where a spark can leap from the soul of the writer to the soul of the reader (Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics, 2012). Subliminal connection and spillage is central to Carson's meditative coda, 'Longing', a small quiet work that follows the grandness of the title opera and essay. The piece sets up a potential suicide with lines such as, 'She is at the river in deep reeds, watching/ She wades along the edge of the river, watching,' and building to, 'She walks into the river' (2006, p.144), causing the reader to imagine Woolf, with the earlier references to the writer within the book. Instead, however, the woman chooses to work, and leaves the river satisfied, if only momentarily. 'Longing' is written as a film script to a short silent film. Although there is no voice, the central character's thoughts are presented as subtitles told by an omniscient narrator. These 'Subtitles' are written in italics below the sixteen images that make up the shotlist. The subtitles 'spill' into the action of the film. Each form plays into the other. The subtitles, which I reproduce here in isolation from the images, provide further ambiguity to the sequence of action.

It was for such a night she had waited

She was not a person who aimed at eventual

reconciliation with the views of common sense

Night is not a fact.

Facts lack something, she thought.

"Overtakelessness" (what facts lack).

As usual she enjoyed the sense of work, of having worked.

Other fears would soon return.

(2006, pp. 243-245)

These subtitles could stand alone as their own argument, and are independent of the action, but are ambiguously juxtaposed against the visuals. Carson uses this technique of formal fragmentation, 'randomising' or pastiche most overtly in her more recent books *Nox* and *Nay, Rather* (2014b). Concepts are not elaborated on, but left ambiguous, for the reader to research. O'Rourke writes that by choosing words that meld into other words Carson is interested in 'making reading into an act of translation, and restoring strangeness to language' (2012). One example is the term 'overtakelessness', which she defines, possibly, in brackets after the term as: 'what facts lack'. Ambiguity itself could be defined as 'what facts lack'. This concept is the one moment of the piece that requires research, translation, or at the very least the ability to accept ambiguity. It appears that Carson wishes the reader to do just that, to resist disambiguation and sit in between facts, as she does little to explain the word in *Decreation*. However, this concept is elaborated on in her epitaph for her brother, *Nox*. In *Nox,* which is one long accordion shaped scroll, there is a footnote in 1.3 that explains 'overtakelessness':

> "Overtakelessness" is a word told me by a philosopher once: *das Unumgangliche* – that which cannot be got round. Cannot be avoided or seen to the back of. And about which one collects facts – it remains beyond them. (Carson 2010, n.p.)

The protagonist of 'Longing' does not long for 'reconciliation with the views of common sense'; instead it would seem, her longing is for work, for creative work, performed as a witch might perform a spell. Carson's end piece reads like a dream; there is little to ground

it within one specific experience. The woman is not named: it could be Carson, or the reader, or a third person. Carson, through the use of non-specific language deliberately leaves the character and her actions open for inhabitation by the reader. After the density of the language, ideas, translations, references and formal theatrics of most of the text within *Decreation*, reading 'Longing' brings the book to a graceful, soft close. It doesn't demand anything of the reader, but to let the images and thoughts wash over them. A woman enters a space, works and leaves. Although the woman is alone, the repeated images of the river, the night and the moon connect her to the feminine creative tradition and the opening poem of the book. 'Sleepchains' and 'Longing, A Documentary' bookend a work that is soaked in imagery of water and women that chose to bring themselves closer to ecstasy and the sublime through an annihilation of themselves within their work.

This experience of moving through forms and ideas is what Carson calls 'banditry' (2006, p.45). Banditry is thrilling and dangerous, and forces the reader to be engaged in an active sparring with both writer and the text. This Book of Ambiguity directly addresses the reader with the challenge – 'Let us see who controls the danger' (2006, p. 45). Carson explores this ambiguity of creator and reader throughout the book as a whole, and repeatedly within the microcosm of the individual works. As Rees-Jones writes in his review of *Decreation*, what surprises in the book, is the way Carson, 'can continue to engage with ideas in a way that makes the reader feel included, part of the process of thinking, making and feeling that the book interrogates' (2006). The Book of Ambiguity does not assume that the writer always has control, or that the boundaries between book, reader and writer are fixed. Cixous writes:

> because of that frightful human disorder at the boundaries between the kingdoms of Life and Death/ the sensation that there is a book that is following me, or that I am the book [....] I never know who is driving whom nor who is killing me/you nor who is causing whom or what, it leads me, jostles me, sends me, that sensation was born in the Algiers cemetery. It suprises me, it disconnects me, it apostrophizes me, it pushes me farther than myself. (2002, p. 433)

Cixous conjoins writer and reader by her use of 'me/you', the writer is intimately connected with the reader in the creation of The Book of Ambiguity. Carson blurs pronouns, connections, and genders throughout *Decreation*; indeed for Carson, ecstatic decreation eclipses all boundaries. Cixous, could easily be articulating a process of decreation in the above extract from 'The Book as One of Its Own Characters'; the 'disorder at the boundaries' is another way of expressing the foam or the spill between creator and the created, between life and death: the ecstatic.

The Ambiguity of Ecstasy

The ambiguity of ecstasy lies in its transience, for ecstasy craves what only death or decreation can deliver for any period of time—a surrender of the concept of selfhood. Ecstasy seeks totality, and its elusiveness adds to its continual allure. Carson looks at this in her first book *Eros the Bittersweet*, where she discusses the fate of the imaginary lovers in Plato's *Symposium,* locked forever into an embrace, but still not satisfied (1998, p. 65). What they do want, according to Aristophanes, is eternal oneness, and this is offered to the lovers in life and death by Hephaistos:

> Well, is this what you crave to be joined in the closest possible union with one another, so as to not leave one another by night or day? If this is your craving, I am ready to melt you together and fuse you into a single unit, so that two become one. (1998a, p. 68)

It is this unification that Porete and Weil seek with their God. It is also what the woman in 'Longing' seeks through work. Yet this longing for unification can never be fulfilled for, as Carson writes, Eros, or the process of 'falling in love' depends on otherness and a hunger for the 'other'. Eros, as Carson explains is bittersweet, because it is based on want, and as soon as the lover gets what she wants, she is no longer wanting or longing. Carson, in 'Why I Wrote Two Plays about Phaidra', describes this impossible longing when she writes that Phaidra didn't care about Hippolytos, money, or property, all she cared about was: 'the core. Eros itself. She knew that was real. And knew she would fail it' (2006, p. 310). For Carson, impersonating Euripides, in this same essay argues: 'what do we desire when we desire other people? Not them. Something else.' (2006, p. 310) Or as Weil writes:

> I want the person to love me. If he is however, totally devoted to me he does not exist any longer and I cease to love him. (1977, p. 364)

It is this contradictory characteristic that drives desire. According to Carson this ambiguity of ecstasy is what drives Sappho, Weil and Porete to strive for decreation, to let go of the self, in order to accommodate, or become one with a deity. This state depends on not knowing otherness; it is as transitory a state as a total solar eclipse. Carson posits an alternative to death, however, and even an alternative to losing oneself in another.

In her first book Carson articulates the connection between seeking knowledge and Eros:

> I would like to grasp why it is that these two activities, falling in love and coming to know, make me feel truly alive. There is something like an electrification in them. They are not like anything else, but they are like each other. (1998a, p. 70)

Carson goes on to discuss in detail the inherent paradox at the heart of both 'falling in love' and the seeking of knowledge. According to Aristotle we seek to know by our very nature, but we always come short:

> Both mind and wooer reach out from what is known and actual to something different, possibly better, desired. Something else. (1998a, p. 71)

Both seeking knowledge and 'falling in love' are acts of the imagination, as Carson writes:

> Imagination is the core of desire. It acts as the core of metaphor. It is essential to the activity of reading and writing (1998a, p. 77)

For Carson, the novel is the form that institutonalises Eros' unquenchable longing. The novel (or any artistic creation) is a place where readers/viewers can go to simulate a feeling akin to 'falling in love'. In general reading a novel is potentially safer than 'falling in love' with a real person for:

> It becomes a narrative texture of sustained incongruence, emotional and cognitive. It permits the reader to stand in triangular relation to the characters in the story and reach into the text after the objects of their desire, sharing their longing but also detached from it, seeing their view of reality but also its mistakeness. It is almost like being in love. (1998a, p. 85)

The Book of Ambiguity, however, allows no such clear triangular relationship. The Book of Ambiguity gets closer to 'falling in love', than the book that provides clear, stable boundaries between third person, writer and reader. It disturbs this comfortable, safe distance by thematically and formally insisting on the impossibility of ever really knowing something or someone fully. Books of Ambiguity look for 'overtakelessness', for what facts lack, as Carson's final moments of *Decreation* articulates. This ambiguity inherent in Carson's description, keeps the reader thirsting, not knowing, and always desiring. The writer's intentions and themes are not grounded in facts and common sense. There is no 'eventual reconciliation' as the woman in 'Longing' now knows, there is only hunger and compulsion. There is only ecstasy, with occasional moments when the fear subsides and the writer, or creator is fully absorbed in the process of creating.

The Book of Ambiguity is an ecstatic book because it accepts that there are certain things that will always remain impossible to put within a closed narrative. As Carson writes when trying to understand her brother's death in *Nox*: 'It resists me' (2010, n.p.), and later in 'The Anthropology of Water' she decides:

> I am a pilgrim (not a novelist) and the only story I have to tell is of the road itself. Besides, no one can write a novel about a road, anymore than you can write a novel about God, simply because you cannot get around the back of it. (2000, p. 152)

Carson then talks about the sadness of being denied a story with a distinct point of beginning, middle and end, or with round characters that you can see around. For God and the road, according to Carson, do not move but:

> At the same time, it is everywhere. It has a language, but not one I know. It has a story, but I am in it. So are you. (2000, p. 152)

The writer, reader and subject are connected in the Book of Ambiguity, for the experience of reading and writing is about a desire to let go of the self, to decreate. For Carson, Weil, Portete and Sappho, there is always pain within the search for knowledge; and with that pain is love, or God. In a scene in 'The Anthropology of Water' that echoes 'Longing', Carson tries unsuccessfully to capture pain; she describes binding up pain in a photograph at the 'edge of the world', with the 'moon, like a piece of skin above' (2000, p. 170). In this essay, which centres on a pilgrimage, she asks what sense there is in the pain of penance or pilgrimage. The answer eludes her, but she decides that we contrive pain: 'for ourselves as we cast about for ways to bind up the wound between us and God' (2000, p. 170). The Book of Ambiguity requires the reader to accept that moments of ecstasy, of stepping outside oneself, are brief and can involve both pleasure and pain. Ambiguity does not offer resolution, for like ecstasy, ambiguity exists because of the very boundaries between reaching for something and then grasping it. Although The Book of Ambiguity cannot ever fully dissolve the borders between 'you', 'me', God, or a created character in a work of fiction, through its very ambiguity, it works to create moments where those borders blur.

The Book of Ambiguity is an unstable book where occasionally writer, reader and character come close to oneness. It is a book that comes closest to the 'dream of distance' that Carson talks about, where writer and reader can be displaced from their notion of an individual self, thereby entering into an ecstatic relationship with the dream, or the book. Carson quotes Weil wishing to be remembered, not as the writer of her books, but as the book itself. Weil asks: 'if you should happen sometimes to think of me you will do so as one thinks of a book read in childhood' (Carson 2006, p. 174). Carson, in a rare moment in *Decreation* enters the essay here and talks about her memories of childhood books, and how she was unable to separate the object from reality, and wished to eat the pages to taste the various flowers depicted in the pictures. Carson wonders if children 'in their natural wisdom' (2006, p.175) refuse to consent to stay within the contradiction of the desired or imagined object, because for children, the 'in between' does exist. The ambiguous is the real. For children, just like the woman in 'Longing', live outside the boundaries of common sense. Children live within the possibility of the night

not being a fact. In fact night, for children, can be anything, as a wealth of children's stories attest to. What is awake and what is sleeping, what is dream and what is not, are much more ambiguous for children than adults, as Hustvedt writes: 'for children the night looms larger' (2010b). Carson, remembering her own impression of books read in childhood writes:

> They come to my mind's eye in violent shortening and framed by a precarious darkness, but at the same time they glow somehow with an almost supernatural intensity of life that no adult book could ever effect. (2006, p. 175)

The supernatural intensity of the child's naive experience of night and the book recalls the sublime, and the ecstatic. Perhaps The Book of Ambiguity will always fail at recreating this intensity, because adult readers bring rationality and the Derridian mark of genre to each reading experience. The Book of Ambiguity calls for the child within the reader, calls for a decreation of self as detached reader, and rallies him or her, to join with the writer and the immensity of the ideas, philosopers, writers and images brought about by the experience of reading the book. It is an ecstatic book, and asks the reader to take themselves out of themselves, to be within the reading experience, within the structuring, and within the telling. Even though the reader, and the writer of The Book of Ambiguity are aware that this ecstatic state is only a momentary loss of self, only a momentary respite from the 'fears' that will return, for that brief moment, reader, writer and character spill together: spill in a 'foam' of shared sublime experience that dispels the loneliness of the individual existentialist condition. Carson the writer spills into her books and exposes herself and her vulnerabilities again and again.

It is love, ecstasy and desire that consume Carson; she is rigorous in her analysis of the painful and often humiliating nature of love. The largest characters in Carson's work are her own family, with her lovers, brother, mother and father pervading nearly all of them. Love embodies the sense of loss for Carson. Geryon (later G), longs for Herakles (later Sad), in *Autobiography of Red*, and in its sequel *red doc >*. While in *The Death of a Husband,* 'The Autobiography of Water' (Carson 2000, pp. 113-260) and 'The Glass Essay' (Carson 1998b, pp, 3-47) Carson painfully documents her rejection by her lover/s, Beauty, the emperor, and Law, respectively. When Beauty betrays her she gasps:

> What is so ecstatic unknowable cutthroat glad as the walls
>
> of the flesh
>
> of the voice of betrayal –

(2002b, p. 25)

She documents desire in 'The Autobiography of Water', as an anthropologist might. Writing of her relationship with the emperor:

> You will see desire go travelling into the total dark country of another soul, to a place where the cliff just breaks off. Cold light moonlight falling on it. (2000, p. 195)

In 'The Glass Essay' she is unsparing of herself and her desperation over her unrequited love for Law:

> Everything I know about love and its necessities
>
> I learned in that one moment
>
> when I found myself
>
>
> thrusting my little burning red backside like a baboon
>
> at a man who no longer cherished me (1998b, p. 15)

Documenting the death and pain of love is essential to all of Carson's original books, adaptations and translations. The death of her mother, her father's dementia and her brother's absence and eventual death haunt her books. Her love affairs are painful, and yet, although as she writes in 'The Anthropology of Water', she lived 'blank for many years', with nothing but notebooks to fill with work, she learned two things: 'Enlightenment is useless and nothing replaces the sting of love' (2000, p. 221). Seeking to understand what love or ecstasy is has concerned Carson since her PhD thesis that would become *Eros the Bittersweet*. In *The Albertine Workout* (2014a), Carson analyses Marcel Proust's obsession with Albertine in his fictional work, *The Captive,* and Albert, in his real life love affair with his chauffer Albert. Carson quotes Proust as saying: 'One only loves that which one does not entirely possess' (2014a, p. 18), for it is 'otherness' that makes a person desirable, and possession of another equates with the erasure of 'otherness' (2014a, p. 9).

Attempting to define love pervades her books, she continually asks the emperor in 'The Anthropology of Water' - 'What is love like for you?'. In 'The Glass Essay' she writes:

> What is love?
>
> My questions were not original
>
> Nor did I answer them. (1998b, p. 22)

For Carson love is a complicated blend of erotic desire, devotion to family and pursuit of knowledge and god. The craving for love and the pain of love are fundamental to her writing, and in many ways work replaced and protected her from Eros, until, as she writes, 'love knocked me over' (Carson, 2000 p. 189). In *Plainwater* Carson tells the reader that she rarely used the word 'woman' for herself before her father died, for she perceived that she would trouble him less 'if she had no gender'. Carson's father would yell at her: '*For God's sake don't grow up to be one of those helpless women*' (2000, p. 198), hence she strived to make her body 'as hard and as flat as the armor of Athena' (2000, p. 189). As a consequence of this genderless guise, Carson writes, for many years she lived alone, repressing her gender and expressions of love or sexuality. Perhaps this is why Carson's books, though intellectually dense, and always ostensibly formally contained, pour with overflowing ecstasy.

Lava: A Conclusion

Carson's books overflow with rich reds, greens, blacks, yellows, insomnia, water, the moon, the soul, God, dreams, the tango, peaches, Venice, rain, fire, television, cigarettes, cats, madness, asylums, hedonism, wine, photography, snow, mirrors and volcanoes. When asked about such recurring images in her work, in particular volcanoes, Carson dismisses any deep symbolism, saying merely that volcanoes 'are easy to paint' and red is her favourite colour (Bush 2013). In any case, smoking volcanoes are on the cover of *Autobiography of Red* and *Glass and God*; the central journeys of *Autobiography of Red* and *red doc* > are to volcanoes, and volcanoes feature in passing in most of her other works. What strikes me about Carson's writing, however, is not the volcanoes themselves but the more pervading, fluid, formless, shapeshifting lava. The phallic form of the volcano could metaphorically represent the form Carson tried to take on as she desperately tries to hide any 'telltale drops' (2000, p. 189) of blood or wetness that seeped out of her. Carson observes:

> I was a locked person [.....] Something had to break [...] I prayed and fasted. I read the mystics. I studied the martyrs. I began to think I was someone thirsting for God. (2000, p. 122)

In the same essay she tells the reader how she 'didn't bleed' for years and hasn't been a woman for very long (2000, p. 201). This dormant volcanic state is unstable, until extinction. As Ida articulates in *red doc* >, incidentally a book with lava on the cover, 'Nature is on the *inside*' and, 'To *feel* anything deranges you. To be seen *feeling* anything strips you naked. In the grip of it pleasure or pain doesn't matter' (2013, p. 77). Writing, for Carson, as it is for Porter and

Hustvedt, is a way of articulating f*eeling*. The writing comes, as Cixous says, like lava. The things others call 'books', are for Cixous, *things*: 'untitled lava flow, spread by cracks in the soul' (Cixous 2002, p. 403). It is this flowing lava, with its wantonness, wanting and wetness, that is the central image in Carson's work.

It is fitting, given Carson's interest in translation and the roots of words, that this central image takes this thesis back to Cixous, and through Cixous, to the origin and complexities of the word lava. Cixous writes that, 'untitled lava' mutates to *larva*, and then becomes *larvae*, in her essay, 'The Book as One of Its Own Characters' (2002). *Lava*, as Cixous points out, is like *larva*, in that its state shifts between two states; a larva will undergo a metamorphosis from a juvenile to an adult stage, while *lava* can be both the flowing stream of molten rock and the rock in its solid state. Most etymological dictionaries believe the word lava to have originated from the Italian word 'lava', meaning a stream of water caused by sudden rain. While 'larva' derives from the latin, *lar,* or *lares* (plural), who were ancient Roman gods of the home. Carson's work is as difficult to define and confine as either lava *or* larvae. Forms mutate in Carson's books. Books break out of their carefully formed shapes, and modern ideas and imagery move across, and on top of, vanished civilisations. For Carson, Catherine Deneuve inhabits the same space and time as Sappho. In her essay, 'Irony is not enough: Essay on my life as Catherine Deneuve', Carson (as Deneuve) watches: 'Parts of time fall on her' (2001a, p. 140). Schultz argues, for Carson: 'time is a volcano: something ancient, quiet, beautiful and life-threatening; something that obliterates colossally and preserves capriciously' (2013). There is indeed a random reach to Carson's books that spreads and flows across styles, history and worlds. Carson's books, like lava and larvae, refuse stable boundaries and adopt ambiguous forms.

Carson, like lava, seeks to 'explode the distinction between the outside and the inside' (2001a, p. 152): she leaks, she pours. Lava seeps into all of Carson's books; when Ion asks G towards the end of *red doc>* about his trip, it is 'Lava' that answers her (2013, p. 149); Kreon, in *Antigonick* (and indeed all men, according to the chorus) are full of hubris, and in their denial of death, have 'lava up to here' (2012, p. 39). A volcano in the Philippines erupts in passing in 'The Glass Essay' (1998b, p. 5); and in Carson's short talk titled 'The Youth at Night', a young man drives around while, 'Terrific lava shone from his soul' (1998b, p. 140). In *Nox,* Carson defines *manantia,* as: 'to flow, pour, run. To exude, be shed, run out, to leak' (2010, n.p), while in *Autobiography of Red,* lava pours up stairs, out of photos and into every scene. Women

in ancient myth, according to Carson, swell, shrink, leak and metamorphosis: they are, 'notorious adaptors of the forms and boundaries of others' (2001a, p. 155). Women are porous, mutable, leaking, dangerous and polluting. Women are passionate, wet, wanting, and wanton; they move across boundaries, are unstable compounds and are sexually insatiable. And it is love, and the madness it unleashes in women, that is the principle motivation in ancient mythology, 'for women's flight from form or tempering with boundaries' (2001a, p. 154).

In a fragment from *Autobiography of Red* titled 'Lava', Geryon, Carson's red-winged homosexual monster who dreams of being a writer, lies in bed wondering what it would be like to be a woman. Carson here changes the pronoun usage from 'he' to 'she', and Geryon (as 'she') listens to black lava creeping towards 'her'. As the reader and writer *inhabit* Geryon, there is a moment where consciousnesses and gender: move, pour, run, extend, foam and spill together. Writer, character and reader imagine lava and its ambiguous form. For lava:

> can move as slow as
>
> nine hours per inch.
>
> Colour and fluidity vary with its temperature from dark red and hard
>
> (below 1,800 degrees centigrade)
>
> to brilliant yellow and completely fluid (above 1, 950 degrees centigrade)
>
> (Carson 1999a, p. 48)

And in this dark space of momentary connection between consciousnesses, 'she', (Geryon as Carson), wonders if 'he' is listening to the sounds of lava too. This 'he', is both lava and an imagined male threat of the 'black' silent night, a blackness that threatens to devour all mingled colour, passion and ecstasy. This blackness pervades mythology and Carson's ambiguous worlds, but red-hot molten lava constantly bursts forth. Geryon battles 'black magma', the blocked volcano vents, 'holding stores of pain' before realising that living this way is not possible for: 'To deny the existence of red, is to deny the existence of mystery. The soul that does so will one day go mad' (1999a, p.105). Even in madness, even outside gender or time, the ecstatic soul still wants everything, in a foaming Kantian 'motion of pleasure and pain that throws itself back and forth' (2006, p. 65). Carson, in *Decreation,* and her immensely varied body of work, has created books that refuse to stay within safe borders; Books of Ambiguity, erupting into formless, multi-coloured shapes, seeking out, reader, character and writer in shared ecstatic connection.

In fever you can lose your sense of self. The pain that was local becomes general. The grip on category wains as body temperature rises making you feel hot, then cold, then hot again. There can be epiphanies through the tears, deliriums and hallucinations; it is an ambiguous space between life and death, wake and sleep, dream and reality. The self is withdrawn into the fever, into the sea. *The self is a sea in fever.*

Perception and bodily functions merge what we see what we hear, what we feel *seems closer and closer* until the outside world is diminished. There can be violent shaking, convulsions and an endless, bottomless thirst.

Clarice Lispector calls this state an *orgasmic apocalypse,* where death, sex, love and madness all seem close, entwined until: *I then go too far in order to be. I'm in a trance. I penetrate the surrounding air. What a fever: I can't stop living. In this dense jungle of words that thickly wrap around whatever I feel and think and live and transform everything I am into something of mine that nonetheless remains entirely outside me.*[10]

And in this place of between, the fight is surrendered, and the sea of fever transcends the binaries of body and mind, sane and insane, male and female, dream and reality, free and captive, life and death, beginning and end, and takes the fevered to the boundless pages of ambiguity.

[10] Lispector 2012, p. 60

CONCLUSION

Ambiguous Form, Critical Reception and the Female Body.

In order to come towards a definition of The Book of Ambiguity this thesis has provided abstract and concrete examples of how writers employ ambiguity to enable an ecstatic connection between writer, reader and the book. In this way, the third person construct of character provides a membrane for writer and reader to meet and explore: to enter the playful land of the ambiguous. These moments of connection remain momentary and fragile, yet they take the reader and writer closer to an understanding of the ambiguous states of madness, ecstasy, sexuality and humanity itself. This ecstatic meeting place subverts and challenges established genres. It exposes the third person as a non-existent fabrication of creative writing, and in doing so dissembles the constructed categories of 'us' and 'them'. I have written that these books are created through a Cixouisan *bisexual jouissance*. I have argued that this style of writing has only been possible in a post-*Madwoman* era, where women are not only writing freely without the fear of incarceration, but also creating their own forms. These forms are still the minority. The post-*Madwoman* world is not a universal condition, and this thesis acknowledges that expressions of madness, sexuality and ecstasy in many women could still result in punishments such as confinement or death, for as Jacqueline Rose writes in her book *Women in Dark Times:* 'Pick one newspaper at random on any day of the week. Evidence of cruelty against women is to be found on almost every page' (2014, p. 260). I would like to use this conclusion to briefly examine the critical response to The Book of Ambiguity and to posit that, even though we are in a post-*Madwoman* era, there is still a fear of women and books that do not behave in certain ways.

In Chapter One, I illustrate how publishers, funding bodies, critics and the culture industry seek to categorise art by creating labels such as: academic memoir, verse novel, fictional essay or prose poem, to books that defy genre. I also argue that this engenders fear because subverting genre or popular literary conventions is a way to question the certainty of established categories or boundaries of behaviour. I cite the example of the *DSM*, as the ultimate categorising book, which seeks to label and box ambiguity. In contrast to the *DSM*, The Book of Ambiguity questions patriarchal control of genre by questioning and refusing genre and therefore the sanctity of order. Ross writes:

> When a situation is marked by ambiguity its resolution is unclear: there is more than one possible solution, more than one meaning. It is often a situation marked by tension, as competing resolutions are suggested by those involved. In between order and chaos, ambiguity demands further reflection, consideration of new and different outcomes. (1983, p. 69)

Ross articulates that ambiguity is not chaos; rather it is 'in between' order and chaos, it is outside binaries. It is different, because it is written from, and through the female body. Porter writes '[women's] whole experience of our bodies is different [...] men and women are very different [...] Our nervous systems are different, our ways of comprehending the world are different' (Digby 2006, p 9). I illustrate how Books of Ambiguity abound in opposing desires and characters often want security at the same time as they want passion. Resisting closed linear resolutions; writers of Books of Ambiguity allow their characters to express the contradictory and ambiguous parts of themselves, as well as their overwhelming sexual desires. The Book of Ambiguity provides an experience of passion, within the security of the book. The Book of Ambiguity is in-between order and chaos. The Book of Ambiguity is an erotic site that will not be contained, and like the female body, is multi-orgasmic and defies the rational forms imposed on it.

The personal nature of the criticism against women writers of Books of Ambiguity highlights how women remain identified with their work, and the characters within it. It also confirms that there are still restrictions on what women can or can't say. A program note from 1973 for an evening of female poetry, titled 'The Tender Muse', outlines that;

> Women's poetry, English or American remains always intensely personal at its best. As the more general subjects are discussed, so the verse and the inspiration seems to flag. (York Festival 1973)

Women's status as tender, emotional and hysterical is implied within these patronising comments at the dawn of the post-*Madwoman* era. This perception of women, as I have argued earlier in this thesis, has been set out since antiquity. What differentiates The Book of Ambiguity is that its writers do not see the ancient borders of division between the 'personal' and 'general', that the anonymous writer above rigidly adheres to, as set in stone. Hustvedt, Carson and Porter, and many other women writers, according to Patricia Waugh, reject the 'aesthetics of impersonality' and the privileging of objectivity, 'distance, autonomy, separateness, discrete form' over the personal, the human or the ethical (2012, p. 20). It is the vagaries and the in-between: the mingling of public and private, self and other, personal and general, the universal and singular that defines post-*Madwoman* writing and The Book of Ambiguity. Hustvedt includes her personal story within the clinical generalities of the limited

DSM; Porter inhabits the personal world of Akhenaten to bring a fresh reading to ancient Egyptian history and Carson brings the personal into creation itself.

The critical reception towards The Book of Ambiguity, as written by Porter, Hustvedt and Carson, demonstrate the uncomfortable challenge to traditional boundaries the book engenders. Although in a post-*Madwoman* environment women cannot be involuntarily incarcerated, their work is often attacked for articulating the very things that they were previously institutionalised for: namely experiences of ecstasy, *bisexuality,* lesbianism, passion, episodes of madness, or simply behaving differently. Women, it seems, are still required to be polite and to fit within form. Porter, according to Plunkett, challenges the 'politeness' of form, writing:

> her subjects' and speakers' bodies bloody, pulsing, slippery with desire, or saturated by weeping. And since weeping and bleeding, and bodies wet with want, are all either female or imagined as feminine, the imagination of poetry as a virginal wallflower aptly conveys a masculine imagination of a feminine poetics, a gendered prescription [....] that Porter absolutely refused. (2010)

Refusing to portray characters in the way they had previously been portrayed in the *Madwoman* era, or approaching genre in the way it has previously been approached, is for many post-*Madwoman* writers, the meaning of feminism. Porter, when questioned why she chose to write about Akhenaten, rather than one of the many silent female historical figures, responds: 'feminism meant she was not tied to dogma, it meant she was free to write any way she wished; feminism equals heterogeneity and diversity' (Digby 2006, p. xvi). This diverse approach to the ambiguities of gender and genre saw her writing labeled 'odd' by David McCooey in the Sydney Morning Herald, even if later he patronisingly concedes that her books were 'strangely affecting because of their oddity' (2002). This ambiguous response is also present in Peter Craven's tribute to Porter in the Sydney Morning Herald:

> A month ago, the poet Dorothy Porter died of cancer, in her mid-50s. She seems to have been a woman of great magnetism [...] I'd always been a skeptic. Perhaps it was because I'd been an enthusiast for Alan Wearne's verse novels. [...] Vikram Seth's The Golden Gate but I was a bit prejudiced against Porter's verse novels. (2009)

Although Craven goes on to begrudgingly acknowledge her skills, the opening of the article seems to dismiss Porter for no reason but the fact that she was not male, like the writers of verse novels he admires. Patton, quoted in Digby, criticises Porter's work as laced with a 'mild schizophrenia', a term he could have found within the DSM, declaring it full of juxtaposing 'lyrical bursts and crass imagery' (Digby 2006, p.8). Porter responds to this criticism saying:

> I'm really not quite sure what he means. A lot of my poems [...] were written in real heat. He seems to be both fascinated and repelled; praising and recoiling in horror at the same time. It was very peculiar. (Digby 2006, p. 8).

The critical reaction to Porter encapsulates the response to women from antiquity, as wet creatures that are terrifying and entrancing at the same time, and therefore to be feared, and contained. The 'heat', of creation she refers to, is reminiscent of Cixous' lava and larva that come to her in the night, her *things*, that 'terrify and fascinate' (2002, p. 404). Cixous puts this down to the fact that these *things*, these ambiguous creations, bring up an unjustified repulsion. This repulsion, Cixous believes to be: 'an issue in the deficiency in our soul, our acquired taste for the definite, the situated' (2002, p. 404). This repulsion intrigues because it will not be situated; Porter will not sit comfortably within the established labels of lesbian, poet, feminist, novelist or crime writer. Her writing, which I explored in Chapter Four, is, to use her own words,' *bisexual'* (Digby 1996, p, 16) and subversive. This has meant that critics, even when seemingly praising her work, describe it as 'odd', as with Ball's comments: 'Like most of Porter's work, *El Dorado* isn't pretty, but it is full of an odd kind of beauty' (2009). When damning her work, they are savage: Porter reports in her article, 'It's too hard to write good – I'd rather write bad' for the *Australian Humanities Review,* how the Queensland Board of Education called her young adult novel *The Witch Number:* 'a diabolical and subversive text with designs on gullible young minds to twist and turn them to the foul practice of witchcraft' (Porter 2000). This critical reaction is strikingly similar to that toward Carson and Hustvedt, for as often as these writers have had their works hailed as 'tour-de-force' they have had their books dismissed by peers, critics or academics. Porter received more popular attention than any other Australian poet in her lifetime, yet serious discussion of her poetics is limited. Perhaps this is because, as Michael Brennan writes after her death: 'Porter's work is geared towards a defiant stand against academic, obscurest or life-style/diary like writing' (2009).

Carson embraces the obscure academic world that Porter challenges; however, she is not afraid to subvert and play within it. Reviews for Carson's inter-generic works such as *The Beauty of the Husband*, range from Toh Hsien Min who writes: 'It astonishes not for the breadth and depth of classical and historical reference we have come to expect from her, but for her scintillating interweaving of mathematics and semiotics' (2001), to Robert Potts, who wrote about the same book in *The Guardian*:

> What differentiates the [book's] self-pitying account of marital unhappiness from a slice of confessional-style realism is an occasional (and occasionally clichéd) lyricism, some fashionable philosophising, and an almost artless grafting-on of academic materials [...] the

> book fails as poetry, simply because it shows either crashing inability or an unbecoming contempt for the medium. (2002)

Potts, not content to attack the book alone also focuses on the woman behind the work writing: 'Carson herself, one notices, reads in a monotone, as if Lilith from Frasier were using Stephen Hawking's voice-synthesizer' (2002). Potts appears confronted and personally outraged by Carson's dismantling of form and playing with boundaries of the poem and prose. His review desperately tries to bring formlessness into form:

> Carson subtitles her book "a fictional essay in 29 tangos', though her publishers (and, indeed, the judges) seem to think it is a poem. If so, then it is mostly a "prose poem", with the emphasis on the first of those terms. The one overt use of poetry, when Carson's narrator shares with us some of her younger self's 'elegiac couplets', suggests that Carson is deliberately anti-poetic [....] not elegiac couplets but doggerel. Even so, one suspects that Carson's avoidance of metre stems partly from inability, although generous reviewers have suggested that her "form" in this book (very long lines and very short lines) mimics the rhythm of the tango. (2002)

I have focused on Pott's review at length because its scathing attack encapsulates the fear patriarchal structures have for the formless woman, and how, upon feeling threatened, use words and labels to constrain, demonise and patronise women. Potts questions Carson's ability and labels her work 'doggerel', 'anti-poetic', and as a 'prose-poem', all designed to belittle, scar, maim and hurt. Even when reviewers are less harsh, their comments emphasise Carson's' inscrutability' (Anderson 2013): Schultz writes about *red doc >,* 'Did I mention this book is strange?' (2013); McKenzie writes about *The Autobiography of Red*, 'This is not even good prose, let alone good poetry' (2000); and on the back cover of the same book *The Village Voice* writes: 'A deeply odd and immensely engaging book' (Carson 1999a). The problem, as Anderson writes in *The New York Times*, 'seems to be a question of form, Carson won't sit still' (2013) and the structures central to dominant discourses seek to contain individual voices and individual freedom. Anderson describes this quality of Carson's, as not just restlessness, but as unnatural: 'for two decades her work has moved [...] in directions that a human brain would never naturally move.' Critics often treat Carson, as they treat Porter, as an oddity: a formless, wandering, wanton writer, whose words do not fit into neat categories.

Siri Hustvedt discusses the gender distinctions entrenched in literary categories in her interview with Auster:

> There is some idea that women write a certain kind of book and men write a certain kind of book and the books that men write are more serious. It's just the way it goes [....] these ideas of "woman as body", "woman as nature", "woman as the sexual", "man as the intellect", these are very, very old dualisms and they still inform thinking, even though they are often unconscious [...] in the sciences – if you've got the stuff everyone will acknowledge that. Not so the same in literature.

(Siri Hustvedt interviewed by Paul Auster, 2012)

Hustvedt, as outlined in Chapter Three, is constantly interrogating issues of representation in her work, and often creates fictionalised versions of herself, or family members in her books. Doll writes of this characteristic of Hustvedt's work: 'There is something embarrassing about reading these intimate (or faux-intimate) passages, which may (or may-not) shed light on the author's own insecurities' (2008). Another reviewer writes about the protagonist of *The Blindfold:* 'Iris is, as probably most first person protagonists are, a "version of her creator" pierced together from the author's personality, nerves and experiences. She is intelligent, depressive and a bit lost' (Kerry 2007). In various reviews Hustvedt has been accused of being too clever or too confusing in her sliding between identities, or simply indulgent. Doll writes:

> *The Sorrows of an American* also stands out for breaking Hustvedt's garland of flower named heroines (Iris, Lily, Violet), the significance of which – save for Iris, which is an anagram of Siri – has always been lost on me [...] If anything, Hustvedt's novels are enjoyable sometimes despite what she calls their "rich associative subtext", which is not always as "sub" as Hustvedt seems to believe. Rather her references are often artlessly planted on the surface of the text. (2011)

Doll, seems to pinpoint the main issue that reviewers, including herself, have had with Hustvedt's work—its link to self-pleasure. Doll writes: 'Sure her novels are sometimes intellectually masturbatory but that's not entirely a bad thing – masturbation gets a bad rap' (2011). A woman interested in her own sexual pleasure could, in a *Madwoman* world, have been incarcerated. However, in a post-*Madwoman* age, Cixous and other feminist thinkers identify this self-expression through the female body, as *écriture féminine.*

This thesis has argued that women writers, in a post-*Madwoman* age, are able to express a connection to their bodies, their desires and their *madness*. However, this freedom is tempered by the critical reaction to The Book of Ambiguity, which illustrates that women are still maimed, confined or bound through the language used to label and describe their books. *The Book of Ambiguity* has argued that this is because of the threat ambiguity itself presents to language, a language that has been constructed by men, and placed within forms decided upon by men. Feminine *jouissance's* rhythms are markedly different to the masculine rhythms and desires expressed in the linear narrative and do not fit comfortably within the closed definitions of novel, poem or essay; as Cixous writes, 'female – sexed – texts' still scare (1976, p. 877). Yet a growing number of women writers are confident in their own desires, intellect, bodies, madness, darkness, sexuality and curiosities, and are refusing to be driven by the market economy, thus creating books that defy definition. These are books that provoke readers and

writers to challenge, in a de Beauvoirian sense, the injustices within the world in order to expose our ambiguous ethical condition: that real freedom can only be attained through striving towards the freedom of others. Such books, driven by subconscious process rather than rational form, resist incarceration, and sit between order and chaos as The Book of Ambiguity.

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